The Universality of Spirituality and Spiritual Intelligence

Michiel Bouman

Abstract: Spirituality, especially in the perspective of universality, is of the essence for disability theology. It provides answers to a genuine concern of many religious persons, namely, whether their loved ones with profound intellectual disabilities or dementia can (still) engage with the transcendent, for example, as to whether they can know God. In this paper, I assess whether there are reasonable grounds for the universality of spirituality. In the first section, I assess a variety of approaches that have dealt with this matter. In the second section, I discuss whether the concept of spiritual intelligence can be used to argue for the universality of spirituality. This concept draws a line between spiritual intelligence and general intelligence, usually understood rationalistically, and thus opens the way for understanding the spirituality of persons whose general intelligence is profoundly disabled. In the third section, I argue that psychological research should be complemented by theological arguments, making a case for the apophatic nature of the mental lives of persons with intellectual disabilities, as well as for a sense of spirituality that acknowledges its transcendent dimension. In the fourth section, I illustrate this with three theological approaches to the universality of spirituality and spiritual intelligence. I conclude by asserting the theological plausibility of the universality of spirituality and the universality of a specific form of spiritual intelligence.

Keywords: disability theology; mystery; profound intellectual disability; spiritual intelligence; spirituality

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Christian Perspectives on Science and Technology, New Series, Vol. 3,
Special Issue: Artificial and Spiritual Intelligence (2024), https://doi.org/10.58913/HWYG5035

> *"The voice went forth—coming to each person with a force adjusted to his individual receptivity … This is why the Decalogue begins I am the Lord thy God, in the second person singular, rather than in the second person plural: God addressed every individual according to his particular power of comprehension." This does not imply subjectivism. It is precisely the power of the voice of God to speak to man according to his capacity. It is the marvel of the voice to split up into seventy voices, into seventy languages, so that all the nations should understand.*
> (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*)

In *God in Search of Man*,[1] Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel points to the universalist aspirations of God. God's voice speaks to each person in a different language, according to his or her power. This universality of God's revelation resonates with disability theology's plea for thoroughgoing inclusivity, whether this concerns the use of inclusive language, physical access to places of worship, or disability-friendly forms of worship.[2] One important question for caregivers and disability theologians alike is how far God's inclusivity extends and how this can be explained theologically. Is it possible for a person who cannot understand the Bible to know God? Some Christians see knowing God, or encountering God, as a necessary precondition for salvation. What does this mean for those who are not merely unable to confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9), but are profoundly intellectually disabled, and therefore seemingly unable to know God at all?[3]

Below, I assess a variety of contributions from disability theology that have engaged these questions. First, I introduce Peter Kevern's

1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York, NY: Octagon, 1976), 261. The citation included in the above *motto* is from *Exodus Rabba* 5.9.

2 Joanna Leidenhag, "Autism, Doxology, and the Nature of Christian Worship," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 26:2 (2022): 211–224, esp. 212, https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2021.1982840.

3 I use "knowing God" throughout this article in the sense of personal knowledge which in other languages is distinguished more clearly, e.g., as *kennen* instead of *wissen* in German.

diverse approaches to the universality of spirituality in persons with dementia. I draw different conclusions from Kevern's, as all of his approaches require a degree of intellectual capacity on behalf of the person and therefore fail to be fully universal. This is also where theological approaches that rely on psychological research fail to meet the criterion of universality. Second, I introduce the concept of "spiritual intelligence," a term whose coinage itself can be seen as an attempt to distinguish this type of intelligence from general intelligence, and may therefore inaugurate the possibility of speaking about the spirituality of persons whose general intelligence is profoundly disabled. Third, I argue that it is impossible to arrive at a truly universal understanding of spirituality by means of psychological research alone.

Arguing for the apophatic nature of the mental lives of persons with intellectual disabilities, as well as for an understanding of spirituality that acknowledges its transcendent dimension, I propose that psychological research should be complemented by theological anthropology and epistemology. In the fourth section, I illustrate my proposal by discussing three theological approaches to the universality of spirituality and spiritual intelligence.

Approaches to the Universality of Spirituality

When persons suffer from profound intellectual disabilities, severe forms of dementia, or other conditions that heavily affect the brain and the body, it is hard to see how they (still) engage the world around them. Trying to understand if, and envisioning how, they can have spiritual experiences is even more of a challenge. Is it possible to know whether someone is experiencing God or is spiritually engaged? In a critical literature review, religion and dementia scholar Peter Kevern notices that research on dementia and spirituality is limited in its understanding of the spirituality of persons with severe forms of dementia, because of the interpretational character of the assessment.[4] The

4 Peter Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia: A Review of the Research Literature, a Critical Analysis and Some Implications for Person-Centred

limited or absent communication on behalf of the studied individuals makes it nearly impossible to say anything about their spiritual experience. What someone is thinking can only be conjectured or theorised about. Kevern discusses various approaches that seek to overcome this gap, but he is critical of their effectiveness.[5] He distinguishes five approaches, which I present below, and to which I add other contributions that engage similar issues, such as those that are encountered in research on persons with profound intellectual disabilities.

First, there are various accounts that adopt a palliative or therapeutic approach, which instrumentalises spirituality as an effective means to counter psychological symptoms such as discomfort or aggression. Therapeutic intervention, however, can be quickly dismissed as an approach that substantiates a universal conception of spirituality, as it does not reveal anything about the spiritual experience of persons with dementia, but mainly serves as an argument for the beneficial nature of some spiritual practices.

A second type of approach dismissed by Kevern is the type of ideological approach that sees spirituality as something essentially and intrinsically human, sustained by God or the soul. Although helpful from a more theoretical perspective, Kevern dismisses these approaches as leaving spirituality "with no purchase in the practical world."[6] I return to this approach in the third section of my paper.

Third, there is the romantic approach, which grants the effectiveness of the intuition of a researcher or caregiver in observing the spirituality of persons with dementia. Theologians John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, for example, advocate the method of the "observer-interpreter" who can register the spirituality of the person by careful observation.[7] In one of their articles, they reflect on the story of Mary, a

Spirituality and Dementia Care," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 18:9 (2015): 765–776, esp. 769, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2015.1094781.

5 Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia," 770–771.

6 Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia," 770.

7 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 240–241. For a critical discussion of this method, see Jill Harshaw, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of*

profoundly intellectually disabled woman, who becomes surprisingly quiet during the quiet time of a church service. They conclude that this unexpected silence is a token of her experienced spirituality. This intuition, however, cannot be validated or substantiated by those lacking said intuition, and therefore falls short of providing a robust ground for arguing for the spirituality of persons with severe dementia or intellectual disability. The argument relies too much on the interpretation of the observer or researcher and therefore, in the end, cannot tell us anything definitive about the spirituality persons like Mary have.

A fourth approach is to see the self as socially extended, which is why the spirituality that belongs to the self can be sustained by a community as well, e.g., by keeping certain memories and stories alive. Disability theologians have pointed to the social nature of spirituality and the communal effort in knowing God. One example is Joanna Leidenhag, who advances this argument when discussing the inclusion of persons with autism in worship. Drawing an analogy between the sensory overload autistic people often experience and the holiness of God, Leidenhag explains that "all humanity is hyper-/and hypo-sensitive to the presence of God."[8] None of us can see God directly, but together we might get a glimpse. Communally, we can attend to the divine presence and know God: "worshiping together will be especially fruitful and transformative if the gathered congregation is diverse … This is why disability has a prodigious power 'to expand communicative bandwidth'."[9] The diversity of spiritualities and spiritual intelligences (see below) thus accommodates and presupposes the need to learn to worship together.

This type of argument, although valuable for the purpose of including (neuro)diverse ways of worship, falls short of arguing for the universality of spirituality. Leidenhag's theological arguments for the communal nature of attending to the divine presence are convincing,

People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016), 68–84.

8 Leidenhag, "Autism," 218.

9 Leidenhag, "Autism," 220.

but this cannot tell us anything about the individual spiritual experience of persons with profound intellectual disabilities. This can also be seen in Swinton, Mowat, and Baines' article on Mary, as they too conclude that her "spirituality is being formed and held by her participation in the community … She is dependent on her community for her spiritual experience," which is why "Mary's spirituality is a corporate rather than personal concept and experience."[10] Again, although a theological case can be made for the community sustaining Mary's spirituality, it can similarly be objected that there is no way to deduce Mary's individual spiritual experience from this.

The final approach is the cognitive-psychological approach, which argues for the continuing presence of "deep capacities" or procedural memory sustaining the spirituality of those whose overt aptitude for engaging with the spiritual has receded. These movements portray an embodied way of understanding and engaging with the spiritual. John Swinton draws from this type of psychological research when he argues that persons with severe forms of dementia can sustain their spiritual lives in an embodied way: "their movements were memory … they know and remember Jesus in their bodies."[11] Throughout his work, he emphasises the embodied and affective nature of knowing God, as opposed to cognitively knowing *about* God: "knowing about God may not be as important as knowing God, and … knowing God involves much more than memory, intellect, and cognition."[12]

Kevern evaluates the socially-extended self and cognitive-psychological approaches more positively than the other approaches, as they reframe the conception of spirituality itself instead of bluntly

10 John Swinton, Harriet Mowat, and Susannah Baines, "Whose Story Am I? Redescribing Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 15:1 (2011): 5–19, esp. 14, https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2011.539337.

11 See John Swinton, "What the Body Remembers: Theological Reflections on Dementia," *Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging* 26:2–3 (2014): 160–172, esp. 168, https://doi.org/10.1080/15528030.2013.855966.

12 John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 10.

positing or seeking to intuit the dominant conception of spirituality. Kevern concludes: "if these findings are correct, they imply that the spirituality of people with dementia will, as the condition progresses, come to draw increasingly upon their early, frequently repeated conditioning and upon constant reinforcement by and support from their broader social circle."[13]

Although I concur with Kevern that the final two approaches bear merit, their limitations become apparent when it comes to arguing for a universal conception of spirituality. This is because these approaches eventually account for the spirituality of persons with profound intellectual disabilities on the basis of a previously developed intellectual capacity or the presence of a spirituality-sustaining community. For if persons with severe dementia never developed an embodied spirituality, or not to the extent of developing "deep capacities," the argument cannot be applicable to them. This would be equally true if they lacked a social circle or religious community to sustain their spirituality.

For example, what if there was no community to foster Mary's spirituality?[14] In Christian terms, this would translate to an impossibility on their behalf of (still) knowing God. Another flaw of these approaches is that they fall short of accounting for the spirituality of persons that are born with profound intellectual disabilities. Especially the cognitive-psychological approach, which relies on the persistence of earlier expressions of spirituality, does not suffice in this regard, but the socially-extended-self approach also runs into trouble, as there may (supposedly) be no prior spiritual identity that can be referred to as being maintained or kept alive.[15]

Another approach, which is not discussed by Kevern, is Swinton's emphasis on other attitudes such as love, trust, or faithfulness over understanding or knowledge. In *Becoming Friends of Time*, Swinton explores whether people with profound intellectual disabilities can

13 Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia," 772.

14 See Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 80–81.

15 Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia," 771.

be disciples of God, which is a variation of the question of how persons with profound intellectual disabilities can know God: how could they follow Jesus if they can never intellectually know anything about him? The problem, according to Swinton, might begin with thinking about the concept of discipleship in purely rational-cognitive terms.[16] This intellectualisation of discipleship is detrimental to letting people with intellectual disabilities belong as disciples. For Swinton, however, discipleship within the Christian community is the ability to love and respond to the vocation to learn together "to love God, and in coming to love God, learn what it means to love and to receive love from all of its members."[17] Instead of seeing discipleship or following Jesus as a personal choice from an autonomous self, we should understand it as an obedient and trusting response to Jesus' call, exactly as it is portrayed in the gospels.

Although helpful up to a point, there are again some difficulties with Swinton's arguments, especially in regard to persons with profound intellectual disabilities. The argument about non-propositional ways of knowing God just changes the question: how can we know that people with profound intellectual disabilities are faithfully or trustfully responding to God's call? One would need to reconstruct the concept of faithfulness or trust to include the attitudes and behaviour of persons with profound intellectual disabilities.

Notwithstanding their value in other regards, none of the above arguments seems to be sufficiently convincing to help conceive of the universality of spirituality and the possibility of envisioning the way persons with profound intellectual disabilities engage with God. They either do not argue for the spirituality of the person in question (the palliative approach) or rely on interpretation from the observer (the romantic approach, arguments for collective and embodied spirituality) or are not universal enough (the socially-extended-self and

16 John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 96, https://doi.org/10.1177/001316447103100435.

17 Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*, 93.

cognitive-psychological approaches). Only the ideological approach can argue for the universality of spirituality, but it is dismissed by Kevern for not being practically applicable. I return to this approach in the third section below, after I discuss whether the new concept of spiritual intelligence can help conceive of the spiritual experience of persons with profound intellectual disabilities and thereby universalise spirituality.

Spiritual Intelligence and Intellectual Disability

Thus far, I have spoken about the universality of spirituality. However, relatively recently, it has been proposed that (some forms of) spirituality might be understood as a type of intelligence, called *spiritual intelligence*. By coining spiritual intelligence as a *sui generis* type of intelligence, there may be a recognition that spirituality comes apart from general intelligence. Separating spiritual from general intelligence, in turn, might help to make room for the spirituality of persons with profound general-intellectual disabilities. Spiritual intelligence may thus support a universal understanding of spirituality. Below, I briefly discuss the concept of spiritual intelligence and then assess whether it indeed may fulfil this role.

Psychologist Robert Emmons was the first who proposed adding spiritual intelligence to the other types of diverse intelligence identified by his colleague Howard Gardner in *Frames of Mind*.[18] Emmons' motivation for this was partly to be able to acknowledge that spirituality can be done well (intelligently), that is, can be successful, or can be unsuccessful (unintelligent).[19] Spirituality is intelligent when its aim is to grasp or understand something, or, to put it differently, to accomplish something (e.g., deeper meaning, encounter with God, peace).

18 Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Bury St Edmunds: St Edmunsbury Press, 1983).

19 Robert A. Emmons, "Is Spirituality an Intelligence? Motivation, Cognition, and the Psychology of Ultimate Concern," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10:1 (2000): 3–26, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001_2.

This line of thought has been further developed and has recently been identified by Harris Wiseman and Fraser Watts as the more implicit side of the dual systems of cognition theories such as Philip Barnard's Interacting Cognition Systems and Iain McGilchrist's hemispheric lateralisation thesis.[20] Thus, spiritual intelligence, besides making room for the intelligent nature of spirituality, can also serve as a critique against an overly cognitive conception of intelligence, which fails to do justice to different types of cognition that are more intuitive, pre-conceptual, and implicit. Wiseman and Watts take this further and provide a participatory conception of spiritual intelligence:

> We wish to recover the earlier assumption that spiritual intelligence is more than a human power. Rather, we wish to explore the powers that humans use in order to engage with and participate in a transcendent spiritual intelligence. Put another way, the psychological dimensions of spiritual intelligence are concerned with the means, manner, and purposes by which a person works with, participates in, gives him or herself over to this transcendent intelligence. It is the powers and processes involved in that giving over that are the chief concern.[21]

Spiritual intelligence might thus be a promising step away from intelligence as something that can be measured on a single scale, from zero to high intelligence. Rather, there are various scales for various types of intelligence. Furthermore, Wiseman and Watts' conceptualisation of spiritual intelligence as a diachronic participation in a transcendent intelligence critiques a skill-based, or ableist, understanding of spiritual intelligence.

Does spiritual intelligence then provide a solution to the issue of spirituality and intellectual disability that I assessed in the previous section? The answer to this question depends on how spiritual

20 Harris Wiseman and Fraser Watts, "Spiritual Intelligence: Participating with Heart, Mind, and Body," *Zygon* 57:3 (2022): 710–718, https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12804.

21 Wiseman and Watts, "Spiritual Intelligence," 3.

intelligence is understood. Although the coinage of spiritual intelligence and the subsequent discussions have already contributed by nuancing the understanding of intelligence, much still hinges on certain identifiable capacities on behalf of the individual. Intelligence is, in the end, an evaluative term, expressing whether certain aims are successfully reached and reachable or not. In that spirit, the concept of spiritual intelligence is specifically proposed to emphasise that with spirituality not anything goes; it can be done intelligently or unintelligently.[22]

The diachronic participation account of Wiseman and Watts qualifies this somewhat, as it shifts the understanding of spiritual intelligence as a mere human achievement to an interaction between a human being and the transcendent intelligence it participates in or gives itself over to. Nevertheless, Wiseman and Watts' account does not obliterate human agency: "one participates in the broader spiritual intelligence with one's whole mind, one's whole body, and one's whole heart."[23] The necessary human agency, be it bodily, cognitive, or affective, brings us back to the same problems of the previous section: we cannot account for their presence in persons with profound intellectual disabilities.

The exact nature of spiritual intelligence is still a much-discussed topic and seems to provide promising avenues of interaction with disability theology.[24] Nevertheless, it does not automatically lead to a universal conception of spiritual intelligence, precisely because it seeks to make room for the intelligent nature of spirituality, which harbours an evaluative element that is based on human agency, either in bodily, cognitive, or affective form (or in all three of them). Although the affective agency might be understood to be present in persons with intellectual disability, it is hard or perhaps even impossible to research

22 Emmons, "Is Spirituality an Intelligence?" 19–21.

23 Wiseman and Watts, "Spiritual Intelligence," 5.

24 Marius Dorobantu and Fraser Watts (eds), *Perspectives on Spiritual Intelligence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024).

this for similar reasons as were provided above. In the next section, I therefore return to the ideological approach distinguished by Kevern.

A Theological Addendum

The spirituality or spiritual intelligence of persons with profound intellectual disabilities could in principle be considered to be a purely psychological question. However, the many answers to the question of the universality of spirituality—i.e., those that try to posit God's ubiquitous presence or that present a universal theological epistemology—seem to be at least partly unsatisfactory. As I argued above, the inner mental lives of persons with profound intellectual disabilities escape the methods of psychological research, because these persons cannot express themselves and their behaviour can be incomprehensible or ambiguous. Rather than assuming that their mental lives are therefore lacking or are substantially impaired, I would argue that, from a social scientific point of view, we must remain agnostic about them. This does not mean, however, that the academic conversation has to stop there. On the contrary, against Kevern, I would argue that it is especially important to discuss philosophical and theological (or, as he calls them, ideological) arguments regarding the anthropology and the theological epistemology of persons with profound disabilities. Below, I argue why a theological addendum is called for when speaking about the universality of spirituality.

On a basic level, theological and philosophical presuppositions have a substantial influence on the discussion by informing the conceptual framework. This can be clearly seen when it comes to the concept of spirituality, whose definitional resistance seems to reflect the simple fact that one's conception of spirituality is bound up with what one considers to be spiritual, something which cannot be neutrally described but is always (theologically) put in immanent or transcendent terms.

Howard Gardner, for example, in his discussion of spiritual intelligence, conceptualises "the spiritual" as referring to three dimensions:

physical states (meditation), phenomenological states (feeling at one with God or the universe), and a computational aspect that deals with elements that transcend normal sensory perceptions.[25] He reduces the first to bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, the second to feelings (which he doesn't regard as intelligent), and calls the residue "existential intelligence" because it describes our capacity to deal with the questions of our existence. From his psychological perspective, spirituality is a sum of psychological aspects that are shared under the same concept, where each aspect is thought of in immanent terms.[26] No wonder Gardner excludes the possibility of spiritual intelligence, although he does leave open the question of whether there might be existential intelligence.

From a (classical) theological perspective, however, "the spiritual" inevitably has to do with transcendence, and so the question of the universality of spirituality is tied up with a theological understanding of transcendence. A theological conception of spirituality could broadly be defined as "having to do with engaging God" and spiritual intelligence as "knowing God in a broad sense." The two terms are very similar in my view, as both have to do with engaging God.

Spirituality is the more common term, whereas spiritual intelligence has more of an evaluative tone to it. Leaving the intricacies of defining either terms for now, whether they are understood as distinctive ways of understanding reality or understanding a different reality,[27] spirituality and spiritual intelligence are about grasping, understanding, or encountering the spiritual, which, from a Christian perspective, amounts to encountering the presence of the triune God. Spiritual

25 Howard Gardner, "A Case Against Spiritual Intelligence," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10:1 (2000): 29, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001_3.

26 Although Gardner states that he does not doubt that the phenomenological state of spirituality can be genuine, he does not seem to accept that such a state may also be an actual apprehension of something that is really transcendent, such as God. Gardner, "A Case Against Spiritual Intelligence," 29.

27 Dorobantu and Watts, *Perspectives on Spiritual Intelligence*, 9.

knowing is therefore relational knowing constituted by an encounter between God and human beings.

When we accept spirituality as relating to that which transcends our knowledge, we have to acknowledge that what spirituality exactly is and who exactly is capable of being spiritual also partially transcends our knowledge. For how could we completely understand how we relate to that which, or the one who, we can never completely understand? Spirituality as being related to God therefore belongs to one of the mysteries that in Christianity is often marked as such, namely, that of how finite persons can share in the divine life. Although there is no consensus on what exactly a mystery amounts to, a classical theological perspective would understand it to be something that we cannot grasp, except from revelation. From a Christian point of view, a theory for the universality of spirituality thus needs to be theologically informed.

The conceptual framework of spirituality can thus be seen to be informed by a broader theological framework. This can also be said of the concept of intelligence, something which should be borne in mind when it comes to intellectual disability and the discussion of spiritual intelligence. Historian C. F. Goodey has convincingly argued that the concept of intelligence reflects what is valued in a society of a specific time period, just as the concept of intellectual disability reflects who is excluded in that same society.[28]

There is a helpful analogy here with the debate on personhood and disability. Personhood, not unlike intelligence, is a concept that is (at least partially) informed by ideological considerations. Although both concepts seem to be natural to us, there is much to be said about what constitutes either a person or a certain type of intelligence. When it comes to personhood, this is perhaps even more obvious. Disability theologians have repeatedly unnerved anthropological assumptions informing medical ethics, academic research, and public policy. A salient example is John Swinton's discussion of ethicist Peter Singer's liberal anthropology, which is heavily based on human autonomy,

28 C. F. Goodey, *A History of Intelligence and 'Intellectual Disability': The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

rationality, control, and general intellectual ability. Swinton strongly criticises Singer's anthropology, including his understanding of persons with severe forms of dementia as having ceased to be persons, whose life is therefore no longer inherently valuable or worthy of protection.[29] Such a conclusion is not supported by mere social scientific evidence but imbued with philosophical and (a)theological presuppositions.

Against such a view, Linda Woodhead has argued that a theological anthropology should be an apophatic anthropology.[30] Since human beings are created in the image of God, their essence is ungraspable, just as God's essence is ungraspable. As it is impossible for us to understand human nature fully, it is impossible fully to understand what constitutes human personhood, as well. Such an apophatic theological anthropology is therefore embedded within a larger theological understanding of reality, which is why Woodhead is able to unpack what such a theological apophatic anthropology implies. In short, she argues that the *imago Dei* account of personhood can be understood to imply that human beings become persons by increasingly reflecting the image of God:

> Human beings, made in the image of God, do not contain their essence in themselves but in the God into whose image they are to grow. They become human by becoming divine—which means growing into something we do not know or control rather than something we already possess.[31]

Woodhead's theological anthropology is tightly bound up with what may be called her theological epistemology: knowing God is becoming more like God and thus increasingly participating in the divine nature.

29 John Swinton, "Forgetting Whose We Are: Theological Reflections on Personhood, Faith and Dementia," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 11:1 (2007): 43, https://doi.org/10.1300/J095v11n01_04.

30 Linda Woodhead, "Apophatic Anthropology," in *God and Human Dignity*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 233–246.

31 Woodhead, "Apophatic Anthropology," 236–237.

Interestingly, her anthropology thus seems to presuppose the possibility for human beings to grow in possessing "the unknowable character of the divine being,"[32] and thus seems to require a universal understanding of spirituality as well. The differences noted in theological and philosophical anthropologies therefore do not just serve as analogies for the question of spirituality; they cohere with it closely. Whether spirituality is a universal human feature is an important question that can have serious consequences for our understanding of persons with intellectual disabilities. It should therefore be the subject of academic inquiry, even though this takes us to an ideological, or better, theological argumentation that goes further than the empirical evidence, or "the phenomena."

Besides the arguments presented above, I believe a theological approach is called for precisely because the question it seeks to answer is often one of theological or pastoral concern: can our loved ones, regardless of their intellectual deficits, relate to God?[33] Such a question itself seems to arise out of an intellectualistic theology that may very well be intrinsically exclusionary to persons with profound intellectual disabilities. Jill Harshaw therefore wonders whether certain research strategies that try to search for traces of intelligence in persons with profound intellectual disabilities might be induced by "a subconscious fear that … such persons are not fully capable of a genuine relationship with God … so that, in order to be comfortable about asserting their capacity for spiritual life, we should assume that it can be identified and explored through cognitive and linguistically based methods."[34]

Relating these considerations to the previous section, it seems as if an ideological approach—in the sense of a discussion about the theological and anthropological presuppositions of the debate—is not just warranted, but even called for. This is where I part ways with Kevern, who dismisses an ideological approach to the spirituality of persons

32 Woodhead, "Apophatic Anthropology," 238.

33 The usual follow-up question is expected to be "and can he or she thus be saved?" which reveals a soteriological concern.

34 Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 84.

with severe forms of dementia, because such an approach "makes no space for 'spirituality' as pertaining to human beings and their actions, and so leaves the concept with no purchase in the practical world."[35] It is not entirely clear to me what Kevern means by the need for the concept of spirituality to have a purchase in the practical world, but I assume this has to do with his main purpose of trying to be able to "understand their [namely, people with severe dementia's] spirituality as extending beyond that point to the end of their life, integral to their personhood regardless of any loss of other capacities and competencies."[36] If this is the desired purchase a theory of the universality of spirituality needs to have, I do not see why a theological approach would not work. Provided that on the basis of the only approaches that Kevern finds promising, there are in fact certain competencies or conditions necessary, I would argue that his conclusion risks denying spirituality to those that lack those necessary competencies or conditions.

I believe that this is the case for any approach that defines spirituality purely immanently, as such an approach seeks to find or argue for some trace of spirituality in the human person itself. If it is then asserted that spirituality is a core feature of humanity, the lack or inadequateness of convincing evidence or arguments for a person's spirituality can backfire to imply that such a person is therefore no longer a human person.[37]

Thus, the understanding of the spirituality of persons with intellectual disabilities as scientifically inaccessible and theologically mysterious does not mean that we should not reflect on it.[38] In this light, many of the approaches that I initially dismissed as being able to argue for the universality of spirituality are in fact helpful as arguments for a

35 Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia," 770. Kevern does acknowledge that this type of account can be drawn on as a possible explanation.

36 Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia," 770.

37 Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia," 766.

38 Cf. Alister E. McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason: Science and Theology in an Age of Multiple Rationalities* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 195.

certain theology.[39] They problematise the question of having to know God intellectually, as Swinton does by emphasising love, trust, and faithfulness. Similarly, the arguments for an embodied, communal notion of spirituality gain force when understood within the framework of Christian theology.

The fact that something is a mystery also means that it doesn't admit of general solutions, but that it needs to be dealt with in concrete existence.[40] That is also why I am less sceptical of the possibility of what Kevern calls the romantic or intuitive approach. Why should we dismiss the idea of personal knowledge which can be acquired by genuinely paying attention, and being present, to persons with profound intellectual disabilities for a long period of time?

Many arguments in disability theology are presented in narrative form or supported by illustrative personal accounts which are, in my opinion, more of a strength than a weakness.[41] They often provide touching examples of how, regardless of the severity of disability, the spirituality of persons with intellectual disabilities seems to be revealed at times.[42] The same is true for the story of Mary. It is one more story that illustrates how people do have experiences in which they are convinced that they can perceive the spirituality of their disabled loved ones. Within a theological framework, there are therefore strong accounts to be given for the universality of spirituality.

39 This aligns with Kevern's approval of John Paley's objection that findings like these "only make sense as spirituality if some theological or religious concepts have been 'smuggled in'." Kevern, "The Spirituality of People with Late-Stage Dementia," 770.

40 McGrath, *The Territories of Human Reason*, 192–193.

41 See also Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 41: "any attempt to explore the spiritual lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities will necessarily involve affording attention and respect to the particularities of their embodied experience."

42 See, for example, Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (London: SPCK, 2014).

The Inclusivity of God's Revelation: Contributions from Disability Theology

In this final section, I provide a few examples of theologians who have argued directly for the universality of spirituality or spiritual intelligence in a theological way. This should serve to illustrate the point that the mystery of the spiritual lives of persons with profound intellectual disabilities is unsolvable through scientific methods, but can be grappled with theologically, albeit inconclusively. I first discuss Jill Harshaw's account of the accommodation of God, then move to Erinn Staley's argument from negative theology, and end with Petre Maican's argument from the Orthodox conception of the *nous*.

In her book *God Beyond Words*, Harshaw explores whether persons with profound intellectual disabilities can be understood to have spiritual experiences. She does so in a thoroughly theological way and likewise argues that this is the only adequate way: "Rather than asking these people for information they cannot provide, or relying on assumptions made by those around them, questions can be addressed to the *source* of any spiritual experience they might have."[43] She therefore identifies God's self-disclosure as the proper point of focus and emphasises God's agency in our spirituality. All of us, regardless of our abilities and disabilities, depend on God's revelation to us, which makes possible our encounter. It is God who acts first, so there is always an element of grace included in encountering God. Even our receptiveness to God's revelation is grace. After stating the above, Harshaw introduces divine accommodation into the discussion. God's communication and revelation are necessarily adjusted to human receptivity. After a lengthy discussion, Harshaw concludes that divine accommodation includes all human beings:

> The fundamental aim of accommodation is relational communication between God and human beings. Words are not the exclusive means by which this communication occurs. Words are

43 Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 183.

> merely signs and pointers to a reality which is behind and transcends the means of its expression—the person of Jesus Christ who is the greatest accommodation to humanity's inability to apprehend God.[44]

Denying this would be "underestimating the depths of universal human incapacity when it comes to understanding God."[45]

A somewhat similar avenue of arguing for the universality of spirituality is Erinn Staley's account, which draws from the *via negativa*, the apophatic tradition. She discusses the theologies of Bonaventure and Meister Eckhart, in which unknowing is central. Leaving the intricacies of their apophaticism for now, engagement with them leads Staley to the conclusion that "pointing toward the unknowability of God reminds humanity that the smartest human being is far more like a person with an intellectual disability than he or she is like God."[46] However, this unknowability does not mean we cannot relate to God. Swinton takes a similar stance and even suggests it may be the other way around:

> If a lack of a certain attitude toward propositional knowledge is in some senses important for becoming a disciple, it may be that our brothers and sisters living with profound intellectual disabilities are in a stronger position before God than are those of us who are in many ways held back by our intellect and the desire for life to be reasonable.[47]

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44 Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 90.

45 Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, 116.

46 Erinn Staley, "Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing: Contemporary Insights from Medieval Sources," *Modern Theology* 28:3 (2012): 398, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2012.01757.x.

47 Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*,104. See Christina M. Puchalski, "Dementia: A Spiritual Journey for the Patient and the Caregivers"; and John Swinton, "Known by God", in Hans S. Reinders (ed.), *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010): 37–50, 140–153. However, one should be careful, as Swinton is, not to make this into some sort of advantage of being intellectually disabled. See on this, Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, ch. 6: "The Mystical Experience of God."

Departing from a Christian theological perspective, there is a profound sense of the limits of human knowledge, especially with regard to knowing God. All our knowledge of and about God is dependent on God, so it might be arbitrary to decide that the gap of knowledge is too big for some individuals to cross but small enough for us to jump over.[48]

Finally, Romanian Orthodox disability theologian Petre Maican discusses the relationship between God and persons with dementia. He argues that the Patristic conception of the *nous* helps to understand how persons who are seemingly unresponsive or unperceptive to the world around them can still relate and know God. The *nous*, or spirit, or mind, is the third constitutive element of human beings, next to the body and soul, and functions as the "intuition of God."[49] As we cannot lose our spiritual faculty, the universality of spirituality is guaranteed, even in severe cases of dementia or profound intellectual disability. There is always a relationship between us and God.

Conclusion

The universality of spirituality and spiritual intelligence is desirable from the perspective of disability theology. It tries to find an answer to a genuine concern of many religious persons, namely, whether their loved ones with profound intellectual disabilities or dementia can (still) engage with the transcendent, or are able to know God. There have been various attempts to find an answer to this question. In some cases, these focused on the perception or intuition of the researcher or caregiver, in other cases they pointed to something visible external to the minds of these people, such as their body or the community surrounding them.

In the first section, I assessed five types of approaches that Peter Kevern distinguished, and added a few that deviate slightly from them. Where Kevern finds the cognitive-psychological and

48 Staley, "Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing," 389.

49 Petre Maican, "Spiritual Intelligence and Intellectual Disability: A Theological Re-evaluation of the *Nous*," in this special issue of *CPOSAT*.

socially-extended-self approach promising, I pointed out their shortcomings in arguing for the universality of spirituality or spiritual intelligence.

In the second section, I assessed whether a relatively novel concept, spiritual intelligence, might be more promising, as it distinguishes spiritual from general intelligence. It might therefore help to make room for the spirituality of persons whose general intelligence is profoundly disabled. Although it seems to me that a lot can be gained from bringing spiritual intelligence into discussion with disability theology, at this point there does not seem to be enough consensus on its nature to build a case for the universality of spirituality.

In the third section, I argued that this might never be the case, as the spiritual mental lives of persons with profound intellectual disabilities are intrinsically inaccessible to us. I argued that this is not just because of our current (scientific) incapability, but because spirituality has to do with transcendence. If understood immanently, spirituality does not only seem to lose its coherence as a concept, but also seems to lack in persons with profound intellectual disabilities, as they are required to have certain capabilities to experience phenomenological and computational states. However, if understood transcendently, as relating to the transcendent or to God, the inherent or absolute mysteriousness of the spiritual mental lives of persons with profound intellectual disabilities is emphasised.

This led me to conclude that a theological discussion is called for. I illustrated this by providing three arguments for the universality of spiritual intelligence by theologians Jill Harshaw, Erinn Staley, and Petre Maican. Their accounts of God's self-disclosure and the accompanying necessity of our "intuition" of God present strong arguments for the universality of spirituality. These final three approaches seem to be more promising, as they do not depend on any condition from the side of the person that experiences God or has spiritual understanding. There is neither a need to have internalised spiritual practices nor to participate physically in church services nor to be part of a community in order to have spiritual experiences.

What this means for spiritual intelligence is not entirely clear yet and depends on its precise conception. If spiritual intelligence is understood as participation in a transcendent intelligence (God), then I would argue that these theological arguments apply to it and argue for its universality in a similar way. In that case, spiritual intelligence would mean something similar to spirituality, thus something like engaging with the spiritual, but with a more evaluative connotation. However, if spiritual intelligence is understood more specifically as an ability or skill of an individual person that needs to be cultivated and practiced, it would point to a rather particular type of intelligence, which may be unreachable for persons with profound intellectual disabilities.[50] To conclude, from a theological perspective, a good case can be made for the universality of spirituality and for a specific form of spiritual intelligence.[51]

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.
Received: 23/02/24 Accepted: 19/08/24 Published: 19/03/25

50 There may be two conceptions of spiritual intelligence that can be related to the distinction I make here. See Harris Wiseman, "The Japanese Arts and Meditation-in-Action," *Zygon* 32:3 (2022): 194–208, https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12806.

51 I am thankful for the helpful suggestions of Marius Dorobantu, Fraser Watts, and Harris Wiseman.