

CHAPTER 9

Authenticity and spirituality

What presents itself as spirituality requires discernment.

Sandra Schneiders¹²⁰

When spirituality becomes popular we can almost be certain that some vital elements or ingredients of spirituality have been left out of the popular conception. Things become popular by being distorted, especially by leaving out the hard bits, and emphasising those aspects that seem easy or desirable. The hard bits of spirituality would include sacrifice, discipline, commitment and dedication to the other. A new spirituality arising from society is, at times, going to be 'worldly' and not always 'spiritual'. This should not lead us to reject popular spirituality out of hand, as if it were somehow vulgar or distasteful. We must not become intolerant of the popular just because it is popular.

GIVING BACK TO THE SACRED

Popular spirituality is partly about taking what we can 'get' from the spirit. It is true that the spirit is the fount of our lives, the origin of many gifts, but we must never take the generosity or plenitude of the spirit for granted. The spirit does not exist for our own edification and enjoyment, on the contrary spirituality has traditionally emphasised that we exist to glorify and serve a transcendent reality beyond

ourselves. This sense of service, of giving back rather than of taking, of allowing ourselves to be instrumental rather than assuming centrality, can be experienced by the ordinary ego as boring, unattractive or tedious. Our task is to tackle the problem of authenticity in spirituality, and to ask questions about what is true and false in the popular conception of spirituality today.

I am aware that any discourse about true or false spirituality is dangerous and inflammatory. It can be tempting to insert our own preferred kind of spirituality in the 'true' category, while relegating unfamiliar or non-preferred pathways to the 'false' category. I have to admit that what I refer to as true spirituality is a subjective confession about what I see and value within the limitations of my present understanding. The academic in me likes to be definite about these things, but the postmodern thinker in me has to admit that these matters are relative and subject to deconstruction.

THE POPULAR IDEAL OF BLISS

The tendency to idealise and distort the idea of spirituality has been facilitated in our time by New Age industries and enterprises. These industries service the contemporary hunger for spiritual expression, and they often style spirituality as an ego-friendly or utopian experience, presenting the encounter with the spirit as a 'feel-good' encounter. Popular figures such as Joseph Campbell (1988) and Deepak Chopra (1994) have encouraged people to become spiritual adventurers and soulful questers with spiritual reward as the end. Campbell's hugely popular spiritual message in the 1990s, reproduced in the book and television series *The Power of Myth*, was deliberately targeted at our desires for profit and pleasure, as made apparent in its famous slogan 'follow your bliss'.

Wherever you are, if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying the waters of eternal life, that life within you, all the time.¹²¹

The waters of eternal life are often presented as idyllic and paradisaical, a sort of blue-green sea beside which we relax and become blissfully at peace. But spiritual waters can become grey, dark, stormy and torrential. They can become full of anger and rage at the complacent state of our human existence. These waters may wish to break in

upon us, to destroy our peace, to bring suffering and anguish so that something deeper and non-ordinary can be brought to birth in the human heart. The spiritual waters can and do sustain and nourish us, but they can be destructive and wild, especially if our human structures have made no room for the sacred, and have not factored worship into account. In a secular world that has built barriers against the sacred, I do not think Campbell's image of blissful waters is always appropriate, though it is very marketable by spiritual industries seeking to produce designer spiritualities.

SPIRITUALITY AS PAINFUL INTERRUPTION

Bliss is only one aspect of the spiritual, and when it occurs it is often brief and transitory. Truth be known, our entry into spirituality is often unpleasant, difficult and fraught with emotional and social problems. I often speak of 'falling' into spirituality, in the same way as we speak of falling in love. This fall is often involuntary and uncomfortable; it sometimes occurs against our will and in spite of our intentions. To fall into spirituality is to fall into a larger pattern of reality, over which we have no control, and before which we stand astonished, mystified and often disoriented. However, we do not fall into nothingness or emptiness; we fall into relationship with a secret or invisible other. Faith is letting go and knowing that something greater than ourselves is present.

We are overpowered by a force that is greater than we are. This can be miraculous but it can also be dreadful and humiliating to the ego. We are no longer in control of our lives. As such, spirituality is a kind of alien abduction; we are seized, taken over and coordinated by an outside force. This is why it is strange to hear people talk of spirituality as if it were some kind of teddy-bear's picnic, a pleasant event that they look forward to with great interest. Popular language has sentimentalised the spiritual journey, and turned it into something that is ideal, supportive of the ego and full of delight.

Perhaps it is important that we develop these pleasant myths and illusions, because otherwise we might never set foot in the spiritual domain. Spirituality, at least as I experience it, is not something we have or possess for our greater fulfilment, but something that has or possesses us, for the sake of a destiny we cannot know, and another will we cannot fully understand. At times, it is difficult to understand the rush towards spirituality, because if people knew what they were

about to experience, they might not be so hasty to leave the cocoon of the protected self and go on the journey. To enter into relationship with the spirit is a fateful and foreboding experience; as scripture informs us:

It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

(Hebrews 10:31)

God has not become destructive in our time, but God often appears to us in negative form, because we are so armoured against the sacred that it has to overtake us before any encounter can take place. The angel has to wrestle us at the ford before we even notice that it exists. When personal breakdown is our only way to break through to the sacred, life arranges obstacles, difficulties, crises or ruptures more often than would otherwise be the case, sometimes repeatedly.

Many of us are dragged down into depth, often with no apparent cause or reason. In Greek mythology, Persephone was picking beautiful flowers in a delightful field, when she was suddenly abducted by Hades, the God of the Underworld. We can feel like Persephone, innocent, naive, contented and going about our pleasant business, when something abnormal and horrible interrupts us. Suddenly, the ground beneath breaks open, exposing a terrible abyss and a dark God. Often, the more we cling to the surface of life, and insist on our innocence, the more violently we are drawn into a strange and difficult terrain, a new dark world that seems so different to normal reality.

The surface of our lives can be punctured by the death of a parent, close relative or friend. Or an intimate relationship crumbles, a marriage falls apart, the children get caught up in drugs, crime or suicidal urges, and chaos breaks loose. Depression, chronic fatigue, ennui, burnout, neurosis, and various kinds of psychosomatic illness are, as it were, the 'left-handed' path into depth and potential spiritual growth.

DENYING THE NEGATIVE SIDE

The difficult, unruly or invasive aspects of spirituality are less frequently engaged or discussed. These darker aspects are conveniently bracketed out of the popular equation, or are projected outside our idealised image of spirituality and placed upon other entities or forces.

It is easy to find scapegoats, or to blame other people or institutions for the mess we are in, rather than see that our mess is part of a greater design, and that such chaos is the crucible in which the philosopher's stone is forged.

Secular or private spirituality can isolate us from others and the wider community. Because so much spirituality operates behind closed doors, in the isolation of our homes or bedrooms, or in the privacy of our own minds, it has just as much capacity to shut us off from community and other people, as it does to open a door to a hidden source or divine power. We often boast about the ability of spirituality to offer us connectedness to nature, others or God, but precisely because this operates in the personal mode it frequently has the reverse effect on our social, familial and communal lives, severing bonds between ourselves and others, and alienating us still further from our social environment.

This bleaker aspect of spirituality is rarely talked about, partly because this would challenge our popular belief in the self-sufficiency of the modern individual, who is supposed to be autonomous and self-contained. If we admitted that spirituality brings as much pain and loneliness as blissful connection with the waters of spirit, we would have to admit that our idealised image of the lone individual before God is inherently flawed and even illusory. But because the secular world is based on a myth of individuality and a cult of individualism, we become like sheep who dare not even raise a bleat against the appalling loneliness that privatised spirituality can bring.

There are numerous difficulties and problems associated with personal spirituality, including the sense of disorientation as one attempts to come to grips with another dimension of the real. This disorientation is all the more acute since more of us in secular society enter into foreign spiritual territory without maps or guides, without direction or counsel from theology, religion, psychology or mysticism. Even Campbell, the advocate of bliss, has to concede, 'If you don't know what the guide-signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself.'¹²² We simply dive in headfirst and wander and roam where we please, often unaware of where we are going, or what we are journeying towards. Do-it-yourself spirituality is potentially very exciting, but when obstacles are encountered or dangers are discovered, we then realise that the path is fraught, and we need lights and illuminations to guide our way.

SPIRITUALITY AS SELF-SACRIFICE

The idea that we enter into relationship with divine forces to gain power over them, or to wrest prestige from them, is a popular marketable fiction. The fact is that true spirituality is not something that makes itself available to our egotistical designs, but rather something that draws us into a larger world and makes us subordinate to a greater will that transcends us on all sides. The credo of true spirituality could be the words of Jesus uttered in despair in the Garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion, 'Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done' (Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:42). This is the awesome, foreboding, even terrifying dimension of spirituality, which we might refer to as the not-so-popular aspect of the sacred. Not 'follow your bliss', but 'thy will be done' is the credo for authentic spirituality.

The encounter with the spirit is paradoxical, and our experience of it can split into good and bad aspects when the ordinary ego is governing our standpoint and making our decisions. We designate as bad that which feels uncomfortable, seems overwhelming or compels us to sacrifice, service or subordination. Spirituality is a covenant that offers us the possibility of connection with God, but the price paid for such connection is real and binding. Spirituality satisfies our longing, fulfils our desire, and provides shelter and meaning, but it demands a relative loss of our former freedom and personal autonomy, and entry into the mystery and necessity of sacrifice. We become instruments in the hands of God. Connection to the divine always comes at the cost of losing some element of our former personal freedom.

If we make contact with the sacred, the sacred makes corresponding claims on us. We fall under its direction and become subjects of a divine reality. This involves us in new rules and conditions, including the requirement to follow the dictates of the sacred as they are revealed to us in our experience, prayer, meditation, reflection and spiritual direction. We recognise that we are no longer masters of our fate, as so many modern people like to believe, but become servants of a new reality and participate in a new life that makes considerable demands. Among these demands is not only the need to follow the will of the sacred other, but also to serve the needs of other people and to help others uncover or release

the divine potential in themselves. The spiritual life explodes the myths of egotism, narcissism, self-sufficiency, individualism and privatisation. It is completely subversive to modern society and destroys many cherished values of the intellectual enlightenment, especially its idea of freedom.

Our contact with the sacred brings a *metanoia* or conversion within the personal self, which has been popularised in Christian communities as the experience of being 'born again'. Even though we may have embarked on the spiritual journey for purely narcissistic reasons, such as the search for bliss or relaxation, we find that things are not quite as we had planned once the journey gets underway. In spite of ourselves, and regardless of our motives, we find ourselves having to deal with realities that are not pleasant to the ego. This is why Buddhist teachers say that even a spiritual journey begun with 'impure motives' (such as a search for personal power) can actually serve a greater purpose, and can become transformed into an authentic spiritual quest. The ego does not understand what it is letting itself in for. Perhaps these illusions and impure motives are important at the outset, otherwise the ego may not cooperate with what eventually ends up as its own demise, displacement and transcendence. To the ordinary ego, the spiritual experience is a fraud, because it introduces us to the scandal of living otherwards and to being other-directed. The genuine spirit calls us to break our addiction to bliss and to attend to the needs of the other.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AS A SACRED IMPERATIVE

Although we might initially discover the spirit within ourselves, in quiet introspection, retreat, seclusion or introversion, once spirit is contacted it brings with it an imperative to go outside ourselves and serve others and the world. If we confine the spirit within our own subjectivity, we are liable to explode from the build-up of impossible energy that cannot find fulfilment. Although spirit might be found within us, its 'inwardness' is a temporary dwelling place, because spirit is the fount of human creation and the core of the natural world.

Once released from its hiding place in the self, it rushes out to the wider world, and we need to move beyond ourselves with it, lest we lose the gift of grace that has been bestowed on us. This can cause initial anxiety in many modern people, who may have subscribed to the myth of individualism and are surprised and dismayed by the

momentum with which spirit leads them into the world. The narcissistic idea of private spirituality becomes shattered by the spirit as soon as it is awakened. Private spirituality is revealed as an illusion, or as a transitional stage between a former state of sleep and a future mission of social responsibility and commitment. The divine spark inside us longs to become reunited with the universal light, and this is why genuine spiritual awakening is always followed by a centrifugal movement away from the self towards the world and the transcendent.

In our typical human experience, God starts off as 'my' God, my personal redeemer, guiding angel or mentor, and ends up as the supreme and unknowable Godhead, the great mystery who is creator of the world and the reality within every thing. We are drawn out of ourselves and beyond subjectivity, and if we are courageous enough to move with this momentum we find, ironically, true personal fulfilment and individual satisfaction. The secular myth of the individual locks us into a cocoon that is by definition a recipe for despair, depression and frustration. Our real longing can only be fulfilled by contacting the spirit and moving wherever it pleases.

This helps to explain the age-old connection between spirituality and social service, a connection that is being destroyed by the popular myth of spirituality as a private preoccupation and a path of self-development. But this new popular myth is partly right, and provides a necessary compensation to the ideas of formal religion, which have directed our attention to the outer world, forgetting that God resides in the inner man or woman, and can be discovered there through self-reflection. Religion's emphasis on the world and social service needs to be complemented by a new mystical emphasis on the cultivation of the inner life. Once the inner connection is made, the spirit compels us into the world, and we willingly do what religion preaches. But tradition so often misses the inner connection, and engagement with the world soon runs out if we have not nurtured the *religio* or 'binding back' within ourselves. We need both inner life and outer engagement, spiritual contemplation and social action.

MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM

We tend to see spirituality as a preparation for life, a fulfilment of personal hopes and a search for psychological wholeness, but it is also, in its darker aspect, a preparation for death, and a building of a vessel that will carry us into immortal life. For many people, this side of

spirituality is too morbid to contemplate, but it is a part of what spirituality is about. The God who gives so much and fills us with life, joy and contentment is the same God who overshadows us with mystery and darkness, and draws us into itself at the time of our death.

Rudolf Otto, in his work *The Idea of the Holy*,¹²³ provides a memorable description of the paradoxical nature of the holy. According to Otto, the experience of the holy is complex and two major aspects may be discerned. The first is the *mysterium fascinans*, and the second the *mysterium tremendum*. The first is the experience of the numinous as fascinating, mysterious, wonderful and elevating. This is the side that is championed today in the popular discussions about spirituality. The second, the holy as *tremendum*, is more foreboding and difficult. It recognises that in our contact with the sacred we encounter something that stands against us, and before which we realise our own frailty, weakness and smallness. In our experience of the *tremendum*, Otto asserts, we are conscious of God as 'a religious object over against the self', and we sense our humanity as sheer 'impotence and general nothingness as against overpowering might, dust and ashes as against majesty'.¹²⁴

The experience of mystery as *tremendum* diminishes our status, displaces human authority, and brings us into relationship with something tremendous and awesome. *Tremendum* relates to the English word 'tremor', as in 'fear and trembling before God'. Otto writes:

The Hebrew word *hallow* is an example. To keep a thing holy in the heart means to mark it off by a feeling of peculiar dread, not to be mistaken for any ordinary dread, that is to appraise it by the category of the numinous . . . The 'fear of God' which Yahweh can pour forth, dispatching almost like a daemon, seizes upon a man with paralysing effect. Here we have a terror fraught with an inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instil. It has something spectral in it.¹²⁵

The *tremendum* aspect, he continues, is 'the deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion'. He argues that throughout history the numinous has been experienced as both wonderful and dreadful, and he arrives at the description of the sacred as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

In view of this, it would seem that the task of tradition is to remind us of the paradoxical nature of God and spirit. Religion sings praises to God as the creator of life and the universe, but it also recognises in full solemnity that this same God will draw us into itself at our death. The task of religion is to remind us of the complex nature of spirituality, to release the spirit from the merely personal domain, and to broaden its horizon to include the social world, the community and the whole of our experience.

The historical role of religion is to liberate the spirit from personal narcissism, and to introduce a cosmic or universal perspective as well as to keep spirituality firmly related to morality, social responsibility and the remembrance of our own mortality. This role of religion is difficult yet essential; it is compelled to place more emphasis on the *tremendum* than on the *fascinans*, since it is the *tremendum* that we readily lose, repress or ignore in favour of a brighter and more positive or ego-friendly image of the divine. But a creative religion keeps the foreboding and fascinating elements in steady balance, so that religion both inspires our spiritual aspiration and tempers it by reminding us of our boundaries, duties, responsibilities and limits.

AUTHENTICITY AND TRADITION

Tradition enshrines and contains authentic ideas about spirituality, but because tradition has broken down we have to arrive at these ideas in new ways. As we progress along the spiritual path, we often learn to revalue tradition as the historical repository of wisdom, and this can lead to a completely new attitude towards religious tradition. Typically, at the beginning of the spiritual journey, contemporary people often denounce religion as extraneous or external to the self and therefore as irrelevant to spirituality. With greater maturity, a new understanding emerges, but with this maturity comes a new danger: not ditching tradition as irrelevant, but embracing it too fully as the source and goal of one's own spiritual striving.

The contemporary individual may have to distance him or herself from tradition, to emphasise the personal experience of the sacred. This is the archetypal pattern of Buddha, Christ and all religious revolutionaries: to sweep aside tradition so as to get down to a primordial, personal and immediate experience of the sacred. Jung writes: '[our spiritual instinct] leaves the trodden paths to explore the by-ways and lanes ... just as Buddha swept aside his two million

gods that he might attain the original experience which alone is convincing'.¹²⁶ The historical irony is that the passionate and even fiery individuality of Christ or Buddha gives rise to new religions in which the radical impulses are forgotten, and the revolutionary is then made the head of new social conventions in which the impulse to conform is paramount.

Once personal experience of the sacred has been achieved, in whatever form or expression is appropriate for the individual, there arises a natural desire to link the experience with tradition. It is as if a former rebellious phase has been outgrown, and now there is an opposite desire to embrace tradition and see one's experience in light of the historical process. The spirit, as I have said, hungers for universality, and after an initial period the personal is outgrown and there is a desire to inhabit a much larger world. After pushing tradition aside, we can be assailed by a new problem—a desire to immerse ourselves in a religious tradition, and to abandon individuality in the name of achieving a new authenticity. Formal religion might encourage this as a desirable situation, but it could represent a loss to spirituality.

THE DANGERS OF NOSTALGIC TRADITIONALISM

We must learn to distinguish between traditionalism and authenticity in spirituality. I have observed a number of people, especially around middle-age, who become filled with a desire to lead an authentic spiritual life, and who interpret this as a need to go back to tradition and to bury their individuality in a kind of nostalgic traditionalism. It is as if an Oedipal or rebellious phase has been outgrown, and now there is the opposite desire: not to slay the father of tradition, but to 'marry' the father in an ecstatic merger of self and history. In such a marriage, the pain of isolation is overcome and one attempts to become absorbed in the historical stream. I think this is particularly acute if the postmodern condition has been experienced as flawed, fragmented and disloyal to the past. The maturing person grows out of the rebellious background, and the desire for roots, connections and security makes him or her extraordinarily traditional, as if claiming the authenticity that had been absent in the past.

But authenticity is not to be gained in such a simple way. To be authentic, one must be true to one's own human situation or destiny, and life may be seeking something new or different in and through

our individual example. If life wants us to live in the present, and to find a new solution to the religious problem of our time, then a return to the past is not an achievement of authenticity, but an escape from it. We could refer to this as a regressive restoration of the past. People who do this often view themselves as a cut above the general community who are struggling with the fragments and inconsistencies of present social reality. In its extreme form, this longing for certainty and avoidance of the present leads to fundamentalism, extremism and authoritarianism, all in the name of doing what is 'good' for us and others.

One way out of this dilemma is to make distinctions between traditional values and traditional practices. Traditional values include emphasis on the other rather than the self, compassion, respect, charity and sacrifice. While these may need to be embraced in order to discover a new authenticity, traditional practices, creeds and dogmas may simply lead us out of the present altogether in search of an imagined past. It seems to me that the contemporary and the traditional need to stand separate, although linked, with bridges between them. When we abandon the contemporary in a bid to become authentic, we are misunderstanding the meaning of authenticity, that is to be true to what is present in ourselves and in our society at the time. Authenticity means doing what the spirit wants us to do, and to find out what that could be, we need to develop the skills of prophecy and discernment, and not take flight into convention.

Tradition may best be honoured, not by a regressive return to the past, but by a courageous and faithful commitment to the present, and a living of the 'spirit' of tradition in the context of the present. As Picasso once said, tradition is having a baby, not wearing your father's hat. For our purposes, this might mean borrowing from traditional understandings of spirituality, but applying those understandings to the new context of postmodern society, and not betraying the postmodern condition by a flight to the past. As contemporary historians tell us, any reconstruction of the past is a work of fiction anyway, and our image of the past is always an interpretation of history, not a description of it.

How we relate to tradition is a vital element in the spiritual journey. Once some distance and detachment has been gained, we are at liberty to rediscover tradition as a resource. Creative spirituality seems to be a balancing act. The individual must remain true to his or

her individuality, and yet also draw from tradition to develop a broader view and to uncover the rich resources needed for the journey. If we are not careful, tradition can exert a mighty gravitational force upon us and draw us into a dull and inert historicism. However, to refuse to dialogue with tradition is a sign of continued youthfulness and adolescence, and a denial of the deep sources that nourish us.