

# ON KAIROS MOMENTS, ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES, AND PHENOMENOLOGY: A RESPONSE TO JOHN DRANE

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*In his response, Partridge sympathises with Drane's concerns regarding a confrontational mindset, but places the responsibility for this squarely within the Christian camp itself. He sees this issue and other difficulties that Christians have regarding alternative spirituality as needing to be addressed in order for "occulture" to be properly valued and respected.*

*The differing approaches from both Partridge and Drane are insightful and very helpful in aiding understanding of the current spiritual climate. LS*

I am indebted to John Drane for taking the time to comment on my article. I agree with much of his argument and, in the area about which I think his missiological and revivalist optimism is overly sanguine, I *want* to agree with him and hope he is correct. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests otherwise.

I begin by commenting on issues concerning terminology. First, John Drane draws attention to "misleading terminology", mentioning "alternative spirituality" in particular. "Alternative to what?" he asks. He then claims that Christians will too easily conclude that New Spirituality must be "alternative to the gospel". However, in an area in which terminology is notoriously problematic and thus often needs some qualification, I think the term "alternative spirituality" is largely accurate.

The term "spirituality" refers to beliefs and practices that insiders prefer not to describe as "religious". The sacred persists in the West, but increasingly it does so in *non-traditional* forms, which are increasingly defined as "spiritual" rather than "religious". The point is, much of the emergent spirituality in the West is self-consciously located outside, an alternative to, the traditions of the major world religions.<sup>1</sup>

Christians who assume that this form of spirituality is alternative to "the gospel" are, for the most part, correct. I suspect that John Drane will agree that there is a move *away from* a "religion" that focuses on God, the Bible, the Church, and on that which is considered to be external to the self, and *towards* "spirituality", *towards* that which is personal and interior, i.e. a focus on "the self", on "nature", or simply on "life".

I have found that many of those practising a form of alternative spirituality in the West are, to some extent (often a great extent), mistrustful of traditional, institutional Christianity. They may even have considered themselves "Christian" at some point in their lives and now explicitly practise an *alternative* to the faith they have left. That is not to say that they are necessarily openly

hostile to Christianity (though some are), but only that they believe some *alternative* form of spirituality is required, one which can usefully be distinguished from what would normally be regarded as *Christian* spirituality.

Also with regard to terminology, John Drane accuses my term "occulture" of encouraging a "confrontational mindset". I have some sympathy with his concerns. I am aware that the term "occulture" could be problematic, but, from an academic (rather than a missiological) perspective, think that it accurately reflects what I am describing.<sup>2</sup> As I hoped I had indicated, I am expanding the narrow, technical definition of the term "occult", to refer to an expansive, continually replenished reservoir of ideas which feed new spiritual springs and worldviews,<sup>3</sup> rather than the demonic, which is the often reflected misrepresentation of "the occult" in popular culture. If Christians are to engage in meaningful dialogue with spiritual seekers, they need to understand terminology that is widely used in the alternative spiritual milieu. Failure to grasp this leads to misunderstanding and offence will ensue, as is often the case. This suggests that education in the area is required.

As to the opportunities afforded to Christianity by the new spiritual milieu, I broadly agree with John Drane. I certainly do not seek to contradict his insistence that mission starts with God or that there are many new Christian initiatives encouraging dialogue with alternative spiritualities and seeking to provide Christian alternatives for spiritual seekers. I am aware of some of those he mentions. However, exciting though these initiatives may be, they are tiny when set against the figures of religious decline and the growth in occultural re-enchantment. Optimism is important, but talk of "*kairos* moments" is, to say the least, premature.

Finally, in response to the accusation that my work is "purely phenomenological", if John Drane means that I seek to be objective and judgement-free, and aim (as far as is possible) to bracket my own beliefs, then he is correct.<sup>4</sup> There is nothing wrong with theologians seeking to understand the world in terms of a divine plan and seeking to articulate their particular historical moment in terms of a *kairos* moment, but such interpretations must not be allowed to skew objective analysis and the misapprehension of the beliefs and practices of others. That said, I realise that there is a tension here. I am simply seeking to encourage theologians and missiologists to get as close to the facts as they are able, in order to provide as profitable an analysis as possible.<sup>5</sup> Phenomenology is a good way – not the only way – of doing this. ■

## NOTES

1. Whilst there are "spiritualities" within the world religions, particularly "mystical" movements which focus on the individual's inner experience of the divine, "alternative spiritualities" are not necessarily directly allied to any one particular religious tradition.

2. The term "New Age" is now passé and other terms such as the holistic milieu are a little too limiting. Terms such as "new spirituality" and "alternative spirituality" focus more on the spiritual, rather than on the plethora of ideas – spiritual, fictional, mythical, and paranormal – that *inform* such spiritualities.

3. For more on this, see C Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (2 vols.; London: T&T Clark, 2004–2005). See especially, Vol. 1, Part 2.

4. For an explanation of phenomenology, see C Partridge, "Phenomenology and the Study of Religion", in C Partridge (ed.), *The New Lion Handbook: The World's Religions* (Oxford: Lion, 2005), pp. 14–18.

5. John Drane himself was one of the first theologians to engage in such thoughtful analysis, followed by helpful reflection from a Christian perspective. See J Drane, *What is the New Age Saying to the Church?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991).