NEW SPIRITUALITY AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

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JOHN DRANE is author of the best-selling book *The McDonaldization of the Church* and has extensive experience in cross-cultural mission, with a particular emphasis on new forms of spirituality. After resigning from teaching practical theology at Aberdeen University, he is taking time out to write more books, but will be looking for a new full-time ministry at the end of 2005. This article is based on his 2004 London Lectures, which will be published later this year by Darton Longman and Todd, as *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual? The rise of New Spirituality and the Mission of the Church*.

John Drane adds a missiological perspective to the debate. Although he agrees with Partridge regarding the challenges that the new spirituality presents to the Church, he sees the term "occulture" as evidence of a mistaken assessment of the issues relevant to the missio Dei, *and thus a more optimistic picture emerges. Far from the current spiritual climate providing infertile ground for Christian growth, as Partridge suggests, Drane recognises that mission begins with God and therefore we should be collaborating with the new expressions of spirituality to discern where God has already begun his work. However, the term "occulture" might evoke images of the demonic and introduce a confrontational element profoundly unhelpful to the task.* ***LS***

In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche declared that "God is dead", and for much of the twentieth century it looked as if he could be right. The secularisation hypothesis reigned supreme, and there seemed to be a social equivalence between the decline of religious institutions and the expansion of scientific and technological insights, with regular Church involvement in the UK down to less than 10 per cent of the population (a decline that continues). Yet today a majority would agree with Harvey Cox, that the secularisation thesis is "entirely implausible".[1] For even in European cultures that have rejected their traditional religious beliefs, there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in matters spiritual. Putting the word "spirituality" into a web search engine produces more than 15 million results, and as Chris Partridge has demonstrated, there has been an exponential growth in "spiritual" goods and services on offer, even in the smallest communities. A recent study of the spiritual life of Kendal revealed that while the churches there had declined by 20 per cent in the course of the 1990s, over the same period other forms of spiritual expression had increased by 300 per cent.[2]

It is more than 1,500 years since St Augustine wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you", but the axiom still holds good. Despite all of the achievements of Western civilisation, there seems to be a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the sort of world that purely rational values have created, and an intuitive conviction that "there has to be more to life than this". Cutting-edge medical researchers are agreeing with Augustine, not only demonstrating that a spiritual life is a happy life, but suggesting – especially in neuroscience, and the discipline now known as neurotheology – that to be fully human also involves having a spiritual connection.[3]

DEFINING "SPIRITUALITY"

But why "spirituality"? The major attraction of the word "spirituality" lies in the fact that it is not "religion". People increasingly regard "religion" as a bad thing, whereas "spirituality" embraces the sense of transcendence that religion at its best might imply, while avoiding the negativities that have historically tended to characterise it. "Religion" is viewed as some externally imposed worldview and set of practices, requiring conformity on the part of those who buy into it, backed-up by narrow-minded attitudes based on dogmatic understandings of the meaning of everything – and all enforced by hierarchical structures that are riddled with hypocrisy and self-serving in a way that exploits others and prevents them reaching their full potential as human beings (which is all an intentional part of the package because, if we were to be fully empowered, we would in turn challenge the hierarchies who run religions). It is concerned with books and buildings, institutional structures, and an over-emphasis on rationality that saps people's inner strength, and is ultimately destructive. Bono, the lead singer of U2, has eloquently expressed it: "religion is what is left when the Spirit has left the building".

"Spirituality", on the other hand, is perceived as the opposite of these things. It is life-giving and empowering, the agent through which we might reach our full potential as human beings, living at peace with each other and with the cosmos. To be considered "spiritual" an idea or attitude needs to promote wholeness and healing – of ourselves, of society, and, ultimately, of all that is. As Rodney Clapp puts it, spirituality is "a word we turn to in preference to certain other, less appealing alternatives", and which "permits us to name [our aspirations for meaning, purpose and identity in life] while not implying that we are prudish or conformist or pretentious or naïve".[4]

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for this. Millions of people who know nothing of the militaristic excesses of Christendom associate "religion" with the events of 11 September 2001 (in this case, a certain form of Islam), while the subsequent military adventures led by the USA and its allies continue to be openly defended by reference to the beliefs of fundamentalist Christians. In addition, though, Christianity has been such an integral part of Western culture for the last thousand years and more that the

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average person finds it all but impossible to disentangle Christian beliefs and values from the inherited principles of the wider culture. The idea that religion is a bad thing is therefore part of the widespread questioning of the inherited rational and materialist worldview of Western culture, in which organised religion (the Church) was a dominant force. The promise of a better world for everyone has simply not come to pass. Not only has the human predicament not improved, but as the twentieth century progressed things actually got worse, and the trend continues into the twenty-first. Needless to say, there is a major challenge for Christians in all of this. We seem to have allowed the Church to be depicted as a sad and lifeless institution, with no interest in spiritual matters. Moreover, there is some evidence suggesting that the Church's justifiable concern with political and economic affairs has contributed to this understanding.[5]

The sense of disillusionment with Western culture and its institutions is a major driving force behind today's popular spiritual search. I have been working with the exponents of New Spirituality for more than 15 years now, and most of those I meet are motivated by a conviction that the inherited wisdom of the past has not worked, and by a parallel sense of their own personal need for a connection with something beyond themselves that will endow life with the sort of meaning they crave. In addition, there is often a strong feeling that in the past the guardians of wisdom (religious leaders and politicians) have turned out to be either corrupt or unreliable, and the way forward will therefore be to trust one's own judgment rather than buying into yet more ready-made packages that might turn out to be as damaging as those of the past. In the search for meaning, such people will explore whatever spiritual pathways are available to them in the wider culture, adopting or discarding things on a purely pragmatic basis of whether or not they work. They are like those searchers whom Paul met in Athens (Acts 17.16–34), looking in the supermarket of faiths for something that will help them towards wholeness as human – and spiritual – beings, and prepared to try anything once. The Christian message is often ignored today because the church projects itself as an institution that is bothered only about matters that to other people seem like trivialities. But the gospel also goes unexamined by default, simply because it is not available in ways that are accessible in the marketplace where spiritual goods are offered.

CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

The rise of New Spirituality is undoubtedly a challenge to the churches. But it is also offering a fresh opportunity for effective Christian engagement with the culture. In the past, apologetics has been about persuading those who did not believe in anything transcendent that such a thing was worth considering. Today's spiritual searchers already accept that, and for that reason alone they should be among the easiest people for the Church to connect with. All my experience suggests that they are – yet many Christians view them as "the enemy", to be reviled, condemned, opposed and demonised at every possible opportunity.

Misleading terminology is partly to blame for this. Words like "alternative spirituality" imply "alternative to what?" and Christians easily conclude that New Spirituality must be "alternative to the gospel" in much the same way as Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons represent a perverted form of the Christian message. In the past, every deviant Western worldview was indeed a variation on mainstream Christianity, and the Church developed ways of dealing with those who were heretics, involving confrontation, denunciation, damnation – and sometimes death. But when Christians regard New Spirituality as if it was a heresy they are missing the point, for it is in no sense a deviant form of Christian belief. It is more like the equivalent of a different world faith, though its emphasis is more personal than dogmatic and its core values are not rooted in ideas or beliefs, but in people.

In missiological terms, today's spiritual searchers are a distinct "people group": they represent a different culture, with its own language, conventions, expectations and forms of life. New Spirituality should not be seen as a battlefield, but a mission field. Though there may be something to be said for it as a phenomenological description, Chris Partridge's designation of New Spirituality as "occulture" is unhelpful in relation to mission, because it evokes images of the demonic that can only encourage the sort of confrontational mindset that prevents effective Christian engagement with spiritual searchers. What is required is not a Christendom model of confrontational denunciation, but a biblical model of cross-cultural mission which values people as individuals made in God's image (Gen 1.26–27) and which calls us to listen and learn before we speak, so that the message of the gospel is heard in ways that are truly incarnational in this culture. My use of the word "incarnational" is not coincidental. I do not believe that our aim should be to

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make Christian faith "relevant" to the culture, still less that we should be doing things merely because they are "trendy" or because somebody has packaged them for sale as a mission programme. Being incarnational in mission emphasises the importance of recognising that mission begins with God, the *missio Dei*, and our calling is to discern where God is already at work and then to collaborate intentionally with God's activity in a divine-human partnership.

Though the confrontational approach has been dominant in the past, there are many exciting signs that things are changing, from all around the world, and from Christians of different theological persuasions, which should encourage us to take seriously the fact that God is at work in today's spiritual search, and to position ourselves in the same spaces. It has eventually dawned on us that belief in the *missio Dei* implies that there cannot be no-go areas for God. For years, Christians have protested outside psychic fairs and the like, believing that God was excluded from such places. Now they are finding their way inside to bear witness to the healing power of the gospel – and are discovering that God was already there. Jeff Fountain is European director of Youth With A Mission, and in his book *Living as People of Hope* he tells how his view of mission was radically transformed by a meeting with a neo-pagan witch in Budapest airport.[6] The outcome is a major conference scheduled for Halloween 2005 in Switzerland, exploring how the gospel might be shared in psychic fairs and similar places throughout the continent. In the Autumn of 2004, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation hosted a major consultation in Thailand, and one of the official reports is on "Religious and non-religious spirituality in the Western world".[7] Not only does it encourage Christians to become involved in this ministry, but provides extensive theological justification for it – and in the process, commends some of the most adventurous methodologies, including work done by myself and others in using the tarot for evangelism, inspired by St Paul's approach to the "unknown god" of Athens.[8] Then there is a major study from the USA with a similar message: *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach*.[9] Closer to home, the Group for Evangelisation of Churches Together in England, has just published three significant books encouraging creative mission thinking: *Beyond the Fringe, Evangelism in a Spiritual Age,* and *Equipping your Church in a Spiritual Age*.[10] Three years ago, I spoke about this sort of ministry at the annual conference of Activate, an ecumenical group committed to reaching women with the gospel. A woman in her seventies went off and booked a stand at a local psychic fair, where she offered to pray with people – and her stall was swamped with individuals desperate to hear more about the love of Jesus. Other groups have had similar experiences. In 2000, I helped Churches Together in Colchester to orchestrate a stand at a local psychic fair, and now five years later they have in turn enabled several other groups in southern and eastern England to become involved in such ministries. In Manchester, Sanctus1 (part of the Church of England) has engaged in ministry at the annual Mind, Body, Spirit Festival. And there are others.

Talk of *kairos* moments for the gospel can be overdone, and can also be unhelpful when it reflects an attitude of triumphalism. But with all these current initiatives converging, it is hard to think that this is not one of those moments when God is doing something new. This is mission as out-reach (going onto other people's territory) rather than in-drag (getting people into places where we feel comfortable), which makes it authentically biblical. And because it starts not with ourselves but with God, I have a good deal more confidence in the outcome than Chris Partridge allows himself on the basis of a purely phenomenological analysis of the spiritual search of our generation. ■

NOTES

1. Harvey Cox, "The Myth of the Twentieth Century: The rise and fall of 'secularization'", in Gregory Baum (ed.), *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1999), p. 136.
2. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution* (London: Routledge 2005), p. 45.
3. Cf. Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili, *Why God Won't Go Away* (2nd edn.; New York: Ballantine 2002,).; Dean Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired Into Our Genes* (New York: Doubleday 2004); Rick Strassman, DMT: *The Spirit Molecule* (Rochester VT: Park Street Press 2001); Joel Green (ed.), *What about the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 2004); John Bowker, *The Sacred Neuron* (London: I.B. Tauris 2005);
4. Rodney Clapp, *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, Not Aangels* (Grand Rapids: Brazos 2004), pp. 11, 12.
5. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution* (London: Routledge 2005), pp. 63–66.
6. Jeff Fountain, *Living as People of Hope: Faith, Hope & Vision for 21st Century Europe* (Rotterdam: Initialmedia 2004).
7. Lausanne Occasional Paper No 45. Online at http://community.gospelcom.net/lcwe/assets/LOP45_IG16.pdf
8. John Drane, Ross Clifford and Philip Johnson, *Beyond Prediction: The Tarot and Your Spirituality* (Oxford: Lion 2001); Ross Clifford and Philip Johnson, *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age* (Oxford: Lion 2001).
9. Irving Hexham, Stephen Rost and John W Morehead, *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2004).
10. Published, respectively, by Cliff College, Church House Press and CTBI (all 2005).