

Taking the Incarnation Seriously

Non verbal communication of spirituality within prayer and liturgy

There are mixed feelings about spirituality in the Church: On one hand it offers personal energy and commitment to faith. On the other hand it is difficult to contain and direct within a Christian community. But spirituality is part of being human and must have been embraced by Christ in becoming one like us. Therefore there must be ways in which this area of experience can be given space in the life of the Church. This extended reflection attempts to explore some links between religion and spirituality. It ends with a specific reflection on multiple intelligence theories as one incarnational way of thinking about what we do, as Church, to feed the souls of baptised Christians.

Spirituality has many definitions and whole books have been written on what it might mean. One of the simplest definitions is offered by Evelyn Underhill, a modern mystic of the 20th century who described spirituality as:

*Direct intuition or experience of God.*¹

If spirituality is the direct access to experience of God, those of us who are religious need to ask ourselves what religion is for. If individuals can access God in their own experience why go to church, why bother with shared prayer and liturgy? This is a key question behind the changing face of religious practice in Britain today. How we answer that question depends upon how we view the purpose of religion in our own cultural setting. The way that religion is presented through media and even by the Church itself has led to a distorted image of religion which separates experience from faith.

One favourite question that opens up this area is expressed as follows:

Ford make motor cars, Warner Brothers make films, what does the Church do?

This question has been difficult to answer especially since the fear of hell and judgement seems to have faded in some peoples' minds. Now many associate religion with words such as ritual; boring sermons; old women in black hats; hypocrisy and intolerance.² In contrast, the word *spirituality* evokes in people a sense of an inner life; peace; gentleness; sincerity and unity. The media, and in many ways the Church itself, has presented *religion* in terms of authority, structures and an exclusivism that contrasts with the apparent open-minded tolerance of the present age. It seems therefore that *religion* and *spirituality* are opposing approaches to the experience of the sacred.

The distinction that people make when they say, "I am not religious, but I am spiritual" emerges from a culture that wants to separate two experiences that really belong together. The media view of religion as exclusive, authoritarian and hypocritical makes a caricature of religion. When the Church pronounces its truth without listening, it too reinforces that same prejudice within the culture. When liturgies are celebrated without reference to the experience of individual worshipers, the gap between spirituality and religion widens. Religion, at its best, is a seamless experience of God that has an inner and an outer dimension; a personal and communal experience of God that leads into wisdom, ethics, self sacrifice and loving kindness. It is a far cry from the hypocritical and authoritarian image with which it is burdened in contemporary culture.

¹ Mystics of The Church page 9 Clark Books Cambridge 1925

² See David Hay The Spirit of The Child page 6 Jessica Kinglsey London 1998

Religion has many dimensions that include the doctrinal and ritual elements that are the source of much tension and disenchantment for many people; but there are other dimensions of religious experience that also need to be recognised and given due space in the religious life of Church communities. Some of these dimensions are ways of feeding the spiritual hunger that many people seem to be feeling in our secularised culture. Ninian Smart describes seven dimensions of religion as follows. Which areas do you see as over-emphasised and which ones seem, to you, to be under represented in your experience of Church?

Belief	Doctrine
Ritual	Liturgy
Experience	Feelings
Myth	Stories
Ethics	Morality
Community	Institution
Art	Aesthetic ³

These dimensions are not isolated and unrelated to each other but are parts of an organic whole, each affects the other. Beliefs are expressed in rituals, art expresses the myths of our religion and ethics directs the way we live as a community. The apparent dominance of doctrine and moral issues in Church and in contemporary media may be masking the greater importance of the individual feelings and stories that people need, to make sense of their own experience and so achieve the fullness of life promised in the Gospel. In a culture that can be toxic to religion it is easy for a Church to become defensive and retreat into older certainties. As one writer has commented ‘the last act of many struggling organisations is to rewrite the rule book.’ Defensiveness in the Church can lead to a fear of listening because it might imply a loosening of control or threaten a relativism that undermines the way that faith is traditionally expressed. In that situation, the Church might find itself using people to shore up old structures rather than inviting them to explore the path to fullness of life in Jesus.

Ninian Smart sees Myth and Experience as the food upon which the other dimensions feed.⁴ Perhaps the weakened state of our Church is the result, not of lack of doctrinal, ethical or liturgical life, but a failure to embrace the feelings and stories of the Church community in their search for meaning. The experience of Jesus is the starting point for all Christianity. Our faith is founded upon a direct intuition and experience of God in Jesus. In sharing this experience of God, as Father, Jesus spent time listening, telling stories from life and opening up the experience of the ordinary as a pathway to an encounter with God as Father. For Jesus too, experience fed the more formal dimensions of religion.

The interior and exterior horizons of individual experience have widened in the post-modern era to include psychological mind-sets, new-age thinking, multicultural experience, scientific development and fundamental atheistic-thinking. All these approaches effect changes in the world-view of individuals, who need help to find meaning in the many local and limited models of life that these approaches offer. The Gospel, presented sympathetically within this complex experience of world views, has the power to

³ Ninian Smart *The Religious Experience (of mankind)* Prentice Hall 5th Edition 1969

⁴ Ninian Smart *The World Religions* Page 13 Cambridge University Press 1998

establish a new balance between the inner and outer world and heal the wounded sacramental imagination of the Church.

In our present cultural setting, perhaps we need to open up the stories and feelings of ordinary people within the framework of liturgy, ethics and doctrine in a way that reunites and heals the apparent division between spirituality and religion. That will mean living the tension between tradition and the tentative explorations of religious experience, an experience that is still searching for a language that can link life to Gospel-patterns of meaning. The observations and suggestions that follow are an attempt to explore how such an incarnational and experiential approach might be opened up within and beyond the normal patterns of Church life.

Cues for Church from Spirituality.

As interest in formal religious practice has declined in this culture, there has been a corresponding expansion of interest in spirituality as a personal experience. The disenchantment with more formal expressions of religion is probably an expression of a more mystical approach to life that will eventually renew religious life within this culture. I want to quote Joseph Campbell to begin with in order to set the context for the re-energising of an incarnational approach to a personal spirituality in and beyond Church. His description of a cultural wasteland might well describe the situation we face, as a Church, at present:

*The wasteland is any world in which force and not love, indoctrination and not education, authority and not experience prevail in the ordering of lives, and where the myths and rituals enforced and received are unrelated to the inward needs and potential of those upon whom they are impressed.*⁵

Our churches become wastelands when we fail to connect to the inner lives of individuals and groups that are on a search for new reasons for living and hoping.⁶ I want to propose that in providing spiritual experiences in a religious setting three areas of human experience need to be highlighted in our culture at this time:

Feelings

Personal Journey

Awareness

These are not mutually exclusive areas of lived experience, they each overlap and help to bridge the space between the inner and the outer aspects living. They are the tools for the construction of meaning which has become an increasingly personal task in our present culture. They are also the pathways that lead back into the experience of Jesus as it is traced out in the Gospels. It is that Gospel, when it is engaged with the inner life, that provides a common language to express the Spirit within each of us that cries out Abba, Father.⁷

Feelings

Whether we like it or not feelings have become an increasingly important marker of authentic experience in our culture. As an educator of the young the heightened sense of

⁵ Joseph Campbell *Creative Mythology* page 388 Penguin Middlesex 1976

⁶ We can justly consider that the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping. (Gaudium et Spes 31)

⁷ See St Paul's letter to the Galatians 4:6

feeling in young people is clear and it is seen as validating a whole range of activity for better or for worse. People define themselves, at times, by the way they feel and in some situations seem to become their feelings. This identification leaves them open to the emotional excess that traditional religion has always tried to contain and focus. When the general reports of religion in our culture are peppered with words such as 'boring' and 'empty' it could be that the feeling area has been too tightly controlled in our Church culture and needs loosening up.

The *feeling* dimension of experience holds an energy that promises renewal and flexibility. It also opens up the inner life of an individual to moments of awe, reverence, ecstasy and wonder: all words that have a long history in our religious tradition. The experience of the charismatic renewal, the words of many Victorian hymns and the measured rhythms of plainchant all evoke the feeling dimension that people need in order to engage personally with the spiritual dimension of human life.

Therefore engaging spiritually and religiously with groups and with individuals should involve feelings. It is not enough to say prayers, to repeat truths or just go through the motions if people are to be brought to the fullness of spiritual life. A leader of a spiritual event needs to engage relationally with those in the group or congregation. They need to demonstrate a common humanity rather than superiority. Their own lived experience needs to be shared appropriately and linked, through feelings, to the Gospel. There should be silent space in Christian experiences for people to recognise their own feelings and to be present to them because it is only in the present moment, as they are, that they can experience the presence of the risen Jesus.

The scriptures need to be seen as stories with emotional patterns that resonate in the lives of others and not just as opportunities for exegesis. The desolation of the prodigal son, the anxiety of Martha, the gratitude of a leper and the shame of an adulteress are all opportunities to locate our own feelings within a wider pattern of meaning. Our own anxieties, fears and joys then become a way of connecting an inner feeling with a common language that binds us all together in a Gospel community and in that sense builds up what the Church describes as a communion of saints.

Therefore, in order to be incarnational our Church needs to consider:

1. Finding settings where it is safe to explore feelings
2. Highlighting the feeling dimension behind scripture
3. Increasing the ability of leaders to integrate their faith with feelings
4. Helping leaders to be more articulate about the feeling elements of their own faith.
5. Using appropriate music and stories that engage feelings and lead back to the Gospel.
6. Creating more purposeful framed silences for inner reflection

Personal Journey

Journey is a constant theme in all major religious traditions. In our culture the personal dimension of that journey is the place where many people begin as they search for meaning. It is my own unique journey that roots meaning in life, helps build my identity and it is to that individual journey that I must be faithful if I am to live the Gospel authentically. The offers of the prevailing culture for direction in life seem to be off the

peg items such as money, success, security or popularity. The individual is seen largely as a consumer who buys into these values as part of building up their personal journey. In the end, these values cannot sustain a journey that has to face the reality of death. In addition, such values are not personal but mass-produced tokens of a short-term meaning that do not meet the deeper hungers of the human spirit. The Church too can be guilty of trading in 'one size fits all' answers to the journey of life. These too can appear to people in our society as a kind of oppression that robs them of their identity; offering not bread but stones, not life but stagnation on their journey.

We, as Church, need to become skilled in recognising the transforming patterns of the Gospel emerging in the ordinary blessings and the dilemmas of each life. The leaders of Church groups and liturgy need, in some senses, to become mystics who can engage intuitively as they relate to others. Hearing individuals and group-stories should set up resonances in a skilled listener to the patterns at work in the experience of Jesus and, in so doing, open up a unique map of Gospel meaning for individuals on their journey through life. This raised awareness of deeper patterns, brought into focus by the Gospel, reveals the personal presence of the risen Jesus in the lives of individuals. The personal story then becomes a shared journey into a deeper and an eternal knowing of God as Father. That personal identification with the Gospel of Jesus saves lives from meaninglessness activity and opens them to an eternal quest for a home in God.

Therefore, in order to be incarnational our Church needs to consider:

1. Wasting time with people in communities and as individuals and becoming more relational.
2. Becoming more familiar with the ordinary life patterns embedded in scripture
3. Building a deeper awareness of personal journey in community leaders
4. Finding more ways to express the belief that Christ is already hidden in the lives of all people
5. Creating liturgies and prayer experiences that consciously begin from life and lead back to life as a basic structure.
6. Highlighting the spiritual journey of individuals on the occasion of their marriages, individual confession, funerals and moments of ministerial commitment.
7. Exploring settings where individual faith journeys can be spoken about safely in parishes, groups, hospitals, prisons and also in school settings.
8. Creating new experiences of pilgrimage and renewing older models to emphasise the personal dimension of these spiritual journeys.
9. Creating imaginative symbols of the Church as a community that is on a journey through history as it is expressed in *Lumen Gentium*.

Awareness

I have recently returned from a visit to Australia and have been surprised at the pace of life here in Britain; the speed of traffic, the pace of walking on streets and escalators. The sense of anxious urgency is tangible in most cities. The same speed of life is reflected in the use of television, mobile phones, computer games and an avalanche of images that we have to deal with each day. This level of over-stimulation can drown out the deeper levels of awareness that leads to a more holistic way of living. David Hay suggests that this pace of life and the focus on reality simply as what can be measured has created a culturally

constructed forgetfulness and the social destruction of spirituality. Hay speaks about spirituality as 'relational consciousness' (*An unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness ...expressed in a context of how a person relates to things, other people, him/herself and God*). This category assumes that there is a deep and human awareness of being in relation to something greater than themselves and recognising patterns and perhaps meanings behind those patterns.

This work of reflecting, to build awareness, takes time that is often not available in busy and over-stimulated days. Yet it still happens below the surface, according to Hay, in most people's lives. The problem is that such awareness is not given the space and value it needs to thrive. The interest in meditation and experiential religion is a symptom of this hunger for awareness and one which the Church needs to engage with if it is to be bread for the hungry in our culture. A narrowly secular culture regards such awareness as a subjective, privatised experience that has only psychological value. As Christians, awareness becomes a way of knowing that reaches, beyond words, to intuitions that give life and energy for the building of the community that Christians call the kingdom.

The role of imagination in awareness has been raised recently by the publication of 'On The Way To Life' by the Catholic Education Service. In that publication the phrase 'Catholic sacramental imagination' seems to have resonated with many people. This imaginative process is not just a poetic game but an imagination that shapes experience and gives a person new eyes, to see as Christ saw. This imaginative process allows the world to be re-described, in and through the presence of Christ. The same document reminds us that not everyone approaches faith in a formal or intellectual way. People need symbols, they need space, time and an inner focus in order to allow images to emerge from deeper within themselves and so encounter the angels and demons we all live with. In that encounter, made in quiet awareness and at times through inner struggle, they can then invite Christ to walk on the waters of their troubled lives and invite Christ also to the celebration of their successes. In that inner place they can speak to the Father as Jesus invited us to do in the Gospel.

Therefore, in order to be incarnational our Church needs to consider:

1. Finding ways to build framed silences in the liturgy that lead towards a contemplative awareness.
2. Creating non-verbal focal points that allow devotional silence for groups and individuals.
3. Teaching contemplative skills to ordinary Christians.
4. Using imaginative prayer experiences more regularly in groups.
5. Building group movement into prayer experiences that reinforces the theme of the prayer.
6. Organising spaces in church where people can feel alone and still.
7. Developing resources that stimulate the imagination, as a way of touching deeper awareness and meaning.
8. Renewing and developing symbols and spaces that meet the inner needs of traumatised and inarticulate people.
9. Re-presenting traditional devotional practices such as the rosary, Via Lucis, and the Stations of the Cross in a way that engages with the inner and imaginative life of individuals and groups.

Multiple Intelligence

An example: one incarnational way of looking at how we share spirituality.

If we are to take the Incarnation seriously we need to look for God, in the ordinary experience of being human. If we are to get to know God in ourselves, in creation and in others we need to respect the process of how we get to know things as human beings. In our culture this means recognising that there are a range of different intelligences - ways of knowing - that suit some people or some areas of knowledge more than others. If we are being incarnational in helping people to grow and learn spiritually we need to look at these intelligences as ways in which God communicates with us and befriends us in life⁸. The Incarnation therefore bridges the gap between the secular and the sacred and everything becomes grist to God's mill, including different kinds of intelligence.

I will list the main intelligences here and ask the reader to reflect on how these are already in use within their experience of Church.

1. **Naturalistic Intelligence**
Is the ability to recognize and engage with nature
2. **Linguistic Intelligence**
Is sensitivity to the meaning of words, including word order, sound, rhythm, inflection, context
3. **Intrapersonal Intelligence**
is access to one's own feelings self awareness, memory....
4. **Musical Intelligence**
is sensitivity to pitch, melody, rhythm, timbre, and the emotions sounds evoke.
5. **Interpersonal Intelligence**
is the ability to recognize the temperaments, feelings, and intentions of others.
6. **Spatial visual Intelligence**
is the ability to see the world accurately and transform, modify, and re-create that perception
7. **Bodily-Kinaesthetic Intelligence**
is the ability to use the body in highly skilled ways for both expressive and focussing purposes.
8. **Spiritual-Existential Intelligence**
is the ability to pose and ponder questions about life, death, and ultimate realities.

Of course, everyone does all of these things every day. However, each person will have preferences in this listing for engaging with life and communicating. If we are to take the Incarnation seriously, these styles might suggest ways in which the spiritual dimension of life might be experienced in different ways by different people. For example some readers may wish to reflect in a more structured way on how these different approaches to learning

⁸ Another way into this area is to consider body language as a way of communication. According to an oft cited study, "body language comprises 55% [of total communication], whereas verbal content only provides 7%," the other 38% consists of intonation, tone, sighs etc. (Raudsepp 2002). How does God speak in our bodies?

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and communicating are used in different church settings in different ways by using the grid below. For some people the grid below may actually shut learning down.

What is your experience of the styles in these settings?	Settings														
	Parish mass			Prayer group			Personal prayer			Family prayer			Retreat day		
	S	N	W	S	N	W	S	N	W	S	N	W	S	N	W
Nature,															
Language,															
Self,															
Music,															
Relationship															
Space/visual															
Body,															
Speculation,															
Logic															

S = Strong element N = Neutral element W = Weak element

In accessing the spiritual dimension of life we, as a Church, need to be able to move through a repertoire of intelligences and learning styles so that others can recognise the unique relationship that God may be offering. In the average catholic gathering the space for the interpersonal, the intrapersonal and kinaesthetic learning styles seems to be under-represented. In the writer's opinion, the musical visual and natural styles are present but needing refreshment and the logical, speculative and linguistic elements of intelligence seem to be over-emphasised to the detriment of the other styles.

Using these approaches to spirituality and religion allows the tradition to re-focus itself within a culture and to review its own traditions and re-present them in this culture. In so doing it will be acting like the wise steward (Luke 12.42) who knew how to bring out of his store things both old and new. The traditions of the Church are rich with learning styles that need to be dusted off, adapted and offered in new ways to a new people of God at a different point on their journey.

In the past, our Church built Celtic crosses carved with images of the Gospels, in mediaeval times visual learners would have soaked up the messages in the colours and shapes of stained glass and statues. Today the visual learners may need PowerPoint in churches and a range of images that evoke God's presence in our world such as the chapel on industry in Coventry Cathedral that looks out, intentionally, into the city workspaces. The visual learners may need more images in prayer books, more colour and movement in liturgy to watch and to see images build and develop through the period of prayer.

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For kinaesthetic learners the Church has always offered gestures, genuflections, standing, kneeling, processions and rosary beads to keep people involved through movement. Kinaesthetic learners today may also benefit from the opportunity to stretch and relax in church, to be invited to extend their hands in prayer and to move around more freely in the church space.

Above all else, as a Church, we need to engage more with relationships, feeling and awareness for the sake of the interpersonal and intrapersonal learners. So many words wash over people in church and do not seep into the lived experience of each day. Logical and linguistic learning are important but for many people they do not meet the deepest hunger in a changing culture. The deepest hungers in people, now, seem to be for meaning that is experienced within, for healing of wounded memories and the liberation of imagination in the service of faith. Our Church needs to be bread for those heart-felt needs whilst still holding on to the truths of the faith that need to be proclaimed in the culture. For that reason our leaders, at all levels, need to be spiritually-skilled in this area and be able to bridge the gap between Gospel and culture with a new set of skills. I have suggested what those skills might be in the appendix and leave that list with you for further thought and consideration.

APPENDIX

A tentative listing of spiritual skills for a range of leaders in Church networks

1. Ready to admit failures, personal needs and confusion appropriately
2. Able to group others according to spiritual needs
3. Willing to vary learning styles within shared spiritual experiences
4. Aiming to live a balanced and simple life
5. Aware of broad issues of social justice in the world
6. Sensitive to unhealthy signs in prayer experience.
7. Committed to ongoing learning and personal prayer.
8. Engaging personally, with the heart, with individuals and groups
9. Faithful in personal accompaniment and confidentiality
10. Generous in giving time and praise and honest feedback
11. In touch with their own inner world
12. Informed enough to make links between scripture and lived experience
13. Inspirational in leading from reflection to active gospel living.
14. Optimistic and cheerful able to celebrate life
15. Practical in linking spiritual and action choices.
16. Protective of the primary symbols of Church and the sacraments
17. Safe in managing groups and one to one encounters
18. Ready to hear group and congregational reactions and feedback
19. Sensitive to the Spirit in others' lives
20. Supportive of a range of Church practice

David O'Malley May 2009