

BOOK REVIEW

***Rationality, Humility, and Spirituality
in Christian Life***

by Dennis Hiebert

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Rationality, Humility, and Spirituality in Christian Life is an interdisciplinary excursion into current scholarship on three perplexing topics: rationality, humility, and spirituality. The volume of academic literature Hiebert lays open for the reader is amazing. I was not familiar with most of the literature he has mastered. With this book, Hiebert can be ranked among a handful of sociologists with the intellectual breadth and depth to probe philosophical, religious, and social scientific literature regarding issues that are avoided by others, and weave the threads he finds into a well-woven cloth of meaning. This book is for readers who seek to retain both their faith and their intellectual integrity. His goal is to assist them to decide for themselves which of the confusing maze of ideas that populate our world they want to accept or reject.

Rationality

Hiebert begins by examining the ways “autonomous rationality has infected Christianity.” He explicates “two social practices of rationality that in their extreme, prove problematic. Both the practices of rationalization as illuminated by sociology as well as the practice of rationalism as illuminated by philosophy are shown to reduce Christian faith by diminishing and even denying its non-rational elements” (xvii-xviii). Reason includes mental operations such as categorization, comparison, generalization, and deduction. Rationality is the capacity to use reason. Non-rationality is “belief or action not weighed or evaluated by critical reason, but driven primarily by tradition, custom, norms, consensus, habit, values, ideals, making-meaning, emotions, intuition, or even the unconscious” (7). Hiebert drew this distinction between the rational and non-rational from Max Weber who advocated the view that science must divorce facts from values (7).

Rationalism is the theory that reason is the foundation of certainty in knowledge. Extreme rationalism, which became prominent during the Enlightenment, claimed that thought can be disinterested or divorced from human desires and purposes. It attempted to remove anything non-rational, including emotional, intuitive, subjective knowledge, and replace it with logical, intellectual, and “objective” knowledge. In so doing, extreme rationalism undermined

trust in many of the capacities that make us human: values, empathy, emotions, mystery, humility, and spiritual awareness.

Prior to the Enlightenment, it was assumed that although the “rational” can be conceptually distinguished from the “non-rational,” in practice they cannot be separated. Weber popularized the goal of separation, but from Romanticism to Postmodernism, critiques of Enlightenment rationalism have enabled a cultural turn toward the subjective and away from the supremacy of reason. Forgiveness, redemption, hope, moral judgment, social concern, faith, and love are what Jesus taught and practiced. Christians believe that each of these is real (in the sense that no society could endure without them), reasonable, and inseparable from reason. Hiebert argues for humble rationality and a return to more appreciation for subjective sources of knowledge.

Christianity began when the disciples responded to Jesus’ invitation to “Follow me.” Jesus did not make a rational argument; instead, he offered an invitation that had enough power and urgency to attract them to follow him. Over the centuries, theologians have organized the message of Jesus into rational systems of beliefs. Questions that were once viewed as mysterious came to be viewed as intellectual problems to be solved through reason (20). Enlightenment rationalism infected theology to the extent that theology, for a time, focused on rational propositions. Now myths, ritual, ethos, and spiritual experience are increasingly celebrated, perhaps because they capture the imagination, inspire emotions, and motivate (19). Moses before the burning bush experienced his unworthiness and dependence (20). Similarly, people today seem to want to experience the energy, urgency, vitality, and goodness of an encounter with the divine.

We still need theology. We cannot read about the Prodigal Son, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Sheep without knowing that God cares for us and sees each of us as having incalculable worth. We need reason to make sense of revelation. Theology illuminates God, revelation, ourselves, and the world, and gives us understanding that we could not have without theology. The precise role that reason should play in theology remains controversial, but the need for reason is not.

While extreme rationalism is one over-extension of reason, rationalization is another. Like rationalism, rationalization interferes with our ability to choose explanations wisely. Rationalization, as explicated by Max Weber, is the imperative to find the most efficient means toward any end. Over time, the goal of efficiency undercuts other cultural values such as community responsibility, relationships, and personal wholeness. Rationalization of production and consumption is so ingrained in our total way of life that our culture appears unable to act rationally, that is, to accept the need to change our way of life in order to avoid climate catastrophe. Our economic expectations, policies, and procedures seem unchangeable, even in the face of more frequent severe weather events.

Humility

There has been a burst of scholarship about humility in the social sciences. Many definitions of humility have been suggested, and remarkably, all are in basic agreement. Humility involves a realistic assessment of self, including one's failures and limitations, and a willingness to change one's mind when better evidence is encountered (65). The research agrees that humility is helpful to foster social relationships and to facilitate human flourishing. Arrogance, entitlement, domination, and power-seeking all harm relationships (70). Furthermore, humility has been empirically associated with "generosity, helpfulness and agreeableness, patience, empathy, interpersonal forgiveness, social justice commitment, avoidance of social duplicity, and graciousness in receiving from others" (70).

Arrogance is condemned over two hundred times in the Old and New Testaments, yet Christians frequently speak harshly against each other's interpretations and doctrines. The fact that we have many translations of the Bible should serve as evidence that the Bible is not self-interpreting. If the meaning is clear, it should not be hard for Christians to agree on what it is saying. But it is not clear. Christians who admit that the Bible is sometimes ambiguous are more accepting of the interpretations of other Christians (91).

In an age when Western culture is facing extraordinary challenges, humility is essential for us to respond constructively. We are simultaneously facing the potential of climate catastrophe, more frequent economic downturns, increasing inequality, decreasing global cooperation, social unrest, a global pandemic, and possibly a cold war with China. Our society is so politically polarized that many people on both sides are not open to considering the views of the other side. Vilification is common. Openness and humility are exactly what everything from our interpersonal relationships to our long-term global co-existence needs. Hiebert is doing his best; so must we.

Spirituality

Traditionally, spirituality was viewed as a component of religion. That is changing. As of 2017, 27% of those surveyed said they are spiritual but not religious (SBNR), up from 19% in 2012. SBNRs reject religious exclusivism and do not look to organized religion for guidance. According to Charles Taylor's subjectivization thesis, people are moving away from having external roles and expectations guide their thoughts and actions, and instead are following their personal subjective desires and experiences. They desire to locate their personal source of significance, meaning, and authority within themselves (125).

If religion is defined as a unified system of collectively shared beliefs (something beyond individuals), then spirituality can be defined as individual instead of collective, as internal

instead of external, and as experiential rather than intellectual. So one manifestation of the trend toward subjectivization is a trend away from religion and toward spirituality.

Hiebert surveys both the psychological and sociological literature on spirituality and remarks on the growing acceptance within these disciplines of concepts that are either difficult to measure or beyond our ability to measure. Both humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology have opened the door for psychologists to talk about inner states of consciousness, along with experiences of the divine, wholeness, and transformation (120). Hiebert cites the analysis of sociologists Bellah, Sorokin, Wuthnow, Smith, and Simmel to describe various cultural trends which have spiritual implications.

Hiebert excels at unpacking the place of spirituality within the Christian tradition, both in its broadest reaches and in its denominational particularities. I have never encountered the breadth and depth of analysis of Christian spiritualities that I encountered in the final twenty-five pages of this book. Hiebert is always fair-minded, succinct, and insightful.

For example, his analysis of what distinguishes Christian spirituality from spirituality in other religious traditions describes my own thoughts better than I can. Other religions focus on subjective experience, whereas Christianity relates to all of life. Other religions feature the human struggle to ascend to God, whereas Christianity features divine descent to humans and an invitation for humans to respond with trust. In Christian spirituality, the individual remains fully engaged in social life, but senses a subjective awareness of being “identified, valued, connected, and called” (139). “And if the individual responds positively to the call, it elicits a profound sense of homecoming” (139). Unlike other religious traditions, Christian spirituality involves both the transcendent (divine) and the immanent (neighbor), both the internal experience (joy, gratitude, relationship, comfort) and the external (religious practices) (140). Spirituality is a powerful, irrepressible longing of the human soul. Humans are by nature driven, obsessed with the desire for something more, for something significant and holy. Everyone is, in some sense, a mystic. Spirituality is what motivates us to connect our lives to something significant and awesome (149). Unfortunately, what some call “spirituality” can motivate a person to do great evil. Therefore, we need a faith that both speaks to our deep longing and guides our lives in holy and wholesome directions. Without critical intelligence one can end up with Hitler.

Mysticism discards any attempt to name the attributes of God. God is incomprehensible and undefinable. Some mystics follow the *via negativa*, that is, the path of knowing God by negation of what we think we know. God is beyond our categories. We create space for God so that God can appear to us as the mystery that God is. The *via positiva* is knowing God through God’s self-revelation. The *via negativa* and the *via positiva* are complementary. In fact, both are necessary for talking about God.

Hiebert surveys the available options on each topic and allows the reader to reflect and choose the version of spirituality that offers the best balance of the interior and the exterior.

My own journey inclines me toward prophetic spirituality, and persuades me that God's people are directed to work for world peace and social justice. I admire Dr. King, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Cesar Chavez, John Lewis, and others who were activists for social justice as a manifestation of their spiritual lives. Dr. King talked about praying with our feet. Regardless of what you believe regarding spirituality, you will learn much from the eminent and stimulating path Hiebert cuts through the perplexities of this dimension of the Christian life.

In sum, a humble view of rationality, attentiveness to our fallibility along with willingness to accept correction, and openness to mystery and spirituality are all mutually supportive and interdependent. All make room for a narrative, affective, and incarnational version of the Christian faith. Circumspect rationality is needed to tame our over-blown confidence in the power of reason. Humility is needed to tame our egos and our over-blown certainty about human knowledge. Together they unleash the tether that binds our minds and releases us to explore the spiritual realm, the Divine reality that dwells both within us and beyond us.

We have it on divine authority. Our rationality, our humility, and our spirituality are each rooted in God's purposes for our lives. Our rationality is a gift that works with, not against, our values. Our values are more than expressions of human desires, they are rooted in His desire for us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Our humility is not just rooted in a need for social harmony, it is our response of adoration once we recognize God's plentitude and our finitude. And our spirituality is our adoration of the One who is far beyond us, but who astonishes us by His love for us.

If the Christian life is a journey, this book is food for the journey.

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