

The Holy Wild

This article builds awareness of the concept that recurs through all spiritual traditions - “holiness”. It comes to us from spiritual writers in words like “pure”, “wholeness”, and “ravishing”. These days, it is very misunderstood. Instead of being one of the most beautiful thoughts, it has turned completely around and become associated with hypocrisy, being judgemental, and uncaring.

There are two sides to this story. The false goal of Churchianity. The fantasy of seekers.

STORY ON THE FALSE GOAL

In the early days of the Australian colony, a preacher was seconded to the judiciary. He upheld the law on weekdays, punishing convicts for their misdemeanours, and on Sunday taking divine service and preaching forgiveness. His name was Samuel Marsden, the “whipping parson”.

On the other side of the Tasman, Marsden is remembered with affection for establishing education in New Zealand. A Parson and a civil servant in both cases – one as judge, one as educator. Is one better than the other?

Many of us who have been through church schools have horror stories about religious hypocrisy and narrowness. There are a large number of people who are still refugees escaping from this sort of religion.

The civic role of religion – teaching people right from wrong and making them good citizens - has also been responsible for abuses under colonialism elsewhere. “Civilize then Christianize” was the motto of this terrible heretical movement within Christianity. It is still alive today, where the church is regarded as society’s moral guardians – God’s police.

What is it like to have a high quality of spirituality that is not seconded to the judiciary, ruling a school, or terrorising the natives? What, in short, is holiness?

STORY ON THE FANTASY.

QUESTION: Do you have the expectation, sort of, that spirituality will be something easy, like a feather in solo flight?

Suzanne Clores is not a Christian, a refugee from high school Roman Catholicism, sought widely through religious experimentation: “For as long as I can remember, my recurring image of spiritual experience looked like this: I am standing outside in the country, surrounded by trees, or on top of a mountain, dazzled by the sunset forecasting the last moment of a moment. No ceremony marks the beginning or end of this moment., but a distinct sense of timelessness exists in the atmosphere. I fall into union with an interior self that I can only describe as pure untouched, and deeply connected to all of existence. The environment inside my body and outside my body is the same. There is no me; there is only everything. That was the recurring fantasy” p 195

THINK: Holy living is wild and good, like a relationship of love: ‘This person is outside your control - but we are indivisibly linked.’ So, for holiness, the laws of good relationships apply – e.g. give time and attention before you ask for it, remain growing even if it hurts, make it a two way street, feelings need words and words need feelings, if you commit it will bless you, speak the truth in love, it takes time. Holiness therefore has rules like good relationships growing stronger.

THE BRAVE QUESTION: Does “Holiness” sound to you like God’s police?

Clores: “Devotion, I’m happy to reconfirm, is holy; it’s another word for *brave*” p 228 (italics original).

THINK: Holiness is truly brave and intoxicatingly beautiful. The pure and ethical qualities or virtues which are together called ‘holiness’ are like maps and markers on a journey. They are designed to get us there, not hold us back. Without maps and roads we are lost, not free. Our lives are demand-driven, when they could have been purpose-driven.

When Jesus says “be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5.48) he uses for “perfect” the Greek word “teleios”, which gives us the “tele” in the English words telegraph, telephone, telemetry, telescope, and so on. It means a point in the future, a purpose at a distance. To recap = “be perfect” in the shadow of the Rev Samuel Marsden, would mean moral perfection and bloodthirsty duty, a good citizen’s behaviour and is NOT what Jesus meant. He means, be purpose-driven, the whole journey through, same as God is. No wonder Clores calls it “brave”.

DISCUSS: Do you know someone who remained fixed to a good purpose their whole life no matter what difficulties came their way? Describe that quality. How desirable is that quality to you?

THE GRAVITY QUESTION: Does a holy “connectedness” sound like you have lost your autonomy?

Clores: “We will all tire of the despair we feel at not seeing a direct connection to something greater than ourselves, to each other. Maybe then we’ll begin moving from the outside in.” p 228

THINK: Clinging to our autonomy against an invitation to holiness is like walking under the force of gravity. It is how things are – a massive, unavoidable reality - totally invisible until, like a baby, we fall and cry and say “why did this happen to me?” Still we might blame everyone and everything else, unable to fathom that we are under an influence, and we need to learn to walk with it. A Spirituality that wants to fly but can’t, needs to learn how to walk, to build strength, and to learn to balance. It is a different paradigm, perhaps a little disappointing, but a more approachable one, and a more “everyday” spirituality.

DISCUSS: Using the analogy of learning to walk, where are you in your spiritual journey?

CONCLUSION

To travel in the wild, take a map.

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