

A photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sun is low on the horizon, partially obscured by a large, dark, billowing cloud formation. The sky is a mix of light blue and orange, and the water below is dark blue with a shimmering path of light reflecting the sun. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Christ in us Today

for group study

Do not look for God outside yourself,
for the God which you seek does not exist.
God manifests in us as light in our spirit,
Sweet warmth in our heart,
and strength in our will.
Look within for the living God, and be thankful.

Ask that God may live in you, that he may
manifest through you.

Only God can transform human beings
Everyone is seeking the meaning of life.
The meaning of life lies in communion with God.

The Great Beings, Geniuses and Masters of Humanity
Are those in whom God lives.

God is the goal of life: it is He we are seeking.
God is the beloved of the human soul.

Peter Dueunov, the great seer of Bulgaria

Front-page photograph has been kindly given by Adrian Marshall –
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Christ in us Today

For group discussion with 8-10 people

Contents

1.	God still speaks to us through Scripture	page 5
2.	Divine Truth evolves	page 7
3.	On the threshold of the New	page 9
4.	Exploring the meaning of Faith	page 11
5.	The Value of Spiritual Experience	page 13
6.	Meditation as wordless prayer	page 15
7.	The Christ in Jesus	page 17
8.	The Christ is us	page 19
9.	The Second coming: Creating the Kingdom of God on Earth	21
10.	A group Vision Statement	page 22

We are grateful to Adrian B Smith for much of the work in this booklet, also to the editorial team, Judy Hanmer, David Storey and Celia Storey.

This booklet is intended to be used in groups of no more than ten persons. It is hoped that each person has a copy of the appropriate pages in advance.

Photocopies may be made of the chapters.



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A Method of Working in Groups

Leader or Facilitator

Inevitably someone will have taken the initiative to bring together the group to discuss this paper. Whoever continues to take the group does not have to be a 'leader'; they need not have full cognition of the paper even though it helps. It is however necessary for someone to keep the flow of each session and to watch the timing. They will need to be aware of the way the session is going and how involved or not are the participants, making sure that each has a chance, should he or she wish, to have their say in a safe environment where no one is going to pounce on them for having 'such ideas'. To take away from the 'leader knows all' syndrome we prefer to call this person the 'Facilitator'.

Numbers

It is generally felt most comfortable if groups are for no more than 8 to 10 people. It would be good if there were some sort of commitment from each participant to attend the full course so far as is possible. Obviously there are always extenuating circumstances.

Tuning in to God

It is customary at Christian discussion groups to start with a prayer. We suggest instead having a short time of silence as groups today are finding it more helpful than a prayer. Everyone has rushed to be there, probably after a busy day. To tune in to the discussion session it is good to take a short time to relax, to become aware of where you are and the other people in the room with you. Next we need to realise we are about God's work. We need to lift our minds to the Divine, Jesus, or whatever form makes you feel secure to listen to the word. This could take five minutes or more if the group so wish. A note here as to the importance of punctuality; someone rushing in late really disturbs this process. Have an agreed time to start and stick to it.

Active Listening

Some people find it difficult to speak out when they are in a group but we need to realise that each one of us has an important offering to make, however small. For each one to feel safe there are a few ground rules that need to be observed. There needs to be an agreement of confidentiality. Sometimes the subject for discussion can bring up quite powerful feelings in us. We need to listen attentively, not interrupt and not be judgmental. It has been said "I don't know what I think until I have heard myself say it; and then it is possible that I don't really think that and want to restate it". Each one needs time to express their thoughts and feelings and be allowed to say something that may not tally with others' beliefs without the danger of being told they can't think such things. Everyone has a right to their own belief.

When discussing spiritual matters, the limitations of language can be a great difficulty; language is simply unable to communicate an adequate and comprehensive understanding of the Divine, and in a group which is considering such deep matters we need to recognise this. The language we use to express our experience of God may not tally with that of other members of the group. We need to learn to listen in a really open-minded way, rather than rushing in with our own opinions.

Sitting in a group which listens to each member without interruption or passing judgement can be a profound and life-changing experience. Such an experience enables us to open ourselves to new ways of understanding and expressing our faith and this can help to move us on when our spiritual life feels stagnant or stuck. We begin to appreciate how each encounter with the divine is unique, yet in some mysterious way, part of the whole.

Method of Procedure

Each participant should have a copy of the relevant chapter, preferable given out in advance.

The following format is suggested for each chapter to be used in a gathering lasting about one and a half hours. Times given are meant to be no more than a guide and may be adjusted according to the judgement of the facilitator.

At the first session it would be good for each person to introduce themselves and in a few words say why they are here.

Someone reads the text aloud – clearly	5 mins
A time to reflect on it in silence	5 mins
Without interruption, each person is encouraged to share their reflections.	
Someone starts when they feel ready, then, in turn, clockwise – allowing someone to pass if they do not wish to speak at this point.	15 mins
A silent time to reflect on each person's sharing	5 mins
General, free discussion*	30 mins
A chance to make the sharing our own:	
Each one writes down:	
- What was new to me in what was shared today?	
- What was confirmed by what I heard today?	
- Has anything I heard today disturbed me?	
- Has anything I heard today liberated me?	10 mins
Share with the others – as little or as much as you wish – of what you have written down.	10 mins
When everyone has had the chance to speak, end with some moments of attunement: just be aware how much each of us stretches the mind of each other.	3 mins.

Confirm a date, place and time for the next gathering.

Facilitators Notes

The material has been designed to use sequentially, on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

It is best for the chairs to be arranged in a circle where possible.

***For the free discussion**, another approach could be to leave a 'talking stick' (or stone or other object) in the centre of the circle. People may speak in any order, as they feel moved. The person who has the stick holds the floor, and returns the stick to the centre when he or she has finished speaking.

Be aware lest one person dominates.

Ask the group to read the material of the next session before coming.

There is no copyright on this document so it is good if each participant has a copy of at least the chapter being discussed that session.

Be an Open-Minded Person.

1 God Still Speaks to Us through Scripture

The history, the lives and the cultures of people are God's first book. The Bible is God's second book, given to help us read the first. Pablo Richard.

All inspired Scripture has its use for teaching the Truth. 2 Tim.3 v16

God is constantly speaking only one thing. God's speaking is one thing. In this one utterance God speaks the Son and at the same time the Holy Spirit and all creatures. Meister Eckhart.

Over the last century increasing numbers of Christians have moved away from the belief in the literal words of the Bible to a realisation that, while it is the word of God, it is expressed in human terms, which means it has the linguistic and cultural limitations of all human communication.

There are, however, still found small numbers of Christians who regard the King James Bible as being more true to God's word than many a modern translation; who give equal weight to the Hebrew Scriptures as to the New Testament; who will take quite literally the many prohibitions and exhortations of the Old Testament as applicable today. They hold the Bible up as the ultimate authority because it is God's word. It is the content of the Bible and how it speaks to us that makes it important.

The veteran Catholic theologian of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) Professor Edward Schillebeeckx, wrote in his book *I am a Happy Theologian*:

The word of God is the word of human beings who speak of God. To say, just like that, that the Bible is the word of God is simply not true... The Biblical writings are human testimonies to God... The new theology cannot be understood without the concept of Revelation mediated by history, of the interpretive experience of human beings. When the mediation is not accepted, one inevitably slips into fundamentalism.

The Anglican Archbishop Temple wrote:

There is no such thing as revealed Truth. There are truths of

revelation, that is to say, propositions which express the results of correct thinking concerning revelation; but they are not themselves directly revealed.

The New Testament is our special concern here. We have continually to bear in mind when reading the Gospels that the authors did not have it as their intention to write an historical record. In no way can evangelists be compared to journalists today who are obsessed with 'facts', verifiable facts. The Gospel writers were concerned to proclaim an experience. We all know how difficult it is to communicate to someone else an experience which for us has been life-changing. The evangelists were writing with the purpose of trying to share their experience of the Jesus event with others. While today's historians are concerned with dates and chronology, for the evangelists this was quite unimportant, this is why we find apparent contradictions between them. Dates and places had to serve the proclamation of the Good News, so they were altered accordingly - very often altered in order to give the appearance of fulfilling a prophecy. A prophecy fulfilled provided authenticity no matter that it had to be 'bent' to fit a recorded event. There is no way in which we can interpret the message of the Gospel writers, coming as they did from an entirely different culture and world view, in the thought-forms of present-day chroniclers. In fact, to do so, far from being faithful to God's Revelation, is actually to distort the message the written word is attempting to convey.

Then we have also to take into consideration the many stages by which our English translations of the writings of the New Testament have come down to us. The words we write cannot express 100% the abstract idea we wish to communicate. What you understand from what you read is your interpretation, filtered through the background of your own experience of what you think is being communicated. Let's apply this to the Good News of Jesus. What the Apostles understood Jesus to have said would not have been exactly what he said or meant to say. When they, in turn, preached his message they were selective, each feeding their particular audiences with what they thought their listeners should hear. Only after some decades did some of the words and actions of Jesus begin to be written down; again, selectively for different communities. Matthew, for example was writing for convert Jews so he often mentions the fulfilment of prophecies, while Mark and Luke were writing for Gentiles who had become Christians so they had to add explanations of Jewish practices. Some of the earliest texts were probably written in Aramaic (Jesus' mother tongue) which used a much more poetic form of expression than the Greek language in which the New Testament came to us. The translation from the former to the latter was a translation of thought-patterns, not simply of words. The Greek was then, centuries later, translated into Latin by St Jerome and during the Middle Ages monks copied by hand the copies of copies of this, with mistakes inevitably slipping in. From these, eventually, our different English translations were made. This is all to show that we cannot be sure exactly what words were spoken by Jesus. We have to rely on the judgement of Biblical scholars - and even they are not agreed!

Having said all that, we should not devalue the words of Scripture. Their value to the Christian believer today is not as an historical record but as a pointer to a

way of living more fully. The Bible is one of the means by which the Spirit speaks to us today, with our culture, with our personal spiritual experience and our 'scientific' knowledge. Its spiritual value does not lie in the past but in the present. Its revelatory value does not lie in a literal reading but in its application to our world view. Just as an old map might show us the main roads but would be no help in looking for Motorways or ring roads. The Bible may give us outlines but does not address current moral issues. It addressed the issues of its time. For example, polygamy was not a problem: to have lots of wives was a sign of wealth, a blessing of God. Slaves were part of the social scene. The Bible gives plenty of dietary regulations, necessary in a hot climate when there were no refrigerators.

We may have heard it said that Divine Revelation ended with the death of the last Apostle, when the last word of the New Testament was written. We could be forgiven for understanding this to mean that God no longer speaks to us. True, the supreme, and in that sense ultimate, revelation of God was given us in the person of Jesus the Christ. However, every generation - our own and future generations included - are continually coming to ever deeper understanding of the written scriptures. The expansion of human knowledge throws new light on them. For instance, as astrophysics makes us aware of the vastness of the whole Universe, we have an understanding that the Apostles did not have: that the Jesus event was not cosmic but of concern to Planet Earth only. Our coming to know people of other religions through travel and immigration, and appreciating their religious wisdom, gives us new insights into our own religious tradition. Yes, God still speaks to us today in so many ways if we have the openness to hear Him.

2 Divine Truth Evolves

People do not put new wine into old wineskins; if they do the skins burst, the wine runs out and the skins are lost. No. They put new wine into fresh skins and both are preserved. Jesus. Luke 5 v37-38

God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of the divine will, according to the divine purpose which God set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ, all things in the heavens and things on Earth. Ephesians 1 v9-10

What has passed for Christianity during these nineteen centuries is merely a beginning, full of weaknesses and mistakes, not a full-grown Christianity springing from the spirit of Jesus.

Albert Schweitzer

In eastern and western philosophies, and in the great religions of the world, it has been traditionally assumed that a cause is greater than that which it causes. The higher, greater spiritual realms cause the creation of matter which belongs to the lower realms of existence. Now, in the West, modern science reverses the order, understanding creation as proceeding from below upwards, from the simple to the complex. We call this process 'evolution'.

The Universe is evolving, we are told. We human beings are part of the evolving process. Of all the features composing our world view today, features which are causing Christians to re-think their beliefs, the predominant factor - in the sense of affecting so many others - is precisely our present understanding of evolution. Whether or not we accept the manner of its happening as proposed by Darwin - due to the survival of the fittest - the fact of the evolution of our species is now more than a hypothesis. It has caused our world-view to change from the static to the dynamic. Everything is continually in a process of change. Ideas, theories and doctrines, and beliefs too, are in constant process of change, their statements no longer considered as set in concrete for all time.

Further, we have to acknowledge that change is happening at an increasing speed. Witness the growing gap in the outlook on life between teenagers and their parents today. In the fields of electronics,

genetic engineering, global marketing, changes are happening ever more rapidly.

To think of change as evolution is not to make a value judgement about it. It is not to say that life is getting better, if by better we mean more fulfilling. Who is to say that the home with every conceivable labour-saving gadget and physical comfort makes its owners happier than are the peasant farmers in a village in Zambia, for instance, whose lives are extremely simple by our standards, but by that very fact have few financial and material worries.

We live in an evolving Universe, journeying from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch or the Big Stretch or whatever. There is no escape from that. But as the only creatures on this planet who have a free will, we alone are able to make choices. We can choose whether to go along with change or whether to oppose it. We can decide which new things are for our good and which are detrimental. The Christian has a measure with which to make personal judgements as to which path to take.

The Christian sees the whole evolving process in the light of a belief that God is bringing about His purposes. St Paul recognised that we are on a journey towards our final fulfilment in union with God and recognised too that it was a painful journey:

I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that

is going to be revealed to us. All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children ... [there is] the hope that creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God. For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. (Romans 8 v18-22)

As we move forward, we will, as mature adults, have to face up to the number of disjunctions we are already experiencing between what is proposed for our religious belief and our day-to-day experience of life.

Are we to continue to believe, for instance, that the human being is the only creature on Earth directly created by God, the only creature wanted for itself? Are we to believe that the millions of other creatures, most of which have already vanished from our planet, were simply a preparation for the creation of human beings?

Are we still to do our God-thinking with the cosmological view of the world that the Israelites had 2,000 years ago, as we read it in the Bible, when today's astrophysicists explore the immensity of the Universe way beyond our imagining? Are we still to raise our eyes to Heaven, a place where God is, in making our prayers, and to continue to speak of Jesus 'coming down to Earth' and 'ascending' back to his Father? Do we still think of Heaven and Hell as actual places rather than modes of being and relating, life in another dimension of energy?

The theory of evolution makes us re-think the Biblical account of a once-perfect world, a Garden of Eden, of us all as descended from a single pair of human beings directly created by God, and of a 'Fall' from such a state.

Today young people require authenticity. They are prepared to take on board beliefs which make sense to their experience of life. 'Become real!' What is proposed to them must relate to their experience. This is what gives it and its proposers authenticity.

Our theology is evolving. Not because the Church is receiving new revelations but because we are continually probing deeper into the truths we possess, seeing them in a new light, a light thrown from our increased knowledge and understanding of our world. God, however, does not evolve. God is always in the timeless, eternal NOW. It is we who are evolving in our consciousness, in our understanding of our relationship to the historical and physical totality of creation. And in consequence we are continually evolving in the manner in which we relate to God.

Jesus too was a feature of evolution. Why this Divine visitation only after some half a million years of humans inhabiting the world? Could this only happen when human consciousness had developed to the point where the message he brought could be understood? Not only had humanity to evolve to that point, but such a person as Jesus, as one sharing our full humanity, could not have emerged in earlier centuries. He himself, with his higher consciousness, was a product of the evolutionary process.

Are we more aware of the implications of evolution for our faith? More aware of the need to re-express our Christian beliefs in terms of today's knowledge? We are more aware that we are called to partner God as co-creators, to point our human evolution in the direction to which we understand humanity to be called.

3. On the Threshold of the New

The Spirit of the Lord, indeed, fills the whole world, and that which holds all things together knows every word that is said. Wisdom 1 v7

To find Truth is a descent, a journey inwards. Plotinus

What I know now is limited. One day I will know as fully as God knows me. I Corinthians 13 v12

We should not be ashamed to acknowledge truth from whatever source it comes to us. Al Kindi, Muslim 9C

One of the features of the post-modern times in which we live is that people are feeling free to look far and wide for what they believe will nourish their spiritual lives. This accounts for the plethora of phenomena to which the media apply the label 'New Age'.

Since this non-religious spirituality has come about without any initiator or hierarchical structure, without any unifying ideology or doctrine nor any accepted body of authoritative texts, without any headquarters or membership requirement, we might rightly ask what has brought about this 'spirituality' that has seeped almost unnoticed into so many areas of our present day culture?

This has led many people to feel that it is just one of many indications that the whole of humanity is entering a new level of consciousness which is being sparked off in the Western world. Already in 1939 the Jesuit scientist and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, wrote:

At the root of the major troubles in which nations are today involved, I believe that I can distinguish the signs of a change of age in mankind.

and in 1942 he wrote:

A great many internal and external portents (political and social upheaval, moral and religious unease) have caused us all to feel, more or less confusedly, that something tremendous is at present taking place in the world.

Many other insightful Christians - Thomas Merton, F. C. Happold, Dom

Bede Griffiths among them - have written in the same vein. They see the emergence of a spiritual awareness which is beginning to govern peoples' lives. By spiritual awareness we mean what has been described as: 'The effect the inner person has on the outer'. In other words, increasingly more people are basing their lives on spiritual rather than on material values. They live out of a deeper consciousness.

These are evidence of the movement of the Holy Spirit in our times. Clues to this can be found in three positive features of today's attitude to life, each of which is feeding the other:

SOCIAL AWARENESS An increased social awareness, which reveals itself in our concern for human rights, for justice in our world, for action to overcome the poverty of people of the Third World, response to human disasters, in the spread of democracy and in the freedom to hold people in authority - politicians, the clergy, lawyers among them - to account.

THE ECOLOGY MOVEMENT There is the collection of concerns which we can put under the heading of the ecology movement. This desire for the well-being of our planet unites people of all religions. We are appreciating how Mother Earth is a living organism to be nurtured and not destroyed by greed. We are viewing our planet in its smallness with regard to the vastness of the Universe, the totality of God's creation. We support environmental issues with Green movements.

FEMININE VALUES There are those features of today's life which might fall under this heading. Namely, the challenge to the patriarchy that has been our dominant social structure for thousands of years, the concern for building up mutual relationships, the greater creativity among ordinary people, the increasing anti-militarism.

An expression of this last in the Churches is a move away from a military attitude to our spiritual journey - seen as a warfare against the Evil One: 'Onward Christian Soldiers' - which stressed the masculine values of self-discipline, order, obedience, towards a mystical, charismatic spiritual path with its feminine imagery. Its literary idiom is more likely to be poetry than law. It speaks of love, not threats, of self-surrender and resting in God. While the masculine attitude strives for happiness and fulfilment in the next life and offers a prescription for attaining it, the latter seeks unity with the Divine already here and now. The paradigm is changing; moving towards a balance of the masculine and feminine. A new consciousness is bursting forth.

Newly aware Christians live this out in a double dynamic. Outwards, drawn towards relating, towards community, with social concern, dedicated to service of others, attempting to live unconditional

love. At the same time, inwards, through such practices as meditation, contemplative prayer, transcending to the still centre of our being. Both outwards and inwards nourishing each other, moving us towards a new consciousness.

Christians resonate with the words of the theologian, Thomas Berry, who describes himself as an historian of cultures:

What is clear is that the Earth is mandating that the human community assume a responsibility never assigned to any previous generation. The human community is passing from its stage of childhood into its adult stage of life. We are being asked to accept responsibility commensurate with our greater knowledge. We are being asked to learn a new mode of conduct and discipline. This is pre-eminently a religious and spiritual task, for only religious forces can move human consciousness at the depth needed. Only religious forces can sustain the needed effort. Only religion can measure the magnitude of what we are about. ... Our task at this critical moment is to awaken the energies needed to create the new world, to evoke a universal communion of all parts of life.

4. Exploring the meaning of Faith

*But I gae mad at their grimaces,
Their sighin' cantin' grace proud faces
Their three mile prayers, and half mile graces.* Robert Burns
There is no not-holy; there is only that which has not yet been hallowed. Martin Buber

Each Christian denomination claims that its interpretation of Divine Truth, and its proposed way of responding to that, is the right way. None more so than the Roman Catholic Church which claims to possess 'the fullness of Truth'. It is not within our human capacity to possess the fullness of Truth. God alone has the fullness. We can do no more than handle Truth partially as truths.

If we delude ourselves that we possess the fullness of Divine Truth, that we possess the one and only correct understanding of divine Revelation, then we have no reason to look beyond this. If we think that we already possess everything we need for our spiritual journey, then we believe that we can learn nothing more from any other Christian denomination, let alone from any other religion. We have arrived. There is nowhere else to go. Such a position spells death. The spiritual search is over. Not to move on is to stagnate. To stagnate is to die slowly.

Many Christians are appreciating that no matter how secure they feel in their own faith, there are aspects of the spiritual life which receive more attention in other denominations than their own. They are looking into these and appreciating them. For instance, those whose worship is sacrament-and ritual-centred are learning from those whose worship is Bible-centred. These latter are opening up to the value of a more frequent celebration of the Eucharist.

But further, many Christians, living as they do today in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society are receiving new spiritual insights by learning about other Faiths, especially those from the Far East

stemming from the Hindu tradition with its emphasis on meditation and encountering the Divine in the centre of our being.

We need to be clear in our minds about the different meanings we give to the word 'Faith'.

Irrespective of a particular religious tradition, we can say that everyone's life is lived by 'faith', in the sense that it is the deepest life orientation of each of us; that which gives our lives meaning. It is not about what we believe (a list of truths) but what we believe *in*, without which our life would have no bedrock. We may not be conscious of this 'faith', but nevertheless it gives our life its orientation. Carl Jung, when asked in a BBC interview in 1959 whether he believed in God, replied: "I don't believe, I know". Thomas Merton took that a step further: "We believe, not because we want to know, but because we want to be."

If recognised, it can lead us to *a* Faith. That is, the assent to a particular understanding of life's meaning that answers the need at this stage of our lives. This will usually be within the tradition of a particular religion or of a quasi-religion, for example some cause to which one dedicates one's life. This will change as our life situation changes. It is quite subjective. Within a Christian context this form of faith is promoted by evangelisation or catechesis.

What is often referred to as *the* Faith, on the other hand, is objective. It is the set of doctrines proposed for belief by a particular denomination, often expressed in a creed or catechism and submission to it is required for membership. The expression of *the* Faith, however, is not set in stone but requires to be constantly re-

expressed in order to be received by a contemporary culture. As Albert Schweitzer wrote:

Christianity can only become the living truth for successive generations if thinkers constantly arise within it who, in the spirit of Jesus, make belief in him capable of intellectual apprehension, in the thought forms of the world view proper to their time.

Each of us has to be that kind of ‘thinker’, not leaving it to official religious teachers, if our personal faith is to be meaningful and nourish us in our everyday lives. Many centuries ago the great theologian,

Thomas Aquinas, wrote: “People cannot give consent in faith to what is proposed to them unless to some extent they understand it”.

That requires that we become perpetual seekers. As the Church, we are a pilgrim people. Carl Jung sounds a warning. He wrote:

Science seeks the truth because it feels it does not possess it. The Church possesses the truth and therefore does not seek it. (Letters Vol. I (1906-1950))

We are a pilgrim people on the road to Truth until we pass through death.

5. The Value of Spiritual Experience

Future and past cannot live off the present forms of religious experience for these are too shallow; the future can live only from the most primordial communion with the sacred.

Thomas Berry

How wonderful is the wisdom in the Godhead's heart. It is the heart that sees the primordial eternity of every creature. Hildegard of Bingen

Within the different strands of Christianity there are two opposite opinions held as to what should be the basis of our belief. There are those who teach that sound belief can only be based on objective truth which is found in Divine Revelation as expressed in the Bible and in the traditional interpretation of the Bible. The other school teaches that one's ultimate authority for accepting Christian teaching is a personal spiritual experience.

There are loyal church-going Christians who observe faithfully the law of God as taught by the Church and carry out all their religious practices punctiliously, but whose religious life is lived at a surface level because their heart is not touched: they have not had an experience of God. They know a great deal *about* God, but they do not 'know' God. On the other hand, one meets people who have had a deep spiritual experience. The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre claims in its publicity flyer:

More than half the adult population of Britain believe that they have had spiritual or transcendent experiences, such as an awareness of a supernatural presence or power, meaningful patterning of events, extra-sensory perception, a feeling of guidance or answer to prayer. Often these experiences are of immense personal significance and alter the course of people's lives,

yet they may have had no religious roots within which to ground that experience and therefore they have no way of giving it meaning, or interpreting it, nor of fitting it

into a mental framework by which it can be a means of spiritual growth.

Those that teach the necessity of objective revelation as the basis of belief need to recall that the Bible itself is nothing other than a record of human experience.

All the major religions came into being because their founder had a profound, what we might call 'revelatory', spiritual experience. Jesus himself had such a vivid consciousness of God that he explained it as God-in-him: 'The Father and I are one' (John 10 v30). Furthermore, acknowledging the fact that it is the same God who empowers everyone, we must accept the validity of the spiritual experience of the followers of other religions. Although the intensity or circumstances of the experience may differ, and indeed how it is described, in essence it is the same for all: an experience of the Divine. Where we part company is in the interpretation of that experience which will depend on the religious framework we accept as giving our lives meaning. One person may name the vision of a divine being as Jesus, another as Krishna.

In the past a great weight was placed on Christian apologetics: the provision of rational arguments to prove the existence of God. Anyone who has had a direct experience of God is in no need of such rationalising. In any case, it is simply not possible to prove the existence of God in such a form that is acceptable to all. Reasonable well-informed and sensitive thinkers are able to produce rational arguments to prove that God does, or equally to prove that God does not, exist.

One of the greatest theological minds in the history of the Church, Thomas Aquinas, who applied Aristotelian logic to rationalise Christian beliefs had a mystical experience towards the end of his life, in comparison with which, he wrote: “All I have written seems like so much straw”.

The great mystics in the Church’s history have not been popular with the ecclesiastical hierarchy because their spiritual experience was such that their faith was self-affirming. It did not require authenticating by any external authority.

In our own times most people are putting more emphasis on subjective experience than on objective doctrine as a guide to life. We notice the rise in reports of people having out-of-the-body or near-death experiences which have caused them to have a completely different attitude to life, a realisation that the human being is more than just body and mind: that our consciousness is not to be equated with the brain but can operate outside and beyond the body. This experience is giving a reality to the Christian’s belief in life after death.

For Christians, the ultimate authority for accepting the validity of Christian belief is not the word of ecclesiastical authority - needful though that is for guidance - but personal spiritual experience. Bishop Richard Holloway writes:

Experiences of God are self-evidencing to the participant. They operate within their own integrity, follow the logic of their own experience and require no external authority to validate them; they validate themselves.

From what is said above, it might be inferred that a spiritual experience is always extraordinary, a peak experience. But this is only one aspect. The Spirit can be experienced in any situation. It can be experienced in ordinary everyday life, in love, in compassion, in pain and hardship, even in the chasm of despair. The Spirit never abandons us. It can break through into our lives at the oddest moments. Sadly, we are not always open receivers.

6. Meditation as wordless Prayer

He prays best who does not know that he is praying. St Anthony

Pray as you can and do not pray as you can't. Dom Chapman

In the rush of life, step home within yourselves and be still. Wait upon God and feel his good presence; this will carry you evenly through your day's business. William Penn

When you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. And your Father who sees what you do in private will reward you. Matthew 6 v6

For many people, prayer is understood as saying prayers. And 'saying prayers' is synonymous with asking God for our needs.

An increasing number of people today are seeking places of quiet, moments of stillness in the midst of a frenetic life. More and more are turning to meditation in their search for a deeper prayer life.

We need to make the distinction between two uses of the word 'meditation'. In Western asceticism it is used to describe mental prayer in which the mind ponders on a Scriptural passage or inspirational text. This is discursive meditation; it engages the rational mind. It is different from the passive prayer of contemplation, the prayer described as 'active passivity'. In the Eastern tradition the words 'meditation' and 'contemplation' are used exactly the other way round. When we see advertisements for lessons in meditation, it is the Eastern form which is meant. This is what is meant here: the Eastern form considered as Christian contemplation.

Although this way of meditating is regarded by some as a New Age practice - and for many it is - in fact it is a Christian tradition going back as far as the monks in the desert in the 4th century and mentioned in 'The Cloud of Unknowing' by an unknown English mystic in the 14th century. Sadly the practice has been lost to the Western Church for centuries.

There are several ways of helping us to enter into this form of prayer. It may be by watching our breathing or counting our breaths. It may be by focusing the eyes on a picture, or on a candle. Some people

use a repeated word or phrase. All are ways or techniques with just one purpose, to still the mind, to allow God to speak to us. 'Be still and know that I am God' wrote the psalmist (Psalm 46).

Many Christians no longer feel at ease addressing a God out there with a shopping list! Many feel they have got stuck in their prayer life. It has become a duty rather than a joy. They want to have an experience of God, to enter into communion with God. Today we all live such exterior lives. A hundred percent of our awareness is of or through the body, of material things, of things outside us. To bring balance back to our lives we need to move our consciousness to our inner self, our soul-self, our centre point. "No movement in religious life has any value unless it is a movement inwards to the 'still centre' of your existence, where Christ is". Words of Pope John Paul II when he visited Ireland in 1979. An Indian spiritual writer and teacher of comparative religion, Ravi Ravindra, wrote: "In all spiritual traditions it has been recognised that unless one repeatedly renews one's contact with the centre, in meditation, prayer or quiet contemplation, one is depleted and lost".

This form of deep meditation is more than of spiritual benefit. Being a holistic exercise, it is of benefit to the three dimensions of life which make up our whole: body, mind and spirit. It is totally transforming. It enables people to live at a deeper level of consciousness and since all we do is influenced by our level of consciousness, our exterior action becomes more effective. It is recognised as

improving our relationships because we become more loving, we experience a deep unity with other people - the source of our being meets the source of their being - we more easily recognise “that of God in everyone” as the Quakers say. Because we become more centred, more secure within ourselves, we are more able to take the risk of going out to encounter others. Being more in harmony within our own selves, we become less stressed and this in turn affects our physical and mental health.

Furthermore, the practice of meditation not only reduces our own level of stress - and stress is caused by our inability to absorb experiences - but has been found to have an effect on the stress level of our surroundings. For this reason, it is often members of one’s own family who become more aware of a change in a person who has started to meditate than the actual person. Many scientific trials over the last few decades have revealed that when groups of people meditate together, the reduction in stress and the negative consequences of stress in society become measurable.

It is said that meditative prayer is as easy as walking but as difficult as making a pilgrimage. It is easy to do. It

demands no physical or mental effort. In fact we simply do it, expecting nothing nor trying for anything. We let God do the work. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome:

The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit Itself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words. And God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what the Spirit means. (Romans 8 v26-27).

The difficult part is being loyal to a daily - preferably twice daily - practice varying from fifteen to twenty minutes. Because meditation creates harmony, it is a wonderful means of community building, indeed, of binding together the human community. Swami Paramatmananda (the name given to a Catholic monk, Brother Wayne Teasdale) writes (in *The Heart of Meditation*):

The spiritual journey is the greatest single resource we have to change the world and bring about the birth of a new civilisation that possesses, and is animated by, the heart.

7. The Christ in Jesus

Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. he is the first-born Son, superior to all created things. For through him God created everything in heaven and on Earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers.... God created the whole universe through him and for him. Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place. Colossians 1 v 5-17

The third nature of Christ (neither human nor divine, but cosmic) – has not noticeably attracted the explicit attention of the faithful or of theologians. Teilhard de Chardin The cosmos is fundamentally and primarily living....Christ, through his Incarnation is internal to the world....rooted in the world, even in the very heart of the tiniest atom....Nothing seems to me more vital, from the point of view of human energy, than the appearance and eventually, the systematic cultivation of such a 'cosmic sense'. Teilhard de Chardin

The man Jesus was a product of millions of years of evolution. While there was no need for him to have a miraculous birth in the biological sense, the myth of such a miraculous birth emphasises the truth that Jesus was a very special person. In what way special? Whatever may have been the view of the Gospel writers, a contemporary way of answering this question is to say that Jesus can be recognised as the first fully mature man in our western culture: a 'new man' in whom the highest form of consciousness - Christ consciousness - has broken through. The theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, in his monumental work *Jesus* entitles one of his chapters: 'Jesus, parable of God and paradigm of humanity'.

We need to distinguish between the historical Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus as the Christ. That Jesus of Nazareth was an historical person living in Palestine at the beginning of our Common Era - AD as Christians designate it - is widely accepted by historians as well as by Scripture scholars. It is about his being entitled the Christ and the relationship of the Christ to the Godhead that has caused theologians from the earliest years of the Church to debate, theorise and hold Councils. The relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of eternity continues to present a mystery upon which we need to ponder. (By 'mystery' is meant that Truth

which in its totality we are unable to comprehend. We can only enter it piecemeal and appreciate it partially.)

The word *Christ* is understood to have a broad meaning: to be the manifestation of the Divine in creation. What we are considering here in particular is its manifestation in human form. The Christ-life is the life of God lived as a human person. St Paul wrote: 'The Christ is the visible image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1 v15) and elsewhere he speaks of 'the glory of the Christ who is the exact likeness of God' (2 Corinthians 4 v4). Dom Bede Griffiths referred to the Christ as 'the icon of God'.

In other words, Jesus is the Christ, but the Christ is the Divine however and wherever the Divine is made manifest.

The Christ is God in creation: the creative word, the Logos. So, John's gospel begins:

Before the world was created, the Word already existed; the Word was with God and the Word was God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through the Word God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without Him. The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to all humanity' (1 v4).

The Word, the Christ, is God in the role of continuing creator, holding all things in being.

For us as human beings, the Christ can never be totally known on Earth because to see Christ would amount to 'seeing the Father' (John 14 v9), to comprehend the Godhead. Many human beings think of God in human terms. Our limited human perception of the Christ we may call 'the Christ myth'. (A myth is not a non-reality, but rather the expression, through image or story, of a truth which is beyond our total comprehension, beyond verbal description.)

For us the highest expression of the Christ myth is in human form. It expresses the archetypal image of the fully mature human being: the person as God-like as it is possible for a human being to become - that ideal person who, in our deepest selves, we all aspire to become. So there are many manifestations of the Christ myth. Indeed, every one of us, whether recognising it or not, is to a greater or lesser extent, at different times, no doubt, an image, a reflection of the Christ: an embodiment of the Christ. This recognition came to St Paul: 'It is no longer I who live but it is the Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2 v20) and elsewhere he writes: 'The secret is that Christ is in you, which means that you will share in the glory of God' (Colossians 1 v27). There are not many Christs but only the one Christ and many manifestations of that one Christ.

The manifestation of the Christ with which Christians are most familiar is

in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth. We think of him as the most complete, the most God-like, most God-filled human being. While the Christ pre-existed the Universe, Jesus of Nazareth did not. He 'dwelt among us' in one short period of human history. While Jesus lived in Palestine - supposedly for some thirty years - there was not an absence of the Christ within the Godhead during that period! The pre-existent Christ is in the Godhead eternally, without interruption, what we name the Son, the second Person of the Trinity.

Following John's gospel, Christian tradition speaks of Jesus' coming as the 'Incarnation', meaning that the person of Jesus as the Christ pre-existed time. However, in an evolutionary perspective, the very first human beings - those primates which evolved into creatures with which we can identify - were the first creatures to develop a self-reflective consciousness, and consequently the first to have the potential to recognise the Divine in nature. In this sense we can say they were the first Incarnation of the Christ. The Jesus event, a million or more years later, was the achievement of humanity reaching its incarnational maturity. Jesus was not a being different in kind from us, launched into our world from some heavenly abode, but a product like us of the evolutionary process, which is why we can speak of the Jesus event as a human achievement. And yet, 2000 years later, the rest of us are still striving to evolve to the heights of the Christ myth.

8. The Christ in Us

Make your home in me [Jesus] as I make mine in you. John 14 v4

Surely you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives within you.

I Corinthians 3 v16

....That Christ may live in your hearts. You are filled with the utter fullness of God.

Ephesians 3 v15-21

Jesus Christ became what we are that we might become what he himself is. St Irenaeus

The person of Jesus is more than a model of what we might become. In Christian terminology, 'Christ' means the anointed one, the specially chosen of God, and called Messiah, Saviour. Jesus, by his being the very fulfilment of the archetypal human being, breaks through the barriers of human limitation and thereby empowers us to follow in the same 'Way'. He was so completely for others, living entirely for the Divine Other, that the Christ nature within him was made manifest to full capacity. The powers he is reported to have exercised - physical healing, spiritual healing, power over nature and material things - he was able to do, not because he was God, but because he was a fully evolved human being 'reaching to the very height of the Christ's full stature' (Ephesians 4 v13). Luke says: 'The power of the Spirit was with him' (4 v14). He is the New Adam, in that he is the first to break through to a new level of consciousness, into the next evolutionary step for humanity. Jesus promised us; 'Whoever believes in me will do what I do - yes, he will do even greater things' (John 14 v12). The Kingdom message of Jesus - the very kernel of his teaching - supposes that humanity is, through him, evolving into a new consciousness, a fuller life. 'I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness', said Jesus (John 10 v10). The Christ, acting in the world as creative energy, initiates our evolution as creatures of the Spirit. 'If Christ lives in you, the Spirit is life for you' (Romans 8 v10). The Spirit is always the Spirit of the Christ (1 Peter 1 v11).

What we call the resurrection of Jesus is the symbol of the newly constituted human creature: that state which humanity will evolve into. Just as at our death we shed our human body as being no longer required, so after his death Jesus no longer required his human body, except in a form by which to make known to his disciples that he still lived, though in a higher form of life. Thus his resurrected 'body' had different properties from his physical body.

If at some future date archaeologists found the remains of a body in a Jerusalem tomb that could be identified as that of Jesus of Nazareth, it would not make the slightest difference to belief in the resurrection of Jesus as the Christ.

Before Jesus' death and resurrection his disciples saw only the humanity of Jesus. John relates how after Jesus' death they had gone back to Galilee to resume their old occupation as commercial fishermen. They were completely shattered. When Jesus first addressed them on the lakeshore they did not recognise him. Later, before eating breakfast with him 'none of the disciples dares to ask him "who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.' (John 21 v12)

After the apostles received the Spirit of Jesus at Pentecost, their eyes were opened to see, not only Jesus as the Christ, but themselves empowered by that same Spirit. They became a vastly different set of people from those that had fled to Galilee.

We who live in post-Pentecost times need to be aware how Jesus as the

risen Christ is present in our world today. 'We are partakers in divine nature', wrote Peter (2 Peter 1 v4). Clement of Alexandria (one of the fathers of the early Church) elaborates on Peter's idea: 'The Logos of God has become human so that you might learn from a human being how a human being may become divine.'

In the Eucharist we celebrate one of the modes of the presence of the Christ, under the forms of bread and wine, without identifying it with the historical, biological body and blood of the human Jesus. We acknowledge that we form 'the

body of Christ' (Ephesians 1 v23) and are called 'to build up the body of Christ' (Ephesians 4 v12).

As St Paul could acknowledge, we too are Christed, are reflections of the Divine and, because we have an appreciation of being sharers in Divine Life, we, like Jesus, have the potential to call on the divine energies which are dormant within us all. A Christian lives with that awareness of being a manifestation of the Christ.

9. The Second Coming – Creating the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth

I shall put a new heart and a new spirit into you. Ezekiel 36 v26

You have been born again, not in a physical but in a spiritual way. I Peter 1 v23

If anyone is united to Christ, there is a new creation. II Corinthians 5 v17

There is a lot of discussion to day as to what is meant by The Second Coming. It is sometimes believed that we are to expect Jesus the Christ to appear among us with a great fan-fare of angelic trumpets, announcing the final judgement. This has been part of the Church's teaching from early days, based on Mathew's Gospel (25 v31-46)

At the time of Jesus there was a lot of messianic expectancy among the Jewish people. They were looking forward to being delivered from Roman domination by a descendent of David. At the time of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey there was the expectation that he would be that Messiah. It was not to be.

Many early Christians, however, expected the end time to arrive not long after the Ascension. St Paul was an ardent believer in the imminent return of Christ, as is clear in his first letter to the Thessalonians (Ch.5) – probably the very first part of our New Testament to be written – then he had to write to them again (2.Thess.v2) to say that they should not expect it yet. In Peter's second letter he speaks of those who scoff at Christians because the Christ was promised but had not yet come (3 v3-4).

In John's gospel, while Jesus is speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper he promises: "When I go you will not be left alone: I will come back to you" (14 v18), but this is expressed in the form of his Spirit whom Jesus will ask the Father to send (14 v16). "He is the Spirit who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him because he remains with you and is in you". (14 v17). "When that day comes you

will know that I am in my Father and that you are in me, just as I am in you". (14 v20). From this we see, according to John's understanding, that Jesus was not speaking of some event at the end of time – nor indeed of an imminent end of the world – but rather by his Second Coming he meant the presence of his Spirit in the Christian community and in each of its members who now live the Christ life, till the end of time. He is speaking of our manifesting our divinity. Some people describe this as achieving Christ Consciousness.

As has been spoken of in an earlier section, increasing numbers of people are learning to meditate. This process of 'listening to God' is very often the way we come to feel, in our everyday lives, a closer connection with the Divine or, in the language of the previous paragraph, we achieve a 'Christ Consciousness'. For many, however, increased attunement with God can bring certain disturbance as we cannot become more conscious of God if we are not able first to become more aware of ourselves and those psychological 'blocks' which trip us in our path. Many call this 'opening to God' a Spiritual Journey because it does not happen in just a few sessions of silent meditation, it can take a very long time. For some it is helpful to seek a Spiritual Adviser to assist on this journey, others find some form of counselling through such paths as Ignation Retreats. Others, however, as did the disciples at Pentecost or the incident of St Paul, may have an immediate 'Emmaus Experience'.

For many today the Second Coming is seen in terms of the personal embodiment of the Christ Spirit within.

10 A Group Vision Statement

We suggest that at this final gathering, the group drafts a Vision Statement, based on the journey the participants have made together and what they believe is emerging for the Christian Community of the future. This, in such a way that it can be owned by the group.

A suggested reading list for further exploration

John Shelby Spong: *Jesus for the non-religious* Harper Collins 2007. hb ISBN: 978-0-06-076207-0 or ISBN-10: 0-06-076207-1

Marcus J Borg: *The Heart of Christianity (Rediscovering a Life of Faith)* 2004

Marcus J Borg: *Reading the Bible again for the First Time*, Harper Collins. 2002

Richard Rohr: Commended but no books reviewed personally. See Amazon etc. Greenbelt tapes from <http://www.greenbelt.org.uk/?a=63>

Thomas Moore: *The Soul's Religion* Harper Collins /Bantam 2002/3. 0 553 81527 X

Thomas Moore: *Writing in the Sand: Jesus, Spirituality and the Soul of the Gospels* Hay House 2009 ISBN 1848500945 (Available Cygnus <http://www.cygnus-books.co.uk>)

Matthew Fox: *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Harper & Row, San Francisco. 1990

Diarmuid O Murchu: *Reclaiming Spirituality* 1998 Crossroads

Anthony de Mello SJ: *Sadhana: A Way to God - a creative series of exercises on entering into silence, using breathing techniques, body prayer, Ignatian contemplation*

David Bolton: *Who on EARTH was JESUS?* (Sub titled: *The Modern Quest of the Jesus of History*) O Books 2008.

Jack Kornfield: *Meditation for Beginners* (written from a Buddhist point of view) Bantam Books, also available through Cygnus <http://www.cygnus-books.co.uk>

A more extensive list of recommended books can be found on the CANA website.

<http://www.christiansawakening.org/PDFs/100215%20BOOKLIST.pdf>

2012 Easter Gathering

Saturday April 7th to Tuesday April 10th

Over Easter in 2012 the Findhorn Community, near Forres in Scotland, are hosting a gathering. The subject will be:

Into Christ Consciousness

As one of the supporting organisations CANA invite you to consider joining this major event which hopes to draw people from different spiritual backgrounds from around the world.

See our website <http://www.christiansawakening.org> for further details as they become available.

There are A5 books available from CANA Publications, 102 Church Road, Steep GU32 2DD at a cost of £2 including postage. Cheque made out to CANA