

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Christian Spirituality | BY HARRI KUHALAMPI, THD

Hunger, thirst, longing, yearning, desire, waiting, etc. describe the quest for a more meaningful relationship with God. There is in all of us a deep-seated inner need for meaning, purpose, belonging, transformation and hope, which is not satisfied by intellectual explanations or emotionally-charged experiences. Even after the most striking and moving religious involvement we may sense a deep craving somewhere within us for a more real and more lasting encounter with the Divine.

Spiritual longing is a healthy consequence of our fundamental sinfulness. Sin is not only a behavioral problem but an inseparable part of who we are. Questions about who and what we are form a point of departure which can be expected to produce mature spirituality. In contrast, questions about what kind of people we wish to become are unhelpful here. Christian spirituality is commonly understood to be composed of an endless variety of practices, ideas, feelings and relational attitudes intended to respond to our fallen and sin-polluted human nature. However, the whole plethora of spiritual teaching and praxis is without ultimate significance if it is set apart from a direct relationship with the Holy Spirit. In fact, one of the primary purposes of the Holy Spirit is to make a person more intensely aware of her inescapable weakness and crookedness. The goal is not to cause desperation and despondency, but to inspire a calm acceptance of our existential reality and a transformation of our whole existence accord-



ing to what God has designed for humanity.¹

Our temptation is to deal with Christian spirituality by employing doctrinal, emotional, relational and behavioral language, believing that these offer us sufficient answers in our search for a lasting solution to the predicament of human evil, which we all share. However, spirituality aims at a deeper realm within us beyond the key Christian teachings. The true essence of spirituality goes further than that which can be observed, assessed, comprehended or explained.

Jesus also describes the essence of the Holy Spirit in terms of hiddenness and mystery.² It is unfortunate that the interest of Christians of all times has often focused on the external and explicable aspects of both the Holy Spirit and spirituality. In the most extreme cases, formal religion can replace authentic spirituality; the external performance supersedes the internal silence in which the encounter between the Spirit of God and the human spirit take place.

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The Mystery of the Spirit

We must somehow come to terms with the fact that the third person of the Divinity is ultimately an unattainable secret in the same way as God himself is hidden from us and completely beyond our natural realm of perception. When Jesus explained to Nicodemus that the effects of the Holy Spirit are produced by invisible factors, he also wanted to demonstrate that the Spirit's essential qualities and characteristics cannot be concluded from what we can identify or detect. This means that the Christian teaching about the Holy Spirit, i.e. pneumatology, is only a dim representation of who and what the Holy Spirit actually is. For this reason I do not wish to linger too long on theological definitions of the Holy Spirit.

Instead of attempting to comprehend the Holy Spirit through intellectual means, we are better off if we allow Spirit to remain the inconceivable and perplexing divine being that s/he is.³

Unlike some of the early Adventist leaders, the Bible and the majority of Ellen White's writings agree on the fact that the human sin problem is an existential one.⁴ The traditional name for this notion is original sin. Because the core of our sinfulness is an inseparable part of us, God's solution to this problematic state must also involve a strong existential element. It is the wickedness of our being which makes us long for an existential answer. In optimal circumstances we may be able to learn new ideas, assume different attitudes and even alter our way of life, but we are hopelessly unable to change our nature or permanently remove our inborn inclination to evil. This is the reason why the divine help must come to our aid at the deepest and the most hidden level of our being. It is the immanent presence of the Holy Spirit which conveys in us the divine good, although there may be no clear, experiential evidence of Spirit's presence.

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presently believe about the Holy Spirit. The starting point for most modern Christian thinking is the desire to establish and present divine matters and concepts by way of definitions and explanations that are as concrete and definite as possible. Among Seventh-day Adventists, there is also a growing back-to-the-basics mentality, which calls for clear-cut doctrinal definitions with no tolerance for any uncertainty or any alternative interpretations. Consequently, there is little room for the mysterious or hidden elements seen by those who treasure the fundamental conceptions of Biblical faith. However ambiguous God may be, there seems to be no room for ambiguity in a church with well-defined doctrines and exact views about religious matters. As a result, the inexplicable and mysterious nature of the Holy Spirit seems not to be regarded as a major issue by the church or its theologians.

Despite all theological study and reasoning, the essence of the Holy Spirit and the Trinity remains without exhaustive explanation. What this means is that theological concepts or ideas do not constitute a fruitful method of coming to know the most fundamental aspects of the Trinity. Human intellect is far too limited to comprehend the mysteries of divinity. If that is the case, it begs the question whether we should instead assume a more practical and action-oriented approach to the divine mysteries.

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The Presence of the Transcendent Spirit

Among Christians, there is somewhat of an obsession to describe the effects of the Spirit's activity within our lives in terms of orthodox faith and obedience to God's law. However, the compulsive desire to ascertain the cause-and-effects of God's work does not always lead to a comfortable and relaxed attitude to spirituality. As a consequence, there tends to be an unhealthy emphasis on norms and standards. Often, pastoral supervision and church discipline become methods of enforcing the expected form of spirituality.

Adventist theologians have extensively exploited all soteriological implications of the Heavenly sanctuary,⁵ whereas traditional Adventist references to the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit seem to have only an anthropological bearing, with special reference to questions of health and temperance, but not really to soteriology or spirituality.⁶ However, depicting the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit implies an idea of the presence of this divine being. The concept of a temple carries the assumption of its being primarily a divine dwelling place rather than a house of worship, which a church would be.⁷ The Spirit

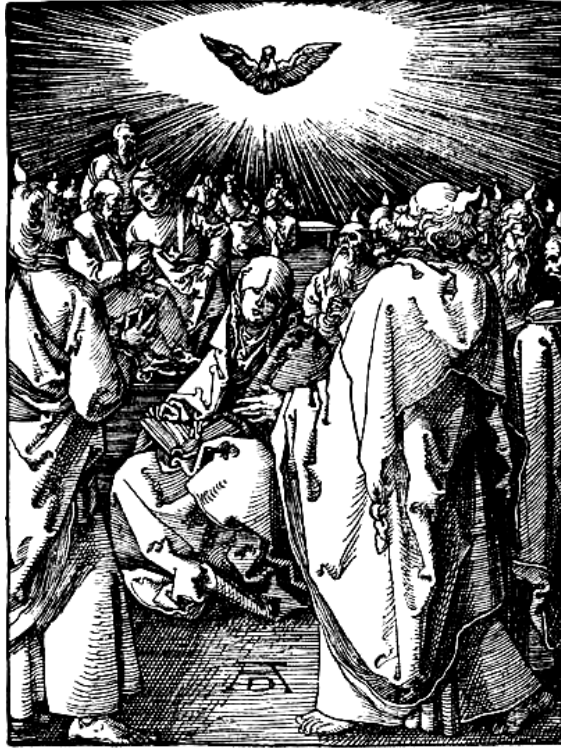
settles in for the purpose of providing the closest possible intimacy between divinity and humanity. The Spirit of God does not hover somewhere around or above us, but has entered in, even to the very center of our being. As a consequence of the immanence of the Holy Spirit, he who prays faces a person rather than a cold, cosmic void.

Interestingly, George W. Reid has chosen "Health and Holiness" as one of the subheadings of his article about the doctrine on health in the *Handbook on Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.⁸ He describes both health and holiness as results of human endeavor, of qualities such as moral uprightness, faithful observance of instructions, and obedience to the given instructions. No one can deny that these excellent patterns of conduct have massive positive effects; however, what must be kept in mind is that no human attempt can produce holiness, because holiness does not exist apart from the one who is holy.⁹ The chain of cause and effect must proceed in the correct order: the outcome of the presence of the Holy Spirit is a balanced life conducted in harmony with the best principles, not the other way around.

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dealing exclusively with absolute, divine qualities, has become a term used for relative, human characteristics. There is no justification for using the term holiness to describe even the most diligent devotion or piety, nor the fruit they produce. The sole access we can have to absolute holiness is when the Holy Spirit brings it with him into his own temple, the human body. Out of respect for the presence of the Holy One within, every understanding believer will wish to care for the overall integrity and wellbeing of this temple.

The reception of God's absolute holiness as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is not the only blessing Spirit brings with him/her. On the basis of the divine presence, preconditions are being created for a new ontology. In the context of Christian spirituality ignited by the Holy Spirit, terms like peace, joy, confidence or hope are no longer limited to describing their respective emotional states, but also constitute the foundational elements for approaching life and existence from a totally different perspective. I give just one example: instead of regarding joy as a positive feeling, it is seen as a favorable way of being. The Holy Spirit makes a new identity possible.

Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are no longer forced to identify ourselves on the basis of the dire reality of inherent imperfection and sin. Instead, we are invited to view ourselves from an absolutely affirmative perspective.

Moving Toward a New Way of Being

Jean-Paul Sartre's famous maxim "existence precedes essence" is, in my view, worth considering in relation to our topic, regardless of the fact that he used this very argument in defense of his atheism.¹⁰ It is a fact that none of the things which we regard as significant have meaning unless we exist at the outset. Therefore, we must ask ourselves such fundamental questions as: "Who am I?", "What am I?", "Where do I come from?", and "Who is God?" As we search for answers, we are forced to candidly recognize our inherent propensity to selfishness and sin. In fact, we have to admit that our total lack of holiness is the hallmark by which we will always be recognized. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit these negative characteristics would remain the ultimate points of reference in relation to which the essence of our being would be defined. Subsequently, it is absolutely vital that the Holy Spirit be present, residing permanently within us, creating by his presence a totally new way of being, a different ontology.

For many modern Christians, any discourse on the issue of the Holy Spirit immediately brings to mind a charismatic approach to spirituality and an emphasis on related phenomena. For them, the essence of the Holy Spirit is found in spiritual gifts and charismatic experiences. They insist that in order to be a true born-again Christian, there must be clear manifestations of the Spirit in a person's life. This belief has led to widespread cultural changes in worship styles and forms of prayer. Typical for this approach to religion is a fairly strong affective charge and a keen interest in the external indications of the movement of the Spirit.

By using some rather exaggerated generalizations I would like to illustrate some basic

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dangers of a one-sided perception of Christianity. The awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit can be obstructed by several things:

- An overly intellectual approach to religion shifts the attention to rational understanding of doctrinal concepts, ideas and structures. Those adhering to the orthodox teachings of the church are regarded as the ones with proper faith.
- A surpassing concentration on Christian action or practice causes an imbalance in the way spirituality is perceived. Those who are faithful followers of the church standards and obedient to all religious laws and principles are esteemed as believers in good and regular standing.
- An extreme focus on the emotional aspects of religion distracts from the fact that the mere presence of the Holy Spirit is essential to the feelings that the Spirit itself awakens. The demonstration of strong religious feelings is no guarantee of a faith relationship with Christ.
- An exaggerated emphasis on social, relational or communal facets of religion tends to position these beautiful human elements too prominently within spirituality. Christians, who are inclined to approach their religion from an interactive and collective angle, often perceive faith as the plaster holding different kinds of people together.

The Holy Spirit Makes Spirituality Possible

Christian spirituality is a paradox: human beings desperately need intellectual structures and rational conceptualizations to make our religion meaningful. A sound doctrinal structure is as necessary for religion as the skeletal structure is for the body. In the same way, work and action play a decisive role in a balanced spiritual experience. On the other hand, a multifaceted spirituality also includes affective and relational aspects as integral characteristics. Mature spirituality is holistic by nature because of its existential and ontological undercurrent. We exist as intelligent, active, feeling and rela-

tional beings because we have been created that way. Who we are and what we are is continuously reflected in the way we think, act, feel or relate. The transcendent Holy Spirit is a total mystery because s/he is constantly present with us and in us, making it possible for us to assume a transformed identity.

I love how Ellen White articulates her ideas on holistic spirituality:

“The sanctification of the soul by the working of the Holy Spirit is the implanting of Christ’s nature in humanity. Gospel religion is Christ in the life—a living, active principle. It is the grace of Christ revealed in character and wrought out in good works. The principles of the gospel cannot be disconnected from any department of practical life. Every line of Christian experience and labor is to be a representation of the life of Christ.”¹¹

The work that God has performed through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit makes experiences of joy, peace, hope and trust possible for anyone and everyone. If we dare to momentarily leave our well-formulated religious structures and the theological solutions which have been offered to us in answer to our spiritual cravings, and if we set out to seek inner silence and stillness instead, the Holy Spirit will have a better chance of doing in us that which s/he has come to do.

Eventually we may end up in a dilemma where we feel an inner desire for solitude and tranquili-





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ty, while the church increasingly encourages us to become more and more involved in intellectual and theological activity. However, a monastic life is not the answer to this predicament. The Holy Spirit knows what s/he is doing, and s/he will perform in us all that is necessary. In fact, it is an excellent thing that we will never exhaust the inner longing for a more intimate relationship with the Divine— not until Jesus comes to fetch us to be with him forever. ■

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istan. His doctoral studies at the University of Helsinki focused on the theology of Christian spirituality. The title of his thesis is "Holistic Spirituality in the Thinking of Ellen White."

References

1. White, Ellen G., *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942),

455: "In order to receive help from Christ, we must realize our need. We must have a true knowledge of ourselves. It is only he who knows himself to be a sinner that Christ can save. Only as we see our utter helplessness and renounce all self-trust, shall we lay hold on divine power." See also White, Ellen G., *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1999), 130–131.

2. See John 3:8.

3. Fowler, John M., "Sin," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 256, 264–266. See also, White, Ellen G., *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1970), 617.

4. White, Ellen G., *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), 172–173.

5. Rodrigues, Angel Manuel, "The Sanctuary," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 375–417.

6. 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19–20. See also, Reid, George W., "Health and Healing," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 774.

7. Valeso, Mario, "The doctrine of the sanctuary and the atonement as reflected in the book of revelation," *The Sanctuary and the Atonement—Biblical, Historical, and Biblical Studies* (Washington D.C.: The Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981), 394, 395.

8. Reid, George W., "Health and Healing," *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 772–776.

9. White, Ellen G., *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1956), 60. "He who is trying to become holy by his own works in keeping the law, is attempting an impossibility. All the man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin. It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy."

10. In my view, in the attempt to explore and define Christian spirituality it is necessary to draw ideas and concepts from philosophy, psychology, sociology and other areas of knowledge in addition to religious and theological ones. In order to avoid describing spirituality in rather sentimental terms, thoughts from such Existentialist philosophers as Søren Kierkegaard, for example, will open up a fresh perspective.

11. White, Ellen G., *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1941), 384.