

Seventh International Conference of the  
International Network for the Study of Spirituality (INSS)

***Spirituality, Critical Reflection, and Professional Practice  
in an Uncertain World***

16-18 May 2023, South East Technological University, Waterford, Ireland

<https://spiritualitystudiesnetwork.org/CONFERENCE-2023>



**LECTURE SCHEDULE**

**PUBLIC LECTURE**

**Tuesday 16 May 2023, 19:30-20:30**

***Seeking God at the World's Edge: The Contemporary Appeal of 'Celtic' Spirituality.***

Speaker: **Prof. Jonathan M. Wooding, University of Sydney, Australia.**

Over the last half-century, but especially since the 1980s, people have turned to the early churches of the Celtic-speaking nations as a source of inspiration for spirituality. For some this has been an historical search for alternative models of 'church' to those of the present day. Others are inspired by the monastic culture of the Celtic churches, which exhibits on the one hand an appealingly ascetic spirituality, and on the other a richness of artistic as well as literary expression.

This lecture will explore themes in 'Celtic Christianity', particularly with reference to the story of St Brendan, whose feast-day coincides with this opening day of the INSS 2023 conference. This is a tale that has had an enduring appeal for its narrative of monks who seek God in the ocean. Thomas Merton saw in it a 'a symbolic tract on the monastic life', but lay readers also find in it a reflection on earthly existence and life in community. It has inspired many modern writers on spirituality, for example Cynthia Bourgeault and Ray Simpson, as well as novelists who have mediated religious narratives for a wider reading public, such as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Frederick Beuchner.

***Jonathan Wooding*** is an Australian-born church historian. He was director of the programmes in Celtic Christianity at the University of Wales Lampeter/Trinity Saint David from 1998-2013. He held the Sir Warwick Fairfax Chair of Celtic Studies at the University of Sydney from 2013-21. He has written or edited sixteen books and has written over 60 articles or chapters in books concerning topics in church history, monasticism, and the cult of saints in the Celtic world—including several studies of the cult of St Brendan.

## KEYNOTE LECTURES

**Keynote 1: Tuesday 16 May 2023, 13:20-14:20**

### ***'Doing' Reflective Practice and Understanding Spirituality as a Way of Being: Implications for Professional and Transformative Practice.***

Speaker: **Dr Cheryl Hunt, University of Exeter, UK.**

Reflective practice has been described as a means of 'having 20 years' experience rather than one year's experience twenty times over' and is often understood as a means of exploring the 'What?', 'How?' and (less often) 'Why?' questions that drive professional practices. 'Doing' reflective practice in this way can undoubtedly provide insights and new perspectives with which to develop and enhance professional practice - but it can also be seen simply as a 'chore', another requirement of an institutional audit culture and/or of the assessment of professional education and training. In this lecture I will illustrate from personal experience how including the 'Who?' question – 'Who is the self that practices?' - in one's reflective practices can change the nature of the inquiry.

I will also address the question of what makes reflection 'critical'. This is generally regarded as reflection resulting in action in order to effect change in personal, social and/or political circumstances, particularly in relation to social justice. Drawing on the work of Parker Palmer on what constitutes 'vocation' and John Heron on different forms of knowledge, I will suggest that to ask 'Who am I?' can shed light on the relationship between spirituality and the material world of everyday practice, including what it means to be a professional. It is a light which can help us not only to see better how our own innate sense of 'beingness' and ongoing experiences and ideas feed directly into our roles as professionals, but to consider the transformative potential of those roles.

*Cheryl Hunt is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter UK where she was formerly the Director of Professional Doctorates in the Graduate School of Education. She has designed, directed and facilitated numerous academic and professional programmes involving reflective practices. A Director and Trustee of the International Network for the Study of Spirituality since its inception, she is also the Founding and current Chief Editor of the Journal for the Study of Spirituality; and the author of Critical Reflection, Spirituality and Professional Practice (Palgrave Macmillan 2021).*

**Keynote 2: Wednesday 17 May 2023, 09:00-10:00**

### ***Thickening Spirituality: Finding Depth within the Spirituality and Health Conversation.***

Speaker: **Prof. John Swinton, University of Aberdeen, UK.**

Within the conversations around spirituality and healthcare there are many different ways in which spirituality is conceptualised and understood. The way we conceptualise spirituality determines what we think we should do with it. Concepts matter. Concepts such as meaning, purpose, dignity, hope, relationality, and transcendence are often used to describe the essence of what spirituality 'is'. These are important. There is, however, a tendency to develop 'thin' descriptions of the various aspects of spirituality - with the

accompanying danger that thin practices will emerge from such descriptions. This lecture will explore what a 'thick' description of spirituality might look like - and what kinds of understandings and practices might emerge from such a description.

*John Swinton is Professor in Practical Theology and Pastoral Care and Chair in Divinity and Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen. In 2004, he founded the University of Aberdeen's Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability. He has published widely within the area of mental health, dementia, disability theology, spirituality and healthcare, qualitative research, and pastoral care.*

**Keynote 3: Wednesday 17 May 2023, 12:15-13:15**

***Narrative and the Task of Spirituality. An Investigation of 'The Universe Story' and its Urgent Implications for Understanding and Practising Spirituality.***

Speaker: **Dr Niamh Brennan, Independent Scholar and Author, Ireland.**

Thomas Berry has written that 'it is all a question of story'. We are in trouble, he laments, because we do not have 'a good story'. The old story of 'how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective' and so, he argues, we need a new story that will provide the context 'in which life [can] function in a meaningful manner.' French hermeneut, Paul Ricoeur, makes the claim that 'life can be understood only through the stories that we tell about it, then an examined life, in the sense of the word as we have borrowed it from Socrates, is a life recounted'. This is achieved by the unity provided by narrative and the way in which it can hold together seemingly dichotomous events and concepts. Both thinkers' commitment to narrative is striking, although from different approaches. Ricoeur analysed the function and purpose of narrative while Berry accepted the power of narrative unquestioningly and used it to propose a new human understanding within an evolving cosmos. The first articulation of this 'New Story' in its stand-alone version was developed by Berry and mathematical cosmologist, Brian Swimme, in *The Universe Story* in 1992. It recounts the scientific development of the universe in a narrative, mythical style. If, as Eaton argues, the cultural narrative of the West was one of 'disenchantment', Berry and Swimme's 'Universe Story' is a counter narrative which integrates the natural world with a spiritual vision and offers a revitalised cultural narrative within a cosmological framework.

This lecture will examine the role that narrative plays in the development of subjectivity, with a specific focus on the critical and challenging implications of the Universe Story for our spirituality, and in particular, its manifestation in our educational, religious and economic institutions.

*Niamh Brennan is a writer and lecturer in the area of cosmology, ecology and spirituality. She is author of *The Human in the Universe* (Wyndham Hall Press 2014) and co-author with Greg Morter of *The Universe Story in Science and Myth* (Green Spirit 2016). She has contributed to several journals including *Religions*; *Worldviews: Global Religions, Ecology and Culture*; *Spirituality*; and *The Furrow*.*

**Keynote 4: Thursday 18 May 2023, 09:00-10:00**

### ***Authentic Subjectivity and Spirituality in the University.***

Speaker: **Dr Michael O'Sullivan, South East Technological University, Waterford, Ireland.**

The purpose of this lecture is to show the value of authentic subjectivity as a methodology for living and studying spirituality critically, empathetically, and transformatively. It will do so in the context of focussing on spirituality in the university, where people are educated to be scholars, researchers, and professionals.

The study of spirituality in university settings faces a number of challenges. It must have a distinctive identity. It must have a field of study that corresponds to it and a distinctive way of studying the field. A third challenge is how to preserve its integrity by not denying its self-implicating character while at the same time exercising critical thinking. This issue highlights a fourth challenge, namely how to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity. Fifthly, in today's world spirituality in the university also needs to be studied in a way that can include everyone, while at the same time providing for the differences that exist between, for example, people who live by a religious spirituality, and those who are spiritual but not religious. As well as catering for the different spirituality life-views, the inclusive character of spirituality as a university discipline must also cater for the rapidly growing phenomenon of 'spirituality and' which is the most striking development in the discipline in recent years. 'Spirituality and' refers to the huge growth in interest in spirituality among the professions.

I will address these issues of identity, integrity, objectivity, and inclusivity for spirituality as a university discipline by means of what I call the methodology of authentic subjectivity. Doing research, teaching, writing, leadership, and administration, etc. in the university according to this methodology is a contemplative and rigorous spiritual practice and allows both the field of spirituality studies to be set by the unlimited scope of the transforming spirit of authenticity and the resources it draws on to do such studies to be open-ended.

**Michael O'Sullivan** is Co-Founder and Director of the Spirituality Institute for Research and Education (SpIRE) in Dublin, Ireland ([www.spiritualityinstitute.ie](http://www.spiritualityinstitute.ie)) and a Research Fellow at the University of the Free State, South Africa. He is a Director and Trustee of the International Network for the Study of Spirituality and member of the Editorial Boards of the Journal for the Study of Spirituality and Spiritus. He is Emeritus Senior Lecturer at South East Technological University, Ireland, and a founding member of the university's research group on Spirituality in Society and the Professions (SpirSoP). He was formerly Founding Programme Leader of the university's MA in Applied Spirituality.

