

WHERE DOES CHRIST MEET SPIRITUALITY?

It is becoming more common to accept spirituality as a normal category of human function. Much is said about people's interest in exploring spirituality. We may welcome the interest, be glad of the diagnosis, but how we respond is a separate question.

My recent experience casts serious doubt on the motivating potential of that interest. At UWA we tried to offer a four part series called 'Lifeframe - Christian spirituality for the rest of us'. It was practise-based. It was first offered as a lunchtime series by direct email to 18000 students, then addressed separately to 3000 staff. Only one registration. My conclusion is that spirituality may now be interesting for people but it is not motivating. From a Christian point of view, it is a not a door way swinging open towards organised religion, quite the opposite.

So how does this universal human experience of spirituality connect with Christian interpretations? Jesus has always invited humans to take an onward journey into a practical spirituality that cuts the ice in a cold world, but even putting it that way anticipates four movements.

1. G*D

We can look away from "church service religion" and focus on the everyday world around us. Some of our experiences of awesome nature and wondrous people lead us to a sense of 'something more'. God's fingerprints are all over our life and experiences, not just as designer (the scientific preoccupation) but as presence (the existential connection). The Creator's spirit is close at hand to all of us. We could be celebrating but there is something in us that switches off or takes side with the opposition. The 'fight or flight' reaction must be relegated below the 'flow and forgiveness' response. There is all this LIFE available and we frustrate our own access. We need to take steps of thanksgiving in order to open up the window a little.

To be frank, it is hard for church people to do this it, because they often act and think too abstractly, and tragically don't know how to connect their experience of life/creation with their faith in Jesus. The vast majority of people, whether churched or not, have spiritual encounters or experiences and need help to recognize them, the safety to name them, and help to interpret them.

Without interpretive help, for example, one could conclude from observing the tragedies of nature, that God is punitive. A Christian interpretation dramatically helps here: God has sent Jesus to connect the broken pieces of heaven and earth, starting with the human creatures (of highest ecological impact). Jesus is not a narrowing religious figure but the key to unlock life. He provides a closeness to God that awakens us, and opens a door to wider horizons.

So, the doctrine of creation needs unpacking and experiencing, in teaching, events, and practices.

BUT the earth story is not just a romance. It carries a lot of tragedy too, so we need to go MAD.

2.M.A.D.

Movies make the good guys win in 100 minutes. But most adults do not see issues so clearly. The “shades of grey” are where good and evil, where joy and suffering mix, a mixture that often confuses us. Where can we find the light among the shades? With good discernment, we can experience the goodness of God among the many shades of grey.

As Peck opens his book, “The Road Less Travelled”, “Life is difficult...once we truly understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult.” We can take seriously how tough life can be. To do so is both realistic and compassionate. So, our spirituality needs to not be ‘sweets at a Christmas feast’ but ‘rations for the whole journey’, both feast and famine. A discerning approach asks:

1. How do we diagnose the nature of this present evil? Why is it so?
2. Where is the hope, even in the worst of it?

Jesus taught us to act in these intersections of suffering and hope: “Let your will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” So, there are two questions that come to find us. Firstly, how responsive at heart shall we be? In the evil that we suffer, are we allowing God to make us better or are we going to end up bitter? Secondly, about the evil that we see around us, how are we going to be one who makes a difference (go m.a.d.) or will we retreat to the silence of those many who allow the evil to prosper? Thirdly, how much does it take? Fourthly, how much is enough?

The next section enters the question of how much God can be expected to provide that 'enough' for our journey.

3. B!G

We are all doing the best we know how with life. We can try to learn life's lessons, and pass them on to others. But it is so easy to pick up the cynicism or the romanticism of the media. For example, we can fall for the lie that we only believe what we want to believe, when we know we are actually learning new things all the time. On the other hand, we can project our wants and fears onto a Santa Claus or Big Mother in the sky. So what can we really learn from life? That is a spiritual question. We can in various ways experience the character of God in the patterns and epiphanies of our life.

Many voices speak of a pattern or purpose emerging in their life. They have a sneaking suspicion that they are here for a reason, and they are taking hold of it! For many people, it is more than suspicion. They have been dramatically met by a happening from heaven, called an "epiphany", which means "truth dawned" on them. Epiphanies are a wake up call, another one of God's business cards or invitations being delivered. Coincidences, interruptions, paradigm changes - what is real here? Some epiphanies may be just an overheated imagination, some of it superstitious, without a shred of evidence. Can we understand these spiritual experiences? Can we seek them authentically?

We can look back at the journey in our life to see if there are any patterns or clues to show that God has been there. What might that mean as we journey onwards in our life? We might also find a few influences that misled us. It is not always easy to grasp, and an understanding of our childhood patterning may release our thinking. These are clues to the nature and character of God in our life, if we care to pay attention.

But not everyone wants what is best and good. At least, not all of us all the time. It is like the fear of the fire.

4. Fire!

We are all spiritual beings, whether religious or not. God is present, extravagantly, if we can grow the connection with Spirit, that is, learn the language. But God is also hidden with enough anonymity (or absence? or impartiality?) that we are still free to choose whether to see honestly and thus we are free to respond authentically from the heart - or not. We do this with all our relationships not just with the divine. What is the switch which opens up the connection or stops us from connecting – with God, our

true selves and our neighbour. For example, over the millenia, it has been noticed how easily we blame others - blame God, blame our circumstances, blame our parents, blame the church - for our lack of depth and our lack of resolve.

But God is wild, not tame, and we may hold a legitimate fear in approaching the Fire. Church is here to help us – that in itself is news to many. But even at its best, there comes an end to the church’s help when we must venture alone into an open-ended relationship with God. This is daily, not just at our death. The journey holds many change processes. We can cling to our masks, our fears, our substitutes, but we were made for the beauty of the fire of God.

There are many theological images and doctrinal assumptions in these four explorations of spirituality. I am indebted to Tillich, Moltmann, Pannenberg, and Fox. The doctrinal questions need to be responded to, but only out of an experience of the dialogue or in respectful and supportive interlocution with those who have. Otherwise we will revert to a preference for abstractions out of context. In that theological task, I want to add two observations about **the content of** the evangel.

CONVERSION

National Church Life Survey suggests that the faith-journey of people are helped by recognising at some points on the journey where they have come to and committing to go onward, in some way. This may be as simple as a milestone, or more like a watershed moment. The latter type are what we call conversion, a larger kind of taking-leave-and-going-on.

In biblical language, conversion always involves repentance, a change of mind and attitude and action. It may come through many steps in a long story or it may come large in a sudden moment, but it always has two sides:

1. Repentance away from something (‘put off the old’):

At the start of a journey, it is good to know what we can and cannot take. Repentance is about healthy guilt, which addresses real wrongs and not inadequacies or false shame. Guilt can be cleansed with the clear fresh-start forgiveness of Jesus, shame must be addressed with love and healed more slowly.

2. Repentance towards something (‘put on the new’):

The 'sawdust trail' model of espousing Christian conversion originally meant a commitment to the emancipation of slaves, a critical and present test-case in love of neighbour. It was later reduced to a private faith-statement about love of God and one's eternal future. Today, public Christian conversion might mean espousing, in my view, just compensation and fair opportunity for Aboriginal people and a more economically-committed care of the whole ecology.

Two-sided repentance, like the discussion of spirituality above, means that we need to frame conversion as a journey, not a decision, which brings me to frame a simple agenda about the meaning of conversion.

Four conversions are needed, all of them simply the commands of Jesus: to love God, to love neighbour, to love one another, to love our enemies. One could nuance these further – what about love of self, love of the planet, nonviolent peace-making, and so on, all good but I am not going there just now. Each love has its own disciplines. I have not witnessed any natural progression from one to the other, without the intentional discipling of a new believer or enquirer.

By contrast, USA studies have shown that the more 'born again' experience without subsequent discipleship, results in a pattern of *more* unethical behaviours (pornography, adultery, gambling, \$ cheating) than those found in the general population. This a shocking reversal of what we expect from Christian conversion. Were they inoculated by their experience? Was this a consumer's shopping trip for a religious experience or some new form of insurance? Clearly, our practise of Evangelism must be tied to the act of baptism or confirmation, and thereby to the ongoing journey of risk-taking discipleship, as it is in the *Becoming Disciples Process* of the UCA Assembly. Indeed, for many the word 'evangelism' implying conversion, has been surrendered to the word 'discipleship' implying ongoing growth.

The question of what are we are converted towards leads to my second observation about the content of the evangel.

ATONEMENT

Can we agree on what atonement is? Not at the moment. In the UCA, I have noticed frequently that our conversation speeds towards a condemnation (Anselm) substitutionary theology because, in Jesus, forgiveness should be free and not at all punitive (Abelard). We then flip onto exemplary atonement, which burdens us with huge idealism – how can we imitate the cross? My point is not to debate these

two points here, but to note the yawning duality. I think we will regain a shared sense of mission by espousing **one theology of atonement**, in which we can use several images as helps the person concerned.

For instance, many believe (from Nature) that God actually is angry with them. If we are to start where people are at, as any good communication strategy would espouse that we need some doctrine of 'satisfaction'(e.g. see the prayer below).

Other images include Redemption from slavery – which may be a popular image in the light if so many 'redemption theme' movies. Health and healing/salvation of the soul are already understood in psychological terms, so they may be extended to systems and communities and souls. The notions of Promise, Covenant, Meaning and Purpose may hold motivating force instead of eternal bliss post-mortem.

These Atonement images are more in need of creative imagination than what we currently do, stretching each image to the breaking point of tacit rejection or by elevating each image to its own theology. Better to use imagination to find the value for some than to take a stance that dismisses some entirely. This approach implies a theology about creativity, the doctrine of parables, and the co-leadership of the parts of the Body. It also reinforces a christocentric singularity.

Bosch discusses these images at length, and highlights the short comings of any and all approaches. With Bosch, I believe we need to stick with a 'comprehensive Christological framework'. For example, I would want a return to the classic double-action of atonement theology, the exemplary and the substitutionary - and not abandon any image from our potential repertoire.

On the other hand, having a made a plea for retaining an historic comprehensiveness, on the field something simpler will happen. People are searching for something real, which speaks to their situation, not something comprehensive. Some will prefer one image over another, possibly because of need or education or experience. If our little explanation is given to good effect, we can recognise that the discipleship does not stop there, it merely begins. It is a paradox that 'at-one-ment' should be so irrevocably diverse.

The blunt instrument of reason is inadequate to the processes of spiritual life. So, when the church meets beyond the worshipping congregation, it meets to argue, plan, budget, and debate, with a sprinkling of prayer. The missional theology which I am suggesting requires us to reverse that balance.

CONCLUSION

On the night that he was betrayed Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying: Take eat this is my body broken for you.

Jesus, our feast-giver, thank you for hosting us.

Likewise after the supper he took the Cup of Salvation and said: Drink this all of you.

This is my blood of the new covenant for the forgiveness of your sins.

Lamb of God, our sin-bearer, have mercy on us.

Silence – as we identify with our whole nation

On that night, the glory of God was mixed with many streaks of darkness.

We too are a nation with many mixed thoughts.

Some of us feel that the wrath of god is punishing us.

In Jesus Christ, the wrath of God was somehow simply satisfied.

Some of us feel enslaved to old regrets and bad habits.

In Jesus Christ, the price of freedom is somehow simply satisfied.

Some of us feel our potential is doomed to frustration.

In Jesus Christ, the futility of life was somehow swallowed up in victory.

Some of us just struggle to make our way in life,

In Jesus Christ is found somehow the way to follow.

Some of us are trapped in the way of shame, honour and revenge.

In Jesus Christ, forgiveness is found.

Some of us are trapped in the way of pride, competition and oppression,

In Jesus Christ, love has become the wellspring of Life.

Some of us feel confused about what on earth that real godliness could be like.

In Jesus Christ, the image of God is somehow simply satisfied.

Pause to contemplate this salvation...

In all the ages, we have gathered like this, The people of the Way.

In all Creation the angels also gather In clear eyed praise of Jesus Christ, singing:

**Holy Holy Holy Lord, God of Power and Might, Heaven and Earth are full of your glory,
Hosanna in the Highest.**

So here and now we gather around this good old table,

Daring to confess some of our mixed motives,

We hunger to worship in spirit and in truth,

We thirst for the Holy Spirit to transform us more.

We come again in humble access,

Free to be in God in the way made possible by Jesus,

Knowing that in the grain of the bread and the press of the wine,

Somehow today we can be simply satisfied.

