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Spirituality: *Biblical and nonbiblical*—Part 1 of 2

Prelude

In 2008, Review and Herald Publishing Association published my book *Hunger: Satisfying the Longing of Your Soul*. In that volume I tried to do two things. First, I wanted to testify to the journey God had taken me on to find closeness to Him and true, biblical heart religion. Second, I wanted to help others who also long to grow closer to God. At the time I first wrote, there was little or no controversy about what came to be called “spiritual formation.” Soon after the book was published, however, some in the Christian world (eventually including some Seventh-day Adventists) began to use the term *spiritual formation* to describe dangerous, counterfeit spiritual practices. I am thankful that the book was received as a real spiritual blessing by many. Much to my surprise, however, I soon discovered that others viewed the book with suspicion and labeled me as a dangerous heretic.

Given the current climate, I would like to clarify several things. I am a lifelong Seventh-day Adventist who cares deeply about my church. I am opposed to all forms of spirituality that are contrary to the principles of the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. I would also be the first to admit that my book is far from perfect. If I could turn back the clock, I can think of a number of changes that I would make in the original manuscript. For example, I would quote passages from Ellen White

that speak to the subject, even though Review and Herald suggested that I not do this because of their plans to market the book to the non-Adventist public I would correct a chart that, at first glance, makes it appear as if I believe in Karma. Obviously, I do not. I would attempt to clarify that the term *spiritual formation*, as I understand it, is a term very similar to *sanctification* or *spiritual growth* and would point out that it has been used in Adventism without controversy for many years (see, for example, “*Seventh-day Adventist Minister’s Handbook*,” The Ministerial Association, 1997, 24–26). I would also not include a bibliography of books for additional reading, since some critics apparently understood this to be my blanket endorsement of all that the various authors wrote or believed. This is certainly not my position. Furthermore, I would be more careful to clarify, define, or omit terms that have become the center of so much misunderstanding and suspicion. Finally, I would explain that while I support biblical repetition within the appropriate context (see Ps. 136), I oppose, as the Bible does (Matt. 6:7), meaningless, mind emptying-repeating, and/or mantra-like meditation and prayer. I hope that such changes would have allowed all my readers to more easily understand my position.

In a certain sense, this two-part article (part 1 follows this prelude; part 2 will be published in the November 2015

issue) is meant, in part, to answer two larger questions that have arisen in connection with the book. In part 1, I explore how biblical Christian spirituality contrasts with that of the so-called Eastern religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the New Age. Part 2 is a response to the question of whether Adventist spirituality is unique. I believe it is and will explain why. I hope this two-part article can be a blessing and further promote a closer walk with Jesus.

In humanity, in whom God has implanted a hunger for Himself, the search for God takes place in many forms. Some of these forms are valid for Christians and some are not. This article suggests ways to tell the difference between biblical spirituality and other major forms of spiritual life. In particular, I present the contrast between Christian spirituality and Hindu/Buddhist/New Age (HBN) spirituality.

A few years ago, respected Christian pollster George Barna published an article, based on a poll, under the title “Christianity Is No Longer Americans’ Default Faith.”¹ In the past, if Americans became religious, most embraced some form of Christianity. Now half of all adults believe Christianity is just one option among many. While people remain increasingly dependent on religion in their lives, they do not necessarily turn to Jesus for guidance. Even those who claim to be Christians are more open to non-Christian faiths and practices.

This presents a major challenge for biblical Christianity. Whereas in the past, much effort was spent explaining or defending a certain type of Christianity in a context of differing denominations, it seems clear that Christians must now explain themselves in the larger context of other world religions.² Even among those who call themselves Christian, a large majority feel free to pick and choose their beliefs to fit personal views and ideas in an individual mix of ideas and practices. This may explain why some estimate that “about 60% of Christians in America accept some New Age beliefs and practices even if they do not always associate them with the New Age.”³ While this statistic is probably too high, the influence of New Age is clearly widespread.

One area of religion where this is particularly true focuses on the spiritual life, or spirituality.⁴ Many voices speak, inviting people to practice various methods of experiencing the Divine.

This confronts Bible-believing Christians with questions such as, What is biblical spirituality?⁵ How does it compare with other forms of spirituality? What should Christians do in response to the present situation where differing religious practices are used?

While there are clearly Jewish and Muslim forms of the spiritual life, as well as differing Christian types, they are not our main concern here. For many people the more urgent issue is the one posed by Hinduism, Buddhism, and their contextualized forms in what has come to be known as New Age. There are many varieties and syncretistic blends of these faiths, but most hold a common core of ideas that we will discuss in this article. In a short article like this, the risk of superficiality and oversimplification is present, but the topic has become so crucial that this subject deserves an initial attempt to understand.

In what follows, I deal with this issue in three sections: (1) inadequate ways of dealing with the challenge of HBN; (2) major concepts of biblical spirituality and HBN spirituality; (3) the joys and advantages of biblical spirituality.

Inadequate ways of dealing with the issue

Some have attempted to meet the challenge of HBN spirituality to biblical spirituality by comparing and evaluating certain terms. Using this methodology, some terms are condemned and other terms are seen as safe. While some terms or concepts are out of line with biblical spirituality and can be quite easily rejected, such as *reincarnation*, *Karma*, and *pantheism*, many terms are less clear and can have both acceptable and unacceptable meanings. Examples of such ambiguous words are *spirituality*, *spiritual formation*, and *meditation*. Before such terms and what they supposedly mean are condemned, clear definition and explanation must be given. This means that dealing with this issue solely on the basis of terms can be misleading and is often superficial.

Others have chosen to deal with the issue by the use of history. Spiritual practices can be accepted and rejected on the basis of their roots in history. For example, one may say that such and such a practice comes from Hinduism and thus is false. This method, while at times interesting and perhaps helpful, has two major problems. First, there are varying interpretations of history, and the origin of many spiritual practices is difficult to prove. Second, conservative Christians look to the Bible for their authority, not history. The right question to ask is, Is this belief, or practice, biblical?

Some contrast biblical and HBN spirituality by condemning or accepting certain practices. Again, this works in some cases. Most Christians would rightly reject such things as invoking or venerating various gods and goddesses and Zen meditation. However, on the other side, some tie the holistic health movement to the New Age. For example, Richard Kyle says, “In practice the New Age and holistic health movement are one movement.”⁶ While it is true that diet and vegetarianism are important for many HBN followers, it is also true that some Christians are vegetarians for valid biblical reasons.

For that reason, I disagree with Kyle. I believe that vegetarianism is valid for Christians as long as vegetarianism is seen in the biblical context. The practice cannot be evaluated by itself but must be evaluated in its context to judge truly, whether it is biblical or not.

Thus, while in some instances, appeals to terms, history, and practices can be helpful, in many cases these methods are inadequate and incomplete. A better place to begin is to compare and contrast principles and the theology of each belief system and then move on to what this implies for the spiritual life and practice.

Biblical and HBN spirituality: Key principles

In this section I outline four fundamental biblical teachings that form the conceptual basis for biblical spirituality and explain the spiritual life to which they give birth. I do the same for HBN spirituality and then compare the two systems.

Four basic concepts underlying biblical spirituality are as follows:

1. *A unique, personal Creator God who is active in the world.* The Bible begins with the story of God’s creation of the world and humanity (Gen. 1; 2). It describes this God as personal. He creates humans, male and female, in His divine image (Gen. 1:27). He speaks to them and blesses them (Gen. 1:28–30). No other God is like Him, for He alone is to be worshiped (Exod. 20:3). This worship is because of His creatorship and saving power (Exod. 20:1, 2, 8–11; Deut. 5:6, 12–15). From the very beginning, when He walks and talks with Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 3:8–10), all the way through the Bible until the very end in Revelation, when He dwells with people (Rev. 21:3), God remains in active contact and communion with the world and people.

2. *Humans are holistic, created beings who have sinned and disrupted their relationship with God.* Since humans went against God and disrupted His good creation and betrayed His love (Gen. 3), their salvation depends on

God's love and grace, which He freely gives (John 3:16). We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Our love and response to God involves our whole being—heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:29, 30). Over and over the Bible calls us to repent—admit we have sinned and cast ourselves on God's grace (Ezek. 18:30; Matt. 3:2; Acts 2:38).

3. *The world was created "good" by God, but it has been devastated by human sin.* Over and over God calls His creation "good" and in summary calls the whole endeavor "very good" (Gen. 1:12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Sin marred the earth (Gen. 3), but we can still see God in the created world (Rom. 1:20). In the end, God re-creates His world, completely restoring and healing the relationships broken by sin (Rev. 21:1).

4. *Jesus is the culmination and center of God's healing and restoring relationship with His people and His world.* From the beginning God has had a plan to restore His people and the world and heal the broken, disrupted relationships caused by sin. The climax of God's plan was sending Jesus to enter human life and sacrifice Himself to save the world and His people (Heb. 1:1, 2). Jesus lived here in our world, died to save us from sin, and was resurrected (1 Cor. 15:1–8). He now sends His Holy Spirit to be present with believers and minister to their needs (John 14:26). Thus, believers interact with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Given these four basic concepts, biblical spirituality is the following of the God-given ways of working to restore the relationship with God now and paving the way to final restoration in a new heaven and earth. Based on these four principles, we can begin to trace the type of life and action that constitute biblical spirituality. Since God is loving, gracious, and saving, He approaches humans with the offer of fellowship. The best response humans can make to this approach is admission of need and then worship. Worship is indeed the primary, most common response of believers to the personal God of the Bible. Humans cannot repay God's grace or earn His favor: the

worship they give and the obedience they practice are just appropriate ways for them to show their gratitude.

This personal interchange initiated by worship is nurtured through various means. Prayer is one. Prayer addresses God with our thoughts, needs, praise, and requests. Prayer is also listening to this personal God to discover what He may say to us through the Bible, nature, and His still small voice (John 10:3, 4; Ps. 33:6, 9; Rev. 3:20).

Meditation is another way we enter into relationship with this personal God. In meditation, we reflect on and ponder God's Word and works by quietly speaking them or silently and atten-

impure and untrue. There is not the choosing of the better part, the sitting at the feet of Jesus, as did Mary, to learn the most sacred lessons of the divine Teacher, that they may be laid up in the heart, and practiced in the daily life. Meditation upon holy things will elevate and refine the mind.⁷⁷

Other major ways to enhance our relationship with God include living in obedience to God's Word, fellowshiping with other believers, and fasting. In this relationship, several things must be remembered. First, there is a divine-personal dimension to all of these practices. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is truly present and at

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tively pondering what He would have us understand and do. The Bible speaks often of meditation—Joshua 1:8, Psalm 48:9; 77:5–7; 119:15, 148; 143:5. Ellen White has this profound statement:

"Why is it that our youth, and even those of maturer years, are so easily led into temptation and sin? It is because the word of God is not studied and meditated upon as it should be. If it were appreciated, there would be an inward rectitude, a strength of spirit, that would resist the temptations of Satan to do evil. A firm, decided will-power is not brought into the life and character because the sacred instruction of God is not made the study, and the subject of meditation. There is not the effort put forth that there should be to associate the mind with pure, holy thoughts and to divert it from what is

work to teach, guide, encourage, and bless (see John 16:13–15). In biblical spirituality, real divine-human communion takes place. Second, all we are as humans is part of this relationship and communion. As mentioned earlier, we are to respond to God with all we are—soul, mind, and body. Some may emphasize the mind and cognition as the key to spirituality. Overemphasized, such a view can neglect the spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of biblical spirituality. Others, even some Christians, denigrate the physical or emotional aspects in order to be more "spiritual" and deal only with the realm of the abstract or immaterial. Some may want to live outside of the mind and exist in a so-called *realm of the spirit*. All of these views are imbalanced. God created all aspects of us,

and we must keep all these elements in balance.

In the world today, a cosmic conflict continues between good and evil. The forces of evil, Satan and his host, seek to disrupt the work of God in us. This is a practical reality that must be recognized but must not be applied in an imbalanced manner. Those who ignore or deny the presence of evil need to recognize the possibility of deception. At the same time, there are some who see Satan almost everywhere and create such a fear of deception that anxiety keeps sincere Christians from experiencing all that God wants for them. Such people make Satan so powerful, to the extent that they forget that Jesus gained the victory over all evil powers and is truly Lord over all.

In biblical spirituality, Jesus is the center. Since He is Creator and Savior, we worship Him. He sends the Holy Spirit, who comes to us as we commune with God, and teaches us, leads us, guides us, and even helps us pray (Rom. 8:26, 27). Since Jesus has triumphed over Satan and sin, we may seek His help and power when we face evil. We pray in the name of Jesus (John 14:13, 14) with direct love and devotion to Him.

HBN core concepts

While there are exceptions and some variations, most HBNs would believe in the following four concepts:

1. *“God” is an impersonal power or cosmic force permeating all things.* This teaching is common to all pantheistic beliefs: God exists everywhere and in everything. He is not a Person outside of us, but rather an impersonal force in us, outside of us, over us, and in all things, material and immaterial. As God is not a personal being, so Satan is not a personal being. Consequently, the Christian position of sin as a personal rebellion against God is not tenable to HBN, and the cross as God’s way of salvation is indeed considered “foolishness.”

2. *Humans have the divine within them and need to learn how to experience and enlarge that power through enlightenment, meditation, knowledge, and service.* The law of Karma (the cosmic law of cause and effect) and the process of reincarnation (the endless possibilities of birth-death-birth-death . . .) provide for human life a limitless path of advancing to higher stages of enlightenment, finally reaching a state of oneness with god (nirvana or bliss). This route is endless and cyclic, and one’s onward progress or downward

plunge depends upon one’s good works or lack thereof in current life.

3. *The path to enlightenment and salvation is based on discipline and practice.* Meditation, which puts people in touch with the divine inside them and the world, is a key ingredient. As one experiences altered states of consciousness through such things as meditation, chanting, certain types of exercise, and breathing, the presence of divinity is said to become real.

4. *Jesus is absent, de-emphasized, or reinterpreted.* Indeed, some HBN movements neither find a need for Jesus nor provide for one. Mostly, HBNs see Jesus as one among many gurus or religious teachers.

Based on these beliefs, HBN spirituality uses a variety of means to rid one of ignorance and make progress toward enlightenment that gives ability to experience the divine in all beings. In most cases, the foremost method includes some type of meditation that, in particular, helps one to connect with the power of “the divine” within. Often, various states of altered consciousness are cultivated to escape from the normal reasoning processes seen as a hindrance to the experiential state of higher consciousness.

Another joy in eternity

I have recently found myself giving renewed thought to what heaven must be like. I challenged myself to think of things that I had not focused on before. It is easy to reflect upon spending time with Jesus, my guardian angel, and saints from the Bible and upon reuniting with loved ones who had passed away. But, what else will be there?

I have always held this utopian hope of deep and long-lasting harmony among people on earth—not a harmony based on professional affiliations, schools attended, churches attended, or similar political ideologies. Rather, a harmony based on accepting people

for who they are: God’s created beings whom He loves with an everlasting love and died to save.

Perhaps middle-aged realism (or apathy) has settled in. But now I think more and more of the New Jerusalem: a place where people are not judged on whether they are rich or poor, fat or skinny, black or white, blue collar or white collar, uneducated or educated. I want to live in a place where people are genuinely accepted for who they are: sons and daughters of God.

But in order to prepare for that place, I need the Holy Spirit to come into my life every day, instilling these

principles in my heart and living out these principles in my professional, ecclesiastical, and societal relationships with others.

“Dear Lord and Father, live out Your life within me!”

—Willie E. Hucks II, DMin, serves as associate editor, Ministry

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The process is powered by personal decisions, self-effort, and teachings of spiritual leaders. Since one lifetime will most likely not suffice for release to nirvana or bliss, reincarnation and rebirth will facilitate more opportunities to arrive at that state.

As we examine HBN spirituality, we can immediately see factors that are contrary to biblical spirituality, and therefore should be shunned by Christians. Any form of meditation that seeks to escape from or leave behind the mind should be rejected. Christians believe that the mind is an important part of who we are, and leaving it behind is not biblical. Indeed, the biblical anthropology recognizes the crucial role of the mind in both the corruption of sin and the transformation of the redemptive process. Biblical meditation, thus, engages the mind and the heart. Any form of meditation preceded by or involving the invoking of the name of a guru or god should be rejected. Any meditation practice that purports to lead to a state of higher consciousness beyond thought or any that is clearly based on a pantheistic belief system cannot be biblical.

It is helpful to keep in mind four major ways that HBN spirituality contrasts with biblical spirituality. First, biblical spirituality is a relationship with a personal Creator God who interacts with His creation. HBN spirituality seeks an impersonal god/force/power that interpenetrates the world. Second, biblical spirituality sees all of life, including body and mind, as a good gift of God. HBN devalues the body and is suspicious of reason, making both subject to higher spiritual consciousness. Third, biblical spirituality recognizes the sinfulness of humans and their need to repent and seek God's help. HBN spirituality has no room for sin as a rebellion against God such as in the biblical view, and often leads to a silencing of conscience and reliance on one's own good works to move upward in the path of Karma toward the

attainment of bliss. Fourth, biblical spirituality rejoices in the uniqueness of Jesus and authority of the Bible. HBN ignores, de-emphasizes, or reinterprets these truths. Jesus' uniqueness is strangled by the fraternal embrace of HBN.

Advantages and joys of biblical spirituality

Sometimes Christians have spoken of the wrongness of HBN spirituality without showing or sharing the privileges biblical spirituality offers. Some of these privileges are as follows:

First, biblical spirituality is communion with a personal God. The vocabulary of personal relationship and friendship fit with biblical spirituality. When Christians pray, they encounter a God of love and compassion who communicates grace, mercy, and concern with the details of life.

Second, biblical spirituality expects the real presence of the resurrected Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, He is there (Matt. 18:20). His final word to His disciples is that He will be with them to the end of the age (Matt. 28:19, 20). Some present-day Christians have lost sight of this truth. A secular worldview has made people suspicious about talk of Jesus' presence because they take an overly rational approach to belief. In some cases, this suspicion about biblical spirituality has led people to seek a religious experience that HBN promises. True biblical spirituality unites reason and experience. An undue emphasis on either aspect is dangerous. We must both think and experience.

Third, biblical spirituality is based on grace. Worship does not seek to gain God's favor but to celebrate His presence and grace. Christians obey, not to earn salvation, but in response to God's love and grace. God does not hear prayers because we pray the right way; He hears because He loves His children. In HBN spirituality we must follow right methods or it does not work. In contrast

to the biblical spirituality of grace, HBN advocates advance to bliss through their own works.

Conclusion

Biblical spirituality is thus unique—a way of life rooted in human helplessness in the presence of sin and God's empowerment through His love and grace. While biblical spirituality recognizes that humans in their own strength stand helpless and powerless, they have God's eternal offer that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, NKJV). Biblical spirituality recognizes the primacy of God's grace first, and only out of that grace is one capable of leading a life of spiritual victory. As the apostle says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:8–10, NKJV).

As Christians we must be able to give a reason for the life we lead, reveal the empowerment of the Spirit in our daily life, and joyfully proclaim the privileges of communion with a loving, personal God. ❧

- 1 The Barna Group, "Christianity Is No Longer Americans' Default Faith," January 12, 2009, www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/15-christianity-is-no-longer-americans-default-faith.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Richard Kyle, *The New Age Movement in American Culture* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 66. It should be noted that Kyle's definition of the New Age movement is rather broad.
- 4 For a definition, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell's, 1999), 2.
- 5 It should be noted that this article deals with general Christian biblical spirituality. The author is a Seventh-day Adventist and in a later article deals specifically with the unique facets of Adventist spirituality.
- 6 Kyle, *The New Age Movement*. See pages 153–74 on New Age elements in health trends.
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern Pub. Assn., 1923), 132. See also Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), 2:187; Ellen G. White, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, MI: International Tract Society, 1894), 188.

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