

Yesterday (29Aug84) a saint asked me for some time, and the request humbled me with a sense of unworthiness, for he's a spiritual man I've been blessed to have known and admired these 40 years. Born to privilege, he chose to live his life among the urban underprivileged, and has never had a "good" job. In short, by worldly standards, he is, and has been throughout his life since age 8, crazy--crazy for God.... This thinksheet is a tribute to him, whose life-story has prompted me to these reflections on what it means to be a human being, a "person," a saint.

1. At various times and under various circumstances, the spiritual comports with the natural, confronts the natural, opposes the natural--and is, respectively, increasingly visible. The spiritual is most visible when it cancels the natural, as in the deaths (to choose reps of the West's two great strands) of Socrates and Jesus. It hasn't been "natural" for my rich friend to live among the poor: it's been, visibly, "spiritual." British scientist and mystic Gerald Heard, whom I asked to give "My Spiritual Pilgrimage" (one of my most useful recordings, through the years), is a similar case: working briefly among the poor, he noted "They esp. respected Catholic priests and religious, for having sacrificed sex to their spiritual mission."

2. The spiritual is not necessarily good. It may be nonmoral, e.g., the élan of a particular people (e.g., "der deutscher Geist"), and it may be evil (e.g., what Hitler's spirit made of "the German spirit"). In history of religions, spirit is as much associated with terror as with love. So I must distinguish: my friend has not just spirit, but biblical spirit --"Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." To have spirit in this sense ("holy Spirit") is so to be open to God as to be filled with and used by the creating, sustaining, judging, forgiving Power directing us to feel, think, act with the qualities Scripture teaches us are the divine qualities. It is not all spirit, but this Spirit, that is "holy," good. Thus this thinksheet's title: The biblical spirit leads not to personal and ethnic pride (which in themselves are not evil), nor to escapist interiorization, but to intelligent-compassionate action.

3. This biblical Spirit-spirit tends to hypertrophy into social action minus spirit, the mystical access to God "withering away" in all-consuming caring-action. My friend has life-long resisted this tendency and is sad that so many in his denomination (and mine: we are UCC) have not. The 6th "way of being religious" (in Streng's schema), viz., "the struggle for justice and peace," has for many liberal Christians become what it is for their compassionally secular colleagues, viz., religion itself (the "esse," not just one aspect of the "bene esse"). My friend, though he maintains his communion with God and openness to mystical and charismatic experience, feels twice defeated: (1) by the inner-urban jungle and the forces inhibiting its humanization, and (2) by compassionate colleagues, in and not in the church, who don't give a fig for mystical experience, which for him is the fount and root of his being and acting. He's twice lonely, and asked to see me about how he can communicate to his fellow-carers and others his Pearl of Great Price.

4. Since WWII (and during: Bonhoeffer's ACT AND BEING) we've had many books preaching the unity of action and contemplation, prayer and politics. Some traditions, e.g. the Quakers, exalt it. Some saints, e.g. Ab. Heschel, have been symbols of it (a great book on Heschel: I ASKED FOR WONDER, quotes ed. by S.H. Dresner, Crossroad/83).

5. Among the creatures, only we humans have spirit, the power to distance one's being from one's environment and even from one's bio-organism. A masterly treatment of this: Max Scheler, MAN'S PLACE IN NATURE, Noonday/70), esp. pp.35-55, the chapter on "The Essence of Spirit."