Spirituality of the Unchurched

Lecture given to ‘Affirming Catholicism’ 15th May 2003

4 sections:

1. Definition of spirituality, so that you can know where I come from.

2. Significance of spirituality and spirituality of the Unchurched.

3. Lessons to be learnt from the spirituality of the Unchurched.

4. Relationship between religion and spirituality.

1. Spirituality – Towards a Definition.

Spirituality is a word commonly used but ill-defined. It is not uncommon to hear people speak of spirituality, but it is less common to hear a focused understanding of its meaning. Spirituality is a comparatively modern word and the great saints would not have recognised it. In its earlier use, spiritualities (in the plural) referred to spiritual jurisdiction over against temporal jurisdiction and so one hears of the ‘lords spiritual’ (bishops, archbishops and prelates) who were often opposed to the ‘lords temporal’ (barons, kings and queens). The spiritual life came to be associated with interior religion and the devotional practices used to foster it. As such, the spiritual life was sometimes considered unsuitable for lay Christians. In the nineteenth century spirituality came to describe a field of study traditionally known as ascetical theology or mystical prayer. The twentieth century saw a more active meaning well summed up by Thomas Merton in Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander:

A point of pure truth, [at the centre of our being] a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our mind or the brutalities of our own will. ¹

This points to a part of being human which is ultimately under the control of God if human beings allow that to happen. It goes back to the heart of the teaching of Ignatius of Loyola who encouraged his followers to live from the inside outwards. In other words, he wanted them to be in touch with this ‘point of pure truth’ which should direct all that they thought and did. To reach this kind of awareness would be rare, but its sharpness makes it clear where spirituality is integrated into humanity. It also makes apparent the power and potential of spirituality.

Fifty years ago, spirituality would have been most naturally associated with Christianity; if the word ‘spirituality’ was mentioned, there would have been a general assumption that the speaker was referring to Christian spirituality. However, greater awareness and study of other religions has made it natural to think in terms of other spiritualities such as Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu, recognising that different belief systems generate different spiritualities. A further development has resulted in spirituality being viewed separately from religion, as can be seen in the 1988 Education Reform Act which refers to a spiritual education which implicitly suggests a spirituality independent of religion. Not only can spirituality be separated from religion but it is often understood in more positive ways than religion: spirituality is associated with wholeness and mystery whereas religion is associated with churches, ceremonies and, in a more negative way, with boredom and narrow-
mindedness. In other words, spirituality is not regarded as being confined to the world of church-going but is part of what it is to be human.

2. The Significance of Spirituality and Spirituality of the Unchurched.

Sociologist Grace Davie has written a book entitled Religion in Britain Since 1945 has, as its subtitle, a phrase which has become better known than the original title of the book, namely Believing Without Belonging. Davie argues her case against a background of a relatively low church attendance while a high percentage of the population still maintains belief in God. These figures have been vindicated in the 2001 census when 71.7% of the population of the UK indicated that they were Christian. The kind of God in which people believe may be vague, and becomes even vaguer the further one is removed from regular church attendance, but nevertheless, there is definite belief. Davie epitomises this with a quotation from a survey in Islington in the late 1960s. One respondent, when asked, 'Do you believe in God?' replied, 'Yes.' But when pushed further and asked 'Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth?' replied, 'No, just the ordinary one.' One of the main theses of her book is that many people still believe, but not so many still wish to belong to the institutions which promote and maintain orthodox belief. [In a recent deanery visit, three parishes in one day independently mentioned a spiritual hunger which they had identified.] In subsequent books, Davie develops these arguments drawing out the weight of opinion against those who would maintain that European society is becoming secular. Europe is as religious as it has always been, but its religiosity is expressed differently. Davie also advocates French sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger who maintains that it is not rationality that makes modern societies less religious but rather they are less capable of maintaining the memory which lies at the centre of religion – an argument for the regular praying of the faithful few. These sociological arguments give support to the contention that spirituality is not a concept germane simply to the religious, but to humanity as a whole.

Psychiatry, originally the arch-enemy of religion and spirituality, is becoming increasingly interested in the field of spirituality. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has a well-supported interest group on spirituality which was set up in 1999. The history of suspicion between psychiatry and religion as well as the seeds for a new, more fruitful relationship are apparent in the group’s description of its aims:

The meetings are designed to enable colleagues to investigate and share without fear of censure [my italics] the relevance of spirituality to clinical practice. The Special Interest Group aims to contribute a framework of ideas of general interest to the College, stimulating discussion and promoting an integrative approach to mental health care. For patients, there is the need to help the service user feel supported in being able to bring spiritual concerns to the fore.

There is an attempt to define spirituality in a broad way as ‘the essentially human, personal and interpersonal dimension, which integrates and transcends the cultural, religious, psychological, social and emotional aspects of the person’ or more specifically ‘concerned with soul or spirit.'
In an article entitled ‘God’s Place in Psychiatry – Spirituality in Psychiatric Education and Training’, Robert M. Lawrence, an Old Age Psychiatrist, argues that there is a place for spirituality in psychiatric training. He begins by recognising the traditional chasm between psychiatry and religion resulting from eminent psychiatrists’ view of religion as a sign of emotional imbalance, psychosis and regression of the ego. He goes on to suggest, tentatively, that spirituality ‘encompasses a universal characteristic of the human mind’ enabling the experience of transcendence. This experience of transcendence had been neglected, perhaps even rejected, in the past and this enabled psychiatry to be used as a social and political tool in exerting control over people and nations. Evidence indicates that recognising and engaging with spirituality has helped in many medical, surgical and psychiatric conditions. Lawrence gives an example of an elderly patient, a regular church attender, who became psychotic in old age. She became paranoid and restless, knocking at her neighbour’s door any time of the day or night. Finally, she was admitted to hospital under a section of the Mental Health Act. In hospital, her condition deteriorated and she required sedation. Her local priest, whom she recognised, came to see her, and the effect on her was so dramatic that she did not require sedation that evening. She was visited regularly by clergy and attended church, accompanied by a nurse, whenever possible. These actions effectively managed her behaviour. There are many similar examples of elderly people suffering from dementia, often unable to speak or reason, who can recite psalms or services or who can enact religious rituals perfectly. The thrust of these pleas is that psychiatry should take seriously ‘possible’ dimensions of spirituality within oneself and others. In the light of the history of animosity between psychiatry and religion, the tentativeness in these suggestions is understandable. However, another branch of science proves empirically that spirituality is part of humanity. Alister Hardy and David Hay, have become associated with arguments from the perspective of zoology, and it is to these that we now turn.

Alister Hardy, one time professor of Zoology at Oxford University, maintained that religious experience is part of the human make-up and he pointed to an evolutionary mechanism which explained, from a biological perspective, the emergence of spiritual awareness in human beings. David Hay, also a zoologist, has maintained and developed further Hardy’s central arguments. Through his research, in which he has questioned hundreds of people, Hay has discovered a link between spirituality and ethics. Those whom he has interviewed have indicated that their spiritual experiences, which have made them look beyond themselves, have changed their attitude. One respondent said, ‘I now have far more respect for my physical surroundings as well as fellow humans…..I don’t think they were important to me before.’

Missiological research has reached similar conclusions. Roger Edrington interviewed fifty ‘working class men’ in Birmingham to discover whether they believed in God and if they did, the nature of that belief. Edrington discovered that all but a handful did have a belief, the majority prayed, though they were reluctant to tell anybody about this (one even admitted to using the privacy of the toilet to pray) because they thought that their way of praying did not fit with conventional ways advocated by the Church which none of them attended. When he asked about images of Christ, he discovered that some were not the images which the church traditionally promotes, but were drawn from his respondents’ experiences. One compared Christ to an officer he saw who went to rescue a wounded soldier when under fire. The officer carried the man to safety on his back: this was how the respondent saw Christ, as a rescuer when life became difficult. Others indicated that their preferred means of communicating about profound issues was not verbal and that, as ‘working class men’, they best knew how to communicate using their hands. This is a significant comment for churches who tend to use written and spoken language (in which
people from particular socio-economic back-grounds would feel more at home) as their primary means of communicating about God.

3. Lessons to be learnt from the spirituality of the Unchurched.

What can be learnt from this non-religious spirituality (or, in David Hay’s phrase, ‘spirituality of the unchurched’)?

1. First, the significance of the fact that spirituality does not simply belong to the religious but is part of what is means to be human. In an article in the *Yorkshire Post* following the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, correspondent Michael Brown reflects on the great change of attitude towards the Church in the course of seven days. He draws on a speech by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, on September 5th in which he suggests that Christianity is almost vanquished in Britain. Brown contrasts these comments with the aftermath of September 11th when people flock to churches in the United States and across Europe to pray for those struck down by the disaster and for their distraught relatives. Brown goes on to write:

   ….. two things seem fairly certain, all the same. One is that the thousands now flocking to the churches to pray - people who would normally never be seen in church - are, whether they know it or not, doing and saying something which great saints and mystics have done and said through the ages. It is roughly this: "Oh God, I do not believe. Oh God, I do not even want to believe. But oh, dear God, at this dreadful time I do want to believe". And the other thing: that the churches have a tremendous opportunity here to tap into this hazy and vaguely spiritual way of thinking about things and that if they do not grasp that opportunity their sin of omission will be grievous indeed.

It may well be that the church is being seen and used as a ‘holy place’ rather than the place where Christians gather for worship, but, as Brown hints, there is important common ground here.

There are striking similarities between the accounts of spiritual experiences of the saints and those who do not necessarily have connections with the church. For example, one person describes a spiritual experience in this way:

   I was lying in a field under a tree thinking rather deeply of love and the joy it brings. Suddenly I became aware of myself as being a leaf hanging on that tree. All materialism disappeared completely, and I felt like a torch burning in the darkness. I seemed to be filled with the rays of the sun. This experience lasted for about three minutes. It is interesting to note that my behaviour pattern has changed since this experience. I feel a lot more peaceful and happier within myself, and I look upon life as being a spiritual evolution within a material body.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim and anthropologist R.R.Marrett reflect on the connection between spiritual experience and personal change recognising it within the religious and the non-religious. In *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* Durkheim writes:

   The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man [sic] who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is
stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them. It is as though he were raised above the miseries of the world, because he is raised above his condition as a mere man…..In fact, whoever has really practised a religion knows very well that it is the cult which gives rise to these impressions of joy, of interior peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm which are, for the believer, an experimental proof of his beliefs.

Marrett writes of the person who is not necessarily a believer:

It is the common experience of man that he can draw on a power that makes for, and in its most typical form wills, righteousness, the sole condition being that a certain fear, a certain shyness and humility, accompany the effort so to do. That such a universal belief exists amongst all mankind, and that it is no less universally helpful in the highest degree, is the abiding impression left on my mind by the study of religion in its historico-scientific aspect.  

2. This sharing of spirituality provides Christians with fellow pilgrims on a number of issues:

i) The ethical issues of which the spiritual experience brings greater awareness are issues important to Christianity, such as care for the marginalized, for the environment and critical questions about the materialism of western society.

ii) The awareness of and commitment to these wider issues is a direct challenge to western individualism with its emphasis on possessiveness. If spirituality is part of the human make-up, then deep within humanity will lurk the seeds for the communal.

iii) The challenge to individualism. In her work with children, Rebecca Nye identifies ‘relational consciousness’ which is an innate level of consciousness or perceptiveness expressed in conversation about how the child related to things, people and God, all of whom are outside, beyond, ‘other than’ the child. Nye argues that this ‘relational consciousness’ is a common thread tying together the spirituality of the children with whom she is in dialogue. Hay identifies this as ‘the biological precursor of both spirituality and ethics’ and sees relational consciousness as another name for what Alister Hardy described as natural awareness. This would support the challenge to western individualism.

iv) Finally, this understanding of spirituality fires another torpedo at the already heavily besieged concept of secularism which is also under attack from Grace Davie and other prominent sociologists. It is also a critique of a world-view, stemming from the Enlightenment, which endeavours to construct a view of society which takes no account of the spiritual. The long-held belief that third world countries, which display a vibrant spirituality, will, on becoming industrialized and computerised, also become secularised, is becoming discredited.

3. Another question which arises is the relationship between the images of God promoted by the Church itself and those articulated by those beyond the walls. The image of Jesus Christ articulated above by one of Edrington’s ‘working men’ reflects the reality of his
experience. This image is not traditional and yet it will speak to the experience of many who turn to God at times of difficulty and distress.

4. The final point that needs to be made is that if spirituality is not simply an optional part of humanity but an integral part, then this has implications for an understanding of what a human person is. It raises significant anthropological questions. The traditional and static understanding of a human being as body, mind and spirit is no longer adequate. A new definition would need to incorporate that the belief that spirituality is integral to human identity and in so doing it needs to point to the fact that human spirituality provides some connection to all of humanity. A human being is not an individual, but a person in relationship with others.

4. Relationship between religion and spirituality.

There is a perception that many consider spirituality to be wholesome and mysterious and religion to be boring and narrow minded, but there is a danger that spirituality without religion could be like a boat without an anchor. Religion, which is a structured system of beliefs, can harness spiritual energy making sure that it is used creatively, constructively and, when appropriate, in an orderly way. At its best, religion can apply the critique which will enable a fruitful dialogue with tradition, prevent spirituality from repeating past errors and being controlled and manipulated by a minority. In addition, religion can, perhaps in a more concrete way than spirituality, underline the inter-relatedness of humanity, thereby reinforcing the significance of the communal. Religion as a repository of collected and reflected spiritualities, both past and present, can connect the contemporary believer with brothers and sisters, both living and departed, who have been undertaking a similar search.

At its worst, religion can stamp out the vitality of the Spirit by only authenticating the workings of the Spirit in the past. At its worst, religion can be used by minority interests to justify, control and manipulate. Christianity began its journey as a spiritual child of Judaism. It remained within Judaism until its leaders felt that it could no longer continue in the spirit of its founder and at the same time remain within the Jewish fold, and so it began independent journeys. As this new movement grew and expanded across the world, it formed structures and formulated rules and traditions, thereby growing into what is recognised as a religion. However, the history of the Christian church is littered with examples of groups who have believed that the religious establishment has not listened to them or acknowledged the way in which the Spirit has been at work within them. The Great Schism between East and West in the eleventh century, the formation of the Methodist Societies in the eighteenth century and the rise of Black Pentecostalism as a result of the Azusa Street revival in Chicago in the early twentieth century are examples of groups of Christians considering themselves culturally and spiritually alienated by their parent religious bodies and forming new bodies as a result of their experiences. Indeed, all religious bodies need to be reformed constantly, remaining open to the diversity of the ways of the Spirit and it is primarily from beyond their walls that the sources of life and reformation are to be found. If a religious body is unwilling to accept this, then one consequence will be the plundering of treasures by those from outside. Folk Religion is a good example of this.

Accordingly, there needs to be an open dialogue between religion and spirituality, between Christianity and new spiritualities, and this dialogue needs to be constructed in such a way that the bulk of the older does not overwhelm the younger and the vitality of the younger does not ignore the older. There is a need to balance vulnerability and openness with confident convictions. Can the two live together? We tend to go for one or the other. It is
the role of the Church to provide the environment in which such a dialogue can take place. This is not a new challenge faced by the Church, but it has to be faced afresh each time the Spirit interrogates it about a new issue.

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4 Davie's later book, Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.10, quotes a figure of 71% of the population who believe in God.
5 Religion in Britain Since 1945, p.79.
7 See http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/college/sig/spirit/index.htm
8 Ibid.
9 This article is to be found on the web-site of the Royal College of Psychiatrists http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/college/sig/spirit/news8/four.pdf.
11 Ibid. p.17.
12 See Roger Edrington, Everyday Men - Living in a Climate of Unbelief, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987, for details of this fascinating study.
14 For a comprehensive collection of accounts see the web site of the Alister Hardy Society, The Religious Experience Research Centre, University of Wales, Lampeter. www.alisterhardytrust.org.uk.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid. p.113 ff, esp. p.118.