

# SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS



Oak tree on the grounds of Elmshaven

# The Holistic Spirituality of Ellen White | BY HARRI KUHALAMPI

WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY HEATHER LANGLEY

Ellen White's spirituality can primarily be defined by using purely Christian and religious language and imagery, simply because Christianity is both the context and the subject matter of all her writings. Only an analysis of her religious ideas exposes the holistic nature of her spirituality and its multifaceted structure. Among the numerous religious topics about which she wrote, five central themes can be identified. These themes compose a thematic framework of her spiritual thinking, a unified body of interrelated ideas. This means that her favorite Christian topics express the predominantly religious substance of her spirituality. However, the essence of White's spirituality can best be perceived in consequence of a thorough understanding of her overall spiritual thinking.

First, the theme of God's love towards humanity is central for White. It can be seen as the leading motive throughout the sources. The results of the study suggest that she promotes a spirituality which focuses on experiencing the divine love, on exploring its meaning for each person and on applying its consequences individually, which means, for example, receiving forgiveness or becoming totally accepted by God. Ultimately, the concept of God's love includes all that God is and what he does, but also all that a believer is and what he/she does as an object of this love.

Second, according to White, selfishness generally directs each person's will, and on that account she sees no other solution but the submission of one's will to the will of God. But she does not urge a person to silence or crush his/her will because she sees great potential in the human will when under God's rule. God does not force anyone under his leadership and guidance; instead, in White's view, God invites a person voluntarily to submit his/her will to God and his will. No one else can yield a

person's will to be directed by God; paradoxically, by such surrender to God, a person becomes truly free. Submitting one's will to God is a continuous, internal, spiritual process, for which each individual is personally responsible. This spiritual course of action is possible only when a person remains fully aware of God's goodness, grace and love. Consequently, the surrender of one's will to God is one of the focal points in White's spiritual teaching and the starting point of what is to follow in a person's spiritual existence.

Third, as a person surrenders his/her will to God, a constitutional fellowship is established between humanity and divinity on a personal level. White mostly speaks about this fellowship in terms of a union with Christ. Through his incarnation and life as a human being, Christ identified with humanity and made this union possible. In her view, the union is there to be celebrated because of God's graciousness and goodness. It must also be nurtured, because we as human counterparts cannot permanently hold on to the union with Christ without constantly tending our side of the relationship. White sees the person's union with Christ as an interactive experience which is primarily actualized by personal dialogue and intimate contact.

Fourth, White depicts the relationship between a person and Christ in primarily dynamic and functional terms; she sees the believer as an active participator in fulfilling God's will and purpose in the world. Cooperation is a term she uses frequently as she speaks about the consequences of God's saving acts for an individual Christian. She sees witnessing, ministry, employment, daily activities, and even care for one's over-all wellbeing as integral parts of a person's connectedness with Christ. Spirituality, for her, is a comprehensive concept, connected to the whole being and to all of life. All our experiences, and all the feelings,

**Ellen White**  
did much of her  
writing at  
Elmshaven,  
a house she  
purchased and  
lived in from  
1900 until her  
death in 1915.  
Elmshaven  
became her  
office head-  
quarters, with  
over 14 staff  
members  
assisting White  
in the editing  
and publishing  
of her works.  
These photo-  
graphs were  
taken on-site.

Writing Room Window



ideas, and relationships we connect to them, have a spiritual significance and value. Because of the all-encompassing involvement throughout one's whole life in the cooperative partnership with God, the transcendent dimension can be present everywhere.

And finally, White uses the term "character" to describe what a person really is, what one's actual identity is, i.e., the core of one's being and its ruling moral qualities and abilities. It is a concept which stands for the essential spiritual quality of a person. When speaking about character, she deals with the inner, deeper human dimension of an individual. Even though her concept of character refers to the same subject matter as spirituality and overlaps with it in meaning, character, as she understands it, is an essential human quality which provides the starting point and motivation for the whole being as well as for all life and action. Without genuine, personal, spiritual development, there would be no character change or any of the growth necessary for individual development and advancement to maturity.

Christian spirituality as presented by White can be defined primarily as holistic on the basis that it concerns all dimensions of humanity. Because these dimensions are combined into one operational entity, a pervasive description goes on beyond the wholeness of being to the way in which spirituality functions in a person's life and personality. By constructing a structure of integrated spirituality which takes into account the holistic view of humanity but also a wide-ranging manner of operations, we are able to obtain a frame of reference for a more comprehensive understanding of White's spirituality.

While it is possible to speak about Ellen White's spiritual ideas in exclusively religious language and to be satisfied with explanations related to typically theological concepts and ideas, there is the problem that such an approach is limited partly to the subject matter of traditional spirituality and partly to the established religious practices used in the search for spiritual wellbeing. Although this study deals with the religious content, there is, however, another way to define and explain spirituality. Academic studies on spirituality offer approaches which are helpful in the exploration of White's spirituality. On the basis of both these approaches and the results of my analysis I will now outline a definition of her spirituality.

White refers to spiritual needs and wants, which in my view are perceived at the level of the human spirit, i.e., the

individual inner realm, and which drive a person to seek for spiritual answers and solutions. In the primary sources of this study, I detected five specific spiritual needs which constitute the reason and precondition for Christian spirituality. In them one can perceive a starting point and a fundamental component for spirituality. The central spiritual needs and wants White records are as follows:

1. Longing or yearning
2. Desolation or helplessness
3. Guilt
4. Anxiety
5. Insecurity

The common human condition caused by sin, i.e., fallenness, creates our inner state of yearning for God and his grace. In addition, one's spiritual needs and wants are a result of unfortunate life experiences. Guilt, for instance, is normally a result of one's own mistakes or shortcomings. However, an inner longing and sense of desolation or insecurity are caused by the lack of appropriate experience offering connectedness, meaning or hope. Therefore, it is this inwardly perceived void and purposelessness which is the starting point as well as the basis for all spiritual exercise and activity. However, it is Ellen White's view that spiritual needs must not be interpreted as consequences of natural causes alone, but also as a result of the influence of the Holy Spirit. Christian spirituality responds to actual human needs and attempts to fulfil them. Hence the human predicament in the midst of grave spiritual questions constitutes the justification for Christian spirituality.

Moreover, Ellen White's spiritual thinking pertains to a view of humanity according to which our being and existence are composed of the following experiential and functional dimensions:

### **1. Thinking**

Christian spirituality occurs in connection with knowledge, concepts, notions, ideas, paradigms, thought patterns, and theories. We thereby refer to abstract, theoretical issues which are rationally perceived and which demand understanding. This aspect concerns what can be known and comprehended, and what makes rational sense to us. More specifically, spirituality is concerned with ethical and doctrinal ideas and views, but it is also sustained, directed and delineated by them. This means that as an

integral part of Christian spirituality there is always a corresponding theology of spirituality with a logical structure which appeals to the human intellect.

The main concepts in the theology of White's spiritual thinking are the following: the love of God, the surrender of one's will to God, the notion of union with Christ, and cooperation. In addition, her thinking can be described by using such theological attributes as, for example, biblical, Trinitarian, Christ-centred or gospel-oriented. Therefore, a discourse on Christian spirituality is not possible without religious and theological language.

Christian spirituality does not function solely within the realm of religion, even as far as the intellectual elements are concerned. Instead, all concepts, facts and information are part of a whole in which spirituality is the combining element. Hence, spirituality refers to those interpretive, inner processes through which the meaning and significance of all intellectual elements is sought. Spirituality can be defined as a quest with the prospect of establishing the role and function of the intellectual elements as part of the entirety of our lives.



## 2. Doing

Christian spirituality occurs in conjunction with the various functions, actions, work and practices which we are engaged in. This means that spirituality is experiential and embodied, and for the most part it is sensory too. In White's case, this practical aspect includes, for example, Sabbath-keeping, healthful living, Bible study, prayer, worship, acts of love, enjoying nature and various forms of ministry. In addition to these activities, which can be perceived as religious, she also includes secular activities among those with spiritual significance, for instance, physical labor, recreation or engagement in social interaction. The notion of a demarcation between spiritual and secular activities can hardly be supported from her point of view; instead the continuous, inner, spiritual functions will point towards and clarify the value and significance of ordinary activities for spirituality.

## 3. Feeling

Christian spirituality occurs in conjunction with characteristic affective elements such as moods, feelings, emotions and relational attitudes. As far as White's spirituality is concerned, the affective features she frequently refers to include peace, joy, trust, hopefulness, gratitude, "rest," sympathy, humility, faithfulness, compassion and love. In her view, feelings may enhance spirituality; by directing one's feelings towards Christ, as she suggests, the relationship with him can grow closer and more meaningful. On the other hand, perceived spirituality may help a person to reach and maintain an emotional balance. She also refers to the spiritual basis of emotional intelligence and skills, in speaking about the character and describing its qualities.

## 4. Relating

Christian spirituality occurs in conjunction with common relational and social elements. The natural and built-up environment, society, communal association, social contacts and personal relations have a bearing on our spirituality, and conversely, our spirituality has an effect on the way we relate to others as well as on the quality of our relationships. White's writings recurrently touch on relational issues which concern the family, local congregations, institutional or denominational working communities, nature, friendships, marriage and church membership issues.

Elmshaven house



## 5. Being

Christian spirituality occurs in conjunction with certain ontological and existential ideas, notions and assumptions. These are issues related to life and death, time, place and space, identity and freedom. Spirituality is therefore related to these philosophical issues, but lacking as she was in formal education, White did not directly address them. However, there are allusions to and reflections of major existential and ontological issues in her thinking as she deals with prophetic and eschatological topics, soteriological ideas such as the theme of union with Christ, the human will and its freedom, human nature and the essence of being, to mention just a few.

As all of these five experiential dimensions are included in White's spiritual thinking, we can justifiably speak about a holistic spirituality. Having identified these dimensions, there are still certain other elements included in the framework of spirituality which must also be identified.

As we endeavour to capture the essential features of Ellen White's spiritual thinking, it is necessary to consider the concept of spirit. Even though the realm of the human spirit has not been distinctly defined in White's writings, its presence can still be easily detected. The list of its central features drafted by John Swinton<sup>1</sup> is particularly helpful in the attempt to capture an idea of what the concept of the spirit means, i.e., the inner quest for transformation, meaning, purpose, transcendence, sense of safety and security, connectedness, value, and hope. However, I would argue that it is only the inner level of the human spirit to which the functions mentioned in Swinton's list are related. In addition to his list of the central features, there is also the outer, experiential circle which is the realm of perceived spirituality. Features of this realm are listed above as the experiential dimensions.

Swinton's list provides an important starting point for further considerations. I suggest that a concept of the



human spirit is, indeed, essential for general academic discourse on spirituality. The operational, experiential and external spiritual functions compose the necessary context within which spirituality can occur. Such things as sense of significance, purpose, value, transcendence, belonging, transformation, security or hope are perceived primarily on the level of the spirit, in the internal realm.

The human spirit is also a helpful term in the attempt to understand and define the meaning of one of White's favorite concepts, the character. There are some aspects which she expresses by using the term "character," which are also included in the concept of spirit. She was not happy with formal religion and the observance of external requirements unless they are an expression and a fruit of an inner reality. Hence "character" refers to this inner, spiritual essence, which seems to be the same as that referred to by the concept of the spirit.

The spiritual significance of White's ideas in terms of union with Christ and cooperation can be understood only in reference to the human spirit. Connection with Christ remains only a theological notion unless the connectedness is a reality at the level of the person's individual spirit. The same also applies to cooperation. Cooperation as a collective word for intrinsic religious involvement belongs to the sphere of operational spiritual functions. The engagement of the spirit makes cooperation a truly spiritual activity.

Furthermore, the active spirituality that Ellen White introduces presupposes an interactive link of dialogue between the operational spiritual functions and the inner

realm of the human spirit. This relationship is, for the most part, interpretive in nature, and it is realized in mental functions that are predominantly conscious and only partly subconscious. The subconscious element may include, for example, intuitions and even occasional supernatural visions, which are unintentional or even beyond human control, but which are yet somehow perceived. It can be assumed that there are also internal spiritual influences and movements of which one is unaware, and which one cannot refer to or speak about.

Perceived spirituality is realized by various forms of thinking, i.e., personal, mental activity of which the person is fully aware, or by such relatively continuous activities of mind as, for example, the following hierarchy of mental activities from conscious to more subconscious ones:

1. Awareness
2. Attentiveness
3. Thought
4. Consideration
5. Pondering
6. Observation
7. Reflection
8. Wonder, awe
9. Rumination
10. Imagination
11. Identification with Christ
12. Meditation
13. Contemplation
14. Intuition (spontaneous insight)
15. Ecstasy/mystical experience
16. Supernatural vision

This list attempts to specify the levels of consciousness which are involved in a range of mental activities. In functioning spirituality, a person uses all of these different operations of mind, and there should be involvement on most of these levels on a continuous basis. However, intuition, ecstasy or vision are the kind of activities where the person is mostly a mere recipient, i.e., these are not results of human initiative or activity, and they are beyond conscious human control. A theoretical structure of Ellen White's spirituality can be constructed as all the elements identified above are taken into account. The interconnectivity of the various elements of White's spirituality can be depicted in the following way:

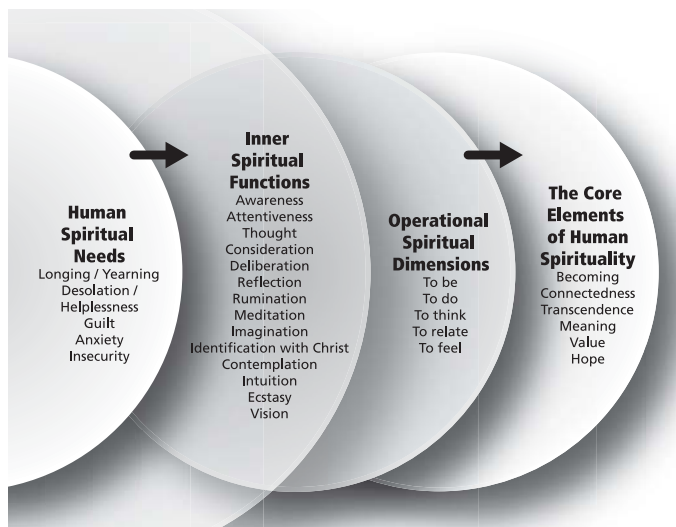
## A Theoretical Structure of Ellen White's Holistic Spirituality



The arrows in this graph represent inner processes and mental interconnections in terms of awareness between the different elements composing spirituality as a whole. It is my view that spirituality is comprised of multiple and multi-directional circles of continuous thinking processes or unconscious mental functions moving between the operational dimensions and the human spirit.

The following diagram also includes the spiritual needs and wants which constitute the reason and precondition for an authentic spirituality.

## Elements of Ellen White's Holistic Spirituality in Theoretical Sequence



Ultimately, a structure of holistic spirituality has thus emerged on the basis of an analysis of White's writings from her mature years. In addition to the religious content, i.e., the basic themes of her spirituality, White's comprehensive approach to spirituality has here also become an object of evaluation and estimation. While it is the real life in the real world which is the best testing ground for the kind of practical and all-encompassing spirituality that White represents, her spiritual approach as a whole, her view of holistic Christian spirituality, should be placed under further critical scrutiny and study. Her ideas about spirituality should also be brought into a closer interface with other Christian approaches to spirituality for mutual benefit.

The comprehensive structure of spirituality introduced in this study may benefit scholars attempting to understand different spiritualities – not only their theoretical premises and individual features but the full picture of which the particular spiritualities form an integral part. It is my view that a wide-ranging understanding of spirituality, including its connections to essential human activities, will help those who strive for fuller spiritual existence. A thriving spirituality does not rise or fall with one idea or a single practice, but it is the result of a balanced approach to all the essential dimensions which constitute human life. Moreover, I believe that a more analytic understanding of White's whole-life-encompassing spirituality will inspire and enrich those who appreciate her writings as the source of their spiritual guidance and nurture. It seems to me that while dealing with spirituality, there is a common ground where her spiritual ideas can be better understood and, hopefully, even appreciated also by those who are not familiar with her religious thinking.

An intimate fellowship and interaction is at the heart of Ellen White's spirituality. This quality is reflected in the way she views the church as a Christian community consisting of members who are capable of genuine empathy and selfless care for others. For her, spirituality is also a relational matter which is materialized within family and among friends, neighbours and colleagues. On this basis, her favorite term, "character," makes sense only as a communal concept, which means that the inner actuality, i.e., a person's individual spirituality, must become concrete in the way a person participates in the common life and interests of the community. Her focus on the character is balanced by her attention to the action and the practical



elements of Christian life, but also, as I see it, by the actual presence of other elements which compose a Christian spiritual existence and experience. ■

## References

1. Swinton, John. *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a 'Forgotten' Dimension*. London and New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001, 2003.

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## More About Harri

Finnish scholar Harri Kuhalampi was featured in several posts on the *Spectrum* website January 10. He wrote an article about holistic spirituality, was interviewed by Rachel Davies, and his dissertation was reviewed by Graeme Sharrock. Links to all of the articles appear below.

<http://www.spectrummagazine.org/article/spirituality/2011/01/10/holistic-spirituality-key-understanding-ellen-white>

<http://www.spectrummagazine.org/review/2011/01/10/finnish-scholar-offers-new-view-ellen-white-s-spirituality>

<http://www.spectrummagazine.org/article/interviews/2011/01/10/new-ellen-white-scholar-shares-his-findings>



### The Holistic Spirituality of Ellen White

If you would like to order a printed copy of this dissertation, e-mail the author at [kuhalampi@luukku.com](mailto:kuhalampi@luukku.com) with your mailing address. The cost: 62 US dollars (48 euros) includes postage and handling. Payment will be made directly to the author's bank account; details will be given when the order is placed.



Writing Room with Ellen's writing chair, left.

