

What is spirituality?

[Angelo Cannata](#)

Abstract

The essential problem in defining spirituality is tension between narrowness and broadness. Critical analysis of dictionaries, history and problems shows that the best definition of spirituality is “*inner life*”.

Introduction

Spirituality is widely studied and explored today, but an agreed definition is still lacking, which arguably impedes research. This article builds on previous research to redress this problem, at the same time trying to determine a definition that also works as a thinking method to guide the study of spirituality.

The absence of an agreed definition has been critically addressed by a number of recent authors. For example, [Bregman's article \(2004\)](#) highlights the multiplicity of definitions while examining Principe's article on the history of the word “spirituality” ([Principe, 1983](#)), the mass media, Paul Tillich's theology; however, it does not undertake a systematic analysis and does not present a method to deal with the problem. The problem of the lack of an agreed definition is also discussed in [King \(2014\)](#), who refers to [Tanyi's \(2002\)](#) articulate definition of spirituality, in the essential frame of a tension between narrow and broad definitions; King is afraid that “...with such a broad definition ... almost anything can be called spiritual”. The same frame is focused on by [Swinton \(2014\)](#), when he says “*It seems that, to an extent, spirituality means whatever the person asked thinks it should mean*”, and by [Gatmon \(2015\)](#) who notes that “*There seem to be as many definitions of spirituality as there are scholars attempting to define the concept*” and gives some examples “... to illustrate both the commonality and lack of consensus in defining spirituality”. Narrow definitions have the advantage of clarity and precision, but exclude too many things or people that we intuitively perceive as undoubtedly spiritual; on the other hand, broad definitions are able to include everybody, but leave the perception of making spirituality something without a precise identity, so that it becomes difficult to realize how it differs from other things. This impacts research: [Oman \(2013\)](#), for example, falls in the problem of narrowness: his study doesn't reach a conclusive definition and is quite conditioned by a concept of spirituality too limited to specific areas like religion, sacred, supernatural, so that other important fields, such as art conceived as a form of spirituality, fall outside its scope. The problem of narrowness and broadness of definitions of spirituality is a consequence of the complex history that is behind the word and the concepts it can refer to. I examine this history briefly later in this essay.

As a consequence of the problem of narrowness and broadness, which is the essential origin of the other difficulties, we might predict that a definition of spirituality is most likely bound to failure today, because the ideas in circulation are not only different from each other, but often reciprocally exclusive, besides being uncritically assumed by people. As we know, for some people true spirituality must be religious, or even referred to one specific religious denomination; for others, religions, with their mental structures and institutions, are instead obstacles to the development of an authentic spirituality. Many connect the idea of spirituality with belief in supernatural forces, energies, powers, or astral influences, while instead others claim true spirituality also exists in contexts like scepticism, atheism, materialism or science. In this situation, finding a precise enough definition of spirituality, able to meet such opposing expectations of people and mentalities, looks nearly impossible. One solution, adopted by [Swinton \(2011, 2014\)](#) for example, is to leave aside the problem of a definition and carry on, relying on the practical and common usage of the word; this criterion could be considered itself a method of interpreting what spirituality is, especially if we consider that, from certain points of view, spirituality shouldn't have a definition, because one of its essential aspects is the tendency to break boundaries, frames, schemes, rules, laws, to allow humanity to reach higher and deeper levels in every direction of positive progress. Nonetheless, this criterion, if used without connections with other perspectives, leaves everything undefined and problems easily arise: for example, anybody talking about spirituality without adequately clarifying the context of their mind, might be suspected of implicitly imposing their own culture and conception of spirituality, although unintentionally, unwittingly, as Hornborg has observed ([Hornborg, 2011](#)). Even the clarification of one's own

context can be tricky if it assumes a definition of spirituality without properly expressing the criticism that the adopted definition is exposed to.

We may notice that other well-established fields of human culture, such as philosophy, religion, psychology, art, or even science, face problems of a lack of a satisfying definition, without going into crisis. However, this does not mean that we don't need researches about definitions; a workable definition is an instrument tremendously helpful to research and indeed to agreement on any aspect of any field. It is also good, however, to note that definitions are misunderstood and become counterproductive if they are treated as conclusive, definitive, ultimate points, that, as such, would discourage criticism and expansion of horizons. For this reason, what I am proposing in this article is not meant as a final, static answer aimed at closing further discussions, but rather as an instrument for further development of general and critical research in spirituality.

We also need to consider the importance of adopting a methodology. This can be understood to be a difficult task, considering the confused present-day situation outlined above and the fact that research on the topic is young and fresh; as a consequence, we find ourselves in the condition of facing a rather new field that needs, to some extent, new appropriate methodologies. For this reason, our methodology is somewhat forced to be dictated by the question itself, in addition to the methods commonly used in academic research. The present article aims to determine a thinking methodology alongside the attempt to find a working definition of spirituality.

The fundamental method to determine a definition of spirituality consists in examining its history where, by saying "history", we are including our present as well. For this objective, Principe's article (1983) is a key work to understand the historical difficulties of the word "spirituality". However, before examining history, I am going to start from a survey of some dictionaries because, when we examine history, we are already conditioned by our present culture. We want to approach history with awareness of the cultural preconceptions that condition our mind; these preconceptions are mirrored by dictionaries and they will be examined critically, considering the description that I have already given about our present situation, essentially framed in the tension between narrowness and broadness. After a survey of some dictionaries, followed by a brief history of the word "spirituality", I will examine some philosophical aspects of our problem, to deeply understand which mental frames we are using in our research and, finally, I will give some concise reasons and perspectives about my proposal for a working definition.

Dictionaries

The first thing that comes out when we look at the meaning of "spirituality" given by English dictionaries is the reference to "spiritual", which in turn sends us to "spirit". This is what we find, for example, in the [*Oxford English Dictionary*](#): it defines spirituality as "*The fact or condition of being spiritual, esp. in nature, outlook, or behaviour; attachment to or concern for spiritual (as opposed to worldly or material) matters or pursuits; spiritual quality or character*". The entry "spirit", in turn, makes use of words that would open wide and complex philosophical and cultural discussions, such as the meaning of "immaterial", "supernatural", "being". Obviously, this happens with any word in all dictionaries, but normally we are sent to words that we perceive familiar, well known, not needing further deep study and details. This is not the case for the word "spirit", considering the confused situation that I have described at the beginning. This way some definitions open even more questions and problems rather than giving a concluding, simple and clear idea. For example, the definition of the [*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*](#), in an attempt to be simple and clear at the same time, by saying "*The quality of being connected with religion or the human spirit*", sends us to "spirit", which is defined as "*The part of a person that includes their mind, feelings and character rather than their body*". There would be a lot to object about the opposition of the spirit in contrast to the body: does an authentic spirituality need to be perceived in contrast with the body, or perhaps exactly the opposite is true? Don't actually many spiritualities deserve great positive attention to the importance of our body?

A definition of spirituality that left me quite astonished for being so much and easily exposed to criticism is that of the [*Cambridge Dictionary*](#): "*The quality that involves deep feelings and beliefs of a religious nature, rather than the physical parts of life*". The immediate spontaneous objections are obvious: is spirituality always religious? What about the work of André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* (2009),

for example, or *Spirituality for the Skeptic* by R. C. Solomon (2002)? How do we evaluate if a feeling is deep or not? How deep does it need to be, in order to belong to the extent of spirituality? Is religious nature something opposed to the physical parts of life?

We see that the essential problem we face by consulting dictionaries for the word “spirituality” is that they have ultimately explained *obscura per obscuriora*, an ironic Latin expression meaning “obscure things through more obscure ones”. Fortunately, we can also find in dictionaries alternative expressions that give the idea of spirituality without making use of words coming from its same Latin root *spirit-*. These alternative expressions too fall in the difficulty I have said before, if we look in turn at their single words and then further at the words used to define them. However, there is a difference, because they connect to different roots: working out the meaning of “spirituality” by examining the meaning of “spiritual” and “spirit” keeps us in the circular horizon of the Latin root *spirit-*; instead, if a definition sends us to words coming from different roots, it is definitely more fruitful, because it makes possible to realize interconnections that enlighten each other and help us to build a rich mental context to figure the meaning of spirituality. At this point, we just need to find the best alternative expressions given by dictionaries to mean “spirituality”.

This research has been limited to a few dictionaries and their definitions connected to the Latin root *spirit-*. I am not going to consider, for example, the semantic field of the German word “*Geist*”, that is etymologically connected to the English “*ghost*”, nor am I going to consider even more distant languages, like Arabic, Chinese, Hindi: such a wide study would need a complex team collaboration to produce a whole book, rather than just an article like the present one.

Among the alternative expressions given by dictionaries, “*inner life*” proves the most effective: it is used like a synonym because of its shortness, is relatively frequent, rich in meaning, intuitively easy to understand, useful for further research and, most of all, it expresses what is essential in the original concept of spirituality, as I am going to notice below in reference to the prophets in the Old Testament. It is able to work as a hermeneutics, which means an instrument for research, able to work as a method.

Now I am going to show how the expression “*inner life*” is fairly used in the dictionaries I consulted and then I will highlight the semantic field of its components “*inner*” and “*life*”.

The online English dictionary vocabulary.com explains the meaning of “spirituality” by saying that “*Spirituality has to do with the spirit, not as in ghosts, but as in the essence of being human – your soul or your inner life*”.

The definition of “*spiritualità*” (spirituality) in the Italian dictionary *Zingarelli 2023* refers to the word “*spirituale*” (spiritual), which has the difficulties I noticed up here, but gives also an interesting example of the use of this word: it reports the expression “*Padre, direttore spirituale*” (“Father, spiritual director”), defined as “*Il sacerdote che assume la cura personale della vita religiosa di un fedele; nella vita monastica e regolare, chi è preposto alla direzione della vita interiore dei novizi, dei postulanti e degli studenti*” (“The priest who takes on the personal care of the religious life of a faithful; in monastic and regular life, whoever is in charge of directing the **inner life** of novices, of postulants and students”). The first part of this definition makes reference to the religious life and, as such, is not useful to us, because it is too exclusive, but the second part tries the alternative expression *inner life* to refer to spirituality, that actually proves crucial. The Italian dictionary *De Mauro*, among other definitions of the word “*spirituale*” (“spiritual”), has these ones, containing a reference to inner life as well: “*che riguarda l’interiorità dell’uomo*” (“Pertaining man’s **interiority**”), “*che ha una profonda vita interiore*” (“Who has a profound **inner life**”) and “*che ha autorità in materia di religione e, in genere, ha competenza sulla vita interiore dell’uomo*” (“who has authority in matters of religion and, generally, has competence on the **inner life** of man”).

The German dictionary *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, at the entry “*Spiritualität*” (“Spirituality”), says as a definition “*Geistigkeit; inneres Leben, geistiges Wesen*” (“Spirituality; **inner life**, spiritual being”).

We can also find connections between “spirituality” and “inner life” by proceeding in the other direction, that is, looking up “inner” in some dictionaries and seeing how the expression “inner life” is used in direct connection with the range of words connected to “spirit”.

The [Collins](#) dictionary, as well as [Encyclopedia.com](#) and [The Free Dictionary](#) give the following as meaning of “inner”: “*Mental or **spiritual***”. More example sentences given under the definition of “inner” make use of the word “spiritual”.

The [Merriam-Webster](#) dictionary has as meaning 2a of the word “inner” “*of or relating to the mind or **spirit***” and gives as an example the expression “*the inner life*”.

The definition of “inner” given by the *Cambridge Dictionary* contains this example sentence in the section “American Dictionary”: “*She met life’s challenges with courage and **inner** strength (= the strength of her character or **spirit**)*”. The explanation in brackets is part to the example sentence.

The Italian dictionary *Zingarelli 2023* defines “*interiore*” (“inner”) as “*Che appartiene alla sfera dello **spirito**, della coscienza, dei sentimenti*” (“Belonging to the sphere of **spirit**, of conscience, of feelings”). The Italian dictionary *Devoto-Oli* defines “*interiore*” as “*Pertinente alla sfera della vita spirituale e della coscienza individuale*” (“Pertaining to the sphere of **spiritual** life and individual consciousness”). This same dictionary gives the following definition of the term “*interiorità*” (“inwardness, interiority”): “*La consistenza o la prevalenza, nell’ambito individuale, dei fatti **spirituali***” (“The consistency or prevalence, in the individual sphere, of **spiritual** facts”). The *De Mauro* Italian dictionary, under the heading “*interiore*”, gives the definition “*Che è proprio o si riferisce all’animo, allo **spirito**, alla coscienza dell’uomo*” (“That is proper or refers to the soul, to the **spirit**, to the conscience of man”). This same dictionary, under “*interiorità*”, says “*Complesso di pensieri, sentimenti e interessi che costituiscono la vita **spirituale** di un individuo*” (“A complex of thoughts, feelings and interests that constitute the **spiritual** life of an individual”). In the Italian to English section of the *Ragazzini 2023* dictionary, the meaning no. 2 of the Italian word “*interiorità*” (“interiority, inwardness”) is preceded in brackets by the specification “*vita **spirituale***” (“spiritual life”) and is translated in English “*inner life*”.

This shows that not only the word “spirituality” is not infrequently expressed as “inner life”, but also the semantic field of “inner” and “inward” is commonly meant as connected to the concept of “spiritual”.

Is “inner life” different from “spirituality”?

This brief survey of some dictionaries has shown that “inner life” is used today as an alternative expression to mean “spirituality”. Besides the dictionaries, others, like [Hill \(2013\)](#) and [Bianchi \(2012\)](#), make use of “inner life” as a synonym of spirituality.

In opposition to the equivalence between “spirituality” and “inner life”, some works mention them together in a way that seems to imply a difference, but actually this is not clarified. We have, for example, Wadhawan’s article (2014) “[Spirituality and “Inner” Life](#)”, but the body of the article doesn’t give hints about what is supposed to be specific of “inner life” in comparison to “spirituality”. The same happens in [Wink’s](#) and [Baker’s](#) articles: both of them mention “inner life” and “spirituality” in the title, but then the expression “inner life” is never mentioned in their content. In Rayburn and Comas-Diaz’s book *The Inner Life of Women’s Spirituality* (2008), there is only one occurrence of the expression “inner life”, other than in the title, which is at the end of chapter 5, as part of a quoted text remarking that spirituality is not just about inner life, in opposition to the “outer life”, but involves the whole existence. [Heelas \(2008\)](#) makes an extensive use of the combined expression “*inner-life spirituality*” in his book and even a whole paragraph is dedicated to it at p. 5, but he doesn’t give an explanation of it.

After these notes, we might still ask what the difference between “spirituality” and “inner life” is: are they 100% interchangeable? The answer is not difficult if we consider their respective history: “spirituality” has a precise history, connected with its past context in Christianity and expansions toward Oriental religions and inner experiences, followed by further expansion in the context of last Western philosophy, while “inner life” is a generic expression meaning what we humanly perceive as an experience of the activities of our mind more connected with important aspects of our life.

A history of the word “spirituality”

The survey of dictionaries, in giving us a first elementary idea of the word and the concept of “spirituality”, has shown our contemporary situation. In order to get a fully grounded and critical awareness of our context, we need now to consider the history that has originated our present. I am going to give a few essential notes on the history of the word “spirituality”, based on Walter Principe’s research (1983).

The noun “*spiritus*” and the adjective “*spiritualis*” are at the root of the Latin word “*spiritualitas*”. The use of these two terms has a background in saint Paul’s theology: he makes a distinction between the spiritual and the carnal person. A spiritual person is one who adapts their life to the Spirit of God; carnal is the way of life that opposes it. The word “*spiritualitas*” is met for the first time in a letter by an anonymous author of the V century, urging the recipient “*to act as to advance in spirituality*”. The context enables us to detect, in the use of the term, the Pauline background we have said about.

In the ninth century Candidus, a German monk, uses the term in a generic sense, not related to St. Paul, but rather referred to a confrontation with what is corporal, material. This way of using the word will spread in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Meanwhile it will be used even in a completely different sense, meaning “*spiritualitas*” the material property owned by the Church, as opposed to “*temporalitas*”, indicating the property of the king.

In the seventeenth century a more philosophical use of the term begins to appear: Descartes, for example, talks about “spirituality of soul” as opposed to extension of matter. The term is also used to refer to the devout life conducted by the religious.

In 1932 the Catholic Institute of Paris establishes a chair of “History of spirituality”. Between the nineteenth and twentieth century, on the occasion of an increased interest in Hinduism, the word “spirituality” is used to express the depth of Indian religion as well, against Western materialism.

In an attempt to define the term “spirituality”, Principe distinguishes three levels of meaning. The first one is real or existential: spirituality indicates the way in which somebody has understood the religious ideal that they will follow.

At this point Walter Principe wonders if we can formulate a definition of spirituality that can be attributed more universally, that is, to non-Christians. However, he quickly abandons the question, after having admitted its possibility. Probably, this way Principe proves conditioned by his mentality of a Catholic scholar, which makes him feel natural the meaning of the term as just referred to the context of Catholicism.

The second level that Principe states is the formulation of a teaching about the lived reality, often under the influence of an outstanding spiritual person. The third one is the study, done by scholars, of the first and especially the second level of spirituality.

At this point the author considers the issue about relationships of spirituality with its context, i.e. whether and to what extent spirituality should take into account other side subjects, such as philosophy, theology, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc., at risk of reducing its specificity to them; finally, he mentions the problem of the subjectivity of these disciplines and of the specific study of spirituality.

I find that, even for Principe, despite his historical research, the meaning of the term “spirituality” is still somewhat confused, as well as having the limit of keeping in the restricted area of religious experience. On the other hand, his research remains a reference point to be well aware of the necessary historical ground for a definition of the term.

Principe’s research is on the word “spirituality”, but Pierre [Hadot’s studies \(1981, 2001\)](#) have given evidence that spiritual exercises were already practiced in the context of classical Greek philosophers and their schools before the existence of the Latin word “*spiritualitas*”. This tells us that we need to consider not only the word “spirituality”, but also the concept of it, that might have been expressed by different words and practices. This creates a circular problem, considering that the concept of spirituality is based on the definition of the term, but the definition of the term is what we are trying to determine, so that we are in the situation of needing a definition to reach the goal of formulating a definition. However, the problem is not an impossible one, because the definition I suggest is broad and flexible. Considering that what Hadot’s studies suggest leads towards a broadening of the concept, this means that the definition I suggest contains already what is needed to include his perspective. Besides, this doesn’t mean that we are going to study just everything,

because the broadening and flexibility I am referring to is not infinite or out of control; on the contrary, it gains precision in the context of the history of the word offered by Principe and the history of the philosophical experience given by Hadot.

Principe's history of the word "spirituality" lets us realize that it was born in the context of Christian religion, that is to say in a context of narrow meaning, but it has evolved to a much broader horizon, as a consequence of contacts with other religions, practices, philosophies and cultures. The widening of the horizon of the word "spirituality" in last decades has been produced especially by the contact of Western culture with Oriental religions and spiritualities, so that today many people make a spontaneous connection of the word with experiences like Yoga, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zen, etc. Western mentality, largely influenced by Christianity and philosophy, has added reference to abstract concepts like awareness, mindfulness, compassion, generosity, meaningfulness, peace, humanism, positivity. Dictionaries mirror our present uncertain situation, but they also contain, among their definitions and examples, the expression "inner life", that is an optimal candidate for a solution to the basic problem of narrowness and broadness. In the tension between broadness and narrowness, when we talk about spirituality today, art and pessimism are an important example of what is at risk of being left aside. In comparison to the amount of references we find to religions, meditation, supernatural, there are very little references to art. The possible perspectives of pessimism are in an even worse situation, because they are commonly considered somewhat the opposite of spirituality, which instead is normally assumed as oriented towards love for life and nature, encouragement, well being, positivity, optimism. Should we think, for example, that a strongly pessimist philosopher like Emil Cioran has to be considered extraneous to what we call "spirituality"?

Narrowness and broadness

We realize that an essential frame helping us to focus the problem of our definition is the opposition between broadness and narrowness: most definitions of spirituality are not commonly agreed or shared, because they are too narrow, they make us worried about leaving outside something important that should be included. It is worth to consider an extreme example of this problem, that can be found in Clifford's article ([Clifford 2015](#)) about his effort to find a scientific definition of spirituality, no less. He finds "... *six unique facets of the quintessence of Homo sapiens that are essential to spiritual and religious experience: (1) self-awareness, (2) linguistic capacity, (3) limited autonomy, (4) creativity, (5) aesthetic sense, and (6) loving and being loved*". After describing each facet, he considers himself able to conclude that "*Every healthy, well-developed human spirit includes all six facets. Actual as well as potential expressions of each facet vary greatly among individuals, suggesting the possibility of identifying differing degrees or levels of spiritual development. A lack of significant capacity with respect to one or more facets of spirit generally indicates that the person either is very young or has some medical problem, such as traumatic brain injury, autism, a personality disorder, or dementia. A deficient or impaired facet may diminish that human's spirit; nevertheless, the individual remains a human being*". He thinks he can even add that "*Indeed, all six facets are observable and measurable...*". The core of the problem in this article is that it lays itself open to move from description to prescription. A description can be discussed, criticized, amended, but, if it becomes a prescription, that means that it claims to have a strongly proved and agreed basis, like, for example, the science of medicine has. As I said, Clifford's article is an extreme example of the problem, but, actually, in their effort to be precise and definite, all not so broad definitions of spirituality meet, more or less, this problem. In other words, they are open to make a more or less remote basis for racism, prejudice and even dictatorship. Even definitions that don't claim to be scientific, such as those making a more generic reference to meaningfulness, love, commitment, awareness, are open to this difficulty: if we say, for example, that spirituality means the mental activity of referring to meanings of existence, shall we conclude that those who don't cultivate a research about meaning of life are less or not at all spiritual? What makes the difference between spirituality and non-spirituality? In the context of these questions we can sense spirituality as a human component that we must recognize to everybody in this world and nobody should be excluded from it. However, we also sense that spirituality cannot be just identified with humanity, because this way it would lose any specific meaning: this happens, for example, in Sessanna's statement "*all humans are spiritual*" ([Sessanna et al. 2011](#)). We can ask what makes spirituality different from humanity. A possible answer is that spirituality is an aspect of humanity mostly related to what we perceive "inner" in humanity, as opposed to "outer". I will resume this question later on.

The definition of spirituality as “inner life” might look like exceeding in broadness: if we consider that inner life is never totally disconnected from any outer aspect of life, we can see that it is at risk of denoting nothing less than life in its entirety, or even just everything. This consideration is a good starting point to check in more detail aspects and potentialities of the definition “inner life”, together with methodological ideas that can work as criterions for further research.

Thinking methodology contained in the definition “inner life”

If we consider the word “life”, we might feel lost in the vastness of the concept, but we can realize that its semantic field can actually work as a thinking methodology. As opposed to what is not life, the word “life” leads us to the semantic context of dynamism, becoming, movement, as opposed to objects conceived as static, unchangeable, fixed. This aspect can be connected to the philosopher Heraclitus, who conceived existence as a becoming world. This context tells us that we should avoid talking about spirituality as “something”, as an object having certain properties, an entity detached from time. Spirituality should rather be conceived as an event, an experience, a story able to be told, narrated, more than described or defined. This implies the personal involvement of those who want to talk about spirituality: spirituality is not, let’s say, “that thing out there”, but a level of experience in progress of the human world, where each of us is involved, of which I must consider myself, now, part of.

From the point of view of our instinctive human perception, life appears to us as an evolution, a progress, a next step, compared to inanimate objects. On the contrary, from a materialistic point of view, the difference between matter and living beings consists not in a jump, a sudden step to a next level, but in some modifications without gaps, so that they belong to a continuum where there is not a moment when matter definitely ceases to be inactive and becomes a living being. We might ask, for example: can a virus be considered a living organism? Can a computer be instructed to imitate at 100% the behaviour of an organism made of DNA? It depends on the perspective we want to adopt. If we want to study the human inner life in a generic sense, we don’t need to specify the instinctive human perspective, because “inner life”, as dictionaries have shown, is already commonly perceived as a human activity. This way the expression “inner life” is narrow and easy enough not to need further explanations at first. Previously I have made some reference to materialistic philosophy to show that, by saying “life”, we automatically put ourselves in the perspective of an advanced stage of the evolution of the world, so that we want to leave aside what is commonly meant without life. This does not prevent us, in another moment, to widen the horizon embraced by the word “spirituality”, to include even stones and atoms: since the materialistic perspective is not excluded by spirituality, neither embraced, this widening is possible. This way, for example, we aren’t surprised by philosophies conceiving the world as a big spirit, or a big mind, or just a big collection of atoms: the mental operation of extreme generalizing is a normal one, both in science and in philosophy, to try to figure how things are and how they work. Today we can find writings about the spirituality of animals, or even of plants; why not of stones? It is up to us, depending on how much we want to use generalization as an instrument of research. This means that the definition “inner life” is flexible enough to embrace anything simply by adding further specifications, according to the perspective we want to adopt in our discussions.

Another aspect implied in the word “life”, if we consider it in the human context suggested by the expression “inner life”, is attention to subjectivity. This means that the study of spirituality should pay attention to the problem of managing objective and subjective ways of dealing with its topics. An objective way will try to be as scientific as possible, precise, defined; a subjective way gives more space to ideas that are very difficult to grasp by science, but are undoubtedly important for the study of spirituality, such as love, self perception, inspiration, emotions, symbols, sensitivity, intuition. This way, the word “life” as a thinking methodology reminds us to pay attention to a necessary dialectic and work of harmonization between materialism and idealism, objectivity and subjectivity, science and art.

Now, the same way we have considered the word “life”, we can consider some deeper details about the adjective “inner”. We can ask: how can we determine what is inner and what is outer? What is their relationship? The etymology of “spirit” can be helpful in this question. Like the almost equivalent words “pneuma” in Greek and “ruah” in Hebrew, “spirit” comes from the idea of blowing, wind, breathing. This can be connected to the fact that not rarely we can deduce the emotions of people by their way of breathing; we do instinctively the same in reference to the heart: a fast and strong beating of the heart is commonly associated with the presence of strong and deep emotions. For that reason, we commonly refer to what is

happening inside somebody as “spirit” or “heart”. In this context, spirituality is an activity that is not immediately visible in people, but we infer its presence from external signs. We can define the idea more precisely with reference on how much the rest of the person is involved. For example, if we need to make a simple maths calculation, like $2+2$, we realize that it is some kind of “inner life”, but it is not so strongly connected with emotions, meaning of life, relationships with other people, responsibility, psychological maturity, etc. So, humanly, instinctively, we perceive what is “inner” as something invisible, happening in our mind and having important connections with our emotions and our life considered as a whole and, in turn, connected to other people’s emotions and lives considered as a whole. We can notice that, especially about the semantic horizon opened by the word “inner”, we are not moving in a strictly scientific area; nonetheless, this horizon is open to a fruitful dialogue with science.

We can gain a better awareness about the value of the definition “inner” by considering in more detail, although very concisely, what the concept of spirit implies in the Biblical context. This concept is typically opposed to the exteriority of law and institutions. The law, although given by God, is considered also a source of problems because it can make people slave of the rules and distracted from focusing on their direct relationship with God, to which the law is just an instrument. Similarly, the institutions like the priests and the temple were considered critically by prophetism. The underlying idea was that both law and institutions risked focusing attention to external behaviour and action, while an opposite focus on morality, heart, intention, was introduced as the way to compensate that risk. This dialectic enables us to infer that the concept of inner life was in the Bible an essential way to understand what the concept of spirit is about. We can extend this dialectic to the later stage of the history of spirituality, when the Western world started to be interested in Indian and Oriental spirituality: Indian and Oriental spirituality were perceived as strongly connected with what is inner in our human experience of life, in opposition to the Western style, more influenced by industrial criterions of speed, efficiency, success, economic power, technology. This can help us to realize that the definition “inner life” is not all that generic and broad, but brings a context of rather precise connotations and dialectics.

As a result of this analysis, we can gain a synthetic thinking methodology by the compound expression “inner life”: spirituality studied as inner life means studying what happens in the mental activity of humans in proportion to the connections of this activity with emotions and life meant as a whole, by exploiting both scientific and intuitive instruments, including a reciprocal critical dialogue between them. These considerations make us aware that the meaning of spirituality is worked out in a productive dialectic between scientific, philosophical and intuitive concepts.

We can notice that this way we really determine degrees and exclusions, that would produce risk of racism and dictatorship if applied with other definitions instead. For example, we can perceive that Clifford’s six facets of his idea of spirituality (Clifford 2015) make us worried about racism: how can we think, for example, that those who don’t cultivate self-awareness are less spiritual, or even mentally impaired? Instead of the highly problematic concept of self-awareness, that of life is a much more essential element of spirituality: we can easily agree that a mental activity that doesn’t care about life, either in a positive or in a negative way, or doesn’t have connections with the emotions that make us perceive alive, cannot be considered really spiritual. As such, the definition “inner life”, besides being a definition and a mindset, is even able to be prescriptive for those who would like to find effective ways to be more spiritual or to effectively approach the world of spirituality.

The definition “inner life” helps also to give seriousness to any content about spirituality if we consider that a lot of marketed, industrial, so called “spirituality”, can exist today precisely because many people isolate what they prefer from the meanings of this word, cancelling the other necessary connections, to make possible the production of distorted and shallow products. If we consider that spirituality, in order to be really spirituality, needs to be inner human activity involving connections with emotions, life as a whole, people, philosophy, religions, the critical mind typical of science, it will be much more difficult to advertise so-called spiritualities that guarantee success in life, special, superior, exotic and mysterious emotions, or exploitation of magic powers imprisoned in stones, amulets and constellations. Rather, a humanistic and scientific mentality interested in culture, antropology, archaeology, is able to give real value to superstitions as deep testimonies able to reveal a lot about human psychology, mental structures, connections between cultures, emotions and even art.

Conclusive notes

If we put our minds in the critical context I have described, we can notice that the definition “inner life” is challenging also for practices of spirituality that are commonly taken for granted as good, correct, legitimate. I am referring to spirituality meant as a practice of compassion, love, generosity, peace. What about the spirituality of Hitler, for example? How can we pretend to understand such things if we choose ready-made pre-comprehensions that they are basically wrong things as a starting point to build a concept of them? If any human experience can fall under the umbrella definition “inner life”, this means, provocatively, that anything we don’t like needs to be reinterpreted, if we want to produce serious studies about spirituality. This does not mean inhuman neutrality, indifference to human suffering, forgetfulness about injustice. On the contrary, “inner life” means consideration of all connections in order to gain richer ideas and experiences. We can think of Jesus’ scandalous forgiveness of sinners as a provocative case in this context of ideas.

These considerations are very similar to the ones needed in practicing psychology. Psychologists need to be free from personal judgements about the life, behaviours and opinions of their patients, otherwise their work would be seriously distorted by their pre-comprehensions. At the same time, they need to employ the most exquisitely human resources of their personality: a computer will never be able to be a psychologist because it is not able to elaborate perceptions that are possible only to an experienced person made by human DNA.

Talking about psychology, we might wonder if there is a difference between spirituality and psychology, considering that both are involved in working on “inner life”. The answer to this question would take us too far from the specific topic of this article. Here we can limit ourselves to noticing that spirituality is mainly inspired by contexts connected to the worlds of religions and philosophy; psychology is rather mainly inspired by the mentality of science and medicine. As such, psychology is much more interested in people’s well being and diseases, while instead spirituality is interested in the inner experience created by relating ourselves with lives, emotions and reflection. This gives further help to make a critical idea about spiritualities that are too oriented towards guaranteeing well being and health: well being and health are purposes of psychology and the connected scientific disciplines, rather than of spirituality, although they are not excluded.

These notes about humanity and analysis, spirituality and psychology, suggest us one last consideration. The activity of studying spirituality by applying methods based on generalization, analysis and criticism is typical of the Western mentality, keen on examining things with rationality. As such, it can be critically considered just another perspective in the world of perspectives: it cannot claim to be the highest, or the most general, or the most accurate. This means that, if we consider that any spirituality can be just a particular perspective, what we call “spirituality” as such is actually another single perspective on something that we cannot think we have been able to grasp, to embrace, just because we have been able to give it a name, a definition and accurate studies. Researchers in spirituality can’t think about themselves as the ones who have the privileged and best perspective on spirituality. Giving spirituality a name, a definition, some studies, can be considered just another spirituality together with the other ones. This, rather than lowering the importance of methodical study of spirituality, can suggest that the serious activity of study and research is itself able to give researchers a real, authentic spiritual experience, worthy to cultivate with infinite passion. Studying spirituality is itself a specific spirituality.

Towards future development

The definition of spirituality as “inner life” can be considered a middle-level definition, in a range of degrees from the most comprehensive to the narrowest. Its level is not exaggeratedly broad, because the common perception we have of the expression “inner life” doesn’t make us immediately think of animals and plants: when we think of inner life we think most instinctively of human inner life. In this context, we can think about even narrower horizons of meaning, that as such can create more debate because they exclude more things and people; however, they can be helpful to gain better awareness of what we are doing when we try to intentionally cultivate spirituality. “Hermeneutic” and “existentialism” are two examples of narrower perspectives or definitions of spirituality, considering that an important characteristic of spirituality is an interest in the meaning of existence. Hermeneutics is study of interpretation and interpretation means giving a meaning. Existentialism is the specific field of studying the meaning of existence. Both hermeneutics and existentialism come from philosophy and we can consider that spirituality as a practice has solid origins in

philosophy, as Pierre Hadot has shown us. Besides, hermeneutics and existentialism don't exclude religions or any other human activity commonly considered as spiritual; they can be used as interpretative instruments to highlight why and how certain practices can be considered spiritual. These are possible fields for further studies.

Bibliography and references

[Baker David C.](#), *Studies of the inner life: The impact of spirituality on quality of life* in *Quality of Life Research* 12 (Suppl. 1) 2003, 51–57.

[Bianchi Enzo.](#) 2012. *Words of Spirituality: Exploring the Inner Life*. Original Italian version: 1999. *Le parole della spiritualità. Per un lessico della vita interiore*.

[Bregman, Lucy.](#) 2004. "Defining Spirituality: Multiple Uses and Murky Meanings". *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 58 (3): 157-167.

[Clifford George.](#) 2015. "Making the Ethereal Earthy: A New Definition of Spirit, *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*", 5 (2), 113-127, DOI: 10.1179/2044024315Z.00000000045A.

Elkins David N., L. James Hedstrom, Lori L. Hughes, J. Andrew Leaf and Cheryl Saunders (1988). Toward a Humanistic-Phenomenological Spirituality: Definition, Description, and Measurement. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 1988 28:5, DOI: 10.1177/0022167888284002.

[Gatmon, Anna.](#) 2015. Four Ways of Spiritual Knowing: An Epistemology for a Diverse World, *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 5 (1), 8-9.

[Hadot Pierre.](#) 1981. *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*.

Hadot Pierre. 2001. *La philosophie comme manière de vivre*.

[Heelas Paul.](#) 2008. *Spiritualities of Life*.

[Hill et al.](#) 2013. From Concept to Science. Continuing Steps in Workplace Spirituality Research. R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Park, *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, chapter 31.

[Hornborg, Anne-Christine.](#) 2011. "Are We All Spiritual? A Comparative Perspective on the Appropriation of a New Concept of Spirituality". *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 1 (2), 255.

[King, Michael.](#) 2014. The Challenge of Research into Religion and Spirituality (Keynote 1). *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 4 (2), 114-115.

[Oman Doug.](#) 2013. Defining Religion and Spirituality in R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Park, *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2013, chapter 2.

Peng-Keller Simon (2019). Genealogies of spirituality: An historical analysis of a travelling term, *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 9:2, 86-98, DOI: 10.1080/20440243.2019.1658261

[Principe, Walter.](#) 1983. "Toward defining spirituality". *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses*, 12 (2), 127-141.

Rayburn Carole A. and Comas-Diaz Lillian. 2008. *The Inner Life of Women's Spirituality*.

[Sessanna, L., D. Finnell, M. Underhill, Y.-P. Chang, and H.-L. Peng.](#) 2011. "Measures assessing spirituality as more than religiosity: A methodological review of nursing and health-related literature." *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 67 (8), 1692.

Sheldrake Philip. 2014. *Spirituality: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

[Swinton, John. 2011.](#) “What is Missing from Our Practice? Spirituality as Presence and Absence”, *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 1 (1), 14.

[Swinton, John. 2014.](#) Spirituality-in-Healthcare. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 4 (2), 162-164.

[Tanyi, R. A. 2002.](#) Towards clarification of the meaning of spirituality. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 39 (5), 500–509.

Van der Veer Peter (2009). Spirituality in Modern Society. *Social research* Vol 76 : No 4 : Winter 2009.

[Wink Paul](#), *Addressing End-of-Life Issues: Spirituality and Inner Life in Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, Spring 1999, Vol. 23, No. 1, *Care at the End of Life: Restoring a Balance* (Spring 1999), p. 75-80.

More publications can be found in the research tools available at [Spiritual Study](#).