

Reflections on Spirituality and the Church

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Abstract: *This article ponders the separation occurring between spirituality and ecclesial existence. In contesting generalisations such as “organised religion” and “institutional Church,” it argues for a more ecclesial spirituality and points to some of the pitfalls involved in a “generic” spirituality, especially the problem of it being colonised by political ideologies.*

Key Words: ecclesial spirituality; generic spirituality; Australian culture; Christian spirituality; Catholic Church – perceptions; religious experience; Holy Spirit

Over ten years ago, my *A New Imagining: Toward and Australian Spirituality*¹ appeared, in belated homage to the Bicentenary celebrations of the time. I had no intention of dissolving a lived and explicit faith with a kind of generalised “spirituality,” and so there was a considerable theological, Christian and even Catholic emphasis, as was pointed out.² I did, however, recognise that the expression and practise of that faith would profit considerably by being located in a larger more inclusive frame of reference which I preferred to call “a new imagining” rather than “spirituality” straight out. My aim was to suggest a fruitful interaction between a certain range of typically Australian cultural experiences and Christian experience, with its distinctive imagination, illumined by the Gospel story, the symbols and sacraments, the creed and the moral tradition of Christian faith. In this I called on the resources of a large range of remarkably “religious” Australian poetry of recent times.³

The rather rough and ready directness of such an approach was based on a simple conviction. There is no way of hearing the biblical command to love God with one’s whole heart and soul and mind and strength if the heart is numbed and the soul is in hiding; or if the mind is just an information processor or an automatic adversarial machine, while one’s strength is dissipated in the multi-choice consumerism of our day. Likewise, loving one’s neighbour as oneself in a diseased culture would end up being a curse rather than a blessing, if the self in question is driven, stunted, rootless and generally hopeless.

Such an approach was a particular cultural variation of the classic Catholic nature-grace relationship. It presupposes that the Holy Spirit, as God’s gift to the human spirit, can hardly be a contradiction to it. Similarly, the Word’s becoming flesh does not vaporise the humanity he assumes, but fulfils its God-intended destiny. On the other hand, the Spirit of Christ is not the same as the human spirit. The cross jolts theology out of any too facile

¹ Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990. See also, Tony Kelly, “Spirituality: An Australian Accent,” *The Way Supplement* 73 Spring 1992, 87-97 which specified nine features of spirituality related to Australian history and culture.

² See Geoffrey Lilburne, “Contextualising Australian Theology: An Inquiry into Method,” *Pacifica* 10.3 (1997): 350-364, and my response, “Whither ‘Australian Theology’? A Response to Geoffrey Lilburne,” *Pacifica* 12.2 (1999): 192-208.

³ Kevin Hart (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Les Murray (ed.), *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1986).

correlation. Jesus in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman witnesses to the arrival of a new era of Spirit and truth when true adorers will worship the Father “neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem,” as the age of the fathers is replaced by access to the Father revealed in Jesus, his Son and Word (John 4:21-26). While there is neither contradiction nor equivalence in the relationship of grace to nature, there is a transformation of God-given proportions. In Jesus Christ, occurs the gift that is truth, a gift in place of all previous preparatory gifts (John 1:16). He comes that his followers might have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10). The promised transformation is salvation for our souls, resurrection for our bodies, and a transfigured universe.

Compared to this more theological approach is the more generalised notion of spirituality of, say, such estimable works as David Tacey’s *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia*⁴ and *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*.⁵ I do not doubt that many of us, and I do include myself, can draw much from these writings, especially when we are looking for something more than the driven routines or banal communications of the a consumerist life-style. At very least, the message of such spirituality is an inchoate protest on behalf of a larger humanity, for the sake of a less driven way of life and an aspiration for something more. In his cultural criticism, Tacey evinces his own broad culture, manifest in a familiarity with many disciplines, and in the grace, clarity and sympathy of his writing. Any pastor or religious educator could profitably consult Tacey’s work to get a “spiritual” angle that would make a good cultural, psychological, ecological or social point. But I think it would result in the diminishment of Tacey’s more general approach and my own more theological and ecclesial concentration were identified too quickly. In the following reflection, I would like to suggest a number of talking points for a new phase in the conversation between an ecclesial Christian faith and the expanding phenomenon of spirituality.

1. THE EXPANDING PHENOMENON OF SPIRITUALITY

“Spirituality,” not unlike “psychology,” “experience” or even “religion,” is a catch-all word. Generally, it connotes the fundamental self-transcending orientation inscribed into human existence. It also refers to the ways such an orientation is actualised in human lives. Increasingly, too, it refers to the way such a dimension is studied and the ways in which it might be promoted.⁶ In fact, the word, “spirituality,” up to comparatively recently times, was an all but exclusively Catholic term. It referred to the experiential and ascetical aspects of Christian life, above all as these were represented in various movements and religious orders,⁷ and finally by the varieties of Christian experience in the world, as in “lay spirituality.” Before this overture to the integrity of the secular, “spiritual theology,” while it was left to academic theology to embody the ideal of faith seeking understanding, sought to promote the concerns of faith seeking its appropriate “psychological” expression in

⁴ Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1995.

⁵ Melbourne: Harper Collins, 2000.

⁶ See Sandra M. Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” *Theological Studies* 50.4 (1989): 676-697 for a still excellent overview.

⁷ As the world was adopting “spirituality” as its emblematic word for depth dimensions of human life, most religious orders began speaking in terms of “charisms,” occasionally with such enthusiasm that the charism associated with this or that founder far outweighs, in rhetoric, at least, the reality of Christian faith and Catholic identity. Whereas founders tended to be content with a sense of special vocation, first particular “spiritualities,” and then distinctive “charisms” are posing a problem for religious orders to explain their respective distinguishing marks.

cultivation of habits of prayer, examination of conscience, and a humble respect for mystical gifts should they occur. With a deeper appreciation of the secular and of the theological significance of the laity's involvement in the world, the older meanings of spirituality began to stretch to new proportions.

The theological origin of the word is found in the Pauline neologism, *pneumatikos*, "Spirit-ual," applied to any person or reality (charisms, blessings, hymns, conduct) under the influence of the Spirit. Paul, in 1 Cor 2:14-15, contrasts the *psychikos anthropos* – more or less the "natural human being" limited to the predictable, routine range and scope of anyone's life. In the Middle Ages, the word took on a more a juridical meaning, so that "spiritual" was contrasted to "temporal" or material in matters of authority, power, and property. But in 17th century in France, there was the golden age of *spiritualité*. It manifested an intense cultivation of religious self-consciousness at the experiential level of faith. Because, predictably, it sometimes took on elitist and exaggerated forms (e.g., Quietism), there arose a much more urgent need for a "spiritual director" to keep the feet of aspirants to spirituality on the ground!

But now this comparatively in-house word has taken wings to enjoy a range of reference of astonishing proportions. For example, of the twenty-five volumes of the Crossroad project, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*,⁸ only three volumes are devoted to Christianity. To change the metaphor, what was formerly a theological backwater became, in recent years, a river in flood.

2. SPIRITUALITY OR CHURCH?

Hence the now urgent question, How is Christianity, and especially its ecclesial form, related to "spirituality"? It is not uncommon that those studying or practising "spirituality" in its new modes, to feel an almost automatic disaffection from what they term the "institutional Church," taken as an extreme example of "organised religion." No doubt the causes of this disaffection are many and various. May one ask, is theology itself partly to blame? Especially in the last decade or so, theology has been so ecclesiologicaly negative that people could be excused for thinking that the integrity of Christian faith was not found in an ecclesial communal setting, but despite it. The supposedly free spirit of faith is always being compromised by "the structures," or the Curia, or this or that ecclesiastical policy or decision: the Church appeared as an obstacle and encumbrance.

In contrast, traditional forms of Catholic ecclesiology—which in fact underpinned the developments of Vatican II – understood the Church as the historical form of grace in, and for, the world. But 'high' ecclesiologies, except in Orthodox circles, have become an object of great suspicion.⁹ In regard to the Church, theology has veered in the direction of a hermeneutics of suspicion, rather than one marked by participation, thanksgiving and conversion. By implication, the Church is located outside the sphere of spirituality altogether, in an alien ambiguous exteriority. Instead of the Church being theologially explored as that identifiable part of the world that cultivates an explicit awareness of the universal mystery at work, the ecclesial reality is subjected to a form of sociological reduction which leaves it with only its most imperfect and limited institutional form.

⁸ Ewert Cousins (ed.), *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1985-).

⁹ For an outstanding interpretation of one of the great ecclesiological theologians of our era, see Richard Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), especially ch.3 on the Spirit in the Church, 80-112.

When the antecedent reality of trinitarian grace as the source, sustenance and goal of all the Church's institutions is given little acknowledgement, belonging to the Church can hardly appear as a field and historical form of communion with God. With the waning of the high ecclesiology, the distinctive Catholic (and Orthodox) tradition, there appears a kind of fierce ecclesiological docetism which, while resolutely stressing the human face of the Church, won't permit it to have a wart or wrinkle. The famed triumphalism of pre-Vatican II ecclesiology has turned into something far more diffident and uncertain.

When the Church ceases to figure as a mystery (in the theological sense) and its eschatological bearing is dimmed, the false ultimacy of the "if only" surfaces. All manner of being would be well—if *only* this or that kind of policy were implemented; or if the CDF proceeded in a more evangelical manner in its investigation of ostensibly unorthodox views; if only Cardinal X were made pope, or the (arch)diocese had someone else for (arch)bishop, etc., etc. The curious absoluteness of such intensely ecclesiastical preoccupations prejudices a sense of ecclesial being in the Spirit, as communion, not with archangels (primarily), but with other flesh and blood believers in an always-limited historical situation. Publicity, of course, tends to follow those who leave the Church in the name of a more personalised spirituality. Occasionally there is some interest shown in why well-known Christians or theologians choose to remain in the Church. The supposition seems to be that the Church is some kind of elderly relative that needs one's care. Classic ecclesiology in the great tradition of East and West would ask a different question, apt to shock modern sensibilities: Why does Church continue to have patience with us sinners, given the often pitiful level of our Christian witness? A theology of the Church needs a eucharistic hermeneutics in which thanksgiving, humility and conversion play their role in the interpretation of the data.

I will not try to illustrate these impressions further since it would need a kind of documentation that might do little good. But I do think there is room for a communal theological examination of conscience on such points, if being in the Church and the practice and understanding of spirituality are not to belong to different worlds. The institutional shape of the Church is never perfect, and never will be. But the institutional component is necessary if Christian witness is to have a presence, a voice and a witness in the groaning, conflictual reality of world history. The Christian community has to confront huge antagonistic forces which have no reservations when it comes to assuming an institutional form: capitalism, Marxism, militarism, racism, and institutional prejudice of all kinds. Add to these the unsleeping enterprise of the commercial and advertising institutions that drive mass consumer culture – "the opium of the people" beyond anything Marx could have imagined. Put all such "institutions" in the context of the institutional media—often owned and directed by any and all of the above – and one might ask why the Church and Christian people generally are not far more organised, in order to have a more effective institutional presence in society. It would serve the anti-human institutions rather well if the Church went in for spirituality as it is often understood. Indeed, if the Johannine counsel, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21) is to lead to more than an invisible interior attitude, it must presuppose some institutional shape in the world – a clear space where God is adored and the People of God is formed and nourished. And it does. In some measure, the institution of the Church gives "spiritualities" a free ride. For it does what they cannot do, namely by confronting the violent anti-human realities of the world, even if this means that the Church itself is often wounded in the process. Moreover, the Church is the bearer of millennial traditions, not only in regard to doctrine, theology, liturgy and moral life, but

also in regard to spirituality as well. Each of these classic spiritualities – Benedictine, Carmelite, Franciscan, Jesuit, and more recently, “Lay,” to name but some – exhibits its own demanding ascetism. How the spirit of the Beatitudes is discernible in the Church at the moment may be a big question. Still, the People of God is not without its prophets, martyrs, founders and reformers. Presumably, this is what Pope John Paul II is trying to bring home to us with the extraordinary number of canonisations he has performed. Believers need continuous personal conversion; and the institutional dimension of Christian community is always in need of reform if it is to be transparent in its witness, both in regard to its own struggling members on the inside, and to the world beyond it, in which and for which it exists.

3. SNAGS IN THE CONVERSATION: DIFFERENT CONCERNS

Apart from a diminished theological sense of the Church and limited understanding of the necessity of its institutional forms, there are other reasons why conversation between the Church and the new spiritual concerns is often awkward.

First of all, the history of Christian faith has required that it develop an intense doctrinal specialisation which cannot but appear rather impersonal, abstract and intolerant when contrasted with spiritual experience. This doctrinal concern is typically evidenced in the need to define matters of faith, usually because of disputes and confusions within the Church. There comes a time when the teaching authority, using all the spiritual and intellectual help it can get, must say Yes or No on a given point. The classic instances are, of course, the Councils of Nicaea (325), defining, against those who taught that Jesus was less than God, that the Son is “one in being” with the Father. Then, very importantly for spirituality, the Council of Constantinople (381) defined, against those who supposed that the Spirit was merely a divine impersonal energy or a created force, that the Holy Spirit is truly divine, “coequal and coeternal with the Father and the Son.” Then Ephesus (431) proclaimed, against those who taught that Mary was the mother of Christ’s human nature only, that she was truly *Theotokos*, “Mother of God.” The Council of Chalcedon (451) completed this early development by distancing itself from two extremes, by defining that “One and the same, our Lord Jesus Christ, is one person in two natures, both truly divine and truly human.” The first centuries of Christian experience highlighted the necessity of this dogmatic mode of clarification. It was continued through to the Council of Trent (1545) in the face of the Protestant Reformation, and in Vatican I (1870) on the particular issue of papal infallibility. Interestingly, the Marian definitions of the Immaculate Conception (1850) and the Assumption (1950) evidenced a more celebratory kind of declaration, exalting both the transcendent initiative and eschatological fulfilment of the grace of God – in regard to Mary herself, and by extension to the whole Church whose Mother and exemplar she is. This latter type of definition is more clearly and positively linked to spirituality, as Jung notably appreciated.

It remains, however, that the need for clear cognitive meaning tended to make objectivity and coherence the dominant concern. Other possible ways of promoting the meaning the faith were downplayed, with the result that the full subjectivity of faith was not brought to expression. In fact, from the time of the Reformation on, the objective reality of grace was stressed against what was understood to be Protestant “subjectivism” with its emphasis on personal experience and “private interpretation” of the Scriptures. The fear of such subjectivism, real or imagined, unwittingly prejudiced an appreciation of the subjectivity of faith in its interior and experiential dimensions. That was left to the

devotional life of the faithful and mystical experience of great mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, with spiritual directors keeping a wary eye on the possibilities of delusion and self-indulgence. It is, therefore, is not without interest that the present Pope in his very first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*,¹⁰ sought inspiration in Vatican II to acknowledge dimensions of human subjectivity that had not previously figured in official documents. He began to speak of “appropriating” the meaning of faith in a manner that suggests that an interior and personal experience of the mystery of Christ was indeed inherent in Christian existence. Much later in the long list of his encyclicals, John Paul II speaks in the first pages of *Fides et Ratio* of the quest for truth “unfolding within the horizon of personal self-consciousness,”¹¹ even though he is careful to warn against collapsing such self-transcending subjectivity into subjectivism.¹²

This is not the time to give an account of a Lonerganian phenomenology of meaning, but it is pertinent to our theme to refer to the four dimensions he distinguishes. He treats first of all of the *cognitive* dimension of meaning, the objective shape of reality, the truth of things, e.g., Australia conceived as a legal, geographical and historical entity. Then, there is the *constitutive* function of meaning, directed not immediately to the objective reality, but to the human subject – meaning as it informs or indwells consciousness, to form a certain identity and self-understanding, e.g., what it means to be an Australian. Thirdly, there is meaning of a *communicative* type – meaning that forms, sustains and guides a given group in its communal life, e.g., the social and cultural fields of meaning that make Australians one national community. Lastly, there is *effective* meaning. It addresses the question of how all the above-mentioned dimensions of meaning inspire transforming conduct in regard to society, culture, the world itself. For example, being Australian is productive of law, culture and conscience, as it inspires commitment to issues relating to the ecological care of the environment, indigenous peoples, refugees, jobless and migrants. Given these four dimensions of meaning, as Australians, we inhabit, not only a country, but a complex field of meaning, and find in it an identity, social cohesion and common responsibilities within the global reality of the human race.

What has this to do with the Church and spirituality? As noted above, Christian communication, especially in the Catholic tradition, is a highly specialised discourse when it comes to cognitive meaning, but has lagged somewhat in the other dimensions just mentioned. It is more likely to speak of the Holy Trinity of three divine persons in one God, rather than these three divine persons indwelling the mind and heart of the believer. It is more likely to speak of Christ as the truth rather than as the way and the life. The rhetoric of spirituality, on the other hand, is very attentive to the constitutive, consciousness-affecting types of meaning, but often indetermined, at least in a methodological sense, about the cognitive content. But if faith is to seek understanding and promote its fullest “appropriation” in the way the Pope commends, it must do so by employing the fully panoply of possible modes of understanding; it must embody itself in every possible dimension of meaning.

When this does not happen, there tends to be (at least) two unrelated modes of discourse, with (at least) two groups of people talking past one another. Not much sense

¹⁰ (Sydney: Saint Paul, 1979), 30-33. See no.10, but note the preceding paragraphs for whole context, nos.8-9, and the sections that follow, nos.13-15, in which the accent is clearly on the meaning of revelation as it informs human consciousness. The Pope is commenting on what he terms a “stupendous text” from Vatican II, namely, *Gaudium et Spes*, no.22.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Sydney: Saint Pauls, 1998), no.1.

¹² *Fides et Ratio*, no.5.

can be expected from a conversation when one group is talking about spiritual experience often in its most exotic forms, and hears, or overhears, the Church authorities talking in a doctrinal mode. More to the point, Australians, especially those interested in the new spiritual movements, will hear Church leaders saying a lot about the sacredness of life, the integrity of marriage, the necessity of social justice, the dignity of the human person, and the evils of abortion, euthanasia and violence. What they tend not to hear, if only for the reason that it is seldom expressed, is anything dealing with the experience of God, the life of grace, the way of Christ, the practice of prayer, the Christian mystery of suffering and death, and the promise of eternal life. When well-intentioned people might expect the moral teaching of the Church to be objective, definite and all-encompassing, they must wonder about where it is coming from, and what it is leading to—the fundamental experience out of which it all emerges.

4. THE 'SPIRIT-UAL' SUBJECTIVITY OF FAITH

An inevitable question arises concerning the extent to which the “we” of the Church appreciates itself as a “Spirit-ual” reality. While the Church is an undeniable empirical presence in its social and cultural institutional form, the theological depth and breadth of ecclesial life is necessarily hidden. But need it be completely concealed? I am not sure how that question should be answered, but it does seem to be the time to emphasise the basic reality of Church’s existence in terms of the gift of the Spirit. Preceding, accompanying and always transcending all that makes up the conscious life, institutional forms and activities of the Church, the Holy Spirit is the animating principle – the “Lord and giver of life,” as the Creed expresses it. Paul can claim, “... no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). At the other pole of Christian experience, the Spirit is the gift that Jesus promises, “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). In reference to the Spirit that is to be given by the glorified Christ, those thirsting for eternal life are invited to come to him to quench their thirst, since it has been promised that “Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38-39. Cf. also 19:30, 34). Likewise, the gift of the Spirit leads to the community of faith into fullness of the truth revealed in Christ: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth... and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13). Doctrinally speaking, the Holy Spirit is the third divine person. But in the order of Christian experience, the Spirit can be said to be the *first* divine person, the indwelling personal gift through which believers recognise Jesus as the Word, and have access to the Father.

Such references suggest that the Spirit works in the interiority of faith, opening it to the fullness of revelation. Lonergan’s axiom is pertinent here: “Genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity.”¹³ There is no immediate leap from subjective awareness to the objective truth of things unless the self-transcending capacities of the subject are involved. In the unfolding of any human consciousness, these dynamics must include sense experience, imagination, feeling, questioning, understanding, reflecting, judging and deciding. With the gift of grace, believers live a Spirit-guided subjectivity which affects all their capacities to experience, understand and love. Through the interior gift of the Spirit, faith can appreciate the objectivity of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, along with the sacramental and ecclesial realities that mediate the gift of God. Indeed, the

¹³ B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 265, 292.

Church's doctrinal concern for objectivity must also be the fruit of its authentic subjectivity residing in a communal and individual conversion to the Gift of God. Unless the tradition, teaching and form of the institutional Church emerge from a consciousness indwelt by the Spirit, and unless this operates through the theological virtues and the gifts of the Spirit in all their variety, doctrinal objectivity degenerates into "dogma" in the modern, pejorative sense.

In other words, the constant pastoral imperative is to promote in the first place, neither an articulated dogmatic clarity, nor a spirituality of self-realisation or cosmic connectedness or ecological harmony, but a spirituality that is genuinely a "Spirit-uality." This does not consist in a cultivation of this or that experience or attitude, but in adoration of "the Lord and giver of life," "the third divine person." The Spirit's incalculable workings lead to an ever fuller apprehension of Christ and inspire intimacy with the Father, in this world and the next. Without that "Spirit-uality," the ecclesiastical fabric is soulless, and the Church can only appear as one more instance of "organised religion," perhaps of interest to the sociologist or anthropologist, but with no claim on the human heart.

Admittedly, here is another side to this matter. I suspect that those who are experiencing a spiritual awakening in a secular or non-Christian form, cannot imagine that there is a distinctively Christian consciousness – or "Spirit-uality," as I have been calling it. Could it possibly be, they might ask, that these dull "church people" actually experiencing "the truth that will set you free" (John 8:32), "the joy that no one can take from you" (John 16:22), "the peace that the world cannot give" (John 14:27), and the love that "nothing in all creation" can sunder or diminish (cf. Rom 8:37-39). Humility and discretion make it difficult to state that those outside the Christian experience do not share the gifted experience of those inside it, manifest in a consciousness indwelt, not by a spirit of fear and servility, but the Holy Spirit of freedom and intimacy with God (Rom 8:14-17). Christian experience has a distinctive cosmic sense also, as when Paul declares that the whole of creation is groaning in one great act of giving birth (Rom 8:18-25), that in Christ all creation coheres and finds its goal, that he is the at once the origin, the form and the first born of all creation (Col 1:15-17; cf. Also John 1:1-5).

It would be a matter of lamentation, I presume, to Church leaders and theologians alike, should those disaffected from the Church claim that they never met with such experiences in their episodic or even protracted encounters with Christian communities. But it would be most dispiriting if faithful Christians themselves were to lament that such "Spirit-ual" dimensions of their faith were a closed book to them. Clearly there is room for an examination of conscience, or, better, an examination of Christian consciousness – of which the moral dimension, conscience, is one aspect. In pastoral communication, it would be a good experiment to re-arrange the order of the Catechism of the Catholic Church by reversing the order of exposition, and beginning with last section, "On Christian Prayer," and then proceeding to liturgical, doctrinal and moral considerations. Such a move would put the whole exposition on a more experiential footing.

5. WHAT SPIRIT?

There is an even more sensitive point to be respected if a genuine conversation on the place of the Church in spirituality is to take place. What would be the response if the to-all-appearances spiritually backward "church people," speaking with humility but with unaccustomed directness, were to aver that the generalised spirituality now in vogue appeared to them as a kind of spiritual autism, a self-enclosure incapable of the ultimately

Other-ward ecstasy of adoration, self-surrender and praise.¹⁴ What if it were urged that this whole spiritual phenomenon were nothing more than the re-emergence of gnosticism, or at least a kind of elitist soul-culture amongst connoisseurs of special experience? I would hope that such questions would not stop the conversation. They arise, however, out of a long and sobering exposure to religious illusion and self-delusion. If religion is promoting neither a conversion beyond the idolatrous propensities of any culture, nor a moral conversion to collaboration in bring about the common good, nor an intellectual conversion to the objectivity that makes learning and discussion possible, the result can be spectacularly self-destructive.

Jacques Derrida, in his *Of Spirit*,¹⁵ cites these words:

The *spiritual world* of a people is not the superstructure of a culture, and no more is it an arsenal of bits of knowledge and utilitarian values, but the deepest power of conservation of its forces of earth and blood, as the most intimate power of emotion and the vastest power of disturbance of its existence. Only the spiritual world guarantees the people its greatness. For it imposes a constant decision between the will to greatness on the one hand, and, on the other, the *laissez-faire* of decadence, and gives its people to the march it has begun toward its future history.

The “spirituality” here referred to, contests a culture of utilitarian values and apathy. It calls on the ties of earth and blood, and the experience of feelings that inspire greatness of soul and energises progress into the future. However, this quotation is from Heidegger’s Rectorship Address in 1933 as he declared his allegiance to the Nazi movement. An aberration on the part of a great philosopher can serve as a timely warning against identifying spirituality too closely with a national identity. In this case as in others, appealing to spirituality solves nothing. It does however pose a question: what is the criterion by which all spirituality is judged? What kind of “spirit” is involved? The Christian experience of the Spirit is always subject to discernment, and that discernment must always take into account the “dangerous memory” of the Crucified, surrendered to death for the sake of God’s reign of peace and justice. Recent widespread interest in spiritualities linked to particular countries and cultures might do well to cultivate a “dangerous memory” of the “spirituality” of Nazi Germany. Even though there is so much to affirm and assimilate in recent studies of Australian spirituality, it is worth entertaining the possibility that one extremist group or another (an ultra-nationalist political party?) might annex “Australian spirituality” to its purposes. While such a possibility is unlikely, stranger and deadlier things have unfortunately happened.

John’s counsel is still pertinent: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). The concrete focus of such discernment in the self-giving love of Jesus is specified: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2). In the Gospel of John, there is another aspect of discernment relevant to our question. Jesus, speaking with the Samaritan woman, makes it clear that the worship the Father in Spirit and truth is not conditioned by any national, cultural and local factors: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John 4:21). I am not commending a fundamentalist reading of such a

¹⁴ See Tony Kelly, *An Expanding Theology: Faith in a World of Connections* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1993, rev. 2003) on the homepage accessed through Google: Anthony J. Kelly, CSsR), especially ‘The New Age Movement,’ 40-48, where I try to sketch out lines of dialogue with new currents of secular spirituality under some nine headings.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), esp. 36.

text, nor a generic spirituality uprooted from anywhere. Worshiping God “in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24) is related to faith in Jesus as “the saviour of the world” (John 4:42). But this does not mean that either such worship is outside place and time and culture, or that the world is a homogenous reality. If the world is to be saved and the worship is to be genuine, time and place and culture play their part, even if they do not limit the Spirit of God and the salvation Christ brings. But in view of the nationalism that can invade the catholicity of faith it is as well to note that the “Spirit-uality” that figures most prominently in the New Testament breaks out of the very conditions that current contextualised theologies and spiritualities are trying to commend (cf. The Pentecostal event as described in Ac 2:1-12).

As a result, the pastoral balance and the theological dialectic required in this situation is most challenging. There is a point where Paul, for example, can commend “spirituality” to his Philippians in the words, “Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8). Yet the same Paul, just a few paragraphs before, though uniquely proud of his share in the gifts of Israel, declares that he has come to regard “everything a loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:8; see the whole context, 3:7-11).¹⁶

CONCLUSION

This reflection ends with more questions than answers. Still I hope to have suggested some conversation-starters on a large and crucial issue, both for the Church and the proponents of the new spirituality. It strikes me that the questions and angles that emerge in reflections like this point to need for a new dimension of interior Catholicity. It is the need to put the “-holic” back into the “Catholic,” so that the subjectivity of faith will be more clearly acknowledged and promoted. It is more a question of the ecology of Church life, rather than suddenly choosing to promote subjectivity over objectivity, interiority over institution, consciousness over conscience, or Spirit over the Word incarnate. There is, of course, a risk in respecting new concerns and entering new conversations. In that case, confident surrender to the Spirit and a deeper adoration the divine “Breath of Life” will be the one thing necessary. More practically and pastorally, it will mean a second phase of reading the ecclesial documents of Vatican II, not as, it were, “from the outside in,” as objective doctrine, but “from the inside out,” as an invitation into new interior ecclesiality.¹⁷ For the People of God enjoying the gift of the Spirit, “spirituality” will always be too weak a word.

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¹⁶ For an outstanding treatment of this and other issues, see Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), esp. 158-170.

¹⁷ See first of all, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1988), 350-426. See especially chapter 5, “The Call to Holiness,” 396-402; and chapter 7, “The Pilgrim Church,” 407-413, and “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world,” *Gaudium et Spes*. no.22. I am thankful to Rev Dr David Pascoe for pointing out the possibilities here.

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In February 2004, Tony Kelly was appointed by His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the International Theological Commission.
