

BISHOPS CONFERENCE COMMITTEE FOR SPIRITUALITY
Consultation March 2007
Key Note Presentation by Sister Diane Reynolds rsa

Recognising a Divide? - 'Painting the landscape'

As I am going to be talking essentially out of my personal experience, it is probably important before painting the Landscape to 'sketch' the kind of experience from which the question of 'recognising a Divide' comes in the light of my experience.

I would already have to add that those involved in the questions surrounding spirituality today are themselves very divided when it comes to the question of there being a divide between religion/Church and Spirituality...! (*Romanes Lecture. Oxford 18th November 2005 – 'Religious Lives' - Rowan Williams*)

- I have worked in the area of 'Spirituality' (and we could spend all day trying to come up with an agreed definition) for the past 40 years.....

But If you put the word 'Spirituality' into a web search engine it will come up with over fifteen million results.

Just for today I would like to offer just 2 definitions of what is understood by spirituality that maybe we can work with:

Canon Julia Butterworth – Canterbury - Diocesan advisor in Spirituality

'Spirituality is part of all of us. It is, quite simply, our relationship to God. If we accept that every human being, however young or old, sick or well, intelligent or disabled, is in relationship with God, whether they are consciously aware of it or not, then all of us have a spirituality. God loves us, his spirit wants to pray in us.' Rochester Diocesan Link March 2007

Philip Sheldrake - University of Durham, Lampeter and past president of the International Society for the study of Christian Spirituality

'...It is possible to suggest that the word 'spirituality' refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live. In other words 'spirituality' is some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it to achieve full potential' A Brief History of Spirituality

My experience in the area of Spirituality – is 20 years working with the Youth in Taize and spending time preparing Taize European Meetings for Youth in many countries both in Eastern and Western 'community in London. In the past 12 years I have been involved in giving Retreats, Quiet Days, Spiritual Accompaniment, Facilitation, and co-ordinate the running of 'The Centre' a place of hospitality at Edenbridge, where people come for all sorts of reasons, all concerned with Spirituality, I work with 2 other sisters from my own Community and an ecumenical team, that also had an Outreach Programme.

What 'the Centre' provides

- It responds to a need today in providing a non threatening place of space and openness
- Hospitality and freedom to explore, an open programme.
- Different kinds of spaces to reflect and pray
- A place of Listening and confidentiality – that is anonymous
- A combination of simplicity and beauty, lack of clutter
- A place where people can just simply come into contact with themselves and discover more about God or Other in their lives and in Life in general.
- Beautiful gardens and grounds to explore or simply 'rest in'.

My other areas of experience come from my involvement in the area of reflection and research in the many aspects of Spirituality.

- MA in Christian spirituality, at Heythrop, my final module of study and my dissertation - looking to see is there such a thing as defining a criteria for a Healthy Christian Spirituality.
- I represent the Conference of Bishops on a variety of Ecumenical committees, all

involved with Spirituality:

So what I am going to be saying today comes from quite a lot of reading, a lot of listening to individuals and groups as well as 'sitting on committees' as well as being involved directing our Retreat House, to which people come from all walks of life.

At the end I will illustrate the more theoretical approach by sharing some of the stories of people with whom I am in contact. The fact that I belong to a Religious Community also means also that I can sit 'more lightly' in relationship to our attachment to the local Parish.

Belonging to a Religious Community enables us to have a certain distance from the Institutional Church - whilst remaining firmly rooted in it – allowing for a certain freedom of movement and exploration. The people that come to us know that they can be anonymous, share their story, and have personal space to reflect on their lives without any commitment, or confrontation with the clergy or Church authority - they many never come again, or they may decide to come back frequently, as is often the practice, as they encounter and build up a sense of belonging and 'Home'

This would be true of Taize too.... for many young people seeing Taize as a second home, the place of an initial awakening experience of God – 'a shock of meaning' as Brother Roger would say.. and as one young person expressed it as their 'spiritual grandmother'!

The aim of this introduction using 'broad-brush strokes' is simply to awaken us to today's reality which is one of constant movement and change in all walks of Society. It is into this same movement that we find the arena of Church, the dilemma or divide between Religion and Spirituality, between being a religious person who goes to Church and the spiritual person who doesn't. We only have to look around us to see that there is little stability in any walk of life, and in contrast a frenetic legalisation of everything to protect the human being within this society with the paradox of the detriment of the quality of human life, and integrated well-being.

Within this context there is a paradox in that many people have started another kind of journey – an interest in their what we can call their 'inner journey', their spiritual life, seen in a seeking of meaning, new values, ways of being together in a common purpose, exploring mystical experiences. And this journey is being embarked upon by those who have deserted the institutional Church alongside those who have never been to Church, and have no prior knowledge of Christianity.

We have developed a people of 'critique' and constant questioning and analysis, that no longer tolerates mere acceptance of a so called Truth but we live in a society of personal experience and tasting the abundance of all that is on offer, and there is so much out there that draws, seduces and conquers.

So today, I come with the big brush to paint the spiritual landscape, afterwards you can add the details to the canvas, coming from such a diversity and richness of so many different parts of the country and dioceses and your specific experience of Church in this country. This is just a starting point for further reflection – you may hear nothing new from me, or it could be that all is new, or at least the angle from which I come – depending on where you are coming from. You may, or may not agree, or what I say may be very much part of your own experience, or not at all your experience.

That is not the essential - the important thing is to react from your own experience - and bring to your group your unique own understanding of what is happening or what is not happening in this area of Spirituality today, that has brought you here, in your relationship to the local Church/Diocese.

So what are we about?

I stood here about a year ago – and since then I feel the conversation and the landscape has already changed – in all sorts of ways, as the speed of life moves even faster, and as people have less time and are becoming more stressed.

And when we think of 'Church life' for want of a better word it is essential to situate 'Spirituality' within the wider context of what is going on for God's people in the afore

mentioned Society - which is one of constant movement and change, lack of stability and meaning, of broken commitment, or simply being unable to commit, and for many the absence of a sense of belonging.

Yet Spirituality in its widest sense is becoming one of the most talked about word, and is certainly the 'in thing' for the moment.

Yet what we are concerned about isn't just any kind of spirituality!

Our Spirituality is about Someone - about a God who through the Incarnation took on human form in the presence of Jesus Christ – offering to lost humanity a new way of loving and being loved.

This isn't just any kind of Spirituality?

And certainly I feel that what a lot of people are experiencing in all sorts of ways and through all sorts invitations to places and exotic countries often at a very great cost, has nothing at a first glance to do with the Christian religion. Yet we need to remind ourselves, that God works in mysterious ways and can reveal love through anything if there is a deep down desire to want to know God. In no way can the Church contain or captivate the Spirit purely for its own ends. The wind blows where she wills!

But we need to remind ourselves too that not all spirits are Good spirits, and they need testing. Today, there is a very strong denial of the existence of evil.

One piece of research I did over a year ago was in the largest Waterstone's in London where I was doing a survey on the books in the section of 'Mind, Body and Spirit' section - only to discover that the largest selection of books available, shelf after shelf were on Paganism and Witchcraft, and Taro cards, and angels.

We complain that religion is off the map – less and less people are going to Church yet looking at the statistics of those who watched the so called 'new types of Religious' programmes today interest in the Spiritual has never in recent years been so great....

More and more television programmes are about peoples 'spiritual' journey... the Monastery, the Convent, the Spiritual Shopper and now the Muslim experience of the Retreat in Andalusia.... plus many other programmes, looking at what people believe, the place of faith... the personal journey.

Interestingly the three programmes of the Monastery, the Retreat and the Convent were all situated in a 'belonging' place providing a common identity, a radical, alternative experience – so different from the consumer world and the individualistic trip. All three experiences were centred on relationships of people living together, of lasting out in the experience, persevering, yet at the same time the importance of being accompanied, listened to, valued, not judged, accepted for who they were – yet challenged, some of their behaviour being unacceptable, and not tolerated by the group. Each experience had its own guru... In fact having briefly watched 'Big Brother' and other common experiences of living on a desert island – this was in fact the 'spiritual version', of some of the other quite vulgar programmes on common living .

And what about the adverts of today when there are all sorts of spiritual connotations - even the names of perfumes like infinity, the beholder, contemplative moods - and you haven't to read very far in any daily paper without finding some story that will have a religious or 'spiritual content.

At the official level - there are a number of pieces of research today on Church Membership or lack of, both statistical and analytical as to why aren't people going to Church:

I only have to look at a handful of books sitting on my study shelf:

- David Hays – '**Understanding the spirituality of people who don't go to Church**', a piece of research coming out of the Adult's Spirituality Project at the university of Nottingham 2000

He has recently published another book: '**Something there' – the biology of the human spirit.**

- Another piece of research by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead '**The Spirituality Revolution' – why religion is giving way to spirituality** stemming from a piece of research

that took place in Kendal.

- The same title of a book by David Tacey and Australian with the sub title of **The emergence of contemporary spirituality.**

- Many books now look at the history of Spirituality trying to put into context what is happening today - the latest is that of Philip Sheldrake – **A brief History of Spirituality**, at the end of the book Sheldrake briefly tackles what he sees as the 'sharp and unhelpful distinction often made between 'spirituality and 'religion'. Another book by Richard Woods a revised edition in 2006 has the title of **Christian Spirituality – God's presence throughout the ages.**

Then we come across other titles such as : **Soul Spark – a course exploring Prayer and Spiritual Growth**, a Grove book Spirituality series, by Nick Helm and a more recent book looking again at research and statistics **Christian Roots, contemporary Spirituality** by Lynda Barley in the Series Research and Statistics by Church House Publishing. **On the Way to Life – A study** by Heythrop Institute for religion, Ethics and Public Life also offers a very good Part I on the Significant Elements in Cotemporary Culture, again examining this question of Religion or spirituality.

Another and final one: by John Drane entitled: - **Do Christians know how to be Spiritual – the rise of new spirituality and the mission of the Church?**

So what's this all about?

As much as we read in the Church media, of less people going to Church, of Church numbers dwindling, of crisis, of scandal, of division.... the paradox is that we see an ever greater desire in people seeking alternative experiences as they embark on their own Spiritual journey..... seeking for something Other that is radically different from the lifestyle of the consumer, the tendency towards individualism of today. But people also want quick answers they are looking for a fast food Spirituality that can quickly satisfy and this is as much in the Spirituality Arena, as in all the other areas of life today... waiting is becoming not only an intolerable experience but unknown to many... even to coming on retreat people want to come now!!!

I feel very strongly that we cannot isolate what is happening in the Church with that of the world and our particular society. When the comment of so many people is that Church/ religion is no longer relevant to their lives, they don't appear to be able to make the connection any more, and yet their main concern is Life and their relationship to life - and our Christian belief is about life, but not any kind of life. Their thirst and hunger remain... and dissatisfied with what the Church offers or doesn't offer the search takes them elsewhere.

What is at stake for us, where's the question?

How can we once more become a people passionate for life in Jesus Christ?

How can we attract as if for the first time others to want to desire to know the abundance of life, given in Christ, that gives essence and meaning to all we are and do.

It is life that interests people today it is there that the Christian message has to find its incarnation, enabling people to develop their personal relationship with God, and others. We need to recognise that this is not only through the sacramental life - although the sacramental life is an intrinsic part of our loving of God and God's love for us – but that is not enough, it is not the whole - but a part of the loving expression - first and foremost of a God who has created and loved them, who gives life, breath and meaning, and sense to their story. We need to help people to meet Christ as Another human being, and it is only from that personal, unique love of God for each one of us that our Christian commitment and the sacramental life can take on any true meaning – or it will simply remaining an exercise in obedience out of fear to a dogma and a having to believe.

What about the antichrist**** Text of the '**Cardinal warns against the values of the Antichrist. '(The Tablet 10th March 2007- The Church in the World)**

Certainly the pattern and shape of life today is not encouraging or conducive to people wanting to go to Church. It's rather like 'mind the gap' and in many places you will find more people in Tesco's and Waitrose... to name a few – than in Church on a Sunday. The icon and ritual of life can now be found on the football pitch and game.... or other sports, the icons are numerous and the rituals enjoyed.

Much of what was exclusive to the Church in its rituals of candles, incense, and chants and flowers and singing have now spilled out of the Faith context and been taken over, owned and secularised by society, consequently Church rituals have lost their sacramental meaning.

The incense, the candles, the dimmed lighting, the Gregorian chant are now part of the ritualising of the evening bath, the therapy of body and spirit, and have no relation to the Church at all.

Yet people need ritual... Think of what happens now when someone dies in a car accident, the place of the accident become the place of ritual... the shrines are about ordinary people, the silence and funeral celebrations bring in the crowds at other times in Church never seen or heard of.... Its all about relationships and people. Loved people.

So why all the 'noise' about Spirituality?

I would like to suggest that the rapid changes in the way we live today, where people find themselves lost, stressed, confused as they search to find a meaning in life, as they encounter the disappearance of human values and reference points - has had a cultural shock to our inner system – let's call it for want of a better word - the soul...

The soul has become dry and thirsty to the point of crying out. It is saying it needs help it wants to 'stop', to get off from the eternal swings and roundabouts that continually turn in on themselves and have no destination. The soul seeks to withdraw, and in a certain sense take stock of what is actually happening to life, and frequently this soul has no idea where to begin its journey. This is the journey embarked upon by those who go to Church because they feel they should – but remain 'thirsty' and consequently seek elsewhere, alongside those who no longer go to Church, as well as those who have never been to Church called the seekers, but they are not always sure what they are seeking a something within – can we call it the movement of the Spirit – as people seek 'something more in life....

.... we only have to look at our consumer society to see how it has jumped into the arena at the first opportunity to satisfy the soul in some immediate way as it seeks to quench its thirst. And our consumer society had certainly provided a real menu of all sorts of spiritual food.... people are tasting and drinking from all sorts of well-pools everywhere... even if it means travelling thousands of miles to experience the mystical difference....

People are experiencing all kinds of menus of spirituality nourishment, without necessarily quenching or satisfying their thirst as frequently they have no-one alongside them to listen and to review the journey.

And maybe one of the challenges to the Church today is that we need to denounce that not all spiritual food is good and that there is such a thing as a 'spiritual indigestion'... not everything on offer in the arena is good.

And where is the Church in that arena? has she something to offer something to say.... ? Does the Church offer challenge, discernment, choice an alternative.... 'Or has spirituality left the Church'?

What is certain today as we explore all the avenues of life with a very individualistic attitude of the 'satisfying me'.... is that the Church can no longer offer the same spiritual nourishment to everyone. What is offered by the Church which is also part of the larger spiritual menu can be enjoyed by some but not all the same 'food' is going to be enjoyed by everyone

So where does the official Church stand?

Is it in even in the spirituality arena at all or when we speak of people on the margins maybe it is the Church itself that is on the margins today?

So what are the questions?

What are the challenges that face Church today where an ever increasing number of people seek a deeper quality of their spiritual life seen as an integral part of their everyday existence that gives it meaning and value, and no longer something apart?

One of the biggest dangers on the spiritual journey is that it can easily become and end in itself, when it is in its essence concerned with the nourishing of our relationship with God who lived – 'in a real' world... who through his intimacy with the Father was surrounded by the crowd, who 'hung' on His words.

Whose ministry was to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God – essentially a mission based spirituality – proclaiming good news to the poor, telling prisoners that they are free, that the blind can see and daring to unveil all the areas of injustice that he encountered.

Is this is the Christian spirituality that we are about?

I would like to finish with a few stories just to show how this world of the spirit, is as diverse as people and cannot be contained... the spirit moves where she wishes..

Imelda Bush - Catholic mother and grandmother

- Catholic background, Irish parents. Imelda goes to Church from time to time.
- Catholic education with nuns – well-known school – loved school, but it was also a place of fear and dread, strict, lots of pumped in religion – but at the same time she admits it gave her good foundation.

- First marriage annulled, second ended in separation, new partner.

So what has helped her through very great difficulties – where she has felt very broken and depressed - essentially her relationship with God, her Trust, God was always there. Not religion because as she expressed that it is man-made, Imelda doesn't trust religion but believes very much in the God within her and the God without. 'Spirituality is a very different thing..... it is my personal living relationship with God'. Prayer also very important to her, but she finds more nourishment going to Aylesford, on retreat, art history, Assisi – visiting spiritual places, and being on her own.

Yasha – Japanese 22years - Photography student living with us

- Her dissertation for her degree in photography trying to portray visually the meaning of what religious life in a Community is all about, and hopefully through this attempt to dismiss the myth that religious life is first and foremost for most people connected with the religious habit.

- Yasha became a Christian whilst studying in Devon, had a Baptist friend, went to the Baptist Church, and was baptised a Christian. Whilst in London she worships in St. James Piccadilly, but is beginning to find it a bit 'special'. she attends our Community prayers and Eucharist.

Yasha shares with me her faith journey we meet regularly, at present she is not sure where her 'homing in God is'... she will take time to search. Last week back in London she sent me an e-mail saying now she had been to a Catholic Church that I had suggested.... and liked it!

Conversations:

- **On the train** between London Bridge and Beckenham – young black female and male students engrossed in the deepest of conversations about the meaning of life and the importance of serving others, but not knowing how to begin, where to go, who to talk to where to start... maybe go to Africa or Latin America where there is a need?

- **In Costa café** – 4 young mothers with children, having coffee and sharing together, then suddenly I heard one of them say 'shall we pray now'.... and she introduced intercessory prayer..... while the others became silent amidst the music and noise of the coffee place.

- **Auntie Joyce** - My aunt a wealthy 83 year old, widowed has just moved to a smaller 4 bedroom house just opposite the Anglican Church. She rarely goes to Church, but likes to talk about God, especially when I visit her... she converses to God but doesn't feel she can pray.. Since moving and realising that she is getting old, has decided to go to Church occasionally – to make the link again with God. Likes the Church and the people there, at present there is no priest.

Yoga groups at our Centre

All professional young men and women, most of whom have had a religious upbringing, but no longer go to Church, have as they will say moved on, experienced other ways, especially in the area of meditation and stillness -and have opted for Yoga... quiet, and meditation, certain discipline, like to discuss religious and spiritual things, compare.... Spend long times over meals socialising and having deep 'spiritual conversations' some join us for our Sunday Eucharist.

Points for consideration and conversation:

- Church Buildings – a place of welcome, joyful, prayerful, visually focused on what 'God is about?

- The importance of being welcomed and to belong, sense of community

- the place of beauty and simplicity – the lack of clutter – visual space, flexible seating to suit different generations
- within the services the place of silence and words, and participation
- the reminder of 'Godly things!' – books, pictures, rituals, prayers whose practice is understood, by the congregation.
- The importance of a place where there is a community that prays where 'I can drop in and out', and feel part of it, without committing myself.

The Spiritual journey

- The 'gift' of journeying with a 'wise' companion
- Where does the seeker actually hear the story of Jesus? where are the teachers?
- The Pick and mix – in all aspects of society as well as in spirituality
- The individual journey, but the importance of the common journey, and its historical roots, the place of **good tradition**, not to be confused with **traditional**.
- the danger of spirituality being an individualistic, privatised affair, a way of self-fulfilment, as an end in itself.
- the danger of 'spirituality' being a form of escape and unconnected to the reality of life today and becoming dis-incarnated.

Short Exercise before going into groups.

In no more than 40 words... (Allow yourself 5 minutes for this exercise)

Imagine you are being asked by someone who is not a Christian to explain

'What is your understanding of this much talked about word – 'Spirituality'?