

Beyond the Spirituality Revolution
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I wonder how many of you have seen *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*? I know at least one of you has, because we ignored the rather grudging reviews and saw it together. I'm delighted we did. It was colourful and fun and gently thought-provoking, not least because of the favourite proverb of the appropriately-named Sonny, the hotel manager, played by Dev Patel. *Everything will be alright in the end, and if it's not alright, it's not the end!*

What, I wonder, to make of such a sentiment on a day like today – does it echo the grating optimism of Dickens' Mr Micawber and Voltaire's Dr Pangloss, or the very different confidence of Julian of Norwich, who famously came to see *that all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.*

A day like today – a strange day: part celebration, part wake; thankful and positive, puzzling and poignant. When Murdoch Mackenzie interviewed me for this job, in the Spring of 2002, he said that there was definitely funding for two to three years, but beyond that the future of LSN was uncertain. That we've continued for ten years is something we're very grateful for, and however one chooses to interpret our closure now, we've worked hard in those years to make a distinctive contribution in the field of spirituality – researching and analysing, monitoring developments, encouraging and resourcing, serving as a conduit of information, ideas and contacts, sharing experience, and reading the signs of the times. As our literature puts it: *we've flown kites; asked questions which deepen and challenge, and move us forward; we've been an open space for theological reflection and exploration; we've lived the tensions that arise in spirituality, and we've listened and responded to the people the churches do not meet, both inside and outside the churches.* Ten years is a good span of time – long enough to see change and development, to see things emerge, grow, lapse, mutate, die, survive; and long enough to see connections surface – across disciplines and boundaries and between individuals and communities.

Just as we were embarking on the new phase in the life of LSN in 2002, David Tacey, in Melbourne, Australia, was working on his book *The Spirituality Revolution – the emergence of contemporary spirituality*, in which he charted the changes and developments of, broadly, the previous decade.

The Spirituality Revolution was one of the most frequently and enthusiastically-mentioned books in a series of conversations I recorded last year, in which 21 people kindly shared with me the stories of their spiritual journeys to date. A good number of you are here today, and I thank you again for your time, your reflections and your generosity. It's no exaggeration to say that for some interviewees, reading *The Spirituality Revolution* was a defining moment in their journey. One described their copy as looking like a hedgehog – there are so many little post-it notes stuck in its pages to mark significant paragraphs. For me too, as I began to settle in my new role, it seemed to validate and affirm not only my personal journey, but also the evolving focus and direction of LSN. So today, who better to help us see where we have been, where we have got to, and where we might go, than David Tacey. Sadly, not in person, but through that new wonder of international communications, Skype. I began by asking David if he'd been surprised that the book had had such an impact on some of his older readers – how aware was he that he was speaking for a far wider range of people than just the young people and students on whom he was focused?

TACEY INTERVIEW

David Tacey. The interview we've just heard is clearly not the same interview we would have heard ten years ago. Today, David's optimism is tempered but not dimmed. He's somewhat relieved that the narcissistic froth-and-bubble of popular spirituality has lost its fizz and his concern for the seriousness and distinctiveness of authentic spirituality is even deeper. Despite some bruising encounters, his appreciation

of the traditions is more nuanced, and his recognition of grassroots developments within parts of the institution more appreciative; but his sense of spirituality as a global movement not dependent on traditional religious institutions remains strong and clear. And just as David's current observations and insights are shaped by ten more years experience, so my questions to him were quite different than they would have been a decade ago. They too were shaped by ten years immersed in contemporary spirituality – a great privilege afforded me by LSN, its trustees and decision-makers, and all those who have contributed to its life, and the life of its predecessors, in so many different ways and over so many years. For that privilege, I thank you, with all my heart.

Ten years ago we struggled to define our terms: what do we mean when we use the word spirituality? (We still do struggle with definitions, of course, but now we've pretty much given up the attempt and accept that the word is used very differently in different contexts). Is this really a revolution? we asked. How many people are involved? Is this the faith of the future? Sometimes we had to defend spirituality – against critical and dismissive clerical voices, against academic scepticism and new atheist hostility. But the discipline was good for us – in order to respond authoritatively as well as intuitively, we did our research as carefully and conscientiously as we could, and gradually began to offer a unique perspective on developments. We worked at the interface between traditional Christian faith and practice and newly emerging expressions of spirituality, and at the point where church, society and the academy meet.

In 2007 – half way through my tenure – the second most important book of my LSN decade was published. Gordon Lynch's *The New Spirituality – an introduction to progressive belief in the 21st century*, was, as David Tacey's had been, genuinely ground-breaking. More so because it wasn't the book that Gordon had planned to write. He'd intended to explore the development of new forms of spirituality that were widely predicted, at least by certain enthusiasts, sub-editors and publishers, to replace traditional institutional religion in the foreseeable future. But as he looked for supporting evidence for such claims, he found it distinctly lacking. Despite important research, not least that by David Hay, which suggests ever-more convincingly that spirituality is an innate and ineradicable human capacity, Gordon found no widespread religious or spiritual *motivation* in the population at large. He had to relinquish, somewhat reluctantly, his earlier assumption that *most people were motivated by some form of 'spirituality'*.

What Gordon Lynch did discover was *not so much a mass spiritual movement beyond the orbit of traditional religious institutions, but a new religious ideology – a significant minority movement – that was developing across and beyond a range of religious traditions*. This, he believes, *is the real story about the 'new spirituality'* and it's very much the story told by my 21 interviewees. Gordon doubts that this will ever *become the dominant religious ethos of the coming century, to which most people will subscribe*, but he does believe that *it represents an important and viable part of the future of western religion, and one we need to take seriously*.

I too believe it's a story that needs to be recognised, articulated, resourced and affirmed, but I also know that those involved in that story already take it very seriously – they require no external validation or permission. If others, particularly those with influence in the religious institutions, decide to take it seriously as well, that would be a significant shift, carrying with it the potential for creativity and renewal. But even if the institution continues, for the most part, to ignore, belittle and reject this committed and conscientious exploration of *the new spirituality*, it will neither derail nor deter those already embarked on this new spiritual path. This, my interviewees make very clear.

Harvey Cox, in his 2009 book *The Future of Faith* helps us get beyond the problem of definitions and sets the scene for a closer look at the features and direction of this new path. *Spirituality can mean a host of things*, writes Cox, *but there are three reasons why the term is in such wide use. First, it's still a form of tacit protest. It reflects a widespread discontent with the preshrinking of 'religion', Christianity in*

particular, into a package of theological propositions by the religious corporations that box and distribute such packages.

Second, it represents an attempt to voice the awe and wonder before the intricacy of nature that many feel is essential to human life, without stuffing them into ready-to-wear ecclesiastical patterns.

Third, it recognises increasingly porous borders between the different traditions and, like the early Christian movement, it looks more to the future than to the past ... The use of the term 'spirituality' constitutes a sign of the jarring transition through which we're now passing, from an expiring Age of Belief into a new but not yet fully realised Age of Spirit.

Both David Tacey and Gordon Lynch discovered remarkably strong similarities and resonances in the experience of a wide range of contemporary seekers, both within and beyond the traditional religious structures. We discovered the same resonances at Sarum College a year past February, as participants described what had attracted them to a day entitled *The 'turn' to spirituality*. It was their stories that led to last year's recordings—the feeling many of us shared that here was something so important that it was worth trying to capture: not to pin it down, or box it up, but to hold it gently, as if on an open palm, to look closely, to honour, and to seek understanding.

Each recording covered the same ground, but with space and freedom for the conversation to unfold as it would. How would you describe your spiritual journey up to this time? What have been the most significant experiences and insights along the way? How has your spiritual practice changed or developed over the years? Where do you find spiritual nourishment and encouragement? Where do you connect with people on a similar journey? How have your understandings of God, Jesus and Spirit changed or developed? How would you describe your relationship with the religious institution, and with the tradition? How has your spiritual experience impacted on your action in the world, your commitment to causes or campaigns? Who are the writers who have helped or inspired you?

The people who spoke to me came from a good swathe of England, from North to South, from a wide range of backgrounds, but a fairly limited age range, say 40s to 70s. All except two were women. They comprised a representative sample, if not a scientific one. Significantly, every single person had some childhood experience, positive or negative, of denominational Christianity, again, across a wide range of traditions. In addition, three people had a particular overview of the contemporary spiritual landscape because of their involvement in training and/or communities and retreat houses. It is of course impossible to do justice to the content of well over thirty hours of recordings in the time we have today. But I hope that one day there will be the opportunity to gather these stories, and others, in a more complete and enduring form. Such a project would build creatively on two excellent earlier collections – my predecessor Ruth Harvey's *Wrestling and Resting* and Janice Dolley and Jane Ozanne's *Awakening to a New Awareness: Stories of Contemporary Christians*. (It's lovely that all three of you are here today.)

So, given the limitations of our time today, I'll simply highlight some of the main themes to emerge from the recordings, and point briefly to ways in which these might impact the wider spiritual and religious scene in the years to come.

One of the first things that struck me as I listened back to the interviews was the strong sense of independent enquiry and exploration in all those who spoke to me. Without exception, they were deeply engaged in the process of trying to make sense of their own spiritual experience. This was a committed and focused pre-occupation. For most, if not all, their efforts were prompted by a persistent dissatisfaction with traditional teaching and doctrine, which routinely failed to connect with their experience and their questions. Their understanding of the nature of belief, as well as their actual beliefs, has already undergone significant change and is continuing to evolve and expand. The integration of new

knowledge about the nature of the Universe and about the human person was important to many. They read, often *voraciously*. As David Tacey put it, their *spirituality is seeking understanding*.

And as understanding is won, however provisionally, it's giving rise to new and more meaningful theological frameworks and narratives. A number of people said that they had a sense of themselves as *still profoundly Christian*, though they doubted that more traditional believers, or church authorities, would recognise them as such. There is a confidence in the reality of their own experience and the validity of their own insights, but it's not an arrogant or blinkered confidence. Their deep desire is to orientate their lives in response to the Divine Will.

If the first major theme of the conversations is '*Faith*', the second, in good traditional terms, is '*Practice*': in other words, the methods, rituals and spaces people have discovered help them to become more open, more attentive in their relating to the Reality they mostly still name God, despite their need to qualify and explain what they now mean by that title. They're drawn more and more to silence and stillness, to the riches of the monastic traditions, and to the mystical and contemplative path (except, that is, for the person who asked, with the merest hint of exasperation: what does contemplation look like for an extrovert?). They use fewer and fewer words and often struggle with conventional forms of intercessory prayer, preferring *to hold* people and concerns wordlessly in the divine Presence. Being outside, connecting with the natural world, whether in a quiet corner of a garden, among trees, or in the wilds, is important, spiritually, for many.

It was to me remarkable that twenty-one individuals, each with a unique life story, had so many spiritual experiences and responses in common. One of the very few things that separated them was the decision to stay within the religious institution, or to leave. The majority of them are staying for now, however marginally, but it's a decision that's revisited often, and with some anguish. For most, the decision to stay is about love and loyalty for a particular community, or the continuing importance of the Eucharist. But a significant minority of the 21, have decided, again for now, to leave, because, as one of them put it: *It wouldn't have been possible to take this journey within the church*. Another, one of those with a particular overview of the current scene, said *Many who come here are among that great swathe of people ... who are leaving their churches, their religious homes, for conscientious reasons – because they're interested in spirituality, because they're interested in going deeper, and they're not finding that in the particular patterns and obsessions of the church*.

There is, in all the people I spoke to, a deep longing for community, and for the opportunity to connect with others *who speak the same language*. For many of them, these are the hardest things to find, both in and out of the religious institutions.

It was, I have to admit, reassuring, that individually and together, these recordings provide significant grassroots evidence to support what a number of commentators are saying about the new spirituality, not just here in the UK, but in North America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa – commentators I've read and quoted at length during my time with LSN .

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David Tacey's tone became understandably weary at the prospect of a 500 year journey to transformation – in such a scheme, my ten years here is less than a blink. But Phyllis Tickle, in her book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, also speaks of 500 year cycles in the spiritual and religious life of the world. She charts a series of 500 year convulsions – the Great Reformation, the Great Schism, the coming of the Dark Ages – and suggests, with Tacey, that what we're living through now, the Great Emergence of her title, is a shift of similar magnitude. It is, she believes a process of re-birthing in which pain, upheaval and profound uncertainty will give rise on the one hand to *a brand new expression of faith and praxis* and on the other to *a more pure and less ossified expression of organised Christianity*.

It is then, for Phyllis Tickle, a win-win situation, in which the tension and interaction between those following the new path and those who remain within the more traditional forms, might lead ultimately to new life and renewal for all. It's a view shared by Tom Stella, whose book *A Faith Worth Believing* I come back to again and again:

*The particulars of my religious awakening may differ from yours, he writes, but I sense that more and more of us have come to see and to believe ancient truths in new ways. The movement away from traditional interpretations situates us on the perimeter of institutional religion; but the margins, more than the mainstream, are a place of hope and vitality. It is from this peripheral place that the status quo is challenged by people whose love for God and longing for spiritual nourishment move them to seek a sense of the sacred both within themselves and beyond their faith tradition. We need not live in opposition to those who continue to find meaning in what they have always believed, but I am convinced that **ours is a necessary voice**, and that we are a significant witness to them, as they are to us. For the truth we all seek is found not in isolation from those who differ from us, but in dialogue with them.*

I've sometimes joked with friends over the last 18 months or so that the uncertainty of my current circumstances is a judgement on me for wanting to write a book called *The Unmarked Path*. I don't really believe that of course, or at least not the judgement bit. But I do believe that Mark I Wallace is right, when he says that *The Spirit calls us to the wager of vertiginous faith, to take the leap of faith into the void of uncertainty. Truth in religion, he continues, begins with the willingness to travel the unmarked path, plotted by the Spirit, in the heart of each person.* And that, the evidence is clear, is the path, the journey of faith, that more and more people are finding the confidence to travel, inside, alongside and outside the Churches.

We do not know where this path might lead but we do know, as the poet Ann Weems knows, that *it's not over, this birthing*. I've quoted her poem, *Kneeling in Bethlehem* before, and make no apology for quoting it again now:

It's not over, this birthing, she writes,

There are always newer skies

Into which God can throw stars.

When we begin to think

That we can predict the Advent of God,

That we can box the Christ

In a stable in Bethlehem,

That's just the time that God will be born

In a place that we can't imagine and won't believe.

Which is not to say that things won't change, won't hurt and won't die, but it is to say that in the realm of the Spirit, the end is never where we think it is.