

Notes on “Spirituality”

Harry Oldmeadow

Outside tradition there can assuredly be found some relative truths... but outside tradition there does not exist a doctrine that catalyzes absolute truth and transmits liberating notions concerning total reality

Frithjof Schuon¹

“Spirituality” has become a rather fashionable catch-word, recently appropriated by all manner of people, many of whom are disillusioned with the sterile paradigms of the mechanistic, hyper-rationalistic, materialistic and utilitarian worldview which characterises modernity but who are also often hostile to traditional religious forms which might provide the necessary antidotes. “Spirituality” stands as a banner under which some of the richness and complexity of human consciousness and experience can be rescued from various physiological and psychological reductionisms. While one might well sympathize with these efforts to combat what William Blake called the “Single Vision” of scientism it must be said at the outset that much of the present-day discussion of “spirituality” really amounts to a kind of sentimental indulgence in which the word itself can be made to mean almost anything — more often than not referring to some kind of vaguely-defined inner life or experience. If the term is to be at all useful we must establish a provisional definition of “spirituality” and make a few remarks about its relation to religion, outside of which the whole notion makes little sense.

“Spirituality” might be conceptualised in many ways. Here is one: spirituality is both a mode of *understanding* Reality, one in which we recognize the Spirit within us, “the immortal spark of God’s Being, eternally living in the depths of man’s soul”,² and a mode of *being* wherein we conform ourselves to that Reality. Further, one might say that spirituality is the domain of human experience in which a transmutation of the soul leads, depending on the vocabulary at hand, to God, to the Self, to *Nirvana*. A Hindu swami asked to sum up the message of Hinduism replied this way: “God Is; God can be realized; to realize God is the supreme end of human life; God can be realised in many ways.” Whilst this kind of formulation poses problems for some religious perspectives it might here stand as a signpost to the spiritual life in general.

Implicit in the idea that spirituality concerns both *understanding* and *being* are the parallel notions of a *doctrine* (an account of Reality in both its absolute and relative “dimensions”) and a *path* (a spiritual method, provided by religious forms, whereby one might live in accordance with the Will of Heaven). One of the myriad problems surrounding many contemporary attitudes to “spirituality” is that the doctrine of an Ultimate Reality (by whatever name—the Absolute, God, Allah, *Atman-Brahman*, *Nirvana/Sunyata*, the *Tao*, *Wakan-Tanka*) and the elaboration of a spiritual method attuned to our relationship therewith, are left out of the picture altogether! What we are offered instead is a notion of “spirituality” as some kind of subjective inner state, a kind of “warm fuzzy glow”, sometimes harnessed to formulations such as “the kingdom of Heaven is within you” — as if by these words Christ meant that the kingdom of Heaven is of a psychological order! This is all of a piece with the notion that “spirituality” is a private affair, and that the spiritual life can be fashioned out of the subjective resources of the individual in question. Some of the factors which, over several centuries, have conspired to create a climate in which such ideas could take root include the rebellion against all authority, the cult of the individual, the humanistic prejudice that “man is the measure of all things”, the triumph—even in the religious domain itself—of sentimentalism over intellectuality, the shibboleths of “egalitarianism” and “democracy”, and the emergence of a rampant psychologism which usurps functions which properly belong to religion. In recent times we have seen many attempts to assimilate spirituality into the domain of psychology, a move which fails to distinguish between the contingent plane of the psyche and the inviolate Self, or Spirit — this failure generating confusions of all kinds, on full display in “occultist”, “New Age” and purportedly “Eastern” movements which lay claim to some kind of spirituality but which scorn traditional religious forms and practices. The same confusion can easily be discerned in the works of many modernistic writers on religious subjects, even when their general disposition towards religion is sympathetic.³ It might also be observed in passing that it is also quite possible to be “religious” in some externalist sense — punctilious in the observation of ritual obligations and so on — yet remain quite “unspiritual”; this is the phenomenon of an empty religiosity wherein the true goals of the path have been forgotten, and all that remains is an empty husk. (Such folk might usefully remember Martin Buber’s remark that “it is far more comfortable to have to do with religion than to have to do with God”.⁴) However, even such an attenuated form of religious practice is preferable to a so-called “spirituality” which has been stripped of all sense of the Transcendent. There remains some

chance that the practices which are performed only to the letter might yet re-ignite embers which seem to have died.

Traditional peoples everywhere, whatever their religious commitments, start from very different premises. To state them succinctly, and without privileging any particular theology: man is an “amphibious” or “axial” creature who lives, so to speak, between two worlds—on the one hand, the ever-changing tissue of relativities which comprise the time-space world of multiplicity and contingency (*maya* or *samsara* in the Indian lexicon), and on the other, the boundless realm of the Divine, the Absolute, God, from whence come various Revelations which provide us, in our terrestrial condition, with all things needful for our spiritual welfare and pertinent to our ultimate destiny. Such peoples could hardly conceive the idea that ‘spirituality’ might be an *ad hoc*, improvisatory and subjective affair; on the contrary, the God-given forms and practices of tradition (Scriptures, myths, doctrines, rituals, sacred art, moral codes and so on), the example of the saints and sages, and the guidance of those qualified to provide it (masters, lamas, directors, gurus, shamans, priests, shaykhs), provide the adherent with a detailed map of the spiritual path. It is not a matter of dreaming up a new map (which may bear little relation to the terrain to be traversed!) but of following the map which tradition invariably provides to those who seek.

In 1984 representatives of all the major religions gathered at St Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, to “meditate together in silence and share their personal spiritual journeys” and to deliberate on those elements of belief and practice which their traditions shared. Out of this gathering and subsequent meetings emerged a list of points of agreement. It is worth considering this list as an example of the kinds of convergences which can be discerned by adherents of different traditions working together in a spirit of cooperative fellowship and dialogue. It also throws some light on our present considerations. The Snowmass meeting proved less vaporous than many attempts at dialogue and produced the following list of elements common to all the major religions:

- The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names....
- Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.
- Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actuality.
- Faith is opening, accepting and responding to Ultimate Reality...

- The potential for human wholeness—or in other frames of reference, enlightenment, salvation, transformation, blessedness, nirvana—is present in every human person.
- Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but through nature, art, human relationships and service to others.
- As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.
- Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life... Humility, gratitude and a sense of humour are indispensable in the spiritual life.⁵

It might be observed that this register, whilst it encompasses a good deal, rather underplays the significance of tradition as the fountainhead of spiritual practice. It also somewhat marginalizes several aspects of spirituality which are fore-grounded in primordial cultures—namely, the paradigmatic function of religious mythology, the sacramental conception of the natural order, and the centrality of ritual life. Nonetheless, in the context of the Snowmass statement one may speak of “spirituality” as a disciplined practice, within the framework of an integral doctrine (derived from a Revelation), whereby we seek to realize the “infinite potentiality and actuality” of Ultimate Reality within ourselves, thus becoming conduits, so to speak, through which Divine Grace may be radiated into the world around us. Needless to say, this kind of formulation will command no assent from materialists, humanists, existentialists, and the like, not to mention those for whom the human being is nothing more than a highly evolved animal, a biological organism whose secrets will be unlocked by a materialistic science and who believe, with Francis Crick, that the soul is a fiction.⁶ All that need presently be said on this front is that the whole notion of “spirituality” can have no real meaning for such people

It might be objected that there have been individuals who have experienced the deepest insights into Reality outside the cadre of any integral tradition and without any disciplined religious practice: the experience of Ramana Maharshi as a seventeen-year old—without doubt a mystical illumination of the most profound kind—might be cited as an instance. As Schuon observes, such experiences are certainly possible as a kind of “isolated miracle”,⁷ exceptions which prove the rule but certainly could not constitute it. In the vast majority of cases, the deepest spiritual experiences *do* take place within the embrace of a formal religion, the soil

having been prepared, so to speak, by some sort of practice as prescribed by the tradition in question. In those cases where a more or less spontaneous and quite unexpected illumination occurs, if it is to become intelligible to others and to have any efficacy in guiding them along the spiritual path, it must be assimilated into the forms (both doctrinal and practical) of the tradition in question. This, of course, is precisely what happened in the case of the Sage of Arunachala.⁸

It might also be suggested that all spiritual experience is in some sense an adumbration, no matter how faint, of the mystical experience proper. One mode of spirituality is the awareness of the metaphysical transparency of every cosmic situation, awakened by what are variously called epiphanies, theophanies, hierophanies and mystical illuminations. In the theistic traditions this mode of experience is sometimes called the gift of “seeing God everywhere”—but it is a universal phenomena and one dramatically exemplified by those many saints and sages who perceive the transcendent dimension which is “hidden” in all natural phenomena. One may cite as representative examples such figures as Rumi, St Francis of Assisi, St Seraphim of Sarov, Ramakrishna and Black Elk.

To conclude: “spirituality” *in vacuo* is indeed a vacuous notion! If the term is to have any meaning and vitality it must be understood within the framework of a religious tradition. In its most simple formulation, spirituality is to do with shattering the fetters of the ego (in Sufi terms, the taming of the *nafs*), the submission of the human will to the Will of Heaven, the “alchemical” transformation of the soul and, in the language of the Vedanta, the re-discovery of that Self (*Atman*) which Alone is Real. All of this lies infinitely beyond the scope of any profane science; nor can it be accommodated in those pseudo-spiritual and humanistic counterfeits which claim to dispense with the dictates of tradition.

¹ F. Schuon: "No Activity Without Truth" in Harry Oldmeadow (ed), *The Betrayal of Tradition*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005, p.

² Barry McDonald (ed), *Every Branch in Me: Essays on the Meaning of Man*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003, p.ix.

³ On the disastrous conflation of the psychic and the spiritual see René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, Ghent: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995.

⁴ M. Buber, *A Believing Humanism*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967, p. 110.

⁵ Thomas Keating, “Meditative Technologies: Theological Ecumenism” in *The Other Half of My Soul: Bede Griffiths and the Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, ed. Beatrice Bruteau, Wheaton: Quest Books, 1996, p. 115.

⁶ Kenneth (“Harry”) Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies. 2000, p. 122.

⁷ Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, London: John Murray/Perennial books, 1961, p. 57.

⁸ See T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Ramana Maharshi: The Sage of Arunacala*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1977.

Dr Harry Oldmeadow is Coordinator of Philosophy and Religious Studies at La Trobe University Bendigo (Victoria, Australia) and is the author of *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo 2000). His most recent work, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Traditions*, was published by World Wisdom in 2004. He is also the editor of *The Betrayal of Tradition*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005. His website can be found at:

http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arts/staff/oldmeadow_harry.html