

Spirituality in Current Contexts: Engagement or Retreat?

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When I saw this title on the schedule, I wondered for a while what Rodney Petersen had in mind that I should talk about, and decided he must mean simply that I talk about what was familiar to me. But having been given the last word after our Bossey and Herrnhut experiences, I ought to bring them together to some degree.

We have dealt a great deal with prayer during these two weeks, personal and communal, looking for a distinctively Protestant spirituality. Of course, we have also heard constantly that spirituality is *a life*, not merely the prayer dimension it includes. But let's concentrate first on the prayer.

We've heard from many sources about a Protestant suspicion of any prayer that does not have visible and practical relation to the rest of life. We had our closest contact with such prayer in visiting the contemplative sisters of Grandchamps. Themselves Protestants, predominantly of the Reform tradition, they tended to look to Orthodox and Roman Catholic sources to restore this tradition of total dedication of their lives, in community, to the practice of prayer, much as the 19th-century Oxford Movement among Anglicans had done. Their prayer is both personal and communal, and is the substance of their lives. One of the most moving experiences of that day was to hear them speak of caring for the members of their community as they approached their deaths. The completeness of their dedication revealed itself in this.

Their prayer was worship of God, an enterprise in itself, not instrumental for any other purpose. It was dedicated to reconciliation among Christians, but only as that itself was a part of their commitment to God's will. This is a very ancient -- monastic -- tradition, in Eastern and Western churches, always admired, rather foreign to most of us now, tremendously impressive as we saw it there.

That it so largely disappeared from Protestant practice before these relatively small-scale 19th- and 20th-century revivals may have happened, as Rodney suggested, because of Protestant engagement with the European Enlightenment. That occurred at a time when Roman Catholic thought gave a blanket denial to the Enlightenment's premises, a denial that would not be sustained today, and Orthodox thought was hardly in contact with it. To have dealt with the Enlightenment onslaught may be one of the great services Protestantism has done to Christian thinking, but it had the incidental effect of cutting off and practically cauterizing the other-than-rational approaches to religious life such as this monastic tradition.

I have to confess to feeling quite strange in its presence myself, coming as I do from a different tradition in Roman Catholic spiritual practice, the Jesuit insistence on "contemplation in action," which probably resonates better for Protestants than the monastic tradition's total dedication to prayer as an end in itself. Like most Protestants, those of us in this more activist tradition have to bring ourselves up short to appreciate the values and even the legitimacy of the exclusive commitment to worship as such. That we find it being revived in these remote corners of Protestant life is worthy of our very respectful attention.

The private, personal prayer, as we often see, can be at a rote level¹, but when it becomes serious contemplative practice, it attains a depth that makes it, existentially, a more important experience for its practitioners than the communal prayer of their liturgies.

At its most serious it goes beyond the distinctions not only of the various Christian traditions but of the religions themselves, to a common ground. Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, perhaps Hindus (of whom I don't know enough to say), at the deepest levels of contemplative prayer, share a practically indistinguishable common experience of being in God's presence, describing it consistently in language that converges from all parts of this wide spectrum, whether we are dealing with a Theresa of Avila or John of the Cross, or with the Zen or Sufi sages.

Are we to conclude from this that confessionalism in faith is needless -- a conclusion we are inclined to already from seeing the bloody confrontations of rival religious confessions, more violent in our century than they have ever been before? I'll give an instant "No" to that proposition, if only because a confessional stance, even the prayer fellowship in a faith *koinonia*, provides an apparently indispensable initiation into this profound life of a prayer of union with God. Our experience of God, even when it becomes as close and immediate as this, originates in a tradition handed on to us, in which we are raised.

Does that mean we have to be satisfied with confessional exclusivism? I think not.

Some years ago I found that I had to explore for myself, in ways that were quite existential as well as theological, how I responded to contacting a Muslim *koinonia* of faith, i.e., whether I was sincere or actually hypocritical when I spoke to Muslims, as one so easily does, of "the spiritual riches of Islam." I can recognize, and I need to accept, the demands of faith that are made on me within the tradition in which I have grown up, which is both Christian and Roman Catholic. Extremely few of us can lay claim to the direct and primary experiences of God from which our major faith traditions have sprung. But neither I nor any of us can own God, require of him that he conduct himself with others, prescriptively, only in the way he has revealed himself to us, to those of our tradition. While he can make demands of us that are faithfully preserved within our tradition, he is free to address others in terms of his own choosing. Hence, even in faithfulness to the God who has revealed himself in my Christian tradition, I conclude that I must recognize his work in the life, the prayer and the praxis, of these others, even though their tradition is not part of my own experience of coming to know God. That is in no way incompatible with faithfulness to God within the tradition of which I myself have experience.

I'm sure all of us who are in the ordained ministry have had pastoral experience of people who tell us they have no need of church or confession or community, but can relate to God in their own entirely private way. Most frequently we have found that these are not the ones who are living a serious personal prayer life, but the dropouts who have none. We do need, however, to remain open to the exceptional possibility that they do indeed have the personal relation to God of which they speak. It has been one of the hallmarks of intolerance in our century that we assume good will and genuine relation to the basic realities of life, of which our faiths attempt to speak, however obscurely, can only be found within our faith contexts. We should be learning better than that by now.

¹A note here on the familiar Roman Catholic practice of the rosary. This has all the appearance of rote, with the repetitive recital of the "Hail Mary" prayer, interrupted at set intervals by the Lord's Prayer and some other memorized formulas, and of course it can be practiced as rote. In the essential design of the practice, though, the repeated prayers are merely timers, and the true activity of the rosary is meditation or contemplation of the series of "mysteries" of the life of Christ that are recalled at the beginning of each set of ten "Hail Mary's," not a very sophisticated but a practical way of developing the habits of contemplative prayer.

This brings us back, though, to the normal and normative need we have for a *koinonia* in faith and prayer to express what, at Herrnhut, among the Moravian Brethren, we have seen as *Gemeine*, a *communion with one another* before God and grounded in God. Without that human communion in faith, the practical effect of faith in our lives is likely to be entirely sterile.

We have traditionally divided, as Roman Catholics and Protestants, over the meaning of this communion, one emphasizing communion in the word, the other communion in sacrament. It is one of the discoveries of recent years, in which we have had ecumenical dialogue with one another, that the two emphases are complementary, that both speak of *presence*, presence of God and of Christ in word and in sacrament. Even though we are still struggling with one another's formulations of that presence, each confession has, during this century, been gradually rediscovering, within its own tradition, the other's principal emphasis. The Moravians' insistence, even at the time of the Reformation, on both word and sacrament, each understood in terms of God's presence in the *koinonia*, and as a potential bond of reconciliation among the then dividing churches, has been a positive influence for all the rest of us.

Catholics, with our more sacramental tradition, have made our own rediscovery of the Eucharist in these last decades, coinciding with the Second Vatican Council. Reception of communion had been put out of reach for most people by the bad theology of the Middle Ages and later, that had wrapped it all in feelings of guilt and unworthiness so engulfing that people feared to receive the sacrament and had to be commanded to do so even once a year (the Easter Communion). In their yearning for the experience of communion with God thus denied them, medieval Catholics had practically invented for themselves a substitute sacrament of *looking* at the Host as a means of communion with Christ present. We see this in their invention of the elevation of the Host at Mass, the new cult practice that expressed its devotion to Christ in praying before the reserved Host in the tabernacle, exposition of the Host apart from the Mass and many other new practices that, from the beginning of the 13th century, went with it. Nowadays some people want to see all this abolished or de-emphasized out of existence. For myself, I find that there was such an inventiveness and authenticity of spiritual longing revealed in this development that I would not want to insult the people to whom it remains important by rejecting it.

Only in very recent years has that medieval guilt culture (left sadly intact by the Reformation) been so broken down that Catholics now familiarly receive communion, as a matter of course, at practically every Mass. The result has been a tendency among us to have Mass whenever we do anything -- wedding, funeral, parish mission, scripture reflection, evening of prayer, whatever. You may remember how Fr. Tim Garrett, who spoke to us so profoundly at Bossey of personal prayer, rather bristled when that was brought up, complaining that Catholics these days always want Mass with everything, as if there were no other way of praying together. I'm entirely unembarrassed by that myself. To *combine* Eucharist with every other prayer *and action* was the practice of the early Church. To all practical purposes, the way that they themselves, or anyone other, could recognize a Christian community/church/*koinonia* (this, for that time, unfamiliar thing) was that whenever these people met they shared the Eucharist. In their understanding, in Paul's understanding, this action was the concentrate/expression of what their life was. I love to say Mass, and it is coterminous for me, in concentrated (i.e., sacramental) form, with the work I do for reconciliation of serious conflicts.

But whether our *koinonia* practice takes a predominantly word-communion or predominantly sacrament-communion form of being one in Christ, one in God's presence, or has achieved a balance of both, we find ourselves in need of an *institution*, the Church. The institution may be very rudimentary when the *koinonia* is small, as was the early Church, more complex and articulated when it is larger. A *Church order* is implicit in this, at whatever level of complexity. We have heard, here at Herrnhut among the Moravians, Martin Theile's and especially Bishop Gill's account of how the initial *enthusiasm* of a Christian group's witness inevitably concretizes in an institutional expression of *order*.

As Bishop Gill told us, even when a new group coalesces around criticism and rejection of the excesses of order and authority in some previous grouping, the new order tends to resemble in many ways the one that was left. This is the inescapable moment when our spirituality engages with *life*. We do have to struggle with it, but not to recognize that this is fact is simply naive, and unworthy of our faith.

This perennial problem with the institutional element in our Christian life is exacerbated in our time to the point that people think of "religion" or "the Church" as that evil thing that damaged us so badly when we were children, even while "spirituality" is seen as that good thing that, we hope, can possibly heal us. The dilemma can be explained, sociologically, in terms of simple group theory.

In any grouping, whether for religious, political, educational or social purposes, artistic, sport, commercial, whatever, there is a fundamental disparity between the group's interest or agenda and that of the leadership. We can define the area of each one's interest or agenda, and represent it by a circle (as in the illustration at Left), and hope that the circles of the group's and the leadership's interest will overlap perfectly.

If they fail to overlap at all (A), i.e., if the agenda of the leadership simply unrelated to the true interests of the group, we know we have big trouble, and we will find the way to get rid of the leadership.

If the area of non-coincidence is substantial but not total (B), we can be sure of major unrest and struggle within the organisation, and will probably face rationalisation from the leadership to try to deny that things are actually as bad as they look.

But the unavoidable fact is that, in any group, as much as the leadership may try to implement the group's interest and make it its own, there is one area in which the leadership's interest is distinct from the group's, and that is its interest in *being the leadership*. The divergence may be slight (as in C), it may serve the group's interest that a good leadership remain in position, but it is the leadership's interest to remain the leadership whether this serves the group's interest or not. No groups of any kind are exempt from this.

How do we engage with this simple reality of human organisation? We have Jesus' texts in Matthew and Mark: let there be no titles, no domination, let the leader be the one who serves the rest, etc. We've all learned enough to be sceptical when we hear protestations of how the authority-figure is at the service of the rest, and can draw our conclusions about it. There is the radical egalitarianism with which Paul describes the community/Body of Christ in *1 Corinthians* 12, where he is reluctant even to affirm the first/second/third positions of apostle, prophet and teacher until he has sufficiently driven home the mutual dependence of every member on every other and the sole headship of Christ himself. Not satisfied even with that, he caps it with the insistence (chapter 13) that none of this goes anywhere unless grounded in love. We have, further, the contesting of all these structure and authority issues that is evident in the New Testament, between the more authoritarian models of James in Jerusalem, or of the Pastoral Epistles, and the anti-authoritarian responses attributed to Jesus himself in the churches addressed in the Gospels of Matthew and John.

This discussion within the early Church reaches its most interesting point in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the first to propound unabashedly the prerogatives of the monarchical bishop. As he travels toward his martyrdom in Rome, Ignatius meets other monarchical bishops, like Polycarp of Smyrna, and lends his unambiguous support to their position, though quite clearly he knows there is no such monarchical figure as yet in Rome itself. Conscious always of the Pauline principle that the Church -- Body of Christ -- has but one head, one mediator, Christ himself, Ignatius recognizes his need to justify, in compatible terms, the claims he makes for the bishop's authority. We have become quite accustomed, in later writing, to the image/metaphor that sees the bishop or ecclesiastical superior as speaking in the person of Christ. Ignatius employs, by preference, quite another personification image.

The bishop, facing the congregation that is Church -- this is very distinctly, like most early descriptions of Church, a gathering of people in one place -- personifies *not Christ, but rather the Father*. It is in the congregation itself that he sees, recognizes, acknowledges the person of Christ -- Body of Christ. The bishop thus speaks *in the name of Christ, i.e. in the name of the congregation before him*. In so doing, he *articulates the faith of the Church*, that stands before him. In the mutual recognition by which he articulates their faith in their name, *in love*, we recognize and experience the *indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit*. The whole image -- theological metaphor -- is deeply Trinitarian. It is *in his articulation of the faith of the koinonia* that the authority of the bishop is validated.

We have everywhere in our Christian tradition the service principle of leadership, far too little practiced though much preached or asserted. For ourselves, the democratic concepts, readily available to us only in recent centuries, are hardly well enough defined yet to serve as wholly intelligible models. Our inclination is to understand them mainly in terms of electoral process, and our various church orders react with different degrees of acceptance or rejection toward that. It has always seemed better to me that our definition of democracy lean essentially on the maintenance of *accountability* at all levels, and that we see electoral process more as a means of implementing it than the essence of democracy itself. It then becomes more serviceable to us as an element in church order.

In my own Roman Catholic context, where we have the highest degree of structural complexity among Christian church orders, we constantly hear, since at least lip-service to democracy has become the norm for secular societies, the near-*mantra* that "The Church is not a democracy." We may well ask: why not, particularly as the order principles of Christian *koinonia* have always in the past tended to follow the contemporaneous structures of secular society (hoping as a rule that we choose the better features of them and not the worse). But Protestants have also had their better and their worse experiences of the creation and enforcement of church order. Count Zinzendorf here at Herrnhut clearly called the shots. Luther and Calvin had their own bewilderments and failures in the matter of order, and were duly challenged about it.

But enforcement or, instead, accountability of leadership to and in the *koinonia* must be *in love*. Otherwise it is simply outside the whole Christian confessional orbit. We have not believed the good news of Christ or become his disciples in order to practice contention among ourselves, to live a life of guerrilla warfare toward one another. All of which is to say that these problems are not peculiar to any one church order, but are endemic to the whole enterprise of Christian faith within the *koinonia*. We are prone, again, to take these internal order problems for granted, as insoluble, and to retreat from them, either by acquiescence or by dropping out. Both of these are failure responses, and our responsibility, in love, is to deal with these problems in all the ever-new ways they present themselves.

Still, these internal matters, if they are all we attend to, are navel-gazing. Our Christian calling is one of witness, a mission to carry the good news to the damaged peoples of the world. This is, to return to the prayerful spirituality concern, what our Eucharist expresses, as (in terms of a liberation theology) the preferential option for the poor, for the oppressed, for those in need of all kinds, including especially

those in need of faith. (Hear, on this subject, the Word of the Lord as *Amos* teaches it, chapter 8: 4-12.) Our spirituality, as an entire life, is directed to others, in engagement.

We become accustomed to hearing now that the Church is in a bad way: struggling in a secularized ("Post-Christian") society, hardly heard, weak in its internal bonding and conviction; or, alternatively, that it is corrupt, self-interested, authoritarian, hardly worthy any longer of our adherence or serious engagement. I would think, in contrast, that we are experiencing an *era of opportunity* for the Church to live *in service*: the *whole* community or *koinonia* in service to all, not for the denominational advantage of any confessional group but as a way of bringing the Gospel's healing action to a suffering world.

As a concrete example, I would think of the situation that the Roman Catholic community of Croatia came to last summer, when the tide of war shifted and they took back their Krajina region and parts of Slavonia. This was the Catholic moment in the war, and time to see what the practice of faith in love would mean. Had they organized themselves then, as *koinonia*, to see that the "ethnic cleansing" policy of their neighbors would not be repeated by themselves now that they had the chance, that their Serbian neighbors, whose families had lived among them for centuries, were not thrust out of the Krajina and Slavonia as they themselves had been, but made welcome to live safely in peace in their ancestral homes, the entire climate of the war would have been transformed, and an altogether different life for the whole community made possible. That this did not happen is a new tragedy of the war, a failure of faith.

What do we work for? Confessional triumph? We've all done that long enough. Many of you, yesterday, visited the Bethlehem Chapel, site of the preaching of John Hus in Prague. One of the frescoes on the wall showed a bloody battle, the banner of (Catholic) cross laid low and the banner of (Utraquist) chalice triumphant, with the inscription "*Veritas vincit*," "Truth conquers." Rodney will recall, from the BTI Workshop visit we made to Rome three years ago, seeing in the Gesu church, at the tomb of the founder of my Jesuit Order, St. Ignatius Loyola, the carving of the triumphant figure of Truth, "*Veritas*," lording it over two slinking, defeated figures whose carved labels had, more or less ecumenically, been allowed to wear away until they were now barely decipherable as "Luther" and "Calvin." This is exactly the spirit that the Bohemian and then Moravian Brethren, pacifists among the Hussites, refused to accept, and the thing most contrary to Christian action in faith.

Some years ago, I organized a couple of days' "Convocation" of our U.S. Interreligious Committee for Peace in the Middle East (an organization made up of American Jews, Christians and Muslims who work together to promote the peace) at Boston College. When I met, a few days before, Jehoshafat Harkabi, an Israeli General who had become a prominent peace advocate in his country but who described himself, in characteristic Israeli terms, as "a secular man," I mentioned that we would have one panel discussion on "The Role of Religious Values in the Search for Peace." Harkabi reacted quite vehemently to say: "What are you doing that for? I would have thought the role was entirely negative." I thought the comment a bit too heavy, and tried to treat it as a joke, telling him I knew just what he meant, but that we had these and these speakers who would deal with the positive aspects of the role. Harkabi, not a bit amused, retorted: "You are going to take religion to the beauty parlor!" The response was so telling that, of course, I introduced the panel by telling that story, and at its end the participants agreed that, instead of taking religion to the beauty parlor, they had taken it to the cleaners.

Our service engagement, in faith, is *for the good* of the others, whether it happens to be for the advantage of our confessional position or not.

I should wind this up simply by saying where all this, as a set of guidelines for living the spirituality of a Christian *koinonia*, such as I understand them, leaves me. Everyone's conclusions from

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this will be highly individual, of course, according to our very individual callings, and there is always the possibility of embarrassment, if we should find out afterward that we just had it wrong. Even so, it is better to act on what we really believe than to retreat. For me, the concerns that I really feel called to act on are:

1. conflict interventions, in such situations as in the Middle East or Northern Ireland, for reconciliation among both/all sides, even for those I would think of as the malefactors; for their conversion, even their secular or human conversion;

2. an engagement, within the Church, for reconciliation. My own work as a theologian in the area of the recognition and validation of sacrament (particularly Eucharist) and ministry across the whole spectrum of differences in church order is the major field in which I find myself engaged at this level. It is contentious enough within my own church.

3. an engagement, within the guild of practicing theologians, for theology as an expression and exploration of tradition(s) of faith, not a reduction of it to a value-free discipline of study.

To fall back from any of these would be, for myself, retreat, and blameworthy. The shape of anyone else's engagement will be equally distinctive, but equally a personal call, which can be accepted or forfeited.