

Mysticism and Contemporary Spirituality: joint CRC/LSN Conference held in Sheffield 6th November 2010

Conference report and comment by John Hetherington

On a showery Saturday in November my partner Mandy and I, and a Buddhist friend, drove from Kendal across to Sheffield to attend a Conference organised jointly by St.Mark's Centre for Radical Christianity¹ (CRC) and the Living Spirituality Network² (LSN). LSN was relatively new to me, perhaps surprisingly. It is part of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. LSN aims to:

- “be an open space for theological reflection and exploration
- ask questions which deepen and challenge us, and move us forward
- 'fly kites'
- live the tensions that arise in spirituality
- listen and respond to the people the churches do not meet - both inside and outside the churches.”

LSN's webpage, points out that LSN exists for people who are exploring the meaning of spirituality both within and beyond the traditional churches. So it provides supporters with information, contacts and encouragement as they seek to understand and deepen their spiritual lives.

However, LSN recognises that, “while many people pursue their spiritual quest within the traditional Christian churches ... the spiritual and religious landscape is changing dramatically. Some continue to participate in church services and groups, but find most of their spiritual needs met outside them.” Their view is that, “Many spiritual seekers today have little or no experience of formal religion; and for significant numbers of others, traditional religion provides neither a context nor a language which is helpful or meaningful on their journey”. As people both in and beyond “church” explore and deepen their spiritual experience, practice and commitment, many of them are looking for information and for companionship. They seek access to new thinking, new ways of seeing and new experiences, and for new opportunities to connect with fellow travellers - kindred spirits - embarked on a similar quest.

LSN links across a wide range of organisations and bodies – though PCN Britain is still not formally one of them. Among the organisations that are linked are CRC, CANA³, the network of Christian Meditation Groups⁴ (in the John Main tradition), the network of Julian Groups⁵ and significant communities such as the Iona Community⁶, and Corrymeela⁷ in Ireland. Although the Findhorn Community⁸ is not on the LSN list, it is also an ecological and spiritual community celebrating open spiritual inquiry and practice. Having been there, it is clearly deeply involved in the development of a “living spirituality”.

The exploring mindset of PCNB, Free to Believe, the Living Spirituality Network and other related networks should enable bridges to be built across this rapidly expanding spiritual landscape. There is a growing interest in spirituality as evidenced by the relatively large viewing figures for the recent TV series⁹ “The Big Silence” which has sought to bring “spiritual awakening” to a national audience.

¹ CRC: <http://www.stmarkscrc.co.uk/news-and-events>

² LSN: <http://www.ctbi.org.uk/200>

³ CANA: <http://www.christiansawakening.org/>

⁴ CMUK: http://www.christianmeditation.org.uk/public_html/web_new/home_main.php

⁵ Julian Groups: <http://www.julianmeetings.org/index.htm>

⁶ Iona Community: <http://www.iona.org.uk/>

⁷ Corrymeela: <http://www.corrymeela.org/>

⁸ Findhorn: <http://www.findhorn.org/aboutus/>

⁹ The Big Silence: <http://www.beunos.com/bigsilence.htm>

Back in September 2008 I authored for Free to Believe a booklet entitled, “Reshaping Christianity – Mysticism, Spirituality and Global Faith”. In it I explored the exciting story of the growing attention now being given to mystical writings in Judaism, Christianity and Sufi Islam. I also touched on the growing significance of the Baha’i faith. My booklet¹⁰ (available from *Free to Believe*, price £2.50) also looked at the surveys done in the UK on the “new spiritualities” and their “belief” systems, and how there are more and more participants in the many open and varied forms of spiritual practice. In it I suggested that orthodox interpretations of Christian doctrine based on a “God above the sky” perspective, as opposed to a “Ground of all Being”, or especially a “God Within”, perspective must be taken less and less seriously. From a Celtic Christianity perspective “all that is” in nature is the divine domain. The new spiritualities and the new physics increasingly share common ground and invoke a form of “process theology” with God present both in the timeless realm of spirit and through the evolving gift of the physical universe¹¹.

Many open hearted people are indeed finding ‘God within’, in forms such as Quaker silence and in the practices of Christian meditation and its Vedanta / Buddhist forms. Traditional Christian doctrines are increasingly being challenged by these perspectives, and by the growing, “turn to experience”. All this is evidenced in falling church attendance, but growing participation in the many forms of “spiritual practice” now available. I am increasingly convinced that it is to the new or rediscovered forms of mystical spirituality and experience that we must look.

So what is the future? Is it likely that the tradition of attending church is only hanging on in those churches which support a “social network” format for the elderly? By contrast, some liberal / progressive churches (and PCN Britain Local Groups) are providing a safe place for erudite discussion of the nature of God. There are also churches (often held in community buildings) that are characterised by loud music and choruses, i.e. “evangelical” celebratory styles of worship, whatever the doctrinal approach. The social action style of Christianity that many churches aspire to is, of course, an entirely valid and vital component of a faith born in the justice milieu of the Old Testament Prophets and of course of Jesus of Nazareth and Paul who challenged the powers and empires of their day. Today, interfaith exploration is increasingly being seen as a profoundly important component of people’s faith and spirituality in the “global village”. It is too early to write “church” off.

In my booklet, I quoted Dave Tomlinson from his book “The Post Evangelical”, who, like many others, had shared my journey from Christian Union to Liberal Protestant, via disillusionment and through to the next obvious step – the journey inward to a new mysticism and spirituality. The mysticism of the early Jesus movement seems to have been lost or suppressed in the period that followed Rome’s takeover.

Spiritual depth, in today’s context, is more and more likely to be rediscovered in the living out of a personal spiritual journey, but one shared with others in small groups, who study together the world’s store of mystical writings in small groups. It needs situations where participants are comfortable with the traditions of the ‘broad catholic’ spectrum (Lectio Divina¹²), where retreat and meditation provide sources of inward experience and insight. Another growing practice is the “pilgrimage” – as for example my life changing journey to Iona – on a Retreat led by “The Sacred Space Foundation”¹³. For others, poetry (across a spectrum from the Christian Mystics, via Rumi and the Romantic Poets, to modern verse) encompassing both religious and spiritual dimensions, is increasingly significant. Sources of poetic meditation that have meant much to me recently are the works of Kenneth Stephen¹⁴ and the late John O’Donohue¹⁵.

¹⁰ Reshaping Christianity: Mysticism, Spirituality and Global Faith – by John Hetherington
A reflection on emerging spirituality and its implications for Christianity and all global religions.
(See FTB Website for ordering and payment information: <http://www.freetobelieve.org.uk/booklets2.html>)

¹¹ See by way of example Adrian B Smith: God Energy and the Field.

¹² <http://lectio-divina.org/>

¹³ Sacred Spaces: <http://www.sacredspace.org.uk/courses.html>

¹⁴ Kenneth Stephen: http://www.kennethsteven.co.uk/Books_of_Poetry.php

¹⁵ John O’Donohue: <http://johnodohue.com/>

So, it was a delight to be at Sheffield as we listened to the speaker Eley McAinsh¹⁶ who, in two lectures and two periods of shared meditation, gave a clear overview of the breadth of contemporary spirituality. Amongst others, her talk drew on Baron Freidrich von Hugel, who argued that there are three dimensions to the authentic religious life – institutional, intellectual and experiential, and Ken Wilbur (one of my favourite modern thinkers) who has sought to add “contemplative knowledge” to the scientific quest. Eley commented that spiritual experience, meditation and contemplation are what lie at the heart of the “Spirituality Revolution¹⁷”. She sees mysticism and spirituality as closely related but not interchangeable. Both involve direct personal experience of the divine ground. Many within PCNB will recall Marcus Borg’s Sheffield lecture¹⁸ with his quotation of Karl Rahner’s phrase, “*The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not be at all.*” For Borg, mysticism is about experiencing God, the Sacred, or Spirit as Real (my underlining).

Eley also quoted key authors such as Gordon Lynch (Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Birkbeck University, London) who has mapped out the changes now rapidly occurring. He has set out his analysis of the emerging encounter with what he calls ‘The New Spirituality’ in his book, subtitled, ‘An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the 21st Century’, which describes his research. It first reviews the roots of the new, progressive spirituality, its ideology, and its organisational emergence. Its approach is captured by his sub headings to Chapter 2 – The Ideology of progressive spirituality:

- *The unity of the ineffable and immanent divine* – the guiding intelligence behind evolutionary process and the energy of the universe itself
- *Pantheism / Panentheism* – replacing a transcendent, patriarchal view of God
- *Mysticism and the divine feminine* – using symbol and liturgy, encounter with nature and celebration of the feminine in God
- *The sacralisation of nature* – affirmation of the material and nature / life as participation in divinity
- *The sacralisation of the self* – as a manifestation of the divine – with human consciousness derived from the supra-consciousness of the “All”.
- *Understandings of Religion* – as culturally and historically bound and thus metaphorical – enabling a growing spirit of ‘ecumenism’
- *The deeper cultural roots of progressive spirituality* show underlying coherence, reflecting adaptation to modernism, liberalism and welcome insights in quantum physics and cosmic ‘unfolding’.

Gordon Lynch also comments that, “people are engaging more and more deeply with the meaning and significance of spirituality in contemporary life and culture.” My view is that films like Avatar express a hunger for a lost innocence and engagement with the natural world of which we are fully part and share responsibility for¹⁹. There remains both a justice and subversive political perspective to the mystical and spiritual path. Dorothee Soelle²⁰ proposes that mysticism is about, “the breaking through of wisdom”.

So, to conclude, I fully agree with Eley McAinsh’s summation in her afternoon lecture, “Mysticism .. is a way to participate in *transformation*. The physicist Paul Davies says, ‘we have to embrace a different concept of understanding ... the mystical path is possibly such a way’.”

In 1994 James Redfield wrote a novel, the “Celestine Prophecy – An Adventure”, in which a lost manuscript was found that spoke of a coming time of human development and a recognition of our capacity for change. It had the drama and tension of all such novels (also made into a film), but behind it was a view that new

¹⁶ Eley McAinsh, Director of the Living Spirituality Network and BBC Religious affairs producer, including the BBC's Radio Four program "Something. Understood" talked at the Priory

¹⁷ David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of contemporary spirituality*; Routledge

¹⁸ Marcus Borg’s and Eley McAinsh’s lectures can be ordered from the CRC website: <http://www.stmarksarc.co.uk/resources/shop---cde-and-books>

¹⁹ See my Blog: <http://progressivespirituality.blogspot.com/>

²⁰ Dorothee Soelle – German Liberation Theologian: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothee_S%C3%B6lle

spiritual capacities were emerging in our evolution as a species. Perhaps it might just be that in the years and centuries ahead the insights of today's "new spiritualities" and the recovery of the mystical path might just mean that human beings – whether people of traditional faith or newer paths – may find that they indeed live in God – Love – Spirit, or any such interchangeable terms, and that humanity can indeed become more than it has ever imagined.

[Word Count: 1900 words]

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