

ON CHRISTIANITY, RELIGION, SCIENCE AND SPIRITUALITY

When called upon to take someone's funeral, the most common phrase I have heard is "He/she wasn't very religious but they held their own deep seated beliefs." That could be said, and is said, about nearly everyone.

Among the living, on the other hand, it is fairly common to hear this or something like it: "I am not religious myself, but I have a spiritual side to me that is all my own. I don't want anyone else telling me what I should believe."

It is my view that each person simply MUST make their own mind up. No one CAN force you to do otherwise, not really, though some might try, and some might try to comply with it. Now comes the unpopular bit. It is also my view that we cannot come to our own spirituality in a vacuum, with generalised statements about god and life. As Iain Tait says: "You can be a meaningless generality or a meaningful specific." We have to get down to particulars, or we will lack the necessities for doing something in particular.

Therefore, a third inflection to this viewpoint is in this form; "I don't follow any one religion. That leads to trouble. Religion causes all the (var.lots of) wars. All paths lead to God and that's the path I am on."

Let's define a few terms, so we can distinguish these viewpoints.

RELIGION

Religion is any organised system of thought about the divine, and its consequent action in worship, prayer, good works or ethics, where people act together. Over many generations of success it is common for many adherents-by-birth to lose sight of its spiritual base and become highly legalistic about behaviours, and possibly militaristic about enforcing them on others in all details. This minority group are today called "fundamentalists", though that is the opposite of the origin of the term.

Originally, it was about those who sought to be clearly in touch with the basic fundamentals of their faith, so they could teach tolerance for interpretations about many things that were not essential to their faith. In other words, it has often been observed that those who cause the religious intolerance and wars are NOT those who fundamentally hold to the spiritual beliefs of their religion. The same can be said about the fundamentalists in the politics of race or economics, which are mostly the cause of wars, even when dressed up in religion.

It is what I have called the “spiritual fundamentals” which form **the spirituality** of a person. These people can claim to have learnt to move spiritually due to their experiences of ultimate values, awesome otherness, transcendence, God, stillness, miracle, release, healing, infilling and so on.

SPIRITUALITY

“**Spirituality**” seems to be used to describe **the depth** of experience of a person, and only secondarily speaks of **the nature** of that experience. One person can say they deeply feel the presence of their recently deceased father, while others would reject that this is still possible but speak of divine comfort. The contents of their beliefs are opposed, the way they understand what is happening is completely different, but the depth of their spirituality is the same.

Some will say “what does it matter if the result is the same”. The Hope Discovery Tour says that the shape we make of each experience now becomes in time a stepping stone that leads us towards or away from better experience, better relationships, better strength, better love, and the power that is required to be someone who makes a difference (M.A.D.) in this world. (Not “better than someone else”, but “better than I would otherwise have been.”) Spiritual stuff flows from one part of us to another. It can quickly grow into something. It is a living thing, not a state of bliss and not a thing, like a brick or a possession.

There is a second aspect to that importance of the nature of spirituality. Jesus attached actions and ethics to follow from our beliefs, not just an inner spiritual well-being. He also maintained that excellent actions and good works that are performed, no matter with what heroism and self sacrifice, but without a vital relationship with God are just an empty noise – “whitewashed tombs” he called it once. That’s a tough call. It’s about this idea of the flow of growth of spirituality within us. It’s all about love in action, but even more, particular kinds of love and particular kinds of action.

To begin and to grow in our own spirituality, it is like learning a new language. It starts off sounding like gibberish. With many small steps it gradually becomes a gateway to a whole new appreciation of culture and beauty. Each person has their own path to take, but we are given to each other to help each other. It is like learning a new skill or sport, like scrap booking or waterskiing or picture framing.

THE UNIVERSAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS

It is common to say that **believing in Jesus Christ is narrow-minded** and exclusive. This narrowness arises from viewing the world only from the point of view of the politics of religions - “He is one god

among many". Jesus never indulged in the politics of religion. He was primarily interested in each and every person the world over.

Another view is that though the church may look and act narrowly often enough, it is Jesus who keeps opening them outwards. There can be no mistaking his global significance or his global agenda, not his world wide effect upon billions. People who come from Buddhist, Muslim, Materialist, Atheist, Hindu and Jewish backgrounds are today relating to Jesus in ways that reflect their specific background, but opens up beyond it.

Jesus described himself as "the door" and "the way". "if anyone thirsts," he said, "let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, I will give rivers to come from within them. (John 7). This does not narrow a person's horizons but opens them. "I come that you may have life," Jesus said, "Life in all its fullness".

For many who make the discovery of the wonders of relating to Jesus personally, the most common descriptions are of a sense of "colour" entering their world, of seeing as though for the first time with glasses on, or of finding what they were made for. Christian faith says that if we don't take the "door", we are locked in somehow. It is the prison door leading out, not the prison door going in. Similarly, if we don't take the "way" or path, then we are wandering, quickly and purposefully, but lost.

This is what we mean by the spirituality of Jesus Christ, or Christianity. There will be many different views, hopefully a different view for each person. This is not to diminish Christianity, but to demonstrate its claim that it is about a God who "knows us each by name". The prophet Isaiah spoke God's feelings towards us when he said : "You are precious and honoured in my sight and I love you. I know you by name. You are mine"

SCIENCE AND FAITH

Science and Christianity have often argued against each other it seems. For instance, there have been debates between Darwinian Evolution v. Seven Day Creation, other debates about the sanctity of life (abortion, euthanasia), and to a lesser extent about environmental issues. The tension goes back further than this to Copernicus and Galileo. In fact, any radical academic advance or any visionary project is resisted by those who teach the widespread established views. These days, scientists have settled on the Big Bang idea which is so very close to what Christians have been saying.

On the other hand, Christian faith with its belief in a stable and designed universe, has helped bring science to life. Imagine how much science would be done if the universe was thought to be running at the whim of a thousand gods! This point is undergoing revival in science today – God as the continuity in energy field theory.

Many of the greatest scientists have been and are today also sincere Christians of intellectual integrity. E.g. the American Scientific Affiliation, ISCAST in Australia.

One thing is for sure, if you are opposed to Christianity it is not because you are intellectual or scientific. You have to look elsewhere for your justification

CONCLUSION

So, the global horizons of a particular love, that comes through a particular Jesus, gives me specific and concrete ways to make a difference in my world, through living a love that knows no bounds, reaches deep within me, and calls me to an untamed future. The future reaches beyond death.