

Spirituality for Smarties

Dallas Willard

About the Author & This Essay

Dallas Willard (1935–2013) was a philosopher, professor, author, and influential Christian thinker whose work explored spiritual formation, discipleship, and the integration of Christian faith with intellectual life. For decades, he taught philosophy at the University of Southern California, where his academic work focused especially on phenomenology and the philosophy of mind and knowledge. Willard was also widely known for works such as *The Divine Conspiracy*, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, and *Renovation of the Heart*.

“Spirituality for Smarties” was originally presented in 2007 at the University of Southern California for InterVarsity USA’s **“Spirituality and the Academy”** conference. Previously unpublished, the essay was later included as Chapter 6 of *Renewing the Christian Mind: Essays, Interviews, and Talks* by Dallas Willard, edited by Gary Black Jr. In it, Willard considers the place of spirituality within the university and intellectual life, arguing that spirituality should neither be dismissed as irrational nor accepted uncritically, but approached with the same seriousness, inquiry, and discernment applied to other areas of knowledge.

“SPIRITUALITY” IS NOW AN ACCEPTABLE AND EVEN A STYLISH PRESENCE in our cultural life, including the university or college. It can come in the form of religion, in some traditionally recognized sense. Religion can be, though it need not be, practiced as a form of spirituality, but much of spirituality’s contemporary acceptance is due to its breaking free from religion in the public mind. A statement overheard in current interchanges is, “I’m not religious, but I am a very spiritual person.” This says something quite deep, though I shall not try to go into it here.

“Diversity” has in recent years done a great deal to widen the doorway into university settings for both religion and spirituality. Undoubtedly that is a good thing, so far as it goes. As you observe the phenomenon of spirituality broadly you see that spirituality meets two basic needs of human life: identity and empowerment. Spirituality tells you who you are, and it offers to give you some power over what goes on in your life. Many people today find these needs painfully unmet in their lives, especially because they are almost totally around individualistic and passive consumption. Of course, such a painful condition is also found in other types of societies, but we have to deal with the condition before us, and [our society] is for the most part one of paralyzing anonymity and passivity. Thus, anything that offers

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identity (turns me into a significant individual) and empowerment (brings important things under my control) becomes something to grab hold of. Spiritualities of all kinds, from vegetarianism to Satan worship, step in to fill the bill, and are available in various degrees.

By “a certain level of maturity” one may be treated as a “spirituality.” This accounts for the astonishingly broad application of the terms *spiritual* and *spirituality* today. However, spirituality on the campus is not treated with intellectual seriousness. It is like a hobby or a sentimental attachment. It might be much in demand on campus, but it shall not be treated within intellectual terms at all. Of course it could be studied in the manner of the social sciences—statistically and so forth. But no one would think of seriously examining Wiccan or Benedictine or Quaker spirituality for its truth or reasonableness, or of comparing them with respect to their moral qualities. One of the odd things about “diversity” is how it usually amounts to treating everything as “the same.” But intellect comes to distinguish, to clarify, and to relate. So while “spiritualities” are welcomed back into the academy, they are not taken on in the central business of the university: the serious work of inquiry, the search for truth, in the hope of arriving at knowledge of “how things really are,” as well as what is best.

So, in fact, things have not changed as much as one might be led to suspect from all the talk about spirituality. The title of the book *Spirituality for Dummies* reaches deeper than just a snappy sales pitch. In a sense spirituality is thought to be “for dummies.” That you can be intelligent and spiritual at the same time, some people are not so sure of. You may actually know some people who are both. Just don’t treat your spirituality as an expression of your intelligence. Religion as a form of truth and knowledge was shut out of the university a hundred or more years ago, and spirituality with it. Spiritualities and religions can be studied; intelligence can be applied to them in the social sciences manner (whatever that may be), but that is all. One cannot say, for example, that spirituality X is more intelligent than, more true to the “facts” than, or morally superior to spirituality Y. And this is the case, not merely to be polite or politically correct—though that may be in play too—but because the concepts of “spiritualities,” “religions,” and especially “beliefs” simply do not apply to spiritualities or to religions, the way the language is now used. That, generally, is how things are now taken in the academy—or particularly at least in the “secular” academy, as it is usually assumed that, if we don’t approach spiritualities or religions in this way, they cannot be fair, respectful, and generous to each other. This is not true, but “tolerance,” in this line of thinking, requires blindness, inattention, or unwillingness to see.

I believe that this way of looking at “spirituality” is a fundamental betrayal both of the spiritual dimension of life and of the intellectual mission of the university. I cannot address all of the difficult issues brought up by bringing spiritualities and religions under the fair scrutiny of intellect in the university setting, and, even if I could, I probably would not find a happy resolution to them. But I would like to try to make a start.

What are we to make of spirit and the spiritual, and hence of spirituality? What are these? What are we thinking of when we bring them before our minds? An old ethicist argues, "The word 'spirit,' even in its lowest use, signifies something that acts; and when acting, is moved of itself and from within." (For instance, we have "alcoholic spirits" as well as "team spirit" and "the spirit of '76.")

The historical association of *spirit* with "wind" and "breath," in the Bible as elsewhere, occurs because spirit is thought of as an invisible power capable of producing visible effects. Wind is like that. But such an invisible power, unlike wind, is thought of as more than, or perhaps totally other than, powers associated with the physical or the natural world and its objects—though all of that imposes serious tasks of clarification, to make any helpful sense. Because of this, in the "spiritual," it easily seems to blend over into the magical. They are often confused.

Recently a book was published under the title *Employing Spirituality in the Workplace*. Among other things it discusses how various symbols, incantations, or physical objects (pyramids, crystals, etc.) could be employed around computers, printers, copy machines, and other office devices to ward off the peculiar evils to which they are subject and to infuse a spiritual power in them. Some would call that "spirituality" tapping into an external source of causation, while others would treat it as magic. (Magic inclines toward disruption or suspension of causation—which is different from a lack of causation.)

So, in a certain minimal sense, spirit is invisible power, and, most likely, a power other than those of the "physical"—whatever they may be. This, I think, will hold of all applications of "spirit," the "spiritual," and "spirituality." But further distinctions need to be drawn. Especially: (1) Is this "power" personal (the powers of a person), and (2) Is this power in some sense "in" the person, or does it lie beyond, outside of them ("transcendental")—or both?

If the spiritual is impersonal, you can freely approach it with an engineering mentality. That is, you find out how to "work it," and then use it for your purposes. It has an order to it, and it can be dangerous, as illustrated in Philip Shah's book *Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Yet, such concepts of spirituality suggest that if you come to learn how to deal with it you can make it do what you want and it has no choice in the matter. Such a position holds that spirituality is neither moral nor immoral. It just "works" or does not, like gravity and electrical phenomena, which are also invisible. Incantations, verbal commands, or spells are required to unlock or facilitate access to it. It is not the result of conversation. Therefore one does not pray to their pyramid, even if they chant at it.

If the spiritual is deemed to be personal, however, whether it is a "familiar spirit," a fairy godmother or Jehovah, you treat it as a person. It has choices and projects of its own; it can decide to do good or to do evil. It has moral personality, and you must come to terms with

that. An engineering approach can be tried, as is common with most historical cases of the use of idols, but what comes of it is at the discretion of the spirit or spirits involved.

With reference to the second question, if the spirit and the spiritual are within you, there are, again, two ways this can be thought of. One is relatively tame. Here you simply discover among your own perhaps thoughts, feelings, and choices some realities and powers you perhaps did not know you had or did not know how to draw upon. You learn how to engage them to discover who you really are, and how you can have results in your life that you desire but were previously unable to achieve. This is mainly what you find on the Oprah show and in Oprah's *O* magazine. It can be described as a milder form of new age thought, directed primarily at health, success, and good living.

In the second approach to the "in you" spirit, you actually turn out to be something very different from what you seemed to be. You turn out to be no less than God, the universe, everything. And everything is you. This is what is presented to us by Shirley MacLaine, by Alan Watts, by Radhakrishna, the Maharishi, and others, "teachers from the East." Basically, what you turn out to be in this view is something "beyond personality," even though the knowledge of this, and of how it works, brings identity and power into your daily life, how much of an "illusion" you and your daily life may be said to be.

Now, these descriptions and distinctions with reference to spirit and the spiritual can provide a kind of taxonomy for thinking about the different "spiritualities" that show up in our society and on our campuses. Any given spirituality will articulate, in general, a way of living that draws in significant ways upon invisible, nonphysical powers to bring about events and conditions in the course of daily existence. It will not be just an outward form of life—as religion sometimes is—but will draw upon an "inner source," not merely associated (or not) with outward forms and activities.

If what I have covered thus far is accurate and helpful, then I see no reason why intelligence should not be applied to the understanding of spirit and spiritualities, or why, in the abstract, one might not choose his or her spirituality on the basis of intellectual insight into what is true or false and what is good or bad. A spirituality is a matter of how I live, with respect to its own relations to other kinds of things, and its positions how one lives life, thinks, treats oneself and others, lives in the family and community, goes to work, and acts in the political and international arena.

In fact, I do not know that it is possible for a socialized human being to entirely escape spirituality, but in theory, at least, one might imagine someone living in total disregard of spirit and spirituality in the sense in which we have tried to explain it. Perhaps there is no such thing as a spirit, and spirituality would then be an illusion. Perhaps the illusion is necessary, as some say; or not. But all of these are fair questions regarding truth or falsity. They are questions to which intellect is appropriately applied.

Clearly spiritualities are different, and often are different in very fundamental ways. Whatever “pluralism” is to mean, it cannot simply mean that “they’re all the same”—at least not if one is to have a clear intellectual grasp of spiritualities, their nature, and so forth. Just look at them. If they are not the same we would not have a problem to which pluralism is supposed to be an answer. If we do inspect the subject of spirituality wisely and fairly, putting our minds to the task, choosing not to be “dummies” on the matter, we will encounter a clear, fairly definable, and tough field of knowledge. We should never put our minds away, especially on the university campus, when we come to spiritualities.

Therefore, the only thing remaining to discuss is how we bring intelligence and spiritualities together in the academy. I suggest we need to start with developing our understanding of intelligence, what it is like to be genuinely intellectual in the approach that one takes to any area of life and thought. We need to understand what truth is, and how logical relations enter into the organization of knowledge. We need to understand logical relations and what they are present and where they are not. We need, as people of intellect, to be really committed to adhering to truth and logical relations with careful attention and modesty. Our situation today is one where these commitments cannot be reliably counted on in universities.

The intellectual life itself can be viewed as a kind of secular spirituality, and it often functions that way. Certainly truth and logic are forces, and are not physical forces. But that leads into a larger discussion that we cannot take up at present. In any case, academic disciplines are rational communities. Especially by how they want things to turn out. We need to be aware that Desire, as Plato told us long ago, is an unruly beast. It can twist and distort our thinking in any area of life. Our degrees and scholarly attainments and recognitions mean nothing to it.

With respect to spirituality, the practitioners on the campus should expect and welcome the most thorough intellectual scrutiny, and they should devote the same both to themselves and to others as the occasion calls for. In addition, they should just be who they are, in terms of spirituality, wherever they are, within the boundaries of what is morally correct and sensible. Pluralism, insofar as it makes sense, is supposed to guarantee that, within those boundaries, one can be what one is without being socially isolated and mistreated for it, or deprived of economic or vocational opportunity. A practitioner of a given spirituality should assume that this ideal is respected (whether or not it is) by those around them in the academy, but they should at the same time understand that this does not mean exemption from intellectual scrutiny. As an English philosopher of some reputation, L. T. Hobhouse, used to say, in matters of religion, “requires of philosophy only a fair field and no quarter given.” Such a “fair field” in intellectual terms is not always given. A couple of years ago there was a scientific conference at City College in New York City. A student arose to ask the distinguished panel—all of them Nobel laureates: “Can you be a good scientist and believe in God?” Reaction came quick and sharp from Herbert A.

Hauptman, who shared the chemistry prize in 1985 for his work on the structure of crystals: "No!" He went on to say that it is incompatible with good science, but also declared, "this kind of belief is damaging to the well-being of the human race." One has only to think of all the great scientists who believed in God to see that this is an irresponsible statement, or perhaps a groundless redefinition of what "good science" is. At any rate, it is not a logical statement about believing in God and the ability to do "good science." A "fair field" would require that Hauptman be faithful to sound reasoning and spell that connection out in a way that makes his claim at least plausible.

Perhaps somewhere he has done that. But I doubt it. People who make such claims, in my experience, have not seriously considered the evidence for their position. On occasion I have asked them for their data, and I have never found one who has taken seriously the provision of intellectual grounds for their claims. They are reasoning in terms of prejudice concerning what they believe must be the case.

A similar case of logical overreach is seen in a widely circulated statement by William Provine, professor of biological sciences at Cornell University:

Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear. There are no gods, no purposes, no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end for me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning to life, and no free will for humans, either.

Now, all the conclusions that Professor Provine has reached may be true. But his claim here is that they are dictated by "modern evolutionary biology." I think that neither he nor anyone else has shown us the path of logically sound reasoning by which established facts and theories of modern biology lead to the conclusion that "there are no gods," and so on. It would be very important to know of a professionally accredited textbook or peer-review journal in which this reasoning is laid out. Of course I am not qualified in this field, but I doubt there is a credible reference to such literature.

Often these kinds of grand conclusions are advanced upon the assumption that "nature is all there is," and that what nature is is exhaustively determined by the particular sciences. But none of the particular sciences, nor any combination thereof, includes in its subject matter any claims about all there is or about all the realms of knowledge. Look and see. Such things are not a part of their competence.

Now, logical overreach is very common on the "spirituality" side as well. Trying to determine the age of the earth by reading the Bible is one example. But I have chosen these illustrations because of a tendency to credit antispirituality (I don't want to say "science") with a higher degree of intellectual responsibility than spirituality (even religion). If this

were ever justified, recent decades have removed that justification. Currently there is a remarkable upswing of an older tradition on the part of those who claim to speak for “science” toward “saving” the world from religion and from most of what would be called spirituality. Some want to keep spirituality, but help us understand it in strictly “naturalistic” terms by, for example, identifying spirituality with brain processes of certain kinds, or with human creativity.

Finally, there are some important insights available to us within the specifically Christian form of spirituality. Christian spirituality holds that the invisible and “unbodily” power that it involves is personal and transcendent, though much effort must be expended to explain exactly what that means. In a spirituality conceived in terms of transcendence, the individual receives the power to be spiritual by (1) calling it, and finding ways of participating in its activities. One can fall into “spiritual engineering” in such a case, but one is usually warned against it. (2) On the transcendent side, the Holy Spirit is treated as a person who is in charge of the world, who works to bring about what is good, who is involved in human affairs for that purpose, but who does not work human beings to reform, choose evil, and go their own way. Matthew Arnold’s description of God as “a force working for righteousness in human history” does fairly well, if we understand the “force” in personalistic terms.

With some adjustments one can see the kinship of Christian spirituality with the other familiar theistic religions, Judaism and Islam are perhaps the most kindred, and, with even further adjustments, there is a similarity with Satanism, and some versions (at least) of Wicca or paganism. There are also some aspects of Confucianism and Shintoism, which now practiced in some quarters, but we will leave these lines of kinship and similarity unexplored areas for now.

In the Christian version of personalized spirit and spirituality, the spiritual life takes on the character of a personal relationship between individuals, with the attendant features of reciprocal attention, care, provision, assistance or service, emotional interaction, expectations, common work, and development or growth. In Western civilization as it has actually developed, the second book of spiritual life is the biblical book of Psalms. Just as an illustration, consider the twenty-third Psalm, with which most people are familiar, whether or not they self-identify as Christians. But the entire book of Psalms is a record, an enactment, a celebration of spirituality, of spiritual life, understood as an interactive relationship between persons in the personal as well as “natural” order. On one side there is a transcendent spiritual being—God, the LORD, the Shepherd—with all other human beings, and Israel among them, on the other side, individually and in groups, all together constituting what is called “the kingdom of God.”

This vision of life on a personal, spiritual basis in the kingdom of God is extended, for the Christian, in the person and teachings of Jesus (the Good Shepherd) in such a way as to

include all of humanity, at their choice, without regard to any kind of personal, social, or cultural status, ethnic or otherwise, and to allow the individual participant to have the dignity and power to achieve a good life and become a good person. Devotion to Jesus Christ and to what he is doing in world history then and now is the center of a distinctively Christian spirituality.

Was Jesus a dummy? Or was he the smartest, most intelligent person who ever lived on earth? If he were a dummy, Christian spirituality would not rise above him. You might try to make a list of three people who you think were smarter than Jesus. Who in your field of specialization would those people be?

The oldest vision of the spiritual life in the kingdom of God here and now is a vision that originated many universities, including the University of Southern California, and other great universities in the Western world, reaching back to Bologna, Paris, and Oxford. Although it did not always live up to its own ideals, Christian spirituality has been one that fostered the life of the intellect as an essential part of the spiritual life. The words of Jesus to his disciples, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” is carved in the walls of more universities than any other saying. The ideology of truth and its discovery and dissemination is in fact a “spirituality” in the broadest sense explained above. The statuary around the central lower quad of the administration building on the USC campus is an eloquent testimony to the underlying spirituality, Matthew Simpson and John Wesley (both Methodist ministers) facing the central quad; Theodore Roosevelt facing north, William Shakespeare facing south; Plato and Cicero facing west; and Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson facing north. What it says about spirituality and the academy is written large in the stone—but many justifiably qualified to doubt, and large elements of non-Christian contributions, especially from Jewish participants. It doesn’t particularly prove anything other than some *de facto* harmony and interpenetration between spirituality and the academy. All the relevant questions about truth, rationality, and value, with respect to a certain spirituality, have to be asked and answered by each generation as it goes by. Any spirituality, even a “secular” one, incorporates a set of claims about reality, truth, and values. The responsibility of people who are doing intellectually tough and honest work with these questions, even if the officially recognized business of study do not take them seriously (and they often don’t).

The Christian in the academy has many useful models to look to. One of the most well-known, of course, is C. S. Lewis. His field of study, English literature, is a recognized scholarly field in which he was, to say the least, a recognized scholar with major publications to his credit. After he became Christian, wherever he was—“warts and all,” as we say. His field of expertise naturally spilled over into a wide range of literary productions in which the truths and values he upheld as a Christian were, as a matter of course, artistically presented; and because of who he was all around he found many ways to

address the general matters of the academy and its varied inhabitants concerning his beliefs and values as a Christian, with no holds barred and no question ducked.

Another individual actually came to be a Christian from reading one of Lewis's books, *Mere Christianity*. He is Francis Collins, well known for his work on the human genome and for identifying genetic defects that predispose one to cystic fibrosis, and other diseases. He simply is who he is and overtly practices his brand of Christian spirituality wherever it is appropriate. In his case, his special expertise put him in position to write the book *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. Like Lewis, he is not dogmatic. His work simply tries to be thorough and honest about the facts and the logic, about what we know and what we don't know, and to leave matters open for discussion where the weight of evidence does not incline in a particular direction.

In thinking about spirituality and the academy, it should be understood that the work of intellect and of the researcher or teacher is not to get people to believe things or do things. It is to bring understanding, awareness, truth, and evidence to light. In a 1918 paper titled "Science as a Vocation," Max Weber says that "it is not the role of a professor in the execution of his duties to sell a student a Weltanschauung, a code of conduct. . . . And if he feels called upon to intervene in the struggle of worldviews and party opinions, he may do so outside, in the market place, in the press, in meetings, in associations, wherever he wishes." But this is still true when we move beyond the worldviews and codes of conduct. If I am teaching geometry as I once did, it is not my job to get the student to believe the Pythagorean theorem, or to act upon it. As a researcher and teacher I am not "selling" anything. My task is to bring understanding and all of what means what, and of what is (or is not) evidence for what. If my intellectual or valuational content of my spirituality, of whatever kind it may be, is relevant to that task, then I have a duty to discuss it, so far as it is relevant. Otherwise it remains in the domain of who I am, where it is open to all to scrutinize and interpret or misinterpret as they see fit. My task with reference to it is simply to be who I am, in openness, humility, and beneficence to all. Its reality will speak for itself to all fair-minded persons. And if it is a spirituality that is also intelligent—a spirituality for "smarties," shall we say—that, too, will be clear upon inquiry. It must gladly stand the tests.