

What has Spirituality got to do with the Church?

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by Edward Bailey

There has been a change in the public attitude towards the concept of spirituality. Now it is occurring in more obviously secular fields and “bursting out all over”. Why should the Church have the monopoly, asks Edward Bailey, and why do we find ourselves talking about spirituality at this time?

Once upon a time (when some of us were at school) we tended to assume that religion had a monopoly of spirituality, and the Church had a monopoly of religion. It was a surprisingly satisfactory arrangement. It gave church people a place in God's purpose; it gave secular-minded people permission to pass by on the other side; and it provided the rules of the game, for those who wanted to take part in matches between the two parties. If humans had a spirit, the Church had a mission; if they didn't, it didn't.

I remember a rare occasion when this “hidden” division of labour (this “cold” war) surfaced. As a novice in the world of education, I attended a lengthy conference of the New Education Fellowship. It was proposed to change its name to the World Education Fellowship. Rather out of the blue, or so it seemed to the younger males like me, came talk of something like “spiritual values”, mostly from older, female visionaries (with Quaker connections?). The memorable point was not which way the name was being changed, or which side introduced the “spiritual” as one of the Fellowship's aims, but the twofold response to the very mention of the word.

Paradoxical though the mixture may appear, the reaction combined an incomprehension (which was professed to be total), with a confessed fear, of what such a Trojan horse might produce. In other words, what was in fact understood by “spiritual” was very definitely not wanted.

Today, the “spiritual”, like Spring, “is bursting out all over”. The “spiritual” aim of education, which had seemed to be entombed in the 1944 Act, is now being monitored by OFSTED – at the behest of a government that was wedded to the market economy and monetarism. The “spiritual needs” of patients, once acknowledged by the hospice movement, are gradually being incorporated in the monitoring of healthcare, and hence in its provision and in training. But the process does not stop there – with the organisation of such obviously humane or humanitarian activities.

It is also occurring in the more obviously “secular” fields of “business”. The “culture” (ie. the relatively informal, yet corporate, spirituality) of different industries is recognised as necessitating higher pay, within the same organisation. A telecommunications plc can



employ an experienced communicator without any technical expertise simply to consider communication in its most general sense. The acknowledged need both to discern and to pay for the “charismatic” element in management suggests that the spiritual is now following the ethical as another aspect of a company's overall assets (or liabilities).

Attitude change

The change in the public attitude towards the concept of spirituality occurred in the 1970s. By the end of that decade, publishing houses started producing series of Classics in Western Spirituality (which included North American native traditions) and New Agers at Glastonbury spoke of “spirituality” in the optimistic way their parents or grandparents had spoken of science. Similar changes had occurred, for instance, when the Labour Party's posters described it as “the Party with a Soul”, in the 1974 election; when *Man, Myth and Magic* appeared in weekly installments on station bookstalls in 1968–9; and when “pastoral care” became a recognised part of teachers' (not just chaplains') job-descriptions, in the late 1960s.

The significant, common element in all these changes is that the terms (pastoral, myth, spiritual) were no longer seen as purely religious. The religious was being drawn upon as the type-case of what it means to be human. For such verbal changes, and the attitudinal changes they express, were inevitably part and parcel of wider changes, in general praxis. These consisted of both a subtraction and an addition.

The decline was in the influence of organised religion. The first ten years after the 1939–45 war in this country had seemed like a continuation of the two inter-war decades, which themselves had looked like an extension of the Edwardian development of those Victorian days that had seen, religiously, a revival of the medieval Church. It saw its mission in terms of public worship, private prayer, and individual charity; as epitomised in churches, schools, and hospitals. By reason of its antique pedigree and continuing vitality, it could still hope to retain a certain cultural hegemony. But by the 1960s, some of those church people who saw the social decline most clearly were predicting the total secularisation of society.

If their conceptualisation was (not surprisingly) somewhat confused and confusing, they were correct in anticipating a time (which occurred in the 1970s) when even members of the welfare agencies (education, health, social services) would feel sufficiently independent of “the Church”, to use its concepts without fear of being labelled as personally or imperialistically “religious”. The way was open for “spirituality” to get out from under the Church’s skirts. Younger entrants, indeed, who were free from the Oedipus complexes of their elders, “did not so much as know” that (western) religion was even particularly concerned with spirituality.

This “great new fact of our time” (to borrow Temple’s description of the old ecumenical movement) can be described in general abstractions as a shift from the (self-styled) rational to the emotional, from the intellectual to the intuitive, from the mechanical to the mythical,

from formula to fable. The significance of this addition is registered in the suggestion that a “post-modern” has come into being (sometimes replacing) the “modern” of yesteryear. This reluctance to designate it with any single adjective may be thought only proper at this stage; but one might notice a shift from the social to the cultural (as one notices in the sub-title of this journal itself).

If we were to epitomise this shift in a story, then we could point to the reaction to the life and death of the Princess of Wales (not forgetting its quantitative and qualitative limitations). But we could equally well point to myriads of lesser examples, of occasions when we are united in a global communion, even as we continue to be isolated in a local loneliness. With spirituality, as with sexuality: what was both discreet (under wraps) and discrete (socially separate), is now both “up-front” and recognised as widespread (“public”, in both senses). They are seen as neither more nor less than two dimensions of the human species. The very fact that we can once again posit universal truths by telling stories, “says it all”.

Renewed interest

Churches and church members may be tempted to ignore the renewed interest in spirituality, either because they’ve “been through it all before” (with Gnosticism, for instance), or because they’re busy (with their own problems, or those of the “real world”). They may also fear to appear didactic, or judgmental. Yet they are (among those who are) called to discern the spirits, and indeed to discern the Spirit. Of course they will be judged by their judgements; but the Lord can make something of any faith, except our “bad faith”. So we can offer contributions to the discussion.

First, we can agree that the “spiritual” dimension, of the human or of the universe, can be distinguished from the physical, and that the spirituality of individuals can be distinguished from that of their context. But we may want to insist that a total separation, in each case, is neither desirable nor possible. We might explain that, in our understanding,

the Incarnation and the Sacrament say something about the Spirit and spirituality, of Divinity and of the universe as a whole. We cannot produce the definition of spiritual, but we can help to avoid re-inventing the wheel.

Secondly, now that we are considering the spiritualities of the different “religious” traditions in the canonical sense (Benedictine, Cistercian, Carthusian etc), and of the different denominational and informal traditions (Anglican and Reformed, or celtic and evangelical) and of various world faiths and life-stances (Islam and Buddhism, liberalism and humanism) we may feel we are working towards a bird’s-eye view of the possible permutations that have so far been attempted. The spirit can blow where it likes in the future, but we can suggest a morphology of its past forms.

Thirdly, two millennia spent cultivating the life of the Spirit, and the spiritual life more generally, whether in religious orders or in pastoral counselling, should have produced some wisdom regarding ways of getting from where we are to where we want to be.

Lastly, as this increasing self-consciousness in spiritual matters compels choices upon people, we might offer a critique of their goal, based upon a New Testament understanding of love. As well as the characteristics enumerated in 1 Corinthians 13, this would no doubt involve communion, thanksgiving, mission, dialogue.

However, a Church that engages with that which is of the Holy Spirit within the contemporary concern with spirituality will almost certainly have to become itself both more coherent in its core function, and more diverse in its parts: as St Paul (and Archbishop Cranmer) said, a Spiritual body – taking all three words seriously.