

WHY IS THE CHURCH NOT FACING UP TO THE SPIRITUALITY REVOLUTION?

Adrian B Smith

Many CANA members will be aware that I am thoroughly convinced that humanity is making an evolutionary shift into a new consciousness. Already in 1936 Teilhard de Chardin wrote:

We now have to accept it as proven that mankind has just entered into what is probably the most extensive period of transformation it has known since its Birth... Today something is happening to the whole structure of human consciousness: a fresh kind life is beginning to appear. (Science and Christ)

The horrors our world is experiencing today are the birth pangs of this transformation. Among the many signs of this upheaval, from a Christian perspective, is what is being named a “Spirituality Revolution”. Four books on this phenomenon have been published recently*.

No one can deny the words of the late religious broadcaster, Gerald Priestland: “Our western world is becoming less and less religious but more and more spiritual”. If evidence were required one need only to compare the dwindling number of people filling church pews with the increasing length of the bookshelves marked ‘Body, Mind & Spirit’ in our bookshops.

Today’s common usage of the word ‘spirituality’ is woolly indeed. Few words in the English language convey such a wide variety of meanings to such a wide variety of people. There is the traditional Christian use to describe a particular path towards God, as for example, Franciscan, Dominican or Ignatian spirituality. To some, spirituality is synonymous with spiritualism. To many, it conveys such practices as Reiki, Eastern meditation, Tai-Chi, hugging trees, using crystals and so much more. It has become a brand name for the search for meaning, for values, for transcendence. Many of these practices would be labelled ‘New Age’ – and consequently dismissed as fads. But their increasing popularity reveals two things. First, that more people are seeking some way of giving their lives a meaning beyond the material and, further, that they feel drawn to something beyond, greater than themselves, which some would name ‘God’. Secondly, that people are not finding the answers they seek to their faith questions, nor an attractive path to follow, in the institutional Church, of whatever denomination. The words and explanations of Christian belief with which they are presented belong to a past age and not to the world, and indeed the Universe, as we experience and know it today. Their meeting with and being edified by people of other Faiths in our midst has shattered the doctrine that the Church possesses the sole Truth.

The spiritual path these people are taking today is causing them to depart from the religious roots of their childhood – if, indeed, such ever existed. They are turning to a pick-and-mix programme, especially towards the mystical traditions of other religions.

I am making no value judgements about this spirituality revolution, but simply observing what is happening around us. Why is it that Church leaders seem quite unaware of the phenomenon or ignore it as a passing fashion? As I travel round England visiting Catholic parishes I find that the great majority of priests are so overwhelmed by their duties to their parishioners – mostly to the tiny percentage of the population who are regular church-goers – that they have little idea of the spiritual temperature of the ‘people out there’. If the thrust of evangelisation is getting the ‘lapsed’ back into church, what ‘Good News’ do we have to offer the vast number of spiritual seekers who feel that ‘church’ has no relevance to their lives? Are we afraid of parting from the theological language in which our beliefs are couched, to speak to people in the language of their everyday concerns? How many people in the supermarket are excited by the word ‘Redemption’? Do we expect people – the young especially – to embrace the culture of our liturgical prayers, our Victorian hymns and our 4th century Creeds? Why are we not addressing them in their cultural term which, after all, is our own out-of-church day-to-day culture?

Is there a meeting point or have we to move radically, such that we shift from the

prevailing Church paradigm to quite another? For example, a shift from traditional supernatural theism (belief in an interventionist God who operates from outside/above creation) to a panentheistic God who operates from within creation? Is that even a possibility? It is challenging. But surely no more challenging than the paradigm shift made by Jesus in turning the prevailing religious values of his own people upside-down.

How do we take the first steps in a new direction? By listening and looking: being aware, noticing, analysing what is going on in the spirituality revolution. It appears to have six characteristics. 1. It acknowledges that there is the Other, the Greater, the Transcendent, the Great Omnipotent Divinity (abbreviated as G.O.D). 2. This Other attracts people towards their higher potential, to become more, to achieve more, to grow. 3. It embodies spiritual values: compassion, forgiveness, peace, etc. 4. It recognises the interrelatedness, interdependence of everything in creation, ourselves included. It has an ecological component, named Eco-spirituality. 5. It recognises our shadow side (and in this it differs from the New Age scene). 6. It feels the need to be expressed in some form of ritual (notice the inclusion of the word in “spi-ritual-ity”) which might be meditating before a Buddha statue, sacred dance, placing candles round the bath.

All this is happening against the background of ever accelerating change. We notice the disappearance of a sense of tradition with the breakdown of traditional, stable society. People are seeking a meaning in life, ideals to live by. Has life a purpose other than that which we give it? Has it a meaning other than that drawn from a faith tradition?

Put simply, the popular contemporary view is that spirituality is seen as holistic, non-dogmatic, self-improving and therefore good, while religion is viewed as out-dated, irrelevant, conflict-causing and therefore bad! What are we prepared to do about that?

Robert Forman. *Grassroots Spirituality: What it is, Why it is here, Where it is going?* Imprint Academic. Exeter. 2004

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William Bloom. *Soulutions: The Holistic Manifest.* Hay House UK. 2004

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Adrian Smith – Autumn 2006