Spirituality is no longer primarily, or even obviously, the subject of theological research. More and more, spirituality has been attracting the attention of the religious studies and, during the past few decades, psychology, sociology, and anthropology have become quite interested in the phenomenon of spirituality. This increasing appreciation at the interdisciplinary level ensures, on the one hand, that more and more data concerning the phenomenon is being gathered and, on the other hand, that additional possibilities for analyzing this data are also being made available. The most far-reaching development in spirituality research, though, is the resulting disappearance of a consensus as to what can be understood as spirituality. We now realize that there are countless forms of spirituality, some of which are diametrically opposed to each other, some of which overlap each other, and some of which appear to be relatively unrelated to each other.

At present, researchers involved with spirituality are being faced with the challenge of learning to understand the phenomenon in all its diversity. In March 2009, at the invitation of the chair of spirituality of the Radboud University Nijmegen, theologians and religious scientists met for the first time in Dutch academia to reflect together about theories of spirituality. What is spirituality? Can we define the phenomenon? Which forms of spirituality can we discern? How can we understand Christian spirituality? Where do we see possibilities for comparison between the diverse forms of spirituality? Which new forms of spirituality do we need to study? What theoretical approaches are familiar? How do we coordinate all the results of our research? The goal of our congress was, in all candor, to inventory the perspectives of the invited researchers and make an initial attempt to formulate a conspectus of the diverse positions which we now occupy.1

For such an embryonic discussion, it’s useful to run through the various camps and blocks, exploring together which approaches are possible and meaningful

within the spirituality discourse. For that reason, we focused primarily on compiling the diverse standpoints and giving them a certain order, examining the incompatibilities between them more than trying to resolve these incompatibilities. We have quite consciously chosen not to systematize the papers as ‘theological perspectives’ versus ‘religious-scientific perspectives’ — that would only solidify the known boundaries between the disciplines and prohibit any new insights. We thought it would be more interesting to present the various papers in another order: we begin with a broad focus on the field of research (Hense, Van den Hoogen); then we zoom in on the Christian tradition (Sheldrake, Plattig, Speedman, Maas), comparisons of monotheistic spiritualities (McGinn), spirituality in the popular culture (Jespers), spirituality in contemporary Dutch poetry (Goud), theoretical approaches to spiritualities (Waaijman), and a project of the Titus Brandsma Institute called ‘Spirin Encyclopedia’ (Huls).

Hense proposes a research strategy encompassing the entire breadth of the field of research, while at the same time taking into account the fact that lived spirituality is often interwoven with everyday reality. Since the various forms of spirituality are so diverse, and since the side effects of spirituality extend into everyday reality, it seems to be difficult to clearly define the limits of the field of research: spirituality seems to be a vague, blurred category; it’s not possible to define this category. What can be done, though, is to inventory the countless forms of spirituality in terms of their family resemblances, and to describe how they are entwined with everyday reality.

Next in this broad look at the field of research is Van den Hoogen, who approaches lived spirituality as a sociolect; in other words, he concentrates on the use of language within a specific social group. Each sociolect can be studied in terms of its content and its structure. Van den Hoogen presents a whole list of different sociolects which can be analyzed as forms of lived spirituality. He then discusses a number of examples in more detail, making use of recent master’s theses from the Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen. His proposal is to study forms of spirituality in their context, with reference to the configuration of their components and the inner dynamic of these components.

Sheldrake discusses recent shifts in the meaning of the concepts ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’. It’s becoming more and more difficult to define ‘spirituality’ since it appears in such diverse contexts, each time with the possibility of a different content. Nonetheless, the epithet ‘Christian’ seems to continue to be able to ensure recognition of a specific form of spirituality. This is further substantiated by a reflection on faith and value traditions, the interaction between various traditions, and the formation of traditions within differing cultural contexts. It is precisely due to its awareness of tradition that Christian spirituality distinguishes itself in its uniqueness.
Plattig sees the task of spiritual theology as being critical reflection on the Christian faith experience. Christianity’s spiritual tradition reveals that faith experience has never been regarded as an absolute; rather, it is always carefully tested. All the desert fathers and mothers recommend a cautious, skeptical attitude regarding one’s own religious experiences. John of the Cross, Catherine of Genoa, and Teresa of Avila are part of this same tradition. When the individual makes his or her own religious experience the norm, critical reflection threatens to be lost.

Speelman is searching for a spiritual method which would be able to describe and promote Christian spirituality in daily life. He understands Christian spirituality as being an orientation, arrangement, and driving force in people’s lives. A spiritual method has to bear witness to God as the Other, who can be encountered in everyday life, who gives an orientation to daily life, and who inspires new élan. Speelman identifies lectio divina, a medieval spiritual practice, as being this method for the future.

Maas questions whether spirituality is a necessity or a superfluous luxury. He points to new practices which have arisen within Christian spirituality during the past few decades, with the goal of learning to believe in the ‘optative mood’. He discusses the orative dynamic of the Psalms and the God-oriented Christian spirituality in a secular context. Via a reflection on a text by Dag Hammarskjöld in Markings, Maas returns to his original question and proposes: spirituality is a necessity because the relationship with God is the only thing which can raise a person above pre-modern heteronomy and modern autonomy.

McGinn attempts to compare Jewish, Islamic, and Christian mysticism with each other. He consciously limits himself to neighboring and contemporary forms of mysticism which have mutually influenced each other and which are based on a common philosophical and religious inheritance. Concretely, he compares the three monotheistic traditions with reference to the position held by esoteric knowledge, the role of the erotic, and the structure of the Godhead. In this way, McGinn seeks to fulfill the two-fold task of religious research: reflection on methodology and exploration of the richness of the great spiritual traditions.

Jespers studies popular Western spirituality. This form of spirituality is often dismissed as false or inferior spirituality; nonetheless, it is precisely this popular spirituality which has known such an enormous rush during the past few decades. Jespers presents four theoretical perspectives for this form of spirituality, followed by a description, with commentary, of two cases of trivial spirituality. He concludes with a proposal for typologizing. Since research concerning this form of spirituality is relatively new (since 1980), and definitions of spirituality seem to be obsolete, this typology is to be regarded as provisional.

Goud begins with his own clear-cut definition of spirituality (= a basic attitude regarding questions of limits), which he then immediately places in perspective
as being colored by specific preferences. According to him, spirituality takes place at the level of feeling and intuition, with the result that it unavoidably ends up being at odds with the ideal of truth. Using the poetry of Rutger Kopland and Willem Jan Otten, Goud shows to what extent spirituality and truth are a tormented couple.

Waaijman describes and documents ten theoretical approaches to spirituality: the teleological approach, the mystical approach, the ascetic approach, the theological approach, the experiential approach, dialogical thinking, the critical theory, the hermeneutistic approach, the holistic approach, and the encyclopedic approach. Some of these approaches are traditional, others are contemporary, but all of them are approaches to monotheistic spiritualities. The focus is primarily on Christianity.

Huls describes a project from the Titus Brandsma Institute of the Radboud University Nijmegen. This project is called ‘Spirin Encyclopedia’ and is intended to be a platform where scholars, professionals, and students can discuss the phenomenon of spirituality. Huls explains how Spirin Encyclopedia works and what it includes. The goal of this encyclopedia is to compile as comprehensive a knowledge as possible about the phenomenon of spirituality and to make this knowledge available by means of cross references and links.

Given the papers included in this collection, the following points are worthy of mention:

1. Some colleagues pursue a scholarly discourse about spirituality in their papers, while others pursue a faith-oriented discourse within a particular form of spirituality. As a result, the papers are not always on the same wavelength.
2. Some colleagues retain definitions for spirituality while others waive such definitions. Those who retain definitions cannot reach a consensus about what spirituality is; those who waive such definitions argue that spiritualities are so diverse that they cannot be understood monoideistically.
3. Most of the colleagues focus on more specific forms of spirituality, leaving large areas of the field of research unaddressed. Undoubtedly, this has to do with the specializations of the researchers involved. However, if we want to arrive at theory formation with regard to the phenomenon of spirituality, then we have to broaden our vision and consider the entire field of research.
4. All things considered, our congress has primarily made it clear that theory formation with regard to spirituality is still in its infancy and that a great deal of (interdisciplinary) research is still needed if we, together, are to arrive at more clarity regarding the phenomenon of spirituality. Therefore, we have resolved to organize a follow-up conference in the spring of 2011.

(transl. Sr. Joanna Dunham, OCSO)