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SOCIAL ETHICS AND A SPIRITUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

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In many European countries, public discussion about the crisis of families and relationships is marked by discomfort over a birth rate that is too low and a divorce rate that is too high. There is a call for political policies that support strategies for balancing careers and family life. Envisioning and formulating expectations for an emotionally fulfilling sexuality and eroticism has become a regular feature of daily life. For some time now the image of the couple in the public perception has been about much more than what is conveyed by the traditional terminology of marriage and family. This can be seen not only in the legal recognition of homosexual relationships but also in the many models now open for heterosexual couples such as "living apart together" or weekend relationships. Amid this diversity, the one commonality is the quest for relationships where independence *coexists with* devotion. What meaning does a renewed spirituality in partnership have within this highly-charged arena?

Although the concept of spirituality does not have a recognised place in the social sciences, social theorists do raise the issue, although they seldom provide any specific analysis. This essay will first consider the views of social theorists Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and Charles Taylor. It will then suggest theological understandings of spirituality in relationships that might seem to fit their theories. The evaluation will include a critical assessment of the idea of spirituality in relationships.

1. Perceptions of Modern Relationships

In *The Transformation of Intimacy*,[1] Anthony Giddens, a representative of the social theory of reflexive modernisation, categorises the historical images of

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[1] Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

gender specific *love* that have been formative in the European tradition: men have tended to identify with *amour-passion*, women with romantic love. The former emerges as something urgent, enchanting, containing elements of a religious form of sacrificial devotion. Romantic love by contrast is reflexively oriented – the lovers sound the depths of their feelings; they look for the meaning of life in love and in love they also look for the eternal in life. Romantic love contains elements of *amour-passion*, especially when there is a connection to Christian moral values: "The precept that one should devote oneself to God in order to know him, and that through this process self-knowledge is achieved, became part of a mystical unity between man and woman. The temporary idealisation of the other typical of passionate love here was joined to a more permanent involvement with a love object; and a certain reflexivity was already present even at an early date."[2]

Self-understanding also belongs to the enduring good in the model of the couple that is crystallising as the leading one at this time. "The imperative of free and open communication is the *sine qua non* of the pure relationship; the relationship is its own forum."[3] Because free will, autonomy, and economic independence purify traditional forms of relationship from dependency structures, Giddens speaks of the "pure relationship"; in it people tend to feel less obligation to remain in conflict situations and so separate more readily than heretofore.[4] Couple therapy services are increasingly in demand as a means of preventing regressive involvement in relationships from turning into lasting mutual dependencies. Giddens' social theory does not accept the critique of excessive claims to autonomy or of arguments based on the power of social structures. It assumes that persons are actors and that they use structures to act, even when these structures restrict their freedom of action; he is critical of the structural interpretation of power as formulated by Michel Foucault. Subcultures, especially gays and lesbians, belong to the trendsetters of social change: "sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity, and social norms."[5] Giddens prefers to speak of eroticism rather than of love and he calls explicitly for a renewal of spirituality in relationships.

For Zygmunt Bauman partnerships are "mixed blessings." In *Liquid Love* he offers a study of "men and women, our contemporaries, despairing at being

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[2] Ibid., 39.

[3] Ibid., 194.

[4] See Andreas Hirseland, Werner Schneider & Christine Wimbauer, "Paare und Geld: Zur Ökonomisierung der Beziehungskultur," in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 2 (2005) no. 1, 108-119.

[5] Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, 15.

abandoned to their own wits and feeling easily disposable, longing for the secu-
rity of togetherness and for a helping hand to count on in a moment of trouble,
and so desperate to 'relate'; yet wary of the state of 'being in a relationship' and
particularly of being in a relationship 'for good', not to mention forever – since
they fear that such a state may bring burdens and cause strains they neither feel
able nor are willing to bear, and so may severely limit the freedom they need
(...)."[6] The background for this statement is a dialectically-oriented postmodern
ethic in which Bauman works out the ambivalences of love relationships as they
arise with illnesses, in old age, and with all non-reciprocal participation in rela-
tionships. He argues that wanting to overcome those ambivalences means run-
ning away from life,[7] for it is of the very nature of life to experience oneself and
the world in ambivalence. The distinctiveness of Bauman's approach, in contrast
to that of Giddens, lies in his criticism of modernity and, above all, in that he
takes the Holocaust as the point of departure for his reflections.[8] Bauman criti-
cises Giddens' "pure relationship" as "de-ethicised," suggesting that permanent-
relationship discourse rationalises what is mysterious in love. The partnership
relationship whose prototype consists in the dual-income childless couple has,
in Bauman's view, emancipated itself both from the traditional social functions
of marriage and from the moral obligations that arise in the situations of old age
or with children or with illnesses and handicaps. Following the Jewish humanism
of Emmanuel Levinas, Bauman stresses the possibility of accepting the otherness
of the partner. He argues that the Greek-oriented culture of *philia*, which has
anchored the idea of friendship between equals in the modern picture of love, lacks
the power to accept the other, the outsider, the unknown, the non-reciprocal in
the beloved opposite.

Charles Taylor sketches a communitarian social theory; a critique of atomism
as encouraging a retreat into the private is characteristic of his work. In his study
Sources of the Self,[9] he diagnoses a modern self-misunderstanding arising from
the fact that it is no longer aware of the sources from which it is nourished.
Taylor advocates a rediscovery of moral resources. Among these resources are (a)
the ideal of authenticity and (b) relationships as a key to the process of the
recognition of others. Taylor discusses the ideal of authenticity particularly in
the context of experiences of otherness; for him such experiences are – as with
Bauman – essential to life in a partnership. Taylor stresses how much identity is

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6 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press,
   2003), viii.
7 Ibid., 165.
8 See Hans Joas & Wolfgang Knöbl, *Sozialtheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004),
   654ff.
9 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

dependent on recognition by significant others and how vulnerable it is if such recognition is withheld. He is not surprised that in the culture of authenticity, relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-affirmation. Love relationships, and this is different from Bauman, are not important simply because of the general emphasis in modern culture on the fulfillment of ordinary needs. They are also crucial because they are the crucibles of inwardly generated identity.[10] Despite this emphasis, couple relationships in no way serve "only" the identity formation of individuals, because individuals and their well-being are the foundation of a successful society. According to Taylor successful democracy is dependent on citizens stepping beyond the directly private context of partnership, family, and kinship and expressing themselves as persons in public, for example in friendship circles, associations, parties and so forth. However, "as our public traditions of family, ecology, even polis are undermined or swept away, we need new languages of personal resonance to make crucial human goods alive for us again."[11] Even justice and equality are criticised as leading principles, because they cannot clarify where it is that people find the essence of a successful relationship, what makes a good life for them and where the sources are to be found from which such a relationship is nourished.[12] The key to Taylor's concept of the person lies in the capacity for strong judgement: In their judgements people articulate wishes for their lives, while at the same time their judgements embody interpretations of themselves. Taylor sees a spiritual dimension in the person's capacity for strong judgements.

This brief survey of social theories regarding relationships leads to three conclusions: First, each view is dependent upon how the author perceives the modern. Second, each theory is marked by a different interpretation of the topos of individualisation. Third, each can validly be related to a discussion of the renewal of spirituality in relationships.

2. Concepts of Spirituality

The approaches of Giddens, Bauman, and Taylor suggest three differing concepts of spirituality. *Anthony Giddens'* thought is open to a quest for a spirituality in relationships in which the rules adopted for a shared life together are not allowed to harden into a routine that freezes each one's perception of the partner and their relationship. There is an *ars erotica* to be developed. Sexually specific

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[10] See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 36.

[11] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 513.

[12] Ibid., 495ff.

perceptions of the body and feelings of physicality are linked with this. Although admittedly no longer expressed in traditional heterosexual terminology, in which female eroticism was concretised in the idea of receiving and the male in that of penetrating, these gender-specific notions may nonetheless serve as a basis for further development toward an eroticism in which the emotional fulfilment of both partners and of each for him/herself has great significance. Related to this are ever-changing definitions of closeness and distance. Present relationships lack stability; distance looks disturbing and threatening, but to idealise intimacy as the sanctuary of stability hinders the *ars erotica*. Dorothee Sölle contends that erotic life always occurs in the alternation of losing oneself and finding oneself again in others; romancing aimlessly and immersing oneself, existing incompletely, undiscovered, partially only, and being found.[13] In her writing on erotic spirituality, Sölle finds such movement expressed in the biblical Song of Songs with its changes of place – its gardens, streets, and vineyards –, its hurrying, going to and fro, flying, being held firm, and questing. Erotic power needs both movement and the capacity for letting go in relationships that are indeed experienced as unstable. Here eroticism is not used as a tool of mutual domination but serves much more for the sharing of power, so that it becomes a healing power, "empowerment" for the lovers.

Zygmunt Bauman's perspective on couple relationships emphasizes ambivalences and points to a *spirituality of resistance.* It resists the temptation to eliminate and get rid of that which is strange and irritating in the other or others, that which in the other causes suffering. In Bauman's terms spirituality would be found where persons pursue their paths unfazed by what is strange to them, undeterred by the risk of non-reciprocal dependencies in relationships. Spirituality here emphasizes making oneself available to the other: being aware of the suffering of the other and sharing it, devoting oneself to the other and thereby also stepping outside of oneself. What persons give each other in this way in an intimate relationship goes beyond their duality, and its significance can certainly be interpreted religiously: "Jewish spirituality is hallowing spirituality; only the name of God is hallowed. This hallowing does not journey out of the world as in special ascetic spiritualities, but into it. (...) The Shoah has produced the 'hallowing of life' (*Kiddusch ha-Hayyim*) as a new spirituality which set 'spiritual' pressure and active resistance against putting up with things."[14] In this way the Jewish tradition offers to social ethical discussion about spirituality in relationships a way of life that takes life as the centre point, promoting life and protecting

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[13] See Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance,* trans. Barbara & Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 118.

[14] Karl-Friedrich Wiggermann, "Spiritualität," in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 31 (2000), 711 (free translation from the German).

it against all the crippling forces of limitation or death. In this perspective, as formulated by Bauman, spirit (understood not as something ethereal and in contradiction to the body but as spirituality) stands against death from the start. The context of the Shoah makes clear, moreover, that the spiritual commitment to life, which was challenged in the extreme situation of the Shoah, has an everyday dimension. The special partnership relationship is about entering the deeper dimension of reality that makes persons mature in regard to their anxieties and directs them to where their religious dimension is to be found.

A spirituality of resistance which does not avoid suffering has a great tradition in the Christian context, but it has not been unproblematic. Consider the so-called Christ-mysticism: "In the later Middle Ages and in early Modern times the pious practice – particularly favoured by women – of participation in the sufferings of Christ and of his mother (compassion) greatly increased."[15] The precious capacity for compassion can thus draw individuals into suffering in such a way that to suffer actually becomes an end in itself. This danger, which has at times surfaced within the Christian tradition, is especially to be avoided where the religious socialisation of women is concerned.

Charles Taylor's theme of authenticity opens up a further way to look for spirituality in relationships. A person emerges as authentic when that person's feelings are pure and strong. Behind the culture of authenticity there lies a way of life close to Romantic Expressionism and the model of romantic love as it arose in the late eighteenth century. The ideal of authenticity forms, as it were, a counter-image to a perception of reality that is defined by coldness of feelings, by "coolness," and by a way of life less directly influenced *emotionally*. Franciscan spirituality incorporates an understanding of this struggle for an emotional, feeling-filled perception of reality. One might call it an *emotional spirituality*; it seeks to counter melancholy, which is also experienced as mental lethargy: "The devil's great triumph is when he can rob us of cheerfulness of mind. He carries a fine dust around with him and he strews it bit by bit through the cracks in the conscience so as to disturb pure convictions and the brightness of the soul."[16] Mental lethargy makes people see nothing, taste nothing, and hear nothing; it makes tears dry up. Even the ability to pray dries up, and this is particularly significant because Christian tradition values prayer as a crucial discipline for the practice of the spiritual life. Mental lethargy hinders authenticity, and Francis himself fought against it with prayers, singing, praising and dancing.

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[15] Elisabeth Gössmann, "Spiritualität. Historisch," in: *Wörterbuch der feministischen Theologie*, ed. Elisabeth Gössman et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2nd ed. 2002), 513 (free translation from the German).

[16] Francis of Assisi, *Legenden und Laude*, ed. and trans. Otto Karrer (Zürich: Manesse, 1975), 117f. (free translation from the German).

3. Evaluation

To raise the question about spirituality in relationships within the context of social ethics means to free the discussion from theological premises. These have been built up over time through a combination of the ideal of romantic love with a theology of marriage and a sacramental theology which idealises relationships in the direction of a divine, perfectly lived love. There is often no awareness that the key to true worship of God is the word of grace, that the married couple does not have to guarantee their love themselves, or that their failings toward each other may also be brought together before God. This tendency may be seen, for example, in the formulae of the marriage vows and the biblical words people choose for their weddings. These choices often make a strong plea for mutual responsibility and invoke the continuity of eternal love. This is a spiritual quest; the couples want to fence round their common future and, by means of a church blessing, be immunised against threatening insecurities. Love, which has become a modern secular religion,[17] struggles for its inner stability. Couples expect spirituality to provide them with a home and with unlimited shelter, yet the word of blessing cannot fulfill these expectations. There ought rather to be a focus on a culture of blessing that encourages people to deal with risks and anxieties openly.[18] A primary task of Christian ethics, then, must be to reshape the perception of the issues.

Discussion of spirituality in relationship would be ill-conceived, then, if its goal were to make the couple a community, a cell, whose purpose is to be a guarantor of society and state. It is not the task of social ethics and the churches to promote spirituality in relationships – redeeming children, career, and longings for a successful coupledom – in order to deliver cohesion for a society at a time of cultural crisis. What is much more of an issue is that couple relationships should not exempt individuals from leading their own lives. Spirituality in relationships requires that the partners individually bring their spiritual maturity into the relationship. Providing support for persons in this task represents an appropriate way for theology and Church to nurture spirituality in relationships. A look at medieval mysticism reveals how much Christian spirituality has led to conversions in lifestyle, how much the connection to God has influenced couple relationships to allow a respectful distance between the partners – precisely because it is in the love of God that the way of freedom from one another and for one another may be experienced. Christian spirituality has always also been

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[17] Ulrich Beck & Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, trans. Mark Ritter & Jane Wiebel (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press – Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

[18] See for example Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952).

lived in communities, while at the same time having its source in the individual orientation to God (see e.g. 1 Cor 7). This concern for the individual is the place where Christian spirituality encounters the social theory we have been discussing. Spirituality cannot be regarded primarily as a founding element of society, but rather as something which concerns the individual first of all, and only thereby can have an impact on the social. Where it is possible, a space can develop that both partners experience, a space that has a material dimension as well, a space that looks like a kind of aura for the couple.[19] Where this is experienced, the life of the couple can certainly have a positive effect on the world around them. Nevertheless, such effects should be seen more as a gift rather than as a necessary result.

Which approach will best promote a Christian understanding of spirituality in regard to "spirituality in relationship"? The first major task of Christian social ethics will be to address this question, that is, to study the ambivalences that the subject of spirituality in relationships carries with it in the modern Christian tradition.[20] It has to do with a renewed reflection about heterosexual sexual relationships in marriage. That spirituality in marriage could become a topic of consideration at all has historical roots both in secularization and in the contributions of the Protestant tradition. In the Western world, both have had the effect of weakening the perception of marriage as a sacrament. Paul Tillich, for example, already made such a diagnosis in 1926, when he noted that Protestantism, by dissolving the sacramentality of marriage, had placed marriage and sexual relationships in general into the realm of individual responsibility, while at the same time clothing exclusive monogamy in the robes of divine natural law.[21] The double morality of the cultural connection between marriage and prostitution was also exposed in this way. Interestingly, Tillich had much the same scene before his eyes in the Twenties of the previous century as we have today. Divorce statistics reveal that the rate of divorce in Germany rose threefold in the first twenty years of the twentieth century.[22] Ute Frevert sees a deep change of attitudes during this time. The more marriage came to be seen as a contract between two people, built on mutual attraction, while the influence of

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[19] See Detlef Hein, *Spiritualität in Partnerschaft: Grundlagen und Perspektiven psychologischer Paarberatung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2005).

[20] See Ilona Nord, "Buhle nicht! Eine Auslegung des sechsten Gebots," in: Hans Joas (Ed.), *Die zehn Gebote: Ein widersprüchliches Erbe?* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006), 119-144.

[21] See Paul Tillich, "Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart im Gebiet der Religion," in: Id., *Die religiöse Deutung der Gegenwart: Schriften zur Zeitkritik. Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10, ed. Renate Albrecht (Stuttgart: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), 41-64.

[22] See Ute Frevert, "Tradition und Veränderung im Geschlechterverhältnis," in: *Funkkolleg Jahrhundertwende, 1880-1930: Die Entstehung der modernen Gesellschaft* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1989; Studienbegleitbrief, no. 9), 58-102, at 97.

third parties (be it parents or the Church) was largely stripped away, the more this attraction became the central connective link in the marital bond. Only in the twentieth century did the individualization and emotionalization of marriage, a process that had already been underway for two hundred years, take hold among broad portions of society.[23] Thus there disappeared any sense of a binding power in marriage that existed independent of the attraction of the couple to one another. In the realm of love, individuality met individuality.[24]

Although this development contributes a great deal to the challenges that contemporary marriage must face every day, it would nevertheless be mistaken, in my opinion, to hold up individualization and the declining power of tradition as characteristics of modernity's decline. Giddens, Bauman and Taylor presuppose individuality as the point of departure for their social-ethical reflections. With a culture that desires to honor the right of self-determination for men and women, no other approach is possible. Therefore, the individual as starting-point also marks the way for the topic of spirituality, although not without raising hermeneutical questions about how married couples are to be perceived. The individuality of married people is perceived primarily in terms of their sexuality – through the lenses of the categories "sex" and "gender." Sexual difference belongs to the criteria for marriage; this remains true even in times when domestic partnerships of lesbian and gay couples have been legally recognized. A different bureaucratic terminology has been sought out for these relationships, in order to make the difference from marriage clear. In feminist cultural anthropology and in symbolic interactionism one speaks of a symbolic system of two genders; attempts to break through this gender-specific construction of identity succeed only partially, if at all. Independent of the ways that particular parents and childcare providers define their own stance regarding the order of the sexes, our culture demands a self-definition as girl or as boy, differentiated from the opposite gender, as a condition for the possibility of identity.[25] Theological social ethics and, especially, feminist and gay theologians have profited here from the sociological research. They have begun to develop a "sexual theology." From this perspective, James Nelson asks, "What does our experience as human sexual beings tell us about how we read the scripture, interpret the tradition, and attempt to live out the meaning of the gospel?"[26] Themes that shape marital life – such as sexuality/heterosexuality, power and violence, family and other forms

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[23] Ibid., 97f.
[24] See Tillich, "Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart im Gebiet der Religion," 55.
[25] See Carol Hageman-White, "Wir werden nicht zweigeschlechtlich geboren ..." in: Carol Hageman-White & Maria S. Rerrich, *FrauenMännerBilder: Männer und Männlichkeit in der feministischen Diskussion* (Bielefeld: Kleine, 1988), 224-235.
[26] James Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 21.

of living – all receive their dynamic power through the cultural system of two genders. Simply looking back over the lifetimes of the past three or four generations is enough to make clear that many things have changed, especially in the growth of individual freedom within the spectrum of life-possibilities for both genders. At the same time, in marriage and in weddings the gender roles that have been passed up by society are being awakened to new life. This is the place where the longing for an inner togetherness, for an eternal blending of the genders, comes to life. The relation of the genders to one another has no quality of the eternal in itself; rather it is human and temporal. This is precisely the Protestant contribution to the discussion about marriage, revealing it as a worldly and temporal thing.[27] Nonetheless, it is possible to speak of the eternal and the holy in connection with conjugal partnership. This can be true, however, only where the sexual relationship and its development into a relationship of individuals with equal rights can be transcended. The eternal is neither at our disposal nor directly accessible.

A way of living in the world that is lived in reference to the eternal must not, however, be thought of as a quasi-sexless or sex-forgetting way of life. Such an approach would only further provoke the advocates of modern sexuality. The discourse of modern sexuality produces modern people, who calculate their own interests, function in careers, and have their lives in good order. Among such people, sexual disturbances are prevented or cleared up by means of a rationalized, scientifically-guided sex life.[28] What emerges is a well-planned, perfected sexuality, which crowns a well-planned, perfected existence, or, to put it in other words, makes such an existence possible at all.[29] In contrast, a life open to the eternal will be far more a way of living one's own gender thoughtfully, so as to make transparent how the narrow boundaries of the masculine and the feminine can be overcome. The eternal, one could say, becomes perceptible on the other side of the dialectic of similarity and difference. It is present where people are aware that their sexuality and the ways they are able to live it out culturally are in need of redemption, where they show themselves to rely on the experience of transcending their gender roles as they are laid down in everyday life. People have some grasp of the eternal when they recognize that that which is at hand, that which is presumably a given – namely to live thus and so as man and woman – is not all there is to reality. Instead they are free to play and to experiment with the gender roles of everyday life.

Developing and shaping such room for play is not unknown in the Christian tradition. The ancient baptismal confession quoted by Paul, in his letter to the

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27 See Martin Luther, *Vom ehelichen Leben und andere Schriften über die Ehe*, ed. Dagmar C.G. Lorenz (Stuttgart: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1978).
28 See Frevert, "Tradition und Veränderung im Geschlechterverhältnis," 97.
29 Ibid.

churches in Galatia, says that patriarchal marriage and patriarchal relationships between husbands and wives no longer play a defining role in the life of the new community in Christ (Gal 3,28c).[30] This perception makes one aware that there is a dimension within marriage which is holy to human beings because it reminds them that their love – or, one could say, the spirit of their love – does not arise from within them but rather carries them beyond themselves. It becomes clear that in their life together with their partner, a "having and yet not having" (1 Cor 7,31) exists. Spirituality in partner-relationship is thus not something to be built up so much as it is to be discovered. This takes place where the spiritual dimension of the couple's relationship is perceived, and its perception also accorded a meaningful space. While this perception may be deepened through prayer and attending worship together, esthetic experiences such as dance or simply going for an everyday walk together can also certainly help to deepen the awareness of spirituality within the partnership.

(Translated from the German by Cyprian Blamires and William C. Howden)

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

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[30] See Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).