

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS? ENGAGING ISSUES, 6 DECEMBER 2022

Blaubeuren

Sleit a Klötzle Blei glei bei Blaubeure. Glei bei Blaubeure leit a Klötzle Blei (The little lump of lead lies right by Blaubeuren).

This Swabian tongue twister was invented by the 19th century German poet Eduard Mörike to celebrate the small town of Blaubeuren south-east of Stuttgart which encapsulates the love-hate relationship between spirituality and religion. The town has two famous geological features:

- The first is this large rock which looms over the town, known in the local dialect as *a Klötzle Blei* – ‘the little lump of lead’.
- The second is the brilliant blue pool after which the town is named. It lies in the bend of the river Blau as it emerges from underground caverns in the Swabian hills on its way to join the Danube.

The pool has always been a place of magic: one of those “thin places”, a Narnian wardrobe where different worlds meet. Votive offerings to its deities which go back thousands of years are on view in the museum. Mörike’s tongue twister refers to the ancient legend which tries to explain the phenomenon. No one knew how deep the pool was. So the local chieftain took a Klötzle Blei – a little lump of the lead from the famous rock – tied it to a ball of wool and lowered it into the pool. In

the hidden depths the water spirit, whose duty it was to guard the pool's secret, caught the missile and wound the wool round it, round and round, until the amazed chieftain declared that the pool was *bodenlos* – bottomless! It connected its devotees directly with the unfathomable mysteries and spiritual energies of the Earth.

Following the evangelization of north-western Europe such cultic beliefs and practices were of natural concern to the Church. So it's not surprising to find the pool overlooked by a beautiful Benedictine Abbey, founded in 1085. The Church's policy was ambivalent. Instead of driving the cult underground by prohibiting it as demonic, the aim was rather to integrate it into the Christian understanding of baptism and healing, aided by the prayers of the monks for salvation in this world and the next. After the Reformation it became a choir school, and is now a theological seminary where prospective Lutheran pastors learn Latin, Greek and Hebrew before beginning their University studies.

Holy wells, well-dressing and hydrotherapy

At first sight it looks as if the traditional spirituality of the place was suppressed by the institution of the Church. But the hospitality of Catholicism to these indigenous practices may have had the opposite effect. The myriad holy wells of mediaeval Europe might be named after Christian saints like Winefride at Holywell in North Wales, but did they in fact represent the infiltration of Christianity by paganism? So said hard-line Protestants. Yet some of these monuments of ancient

spirituality have survived the most strenuous attacks. The efforts of the authorities to prevent the continuing use of St Winefride's shrine by demolishing it were frustrated by the simple fact that St James' Protestant Church at the higher level would have collapsed had they done so. Wishing wells and well-dressing still flourish in the heart of Protestant England. And – most surprising of all - the doctors of the Enlightenment, always ready to mock religious superstition, gave these places a new, scientific respectability by advertising their healing minerals. The re-invention of these ancient sites as fashionable spas, and the fortunes made by attracting wealthy hypochondriacs to them, are entertainingly described in Walter Scott's novel "*St Ninian's Well*".

A complex relationship

Such examples show that the relationship between spirituality and religion is complex. The latest Census figures about religion might encourage us to set them in opposition to one another. But, as RS Thomas said, "Not so fast, mortals!" Two factors in particular should warn us against this.

1. First, the present revival of spirituality is a rebellion against scientific materialism as much as it is against organized religion. Remember the Atheist Bus Campaign and the advert, "*There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life*"? Some atheists are now regretting the spiritual emptiness

of that message, and the consequences for the planet of reducing the meaning of life to “enjoyment”.

2. Secondly, similar issues confront all institutions, not just religious ones. What’s the relationship between education and the institutions of learning, with all their compulsory powers, which are supposed to deliver it? Between health and the medical establishment? Between justice and the legal profession, the courts and the police? Or between truth and the actual behaviour of the media? To our shame, abuse, failure and neglect are universal features of the gap between the “spirituality” of these areas of life and the institutions which embody them. This evening’s focus is on religion and spirituality, but let’s not forget the wider relevance of the challenge.

To explore the subject I’d like to look first at examples of spirituality apart from religion, then at some within organized religion, and finally to identify some of the issues raised.

Atheist spirituality

An example of atheist spirituality is found in Sam Harris’ book, “*Waking up*”, published in 2014. Sam Harris is a neuroscientist who has some interesting things to say about the structure of the brain and its relation to memory and consciousness. As a good atheist he thinks religions are false. But spirituality represents something genuine which

must be rescued from attempts by religions to monopolize it. I quote: *“A middle path exists between making religion out of spiritual life and having no spiritual life at all. Spirituality remains the great hole in secularism, humanism, rationality and atheism.”* Spirituality is about the nature of our search for happiness. *“Our pleasures, however refined, are by their very nature fleeting... Is it possible to find lasting fulfilment despite the inevitability of change? Spiritual life begins with the suspicion that the answer could well be ‘yes’... It is a fact that a condition of selfless well-being is there to be glimpsed in each moment.”* (End quote) Like St Augustine, Sam Harris is troubled by the restlessness of the human heart, seeking ever more experiences and possessions to fill the inner vacuum. *“We are lost in the movie of our lives,”* he says. But this is to are hide our heads under a pillow. By practising disciplines of meditation and mindfulness we wake up from this fictional dream to live in the reality of the present moment, and give what he calls *“undistracted attention to the content of consciousness, pleasant or unpleasant.”* Such mindfulness can be scientifically shown to be beneficial in terms of both mental health and spontaneous loving regard towards others.

Sam Harris’ antipathy to religion does not prevent him from having a high regard for Eastern spiritual traditions, especially the disciplines of Buddhism which he has learned to practice. While admitting that the world of Eastern gurus is full of charlatans, he finds Buddhist

techniques enormously helpful in developing spiritual awareness on a non-theistic basis. An aspect of Buddhist teaching which he highlights is the emphasis on “non-self”. The practice of mindfulness heightens our consciousness of reality, but also undermines our sense of being a separate self. The idea that there is somehow an “inner self” at our centre which is looking out at the world is one of the illusions from which we need to wake up.

Douglas Harding, who died in 2007 at the age of 98, described this “non-self” spirituality as “Headlessness”. *“There exists only the Now, this present moment and what is clearly given to my consciousness in it. I see my arms and legs, but certainly not a head. This nothing, this vacancy at the top of my body is a vast emptiness vastly filled, a nothing that finds room for everything. I have lost a head and gained a world. Its total presence is my total absence, body and soul.”*

For the moment, let's just take this spiritual perspective on board, and save our questions and reactions until later.

Environmental spirituality

Another form of contemporary spirituality is centred on the external world of nature of which we are but a small part. Today's environmental crisis is making us more aware than ever of the beauty that is being damaged, and the interdependence of all living things, including ourselves, on ecological balances which are being wilfully

destroyed. This sense of Paradise Lost, of natural harmony endangered, goes back over two centuries to the Romantic poets. It is powerfully expressed in Coleridge's iconic (if Steve Aze will permit) tale of the killing of the albatross in *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. Like traditional religion, environmental spirituality has a strong sense of sin. But who or what is to blame? Global capitalism or state socialism, each promising unlimited economic growth? The Bible with its view of human "dominion" over nature and its indifference to this world and the body? Or atheistic materialism with its denial of any power beyond ourselves to whom we are responsible? On any account, the culprit is soullessness. Whether we are religious or not, the climate emergency and the Covid lockdowns have taught us how much we need immersion in the natural world to restore our mental and spiritual wellbeing, and to learn humility and wisdom.

For some hardy souls such immersions may take the form of swimming in the sea or in mountain lakes in winter, or running over the edge of a mountain and paragliding, which the French appropriately call The Baptism of the Air.

Less strenuous alternatives are explored in James Thornton's excellent book "*A Field Guide to the Soul – a Down-to-Earth Handbook of Spiritual Practice*". James Thornton came to Church Stretton a few years ago to talk about the work of Client Earth, the international organisation of legal experts of which he's the founder. Knowing that

the crucial thing is not the passing of environmental laws but their enforcement, Client Earth takes governments to court for breaking their own rules. They put the Spirit back into the Law, and have won important cases in the British Supreme Court.

James Thornton grew up as a Roman Catholic, and he now describes himself as a teacher in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. For him, the environmental challenge needs us to change not just our technology and our politics, but our hearts. What he calls deep listening is vital in his own legal practice. He takes several weeks off work every year to renew his soul through contact with the Earth – he calls it “listening to my client”. The book is full of practical spiritual exercises, and I have copies with me which I can sell to you for £5. Here’s the flavour of the book in one of the practical reflections:

“Mark out one square foot of Earth. Sit or lie down beside it and give it your unwavering attention. See what is there. Much of it will be at a smaller scale than you usually notice. Do not touch anything, just attune your senses. Watch, listen, smell. Follow your curiosity. It will take about 20 minutes before you really start to see. Something you thought dead or inorganic will startle you with a movement so subtle you would never have noticed it before. Let yourself experience the life world of the beings within your one square foot. Your awareness is love, and loving anything can bring you to the whole. If a question

arises in your heart, let it rise. When the heart asks its questions from deep silence they are received and subtly answered.”

Spirituality within religion: some examples

Turning now to spirituality within organised religions, a theme shared with non-religious ones is the importance of SILENCE. In many faiths it's a key feature of the monastic life. In Christianity we also find it in Quaker worship and the Retreat movement. And it's an aspect of some traditional religious practices.

- ***One is the Sabbath***, the weekly day of rest, common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, when in Newman's words *“the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over and our work is done”*. Everything stops so that we can worship and refocus on what our lives are for. In the Hebrew Bible this principle of Sabbath interruption is extended to the use and ownership of the land. As a religious institution the Sabbath can, of course, become oppressive, as Jesus recognised. But is there not also a dark side to the 24/7 gospel of endless growth and rushing around with its fateful consequences for the environment, and its soul-destroying effect on ourselves?
- ***Another spiritual practice is Scripture reading***. All the major faiths have scriptures which make their foundational teachings available for us to *“read, mark, learn and inwardly digest”*. This practice takes many forms, one of which is the Lutheran

tradition of special Bible verses for every day, week and year published annually in a slim volume entitled *Losungen*. The custom began in the 18th century Pietist movement as a Protestant compensation for the loss of the cult of relics. How could you feel close to the biblical saints if you could no longer visit shrines where their bones were preserved? The answer was: We have their words! Once Bibles were printed, the text was divided into numbered verses – a holy satnav enabling us to visit utterances of the Old and New Testaments like holy relics, gems of wisdom conveying spiritual power to us. The way in which the annual selection of verses takes place is bizarre. There is a ceremony at which a Lutheran bishop selects the numbered texts at random from a ceremonial vessel. The word *Losungen* means “lottery numbers”. The idea is that, far from being under rational human control, it is the Holy Spirit who mysteriously guides the process. But to ensure some sanity, a so-called “teaching text” is then chosen to link each of the verses to a wider theological theme.

The text for today, 6th December 2022 is Isaiah 60 verse 18: *“No longer will the sound of violence be heard in your land, nor havoc and ruin within your borders. But your walls will be named ‘Deliverance’ and your gates ‘Praise’.* The teaching text is 2 Peter 3.13: *“Relying on God’s promise, we look*

forward to new heavens and a new earth in which justice will be established.”

I have sane Lutheran friends who claim that these texts really do speak to them and guide them day by day. Is this just the pious version of a horoscope? Or is it a form of spirituality which trains people to listen deeply to the Word behind all the other voices which bombard us?

- ***A third example is spiritual direction***, developed particularly in the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The French Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade lived from 1675 to 1751. His letters of spiritual direction are contained in the volume “*The Sacrament of the Present Moment*”, the meaning of which is explained as follows:

“There is no moment at which God does not present himself to us under the cover of some pain to be endured, some consolation to be enjoyed or some duty to be performed. All that occurs within us, around us and through us contains and conceals God’s divine action. So we are always being taken by surprise,” and summoned to give our silent and undivided attention.

We can see an immediate similarity between this “sacrament of the present moment” and Sam Harris’ emphasis on waking up to the consciousness of what is immediately before us. Here the theistic and

atheistic spiritualities overlap. But there are also differences. Where Sam Harris' atheism leads him to "see" the immediate contents of his consciousness and to wake up from the illusion of a "real self", De Caussade "sees" the incarnation of God in each moment, and calls us to "abandon self" in response to each pain, joy or duty. This sense of waking up to something or Someone other than ourselves is also expressed in Coleridge's spirituality: "*Our soul awakens and starts up, as an exile in a far distant land, when after long years of absence we are unexpectedly addressed in our own mother tongue*".

What are the issues?

What, then, is the relationship between spirituality and organised religion? **Religions** are systems of belief, usually in supernatural powers, embodied in scriptures, institutions, customs of worship and prayer, and ethical teachings. **Spirituality** is more subjective – it's what people make of it in their own experience, prayers and meditations, questions, ethical decisions and lifestyles. But, much as we all want to be friends and avoid painful disagreement, there's no such thing as a belief-neutral spirituality. Our spirituality will always reflect our beliefs and assumptions about the way the world is. For those who follow a religion, their spirituality will be shaped by that tradition, but the questions will be personal. People who are spiritual but not religious will seek to explore the meaning of their lives, to relate their inner

experience with their beliefs about the world (with or without non-human spirits), and to integrate these into a consistent lifestyle.

The dangers of religion are well known. But there is a dark side to everything, and religionless spirituality also has some questions to face.

- ***First, is it sustainable without roots?*** Religions have a “givenness” about them – scriptures and traditions that are given to us, so that we don’t have to invent everything for ourselves. Christian spirituality responds to a special form of “givenness” in God’s gift of himself in the Incarnation. What is the “givenness” that feeds religionless spirituality?
- ***Secondly, is it individualistic?*** Religious institutions are communities with a corporate life of memories and festivals. Without this sense of belonging, is spirituality a form of modern consumerism where we do our own thing and avoid the difficulties of mutual obligation?

We can, I hope, agree on three things.

- First, that all of us, religious or non-religious, are on a journey into the unknown. Sooner or later we must expect to find ourselves in unfamiliar landscapes. Believers and unbelievers alike will discover that they do not have all the answers. Our personal convictions and dogmatic systems may guide us – or

they may be as misleading as the early maps of unexplored continents.

- Second, we all need to deepen our spirituality. Religious or not, too many of us are Marthas and not Marys. As Wordsworth wrote two centuries ago, “*The world is too much with us. Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers*”.
- Third, the Environment can unite our different spiritualities in a common cause. In the Victorian era it was ***the re-invention of Christmas*** by people like Charles Dickens which brought together organised religion, secular radicals and the conscience of the newly prosperous middle classes in protest against the inhumanities of the Industrial Revolution. The traditional doctrines of the Church were turned into carols of joy and liberation:

*Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful all you nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies!*

In our day, it is the climate and extinction crises that are the urgent wake-up call to deepen our spiritual awareness, simplify our lives and unite our efforts.

I think that what we need is, not so much a new spirituality, as a coalition of our different spiritualities around this common endeavour.

Each will bring different things to the party, and a healthy variety of religious and non-religious perspectives will help (please God!) to prevent the environmental movement itself from becoming self-righteous and totalitarian. More than ever, we need each other, and we need the debate to continue – which is the whole point of Engaging Issues.

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