

# CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY AND THE CHURCH

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**DEAD OR ALIVE? THE ACADEMICS SEEM UNABLE TO DECIDE. IS CHRISTIANITY IN BRITAIN TERMINALLY ILL OR AWAKENING TO A NEW DAWN? WHILE CALLUM BROWN PROCLAIMS THE DEATH OF CHRISTIAN BRITAIN, OTHERS ARE MORE OPTIMISTIC.**<sup>1</sup> Grace Davie's analysis of religion in Britain leads her to proffer a somewhat ambiguous, but altogether more positive, prognosis: the British people are not unbelievers, they still believe – in God, in the power of prayer, and in life after death – but believing does not infer any form of participation, even association, with an institutional Church.<sup>2</sup>

David Hay and Kate Hunt's recent qualitative study of the spirituality of people who don't go to Church added depth to that thesis, throwing the church a lifeline in very choppy seas.<sup>3</sup> But what is the significance of the prevalence of increasingly heterodox beliefs in the supernatural? Is Brown correct in positing that such research offers mere "crumbs of comfort" to a Church on its death bed?<sup>4</sup>

A degree of agreement is reached when the discussion moves from the health, or ill health, depending on your viewpoint, of Christian Britain to the current spiritual climate in Britain. Here all with one voice celebrate the spiritual awakening currently occurring in Britain today. "Spirituality" has become a kind of buzzword: "The spiritual search, whatever that may mean – and it means myriad things to different people – has become a dominant feature of late twentieth-century life."<sup>5</sup> Although some question the vitality of the spiritual awakening in Europe, when compared with that occurring in other parts of the world, all agree that there are, even here in "pagan" Britain, those who "hunger after righteousness" – or is it just a quick spiritual fix? You only need briefly peruse the shelves of your local bookstore to see the vast array of spiritualities, spiritual therapies, remedies and philosophies on offer. Spirituality is now big business. It has infiltrated the world of sport, health, business and leisure, to name but a few spheres of its now wide-ranging influence.

And the Church? There is clearly a stark discrepancy between the increasing popularity of all things spiritual and the dramatic decline of the Christian churches. The numerical increase among some churches, notably the house churches, does nothing to stem the flow. This forces any thinking Christian to ask why those who have a penchant for the spiritual visit their local bookstore, surf the net, experiment with meditation, yoga, crystals, channelling and a whole host of other alternative forms of spirituality, but do not darken the doors of a church?

Women and men are no longer satisfied with the thesis, "I think therefore I am". They want to touch and taste, to hear and smell, to hold and to be held. They want a faith and a community of faith that embraces all the senses, not just the intellect.

## NOTES

1 Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

2 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

3 David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church: A Report on the Findings of the Adults' Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham*, August 2000.

4 Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 5.

5 M. Brown, in Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 8.

6 Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 19.

7 Ibid., 18.

8 Ibid., 20.

9 Ursula King, *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press), 2-3.

10 John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and the Future of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd), 156.

► Such a question, while simple to state, rarely elicits a simple answer, and any simple solutions proposed are, not surprisingly, most unsatisfactory. Perhaps it would help if we stepped back from the problem and looked at where we have come from.

Davie's excellent analysis of the history of Christianity in Britain since the end of the Second World War, *Religion in Britain Since 1945*, describes four periods. During the first, 1945 to 1960, Christians were upbeat and business was booming. The considerable majority of British people were believers. However, by the beginning of the 1960s the mood was beginning to change. There was a gradual realisation that it was no longer possible to recapture the glorious days of the past and that the general public was increasingly disinterested in the affairs of the Church: Thus, the second period, during the 1960s, was characterised by a desire for relevance during which the Church sought to redefine itself as meaningful and relevant within what it perceived to be an increasingly secular society. The Christian faith was progressively secularised. Anything supposedly secular people did not like was discarded. This response, however well intended, left the Church with little to offer a British public who shortly after showed all the signs of casting-off the mantle of the Enlightenment and longing for a little of the mysterious, supernatural, dare I say it, spiritual, of the pre-modern era. The version of Christianity concocted during the 1960s may have been "lukewarmly welcomed in 1960", but "regarded as laughable in 2000".<sup>6</sup> For, the period between 1970 and 1990, which Davie describes as "the re-emergence of the sacred," and the period beginning in the 1990s, which Davie portrays as "new formulations of the sacred", witnessed an increasing interest in all things spiritual. The British public, concluding that Christianity had nothing to say or offer in relation to the "supernatural or mysterious", looked elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> McGrath contends that it is the mainline Protestant dominations who, for the most part, bought into this thinking, "leaving many Protestant denominations robbed of the riches of the Christian intellectual tradition, starved of any sense of mystery and the supernatural, and bewildered by their loss of members to the New Age and evangelical movements".<sup>8</sup>

I was asked to write about the importance of Christian spirituality for the Church today. The question, or statement, depending on how you look at it, reflects the Church's growing awareness of the state-of-play briefly sketched above. More significantly, the evident interest

in all things spiritual within and without the Church reveals a great deal about the current "spiritual" health of our nation and of the Church. Ursula King, a leading authority on the study of spirituality and contemporary society, contends that, "the widespread contemporary interest in spirituality is connected with a growing awareness that our society is in a deep spiritual crisis, a situation which calls for creative thinking and transformative ways of living in order to overcome the vacuum of meaning and commitment"<sup>9</sup> – creative thinking and transformative ways of living which must be reflected in the life of the Church if it expects to have anything meaningful to say to our increasingly spiritual, postmodern, society. I, with others, am led to conclude that "the Church simply cannot expect to continue to survive for long into the twenty-first century in its present form".<sup>10</sup>

In McGrath's eminently readable discussion about the future of Christianity he tells a "Coca-Cola story". Coca-Cola wasn't selling well, the executives put their heads together and, in short, what emerged was a new range of products, at which point the original best selling Coke was withdrawn and replaced by a sweeter beverage. However, the executives got it wrong. The public preferred the old Coke to the new. What did they do? They immediately reintroduced the old beverage, under a new name, and sales soared. It's not possible to equate Coca-Cola sales with the proclamation of the Christian faith and there are multiple problems associated with using the language of the market to describe the activity of the Church. However, there are important lessons to learn from history and an urgent need continually to contextualise and re-contextualise our Christian faith in the culture within which we find ourselves. We need to explore how we, as a community of God's people, might offer the spiritually thirsty something to drink and the spiritually hungry something to eat. How can we recapture the spiritual essence of our faith and live it in such a way that those who long for a real experience of the living God meet God when they meet us and commune with God when they join us in worship?

But how? Close your eyes and imagine you're at the theatre. The lights are turned down, an expectant silence falls and the music begins, encompassing you in its embrace. A single spotlight picks out a ballerina delicately pirouetting across the stage. You are enraptured, completely captivated. All you see is the ballerina. After a short while another spotlight illuminates the centre stage where half a dozen are

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echoing her solo prelude. You gasp, surprised, caught unaware. Although the dancers at the centre of the stage had been there all the time silent, still, clothed in darkness, you had not seen them, because your attention was focused on the single ballerina.

For a long time now our “spotlights” have only illuminated certain aspects of our faith. We have been captivated by “sound doctrine”, by all that engages the mental faculties, by all that is reasonable and intellectual. A credible conversion to Christianity is all too closely identified with mental assent to biblical truth: “*Believe* and you will be saved.” The evangelical quiet time commonly consists of “studying” the Word of God and we have enthroned biblical exegesis in our times of worship. The single ballerina pirouettes. Is it not time to allow the spotlight to illuminate other facets of our faith? Are we willing to allow God to engage with aspects of our personhood other than our minds? The modern paradigm is passing. Women and men are no longer satisfied with the thesis, “I think therefore I am”. They want to touch and taste, to hear and smell, to hold and to be held. They want a faith and a community of faith that embraces all the senses, not just the intellect. Unless we are willing to radically rethink how we “do” Church in order to facilitate those relationships with God and with one another, there is little hope of satisfying the spiritual hunger of the gathered community of God, let alone attracting the spiritually hungry who experiment with a whole host of alternative forms of spirituality.

I am sure many a weary, overworked minister would like to be offered a fail-safe checklist: do “a” and “b” will result. It is not possible, however, to assure such ministers that if they allow time for silence in their worship services, invite some to light candles, encourage others to write down their prayers, and facilitate biblical meditation, growth will ensure. For, what “works” for one congregation in one community will not necessarily work for another group of people in a different location. Although that might at first appear a little discouraging and unhelpful it is in fact the open-door-of-possibilities into which we may walk, if we have the courage. Instead of being sold a prescriptive, heavily marketed product, we are being invited to explore how to “do” Church in our community in a way that engages all our senses, reviving the life of the Church and, in so doing, nurturing a spiritual oasis where the spiritually thirsty might find something to drink and the spiritually hungry something to eat.