Abstract: In this textual commentary, Gordon Stirling’s article ‘Spiritual things’ is analysed as an exemplar of tonalities and rhetorical turns characteristic of the Page13 collection. In particular, a concern for ethical relationality in informing Christian sociality and linguistic practice is demonstrated as central to Stirling’s creative hermeneutics and grounding in an integral sense of Christian ethos.

O R I E N T I N G

The outcome of diving into the provocative issues swirling around a particular idea cannot be predicted at the outset; we may be surprised by where we arrive. Diving into such a swirl can elicit coughing and spluttering; it can also strengthen us by vigorous movement, as dissonance creates traction by invoking response.[1] Here, we engage Gordon Stirling’s articulation of spiritual things, diving into a past world but perhaps surfacing in tomorrow.[2] For Stirling, presuppositions concerning materiality and spirit have inherently
ethical implications, which play out in the dynamics of conversation and language.

‘Materiality’ here refers to human embodiment, beyond a dualistic (sacred/secular) division of existence. Bodies are both vulnerable and resilient; they are interactive. Being ‘bodies’ signifies much for what it means to be human. It implies relation, and relationality raises ethical questions. Stirling recognises this, and through interpretive questions raised in characteristically colloquial language, he begins demystifying the ‘spiritual’ through the logic of a relational-material lens that is christologically grounded.\[3\]

**DIVING IN**

Published in the *Australian Christian* in 1979, this *Page 13* article offers potential irony in its very title, ‘Spiritual things’.\[4\] Are *things* spiritual? We stumble at the very outset, catch ourselves in potential semantic contradiction. But wait—perhaps *things* can be spiritual! But which *things*? The linguistic practice critiqued by Stirling in the first paragraph highlights the propensity for particular behaviours to be categorised as spiritual in a dualistic sense (i.e. so that other behaviours are *not as spiritual*, or are even profane). Stirling raises many questions which challenge readers to question theological concepts that implicitly shape their thinking and interaction.

For Stirling, the question is not which *things* (behaviours) are more spiritual than other things, but rather how anything (behaviour) is invested with content, an investment which always involves a relational and therefore ethical stance; indeed, he asks which *things* (tonalities, attitudes) are conducive to healthy relationality and are therefore worth pursuing.\[5\] This is an expression of spirit, if spirit is precisely the human capacity to take a relational stance toward others.\[6\] It is this tacit collaboration between human subjectivity and spirit or ‘being open to the spirit’ that Stirling will finally term as ‘spiritual’; that is, not as anything that can be nominated but rather a way of engaging everything that involves people in living engagement with their contexts as open, generous and kind in engagement with others.\[7\] Such engagement is dynamically engaged, rather than being reactive or judgmental of perceived behavioural infractions on what is deemed spiritual.

The article begins with a familiar scenario of tacit outbidding: ‘I’m more spiritual than you!’ Christian language is caricatured by Stirling in its thoughtless deployment, where exclusion or condescension subtly demarcates who or what is ‘spiritual’ or less so—whatever this represents.
Here, Stirling tacitly questions the logic of such deployment, precisely because of its inherent ethical problems and therefore, relational effects. Attention is awakened to these through humour and a little irony, perhaps evoking inklings of the disjointedness readers feel in such scenarios:

“We have heard references to certain people as ‘not being spiritual’. What is usually meant is that they do not attend the prayer meeting or read their Bibles very often, or become involved easily in ‘spiritual things’. Some people present themselves as loving ‘spiritual things’ as opposed to other things. What they mean by spiritual things is hymn singing, praying, attending Christian meetings and speaking frequently about the Lord. The ‘spiritual life’ for them has to do with the ‘God-part’ of us, as opposed to our physical or social or recreational or vocational life. ‘Spirituality’ for them is being involved in ‘spiritual exercises’ rather than in eating, earning a living, socialising, engaging in sport, romping with the kids, or playing … at a church social.”[8]

The questions are simultaneously implicit and laid bare: what are ‘spiritual things’? What would it mean to employ these concepts responsibly? These questions are as ethically interpretive (hermeneutical) as they are investigations into the nature of the concepts themselves (ontological). Stirling turns to a Christian’s trusted source, scripture:

“All of these uses of the word ‘spiritual’ are no doubt valid, if limited. But it seems that the word and its derivatives are used so loosely that we ought to check it out with the New Testament. Once, the New Testament use is in the sense of having a good attitude or a helpful spirit (Galatians 6:1). Once it is used to refer to the ‘spirit world’ (spiritual wickedness in high places, Ephesians 6:12). Twice it is used in the metaphorical sense (e.g. drinking from the spiritual Rock in 1 Corinthians 10:4). And in 1 Corinthians 15:44, 46 it is used to describe the non-material state of the believer after death. The other 14 uses of the word ‘spiritual’ mean simply ‘of the Spirit.”[9]

Here, scripture offers a range of meaningful possibilities as Stirling explores various referential possibilities for the ‘spiritual’ in the New Testament, highlighting the importance of grounding Christian language in its historical
and contextual development. Note the movement of invitational expansion in the first sentence of the above paragraph (‘All of these uses of the word ‘spiritual’ are no doubt valid, if limited’), where Stirling affirms, negates and expands the previously canvassed interpretations of ‘spiritual things’. He continues:

“A spiritual person then is one who is open to the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit .... Wherever he is and whatever he is doing he is spiritual, whether he be in church or at football match, and in both places he will act as one who is motivated by the Spirit. Conversely one can be involved very deeply in so-called ‘spiritual things’ but not be ‘of the Spirit’ (spiritual).”

Stirling returns, expanded by this conceptual exercise, to scripture:

“Paul neatly sums up the meaning of ‘being spiritual’ in Galatians 5:22, 23. He describes what the spiritual life looks like, using the metaphor of fruit .... ‘Spirituality’ or ‘being spiritual’ then is not necessarily reflected in the frequency of our attendance at meetings for prayer and praise, the number of chapters we read per day, the fact that we sing hymns rather than ‘secular songs’, or that we speak often about the Lord. It may well be reflected in these things, but not unless it is also reflected in ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.”

A series of seemingly disparate observations are now creatively united in the metaphor, ‘the fruit of the Spirit’. That is, the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ (and therefore, spiritual things) can only ever be seen ‘relationally’, that is materially observed in the way we ‘get on with people’. This makes explicit that which has been hidden in plain sight:

“Spirituality has to do with how we get on with other people: The fruits of the spirit can only be seen in our relationships with other people. We can only know if a person is spiritual (bearing the fruits of the Spirit) as we see how he gets on with people. The spiritual life is not withdrawal from others, especially the ‘non-spiritual’. When the Holy Spirit fills us with ‘love’ it is an all-embracing compassion for everyone. ‘Patience’ is with people, as are ‘kindness’ ‘goodness’ ‘dependability’, and ‘gentleness.’
Self-control is what inhibits our natural tendency to destroy others. And above all, spirituality is not sitting in judgement upon the spirituality of others.”[13]

This move denudes ‘spirituality’ of any latent dualism attributed to it and broadens our understanding of what ‘being spiritual’ is as directly connected with our human existence, our material or bodily experiences; Stirling here affirms human dignity and finitude.[14] That is, ‘fruit of the Spirit’ do not exist in an invisible, separated spiritual realm, but are what they are only in being concrete. The effect of such affirmation carries with it an opening out of all of human existence as included within the life of God—not pantheistically, but incarnationally. This is the possibility of grace being encountered, seamlessly, as gift—because it equally might not be so; this invokes responsibility and decision. So:

“....the family that entertain at a meal the shy migrants from next door is doing a spiritual thing. The church that surrounds with patience the person who has a succession of bad alcohol problems is doing a spiritual thing. The father who takes time to listen to what his teenagers are really trying to say to him is doing a spiritual thing.”

RESURFACING

This article displays characteristic themes. Stirling is consistently digging in to that which is easily left unthought or ill-considered in Christian parlance, challenging the use of clichés, jargon and wider linguistic praxis. This is significant, because a lack of thought in language betrays a certain theological poverty of thinking. This can result in the words and phrases used to articulate (both express and shape) the christological story that lack substantality and traction.[15] Stirling challenges us to rethink, reword and reengage. This is crucial; such a methodology tacitly and explicitly affirms the gospel’s capacity to speak an ever-new word into any current reality or context; it is a belief that the christological inheritance “is never old wine. It is new and heady and intoxicating in each new generation.”[16] Yet it is a constant reminder that this only happens when we work and think hard to articulate it.

Stirling’s focus on materiality and relationality is a reminder too that people do not need doctrine so much as they need discovery; indignation at their shortcomings so much as needing meaningful participation; easy answers or
the proverbial silver bullet so much as committed, reciprocal companionship in grace, though the ebb and flow of life. For Stirling, the body of Christ is the place this comes to fruition, in the spirit of Christ, as always relational. This goes beyond pietistic expressions of faith which project spiritualised capital onto particular behaviours, so remaining within a dualistic mode of engagement. Faith and identity move from the realm of behavioural codes, to embodied love and grace, which are contextual, intelligent and dynamic and require serious engagement with, and attendance to, embodied existence—and in fact, only exist there.

There is a further clue to this focus in another article, entitled ‘The Power of a Story’. Here, Stirling shares an anecdote from a book entitled ‘Salvation Today’ by Pauline Webb. It recounts the story of a coal miner at an Alcoholic’s Anonymous meeting, who professes that the group has ‘saved’ him … but, with a look at the visiting Reverend, clarifies that he does not mean ‘religiously saved’ but ‘really saved!’ Stirling then asks two key questions, suggesting that the material saving (being ‘really saved’) is akin to the religious saving: “What did he mean by salvation?” Stirling asks, “And is it anything like what the Bible means by salvation? Did God have anything to do with this man’s salvation?”. The suggestive implications are clear.

To return to the title, Stirling’s point actually is, in a sense, that the spiritual is ‘thing-y’. There are two parts to this: the spiritual is thingy insofar as the spiritual is only ever concrete by its expression within material existence (what Stirling refer to as ‘getting on with others’); it doesn’t exist ‘somewhere else’! The spiritual is also not-thing-y, not because of dualistic spiritualism which posits the spiritual as severed and invisible, behind the material, but because human subjectivity is also more than ‘things’; material existence is spiritual in the way the human spirit engages it, even as material existence is the very shape of human spirit. That we can engage with others through a spirit of fear, stinginess and tribalism, but that it is much better to engage with others through generosity, hope and affirmation of dignity, is a belief fuelling Stirling’s project.

We are now perhaps left with more questions than answers; yet, such is the nature of diving into a creative swirl of ideas—we become participants in their re-forming and reshaping, in turn creating new currents to be engaged by others.

This article has been peer reviewed in line with editorial policies.
ENDNOTES


Twenty-four of these articles have been curated and published in *Page 13: A selection from the writings of Gordon Stirling* (see footnote 4).


This might be interpreted as a move of creative 'sublation' (aufheben) in the Hegelian sense of both cancelling and preserving. See Hegel, *Logic*, 141–2 (§96). For a clear and brief explanation of Hegel’s use of this term, see Pinkard, *Hegel’s Naturalism*, 6, 11–12.

For an impassioned exploration of love as mediating the spiritual and material (though with its own distinct nuancing), see Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (George Eliot) (London: Trübner) 1881, pp47-49. Available online at: https://libcom.org/files/The%20Essence%20of%20Christianity.pdf


