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## **Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic**

Philip Sheldrake

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly:

A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic

For many people, the word "spirituality" immediately implies interiority in the sense of a quest for personal spiritual experience away from everyday life. The sharp contrast between inner and outer life was prevalent in most books about Christian spirituality until the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has still not disappeared entirely. However, the idea that spirituality is merely the pursuit of individual inwardness has also been criticized in Christian circles. As far back as the 1930s, the idiosyncratic book on prayer by Friedrich Heiler distinguished sharply between mystical-interior forms of Christian religion and active-prophetic forms (of which he approved). According to Heiler the mystical-interior forms arose from a denial of the impulse of life whereas the active-prophetic manifested the energetic will to live.<sup>1</sup> More recently, in an overly polarized essay, Owen Thomas argued that Christian spirituality has been marred by an emphasis on privatized interiority and needs to be radically reformulated in terms of outer life.<sup>2</sup>

A theologically more nuanced critique of the split between inner and outer is made by Rowan Williams who notes that:

Common to a good deal of contemporary philosophical reflection on human identity is the conviction that we are systematically misled, even corrupted, by a picture of the human agent as divided into an outside and an inside—a "true self," hidden, buried, to be excavated by one or another kind of therapy...<sup>3</sup>

For Williams, this "self" is a morally problematic fiction. It suggests that my deepest interests are individual and preordained and undermines any notion that the human situation fundamentally embodies a common task. Such a view privileges the search for an authentic inner identity "unsullied by the body or history."<sup>4</sup> For Williams there is no complete, *a priori* identity to be unearthed by peeling away various layers of outer existence; rather, the real self is found or made from the very beginning in human communication and interaction. Williams does not deny interiority—believing that it emerges from the hard task of human engagement—but he does suggest that a *rhetoric* of interiority has had serious moral and cultural consequences. **[End Page 19]**

So where does this rhetoric of interiority come from? Richard Sennett, the American social historian, blames Christian theology for the deep division between interiority and exteriority that he believes pollutes Western culture: "It is a divide between subjective experience and worldly experience, self and city."<sup>5</sup> Augustine's *City of God*, suggests Sennett, the classic expression of the triumph of an inner spiritual world over a human, outer, one.<sup>6</sup> Augustine's legacy, he claims, drove Christian culture to view social, public life with suspicion. Sennett further suggests that modern urbanism is infected with this legacy—what he calls "a Protestant ethic of space" that sees the public world as sterile wilderness.

Are these criticisms of interiority fair? In the first part of this essay, I will suggest that "interiority" is not a straightforward concept. For Augustine and other classic spiritual teachers, the concept did not mean the same thing as it has come to mean for us. I agree with Williams that a dangerous *rhetoric* of interiority, creating a dichotomy between inner and outer life, gradually affected approaches to spirituality over the last hundred years or so. This resulted from the combined influence of some aspects of Enlightenment thinking and late nineteenth-century psychology. However, we are in danger of getting things the wrong way round if we begin with an *a priori* definition of interiority as inherently private, individualistic and detached and then interpret spirituality from that fixed standpoint. I believe that, if we survey the western spiritual tradition as a whole, "interiority" can be redeemed. I also believe that the concepts of interiority and

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