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Spirituality, History and the Church: A View from the Parish

ELIZABETH CULLING

Spirituality is in fashion. A quick glance in any Christian bookshop will confirm that it has become almost an industry in itself. There is an epidemic of literature, courses, retreats, aids and techniques, all claiming to help us draw nearer to God and discover our personal spiritual path. They vary considerably and it can be difficult for the uninitiated to find his or her way round the material, without a competent guide. What has the *God of Surprises* got to do with me? How should I *Live for a Change*? Is it important to be *Finding God in all things* and will *The Imitation of Christ* in my personal life make any difference?¹ For many people spirituality can mean something suspect, elitist or trendy, and it is therefore important to define at the outset what is under discussion.

The modern use of the term spirituality covers a very broad area, not necessarily Christian in content. In this article I am assuming a specifically Christian meaning of the word. By spirituality I am referring to the living out of one's belief about and experience of God. Geoffrey Wainwright calls it simply 'the combination of prayer and living.'² It is about living by the Spirit in a way that is both Christ-centred and connected with real life. It is thus not something reserved for an exceptional few. Every Christian has a spirituality whether or not he or she can articulate it. I grew up in a church which took biblical preaching very seriously. Those sermons, delivered from the dominating wrought-iron pulpit twice each Sunday were the foundation of my spirituality. It was further shaped by the youth culture of the seventies, by older Christians who were my mentors and by an avid appetite for reading.

Ponder for a moment your own spirituality. What have been the formative influences so far? To what extent do you prefer private communion with God to the corporate experience of worship? How do you pray? What do you know about the origin of your church tradition? Has any Christian literature from a period other than this century had an impact on your faith?

The varieties of spiritual experience

In recent times the notion of different types of spirituality has emerged, rather in the way that different theologies are often distinguished. Different spiritualities are related to certain groups within the Church or to particular

¹ Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Surprises*, DLT, London 1986; Francis Dewar, *Live for a Change*, DLT, London 1988; Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Finding God in all Things*, Fount, London 1987; Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Fontana, London 1963.

² Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold, eds, *The Study of Spirituality*, SPCK, London 1986, p 592.

periods of Church history or to distinctive traditions. The distinction normally lies in the methods or techniques employed in helping people relate their faith to prayer and daily life. This has become especially important in modern approaches to spirituality because of increased awareness of human psychology. Different people operate in different ways, and therefore it is argued that there is no one correct way to pray.

Since the western world has changed so much and so quickly during this century, it is small wonder that there is a proliferation of books and approaches to spirituality. Some welcome it all with open arms without asking too many questions about the underlying assumptions of what is available, while others view it as a conspiracy of the New Age, or a sell-out to the self-fulfilment and individualism of modern western culture.

In this article, I wish to propose that we need a biblical spirituality, and one that is applicable. One possible way forward is to go back! The Church needs to rediscover the spirituality of older traditions, not in order to escape, but to learn and grow.

Why look back?

Why is there such an explosion of interest in spirituality at the present time? Is it entirely due to the Church capitulating to New Age influences? Or could it be a cry for spiritual nourishment which many are failing to find within the life of the Church? Among the vast array of books available on the market there are many which draw wholly or in part on the history of Christian spirituality. I want to suggest that the resurgence of older traditions is both an encouragement and a warning to us: an encouragement because it indicates that people are concerned to find a Christ-centred spirituality in continuity with the historic faith of the Church; a warning because when people look back it often indicates that they are not finding what they need in the present. So this resurgence is to be welcomed in both cases. Ways which have been tried and tested may provide a useful litmus test to assess what is of value in modern spirituality. They may also instruct us as to how to forge an authentic spirituality for our own times. As we consider what has helped Christians live out the life of faith in various situations and at different times, we may gain new insights into today's needs.

The material considered here is not a comprehensive survey. It represents a personal view of the value of some of the material available, and how it might be used in the parish. My choice has been governed by two criteria: the need to be Christ-centred and biblical, both in content and method, and the need to find material that is relevant to the situations where we live and work.

Aims and objectives

We have two thousand years of Christian wisdom on which to draw, but how accessible is it to most people today?

In suggesting some possible ways of opening up the past resources for today's Church, there is an important point to remember. The aim is not to recreate the past. We are not trying, for example, to become Celts, or sixteenth century followers of St Ignatius in some romantic fashion. Even if

we desire it, we cannot get completely inside another world. In her introduction to *A World Made Whole: Discovering the Celtic Tradition*, Esther de Waal quotes the poet R.S. Thomas to make the same point: 'You can come in/ You can come a long way/ But you won't be inside.'³ So we cannot possess the past, but neither is it closed to us. There is something timeless and universal about Christian experience which gives an immediacy to writings from however long ago. Which Christian has not been able to echo St. Augustine's cry that 'our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee'? That, and scores of other experiences ring true for every age. Thus a good deal of classic Christian literature does not need interpretation.

There is a suspicion, not unfounded, that the present growth of interest in spirituality is a phenomenon confined to those with time, money and education. It is perhaps worth pointing out that this has always been the case in the history of the Church. An article which concentrates on literature might seem to reinforce this picture. The challenge, however, is to encourage the whole Church to grow in the likeness of Christ, and to find ways of helping it to do so. Having recognised the difficulties and the challenge, the literature remains the obvious place to begin, and we may find that it is less obscure and more adaptable than we thought.

Treasures old and new

There has always been an interest in the classics of Christian literature, such as *The Confessions* of St Augustine or St Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, but ask people what they have been reading recently and the answer maybe Hildegard of Bingen or something on the Beguines. There is an increasing number of new translations of older works to facilitate access. There are also anthologies with introductions which provide signposts for the reader. The series published by Darton, Longman and Todd entitled 'Enfolded in Love' presents selections from spiritual classics for daily reading in a very accessible form.⁴ In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster has written a guide to the classical spiritual disciplines, introducing each one himself and drawing widely from many traditions.⁵ The reader who wishes to follow these up thus has a context in which to do so.

Another approach is that of David Adam, whose series of books on Celtic Christianity aim to bring alive the spiritual world of the Celts.⁶ Through prayers which have survived from that time as well as those of his own creation, and through stories and imagery, the author re-creates the spirituality of the Celtic tradition in a way that seeks to be faithful to history and relevant to the contemporary world.

Some writers write from within a still living tradition and attempt to open it up to a wider audience. In *The God of Surprises* Gerard Hughes introduces the reader to the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola.⁷ Ignatian spirituality

³ Esther de Waal, *A World Made Whole: Discovering the Celtic Tradition*. Fount, London 1991, introduction.

⁴ Robert Llewelyn, gen ed, 'Enfolded in Love' series, DLT.

⁵ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1982.

⁶ David Adam, *The Edge of Glory*, Triangle/SPCK, London 1985; *The Cry of the Deer*, Triangle/SPCK, London 1987; *The Eye of the Eagle*, Triangle/ SPCK, London 1990.

⁷ See above n 1.

has become one of the most popular types of spirituality around today, but most Christians would find the original work extremely difficult to read.

Opening up the past

These represent some of the approaches to the huge legacy of spiritual writing available to the Church. It has already been pointed out that overemphasis on reading will reinforce the elitist image; it may also suggest that knowing about spirituality is more important than practising it. Few people are likely to settle down with Calvin's *Institutes* or William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, but they may still feel daunted by the sheer volume of spiritual writings available. There are other ways, however, of providing initial access to the spiritual riches of the Church's heritage, which may lead on to further exploration through books.

A sense of place may provide the way in; for example, in the northeast of England, it is not difficult to put people in touch with their Christian roots. Some of us may be able to use the building in which we meet to worship to introduce people to some aspects of spirituality. I mentioned the pulpit in my first church. Its bulk and position made a powerful statement about the centrality of the Word of God in that church's tradition. It was a feature worth pondering when thinking about the identity of that Christian community. There is far more to spirituality than words on a page. Features of older traditions are vividly expressed in art, music and architecture. Where books describing Luther's experience of God will remain a closed world for some people, his hymns, as he himself knew so well, convey his spirituality in a memorable and enduring way. They may cause us to take a fresh look at the impact of music today to see how it is shaping contemporary spirituality. The world of the Christian music and arts festival, Greenbelt, is more influential than most Christian literature, old and new, on today's young Christians in the U.K., and it will leave its mark on their spirituality. That is just one instance of how reflecting on older spiritualities can help us see current influences in the Church more clearly. Later in this article, we will consider how they may help us think through contemporary issues facing society.

Does your church have teaching series? What can we learn from the Reformers about living the great doctrines of the Scriptures, from St. John of the Cross about guidance, or from the Puritans about prayer? The possibilities concerning prayer itself are endless.⁸ Those leading congregational prayers could use anthologies of prayers from Christian history, enabling everyone to share in such resources. Lent might be a time for exploring silence and contemplative prayer together, two of the most prominent themes of contemporary spirituality.⁹

There are many people who want to pray but don't know how. What are we doing to help them find ways of communicating with God which suit their lifestyle? It might encourage a tired factory worker to hear about Brother Lawrence talking to God while he peeled the carrots for his commu-

⁸ Urban T. Holmes, *A History of Christian Spirituality*, Seabury Press, New York 1981, introduction.

⁹ See below.

nity, or hearten a harassed mother to learn of Susannah Wesley's special chair where she could sit undisturbed to pray among her seventeen children. When people ask for help in praying, they probably do not require a history lesson, but they may benefit from a sense of being connected with the communion of saints who have prayed down the centuries.

It is important to find a variety of ways to feed our spirituality with the Word of God, and to be prepared to try a different approach from time to time. Not everyone will find following a solid commentary through Kings and Chronicles a prayerful experience, and even those who make this a part of their spiritual discipline will occasionally grow dry. Instead of taking the usual lengthy passage, for example, it may be helpful to try the Benedictine way of praying the Scriptures. Read a portion of Scripture until you come to a verse or phrase which causes you to pause and take notice. Meditate on that verse, repeat it to yourself and turn it into prayer. In a world so full of words that we are advised to take out a correspondence course on speed-reading, a method advocating slow meditative reading which 'chews' on a word or phrase is welcome.

Praying the Scriptures is a spiritual discipline which goes back to the beginning of the Christian Church, and one which has been explained by many teachers at different times. Some of the older methods may sound obvious, but we so easily get stuck in the method we were first taught, and forget that there are alternatives. It is perhaps in this area that we find our richest store of treasure in the history of spirituality. Since it is here that we also find one of the most influential types of spirituality around at present, and one with its roots firmly in history, it is a point at which to pause.

Ignatian spirituality

For many who are familiar with the world of contemporary spirituality, the Ignatian method of meditation dominates the entire scene. But what has the sixteenth century founder of the Jesuits to say to us, particularly those of us who belong to the evangelical Protestant tradition? In those weekly sermons to which I keep referring, I was invited to re-live most of the Bible in my imagination. I shared the wanderings of the Patriarchs, tramped through the wilderness with Moses and the children of Israel, watched in awe as Jesus stilled the storm and stood with Mary at the foot of the cross. The imaginative re-telling of salvation history is as familiar to evangelicals as it is to those who have followed Ignatius' method of using the Gospels to contemplate the life of Christ. Ignatius' aim was to increase awareness of God, of self and of the world around, not for its own sake, but in order to become more Christ-centred. Gerard Hughes, Margaret Hebblethwaite¹⁰ and others have reinterpreted St Ignatius for today, in response to the pressing need for people to know God personally and make a real response in daily life. For many people unfamiliar with the Bible and with the idea of a personal relationship with Christ, the effect has been revolutionary. For others, where Bible study had become dry and intellectual, submitting the imagination to God in this way has breathed new life into their walk with God. Bearing in mind that it is no long term substitute for applying the mind

¹⁰ See above n 1.

to Scripture, I have found great benefits in using the Ignatian method with individuals and small groups in the parish. One woman recently confessed that although she had professed faith in God since childhood, she felt she did not know Jesus at all. By taking stories of Jesus from the Gospels and imagining herself as a participant, she discovered him as her personal friend.

Wider perspectives

Concentrating on personal prayer and relating to God is only one aspect of spirituality and never complete in itself. It is when we fail to see beyond this to the wider implications that spirituality can be accused of being inward-looking. The great traditions of the past have never regarded spirituality as a private matter between the individual and God. They have looked beyond to the world around and sought to equip the Church to be salt and light in whatever context it should find itself.

A glance at recurring themes in contemporary spirituality furnishes an important clue to the felt needs of people seeking a spirituality which is relevant for the modern world. I want to draw attention to four themes already touched on, and suggest that the resources of older traditions of spirituality may help us find our own way forward.

The four themes are the search for roots, combating the rampant individualism of modern society, exploring silence and solitude and developing a Christian mind on contemporary issues.

The search for roots

Just as many people today lack roots, a sense of community and the feeling of belonging to a wider family, so the Church has in many ways lost touch with its own roots, its consciousness of the communion of saints, and the riches of its traditions down through history. One of David Adam's motives for exploring the Celtic tradition is its native origin. The prayers in his first book *The Edge of Glory*,¹¹ were composed and used in the author's northern parish, where people could rediscover their Christian roots at first hand. The revival of spiritual traditions of the past is helping to recover a sense of identity in some measure, and should be welcomed for this, if for no other reason. It is especially important where people are coming to faith from outside the Church and have no background of Christian teaching on which to build. It is interesting that *Restoration*, the magazine of the Bradford House Church, ran a series on Church history a few years ago to show members where they had come from and where in the history of the Church they should look for their spiritual identity.

How much do we know about the roots of the Church to which we belong and how much do we care? It may seem a retrograde step to set out to discover what is distinctive about our own Church when the emphasis is so strongly on ecumenism, but as we often hear, unity does not mean uniformity. To be more aware of the historical strengths and weaknesses of the different traditions would benefit ecumenism far more than trying to ignore the past. Our parish church includes people who are deeply attached to their

¹¹ See above n 6.

roots in the *Book of Common Prayer* as well as a growing number of people who have no church background and no sense of connection with previous generations of Christians. We cannot appreciate one another's positions without some idea of the Anglican spiritual tradition which is both historical and on-going.

Individualism

One of the most serious criticisms of contemporary spirituality is that it encourages all the fascination with self-fulfilment exhibited by modern society. It appears that the aim of different techniques is, at best, to foster a cosy Jesus-and-me experience, or, far more sinister, to send the person on a search for the God-within-me, who takes on whatever attributes I choose. There may be some truth in both caricatures, and certain writers or even whole traditions may be cited to reinforce this view; but that should not blind us to the fact that for the most part, the spirituality of the past is firmly rooted within the Church, and bears witness to a much deeper sense of the corporate nature of the Christian life than is often the case today. Focusing on this may help us take a cool look at how much of our own culture we are absorbing in the search for a spirituality which speaks to today's needs. It is important not to dismiss the cry for recognition and personal meaning which is part of our individualistic approach to life. The Church must find ways of enabling individuals to find their identity within the body of Christ. A notable feature of contemporary spirituality is renewed awareness of the Orthodox tradition, which has a deep consciousness of the corporate Church. It may be that part of the West's interest is its own poverty where that corporate sense of the Church is concerned. Closer to home the community originally founded by Nicholas Ferrar in the seventeenth century has been revived to provide a witness to the New Testament meaning of *ecclesia*. Members live in the community and follow a common pattern of life and worship. As society becomes progressively less communal, the witness of places like Little Gidding is increasingly important and their spirituality a vital resource for the Church as a whole.¹²

Silence and solitude

Noisy activism is one of the hallmarks of our society. Many people are afraid of silence and find it hard to sit still, quiet and alone for any length of time. The clamour on the outside is all too often a means of hiding from the chaos within, and we cannot hope to hear God's voice unless we can reach a place of stillness. Yet first we have to learn the difference between loneliness and solitude. The saints of old knew this so well and have much to teach us about the value of silence and solitude and how to find them. The sayings of the Desert Fathers, despite the strange, and to us eccentric, habits of the monks themselves, contain an important message about the need for silence for our frenetic world.

In her book *Poustinia*, Catherine de Hueck Doherty writes that the modern world needs silence, solitude and the desert experience more than

¹² See *The Little Gidding Prayer Book*, SPCK, London 1986.

¹³ Catherine De Hueck Doherty, *Poustinia*, Fountain Books, Glasgow 1977.

the hermits of old.¹³ She goes on to explain that these are not necessarily places but states of mind, which can be found in the midst of the city and the everyday of our lives. We need to learn how to find and make use of these 'little pools of silence' and in very practical terms she invites us to explore the moments of solitude that God gives us. The end of this vital ingredient of spirituality is not personal satisfaction but to reach out to the world, a silence that 'will break forth in a charity that overflows in the service of the neighbor without counting the cost.'¹⁴

The Church is as guilty as the rest of society of an activism that does not allow space for God to speak. It is crucial that we recall the role of silence and solitude among the life of God's people. It is there in the life of Jesus, and is a central feature in the history of Christian spirituality. If the Church is to have a prophetic role in our own day, we need to hear God, and that means learning to be still in his presence.

Contemporary issues

By this I mean questions which arise in society, often political in nature, where the prophetic voice of the Church is called for. Recently there has been the environmental issue, but we might add other matters such as attitudes to wealth and war. These latter examples have always exercised the spirituality of the Church, and from the Fathers onwards there is much to guide how we should pray and act.

One issue of the utmost importance to the Church at this time is the growing secularisation of society. It is directly relevant for the Decade of Evangelism. We live in an increasingly pagan society, for while Christianity is being marginalised, interest in the supernatural is flourishing.¹⁵

The spirituality of the Celts took seriously the reality of evil and the need to combat it. Their conscious battle with supernatural forces is echoed in their prayers, St. Patrick's Breastplate being a well-known example. We may not be called to undergo the 'red martyrdom' which was a real possibility for them, but there are enough similarities between our situation and theirs to remind us that we cannot adopt a comfortable, flabby kind of spirituality and expect to be effective. The Celtic mission which brought Christianity to so much of Britain may still have something to say to the Church's mission today.

Another issue affecting both society and the Church is the environmental one. The rediscovery of Celtic spirituality has produced some interesting reflections on this question. The deep consciousness of creation present in Celtic Christianity, and its awareness of the power of God in creation, seems to speak right into the heart of the contemporary environmental crisis. Where the contemporary Church has often been slow to give a lead, the historic faith has provided resources to help Christians regain a more biblical view of creation and understand their place within it.

In drawing on the historic traditions of Christian spirituality in such a wide-ranging fashion, it is inevitable that a one-sided view of the past is sometimes created. Certain truths may be selected to make a point while

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p 21.

¹⁵ See esp. the chapter 'Cliffs of Fall' in Adam, *The Cry of the Deer*, p 111ff.

overlooking other equally important aspects of a particular tradition and the result is historically inaccurate. Indeed some of the literature around is grossly unrepresentative of the traditions it is supposedly describing. The Celtic tradition and its stance on creation is a case in point. It is no reason, however, for choosing to ignore or mistrust the past. If we find older traditions cited in support of unorthodox ideas, we may want to check out those claims in a wider context. Does Celtic spirituality really proclaim the essential goodness of creation, for example? Or is this portrayal the result of a selective reading of texts? In fact the Celts were thoroughly orthodox concerning creation, sin and redemption, because their spirituality was biblical and Christ-centred. For the most part we cannot hope to be able to check everything for ourselves. We may trust those who write from within a still living tradition to have a greater understanding of the breadth of their own spirituality and use our discretion in selecting sources for our own purposes.

Ultimately the test for the Christian is not how good a historian the writer is, nor that something is old and possibly a classic, but whether it glorifies God. So we may ask the same questions of spirituality, ancient and modern, that we would ask of anything else. Is it Christ-centred? Is it biblical? Does it build up? Does it have something to say to my situation?

Recently I visited a building in York which was described as the skilful use of modern and traditional materials and crafts. The result was a beautiful whole as well as being functional, not an anachronistic attempt to reproduce the past, yet holding on to what had been tried and tested. That seems a worthy aim for Christian spirituality at the end of the twentieth century.

The Revd Dr Elizabeth Culling is assistant curate in the parish of South Cave and Ellerher with Broomfleet, Humberside.