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# Spirituality on our Doorstep

*by Martin Robinson*

Appropriately enough, given the subject, these words were written while at a retreat centre. One of the guests at the centre was an American who had surfed the Internet to locate retreat centres in Britain before travelling to the United Kingdom. She told me that she had been amazed at the large number of centres posted on the Internet and even more surprised to discover many more centres once she had arrived. There is little doubt that retreat centres of various kinds have undergone an enormous renewal in recent years. Such a renewal is evidence of a wider interest in spirituality both across the denominations but also in the culture generally. There are many indicators which suggest that an interest in spirituality is a growing and profound theme across western culture in the closing years of the second millennium.

It would be all too easy for Christians to believe that this manifestation of interest in spiritual matters represents a sure sign that more favourable days await the church in the West following years of decline.

Such an easy conclusion is potentially seriously misplaced. Although it may be difficult for many Christians to fathom, spiritual desire and interest in institutional Christianity are not necessarily connected.

Why should this be? After all, receptivity to spiritual matters and the growth of the Church is certainly synonymous in many parts of our contemporary world and has been true during the history of the Church in the West. The reasons for this strange phenomenon are complex and cannot be fully addressed in these few words. Much of the reason lies in the difficult relationship that Christianity has endured during the period that many have called "modernity". Suffice it to say that there is as much yearning for spiritual depth in the Church as outside of it. In other words, we cannot afford to take the naïve and potentially arrogant view that Christian congregations have the spiritual answers that others are seeking. Even more sobering is the reality that answers to the spiritual quest of many are emerging in the culture and some in the

Church are looking to answers outside the Church and not in it.

The knowledge that this is so has caused many Christians to look with great suspicion on the whole subject of spirituality rather than believing that God might be directing us to look more sympathetically at that which is emerging around us. While it is certainly true that many who seek spiritual sustenance tend either to look to Eastern traditions or to supposedly ancient pagan traditions such as the druids, it is nevertheless true that there are great traditions of spirituality within Christianity which have yet to be recovered by the contemporary Church.

The riches of the desert fathers, of Orthodoxy itself, of medieval mystics and of Ignatian spirituality are being taken more seriously by many Christians across a wide range of churchmanship. More controversially, the spirituality of the Celtic saints has also attracted attention particularly through the activities of the Iona community in Scotland and a number of communities loosely connected with the ancient

centre of English Celtic Christianity at Holy Isle.

Why should an exploration of Celtic Christianity be at all controversial? The simple fact is that some have viewed the recent interest in all things Celtic as at best a romantic delusion and at worst the creation of a Celtic industry that has no real connection with an authentic past. It is all too easy to read into the past what we want to find and so to engage in wishful reconstruction. The process of romanticising the Celtic church has tended to go far beyond an attempt merely to recover ancient forms of prayer. It has tended to encourage a rather vague mysticism which does not really seek to recreate an older Celtic tradition so much as to press it into the service of what the writer Meek has called a "Celtic New Religious Movement".

The core contention of such a tendency is that the Celtic church is an older and authentic version of a Christianity that we have lost and that needs now to be recovered. There are many versions of such a feeling – because "feeling" is what it is rather than an attempt at genuine historical research. But such misguided attempts to portray the Celts as anything from the first Christian Buddhists to early charismatics should not deter us from reflecting on lessons that we might learn. At least three lessons emerge.

First, the Celts seemed to combine a fervent spiritual life with a passion for mission to the point where these twin concerns could not really be separated. All too often mission and spirituality have become separate in the modern Church. It is almost as if we are asked to choose between an activist approach to mission and a contemplative approach to spirituality. The Celts made no such separation.

Second, the encounter with paganism was both sympathetic and yet uncompromising. There is no record of any pagan being burnt at the stake or any Celtic saint being physically martyred (although St Martin of Tours came close to both). The winning of an earlier pagan culture to the cause of Christ seems to have been accomplished in an

astonishingly persuasive manner as compared with the coercive manner of some forms of missionary enterprise.

Third, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that the monastic communities which spearheaded the Celtic missionary movement were remarkably open to the entry of lay persons who would participate in the life of the community for a time. The close relationship between lay people and the monks who formed the religious communities was a critical ingredient in the creation of a movement. Christianity has not tended to grow explosively by producing better post-graduate education so much as inspiring the laity in the daily practise of their faith. The example of simple Celtic communities living close to the lives of those they sought to serve helped to produce just such a Church. Theirs was a spirituality which was not confined to the cloisters but could function equally well around hearth, well and workshop.

Is it possible for the contemporary western Church to develop an approach to spirituality that can renew the Church in such a way that we can speak effectively to the spiritual quest that we find in our culture? Such an attempt needs to be humble, recognising that we have much to learn from the questions of those outside of the Christian tradition.

Appropriating the riches of the past is never easy. It is never possible simply to copy the past, it must be properly contextualised.

The pages of this edition of *TransMission* attempt to speak about spirituality in a variety of ways. The intent is to place reflection on spirituality in a number of specific contexts recognising that spirituality can never exist in an abstract state. It has to be incarnated in forms that are accessible and usable.

Edward Bailey goes straight for the jugular and asks provocatively "What has spirituality to do with the Church?" while David Hay writes movingly of the spirituality he has found amongst the unchurched. We have included a contribution from a leader in the black churches, which some who have extensive contact with that community may

feel needs to be further explored.

There is a dilemma here. Is the medium that we offer in the pages of *TransMission* really appropriate to convey the contribution of black Christianity? Indeed, can we do justice to spirituality at all by writing about it as compared with entering into the experience? Perhaps Mark Earey's contribution on the lectionary represents one way of speaking both of word and spirit. Although such talk may not be fashionable now, the structure we bring to spiritual encounter will enable many to access that which can all too easily become rather esoteric and even gnostic.

Our aim has been for our book reviews to reflect the broader topic of spirituality at least to some extent. Amongst the book reviews is one of a book that I co-wrote, *Who Do You Think You Are?* The reviewer, Bryan Pettifer has rightly pointed out that there is no theological reflection in the book in relation to the issue of giftedness. Since the intended audience is a secular one the absence of theological reflection was deliberate. But I heartily accept the rebuke and freely acknowledge that there is a need for a book that approaches the same subject from a more overtly theological perspective.