

# European spirituality?

*Jan Kerkhofs*

THE QUESTION MARK IN THE TITLE has been consciously added. I am not at all sure we can talk today about a European spirituality. Edy Korthals Altes, former Dutch ambassador in Warsaw and Madrid, wrote a book recently in which he drew attention to the lack of spirituality in Europe.<sup>1</sup> And many times Jacques Delors, as president of the European Commission, in asking about the 'soul of Europe,' has complained about the lack of support on the part of the churches.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, we find today a number of spiritual streams which Europeans follow in order to find something that transcends economics, politics and material consumption. Of course, these streams have many wellsprings in the long history of the churches of both Western and Eastern Europe. I will not try here to summarize two millennia, but to limit my focus to what – to my knowledge – are today the main trends in the western part of Europe. With the obvious exception of Poland, intellectual poverty and the effects of communism have hindered expressions of spiritual creativity in much of central and eastern Europe.

## *Lay spirituality*

As in the past, so today, the laity are nourished primarily by the traditions of the great religious orders. But particularly after the First World War a specific spirituality became fostered by the laity themselves. The decrease in religious vocations as well as the biblical and theological training of many laymen and laywomen accelerated the process. Mainly starting in France, married people opened up new spiritual ways. As an example, I mention the influence of Henri Caffarel's *L'anneau d'or* (the golden ring). The rise of Catholic Action organizations and of youth movements during the inter-war period created a momentum which led to the combining of the inner life with a commitment in the so-called 'reality of this world'. Concern for wholeness, for the integrating of dualisms such as body and mind, private and public, became a common trait. In the shelves of libraries we now find spiritualities of work, of marriage, of business, of medicine, even of politics.

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

Gifted laymen and women started writing in a non-clerical way (I. F. Görres, C. S. Lewis, J. Guitton, D. Hammarskjöld, L. Dupré, D. Sölle). Inspired by the publications of Marcel Légaut, the French professor of mathematics who retired as a shepherd with his family into the countryside, his friends built a network of clubs where depth psychology and a new reading of the gospel inspired a new kind of spiritual search, grounded much more in experience than in hierarchical doctrinal statements. In the Netherlands and in Germany base communities developed a new style of house churches, harmonizing family life, professional activity, meditation and liturgy. In these groupings the old 'caste system' separating clerics, religious and laity has now disappeared. Spiritual leadership belongs to the person who is most gifted in a community.

This trend became particularly successful in southern Europe (and in Poland) and has been channelled in international mass movements such as the Focolare of Chiara Lubich or, on a smaller scale, in the communities of San Egidio. Other big movements have a much more outspoken conservative approach, and are less influenced by the spirit of Vatican II: Opus Dei, Comunione e Liberazione, the Neo-Catechumenate, the Legionaries of Christ, etc. By mentioning them all together, one notes the absence of a homogeneous trend. Polarization is surely a feature of Europe's spirituality and seems to characterize its future evolution.

But, looking at the more open approach, one observes another feature, one which is inspiring for tomorrow. I mean the co-operation of laity and religious. More and more lay people are involved in the editorial boards of the best reviews of spirituality (as *Geist und Leben*, *Christus*, *The Way* of the Jesuits, *Lumière et Vie* of the Dominicans). At the same time I have to mention the fact that the ever-increasing number of lay pastoral assistants and teachers of religion are now starting their own spiritual publications. In this context a new phenomenon strikes the observer. Many religious orders, such as the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the Jesuits, have not only tens of thousands of laity belonging to their Third Orders or to the Communities of Christian Life, but recently, some have also started in an experimental phase the new model of 'associate members', married or not. Some of these associates come from the university world, some from the world of business. Sometimes even the direction of big retreat houses (as is the case in Flanders) is entrusted to them. Progressively they will influence from within the evolution of traditional forms of spirituality.

### *The call of the Spirit*

Influenced by the American Protestant Pentecostal movement, thousands in Europe are joining the charismatics. In part this represents a reaction against too rational a theology, in part it means to fill the gap created by the disappearance of popular religiosity and its more affective aspects (such as the rosary, the Stations of the Cross, benediction).<sup>3</sup> Mainly thanks to the support of the late Cardinal Suenens and his team of theologians, the charismatic renewal did remain within the Catholic Church. Threatened by the consequences of an all-pervading agnostic environment, it is for many a safety net. Indeed, the acceleration of secularization spread a certain anxiety and the charismatic movement provided a healing climate. Here, at least, people could feel supported by the warmth of a community, praying and singing together. The movement reveals the deep need for bodily expressions of the faith, sometimes criticized by more intellectual outsiders. Underneath, however, it speaks of a real trust in the presence of the Spirit. In a disturbing transitional period, such as we have been witnessing in Europe, where many no longer feel guided by their usual leaders, this trust in the Spirit helps many to believe in a future for Christianity after the breakdown of Christendom.

### *Ecumenical ways*

Until 1948 even theologians needed Rome's permission to attend ecumenical encounters. Fifty years later thousands of Catholics find ecumenical involvement quite normal. The influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's prison diary is enormous and excerpts have become frequent reading in liturgies. Authors such as Paul Evdokimov and Olivier Clément have opened up Catholic prayer life to the tradition of the Orthodox Churches. For numerous Catholics a shorter or longer stay at Taizé has been a turning point in their spiritual life. Frère Roger Schutz, whose writings have been translated into many languages, has become a spiritual guide for Christians of all churches. The mass meetings which Taizé organizes regularly in Europe's big cities are impressive events, transmitted by many TV stations. In university parishes of countries of mixed confession, and in workshops and prayer sessions of many major cities, Christians of different churches share their spiritual life.

Many laity push for more. Lutherans were present at the ninety-fourth *Katholikentag* in Hamburg (in June 2000), even participating in the well-organized liturgies. Together with Catholics they are now

preparing a similar common meeting in Berlin in 2003. Those who appreciate that mixed marriages today form the majority of marriages of Christians in Europe's countries of mixed confession will easily understand that in the century just beginning a spiritual cross-fertilization will irrevocably change the religious landscape of the continent.

### *Liberation mystique*

The freedom to pursue personal growth is without doubt a characteristic of today's European spirituality. This is a complex phenomenon and not only a sign of growing individualism. Particularly in Latin Europe, though not only there, the spiritual leaders in the numerous base communities try to translate the Latin American liberation theology into a European context. For them Archbishop Oscar Romero is a powerful symbol. The members try to synthesize a reading of the Bible and a change of oppressive socio-economic structures. These people are far removed from any sort of psychological cocooning and are concerned about the more than fifty million poor Europeans living on the fringes of the continent and lacking the cultural equipment for any sort of reflective spiritual life. Their horizons not only embrace the slums of our various megalopolises, but are widened to include the southern hemisphere. Many are still influenced by the Marxist criticism of the alienating aspects of religion as such, while refusing its atheism. Everywhere these groups have their own networks, their monthly gatherings, their liturgies, related or not to the official Church. Their spirituality is marked by their concern for women's emancipation, for the rights of migrants, for divorced people, for the fate of deviant people. They are driven by a deep sense of justice and compassion.

These people are the bridge-builders linking up with the many for whom the threshold to more classical schools of spirituality is too high. Automatically one thinks of Abbé Pierre and Sister Emmanuelle, two visionaries so much admired by Jacques Delors, who repeatedly declared how deeply he was struck by their radiating joy.

### *Reconciliation*

Underneath its lively exterior, Europe is still wounded by the memories of the two world wars, of the Spanish civil war, of the more recent consequences of fierce nationalism in the Balkans. In some countries there are Christians, belonging to the extreme right, who link a blind patriotism with social and ecclesial conservatism. Meanwhile thousands of other Christians try to be healers, by material support, by

mutual exchange and hospitality, by big events such as the Ecumenical Conventions in Basle and Graz. They are convinced of the need to give this continent covered with its many war cemeteries a peaceful soul. Slowly a spirituality of reconciliation is developing. Germans organize pilgrimages with people from France and Poland. Dominicans and Jesuits promote dialogue with Orthodox Christians and with Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.

Pax Christi International is a particularly inspiring example. When the relations between the Patriarch of Moscow and Rome were in a state of deadlock, Pax Christi was able to hold meetings and prayer sessions in Russia and in the West. It does reconciling work in Lebanon and in Serbia and supports everywhere the dialogue between Christianity and Islam. Other groups do the same in Istanbul. Where theologies have so tragically split Christianity, a serene spirituality tries to overcome centuries-old prejudices. As a symbol of this patient work one may think of the Benedictine abbey of Chevetogne in Southern Belgium, a meeting place for Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, openly discussing their differences and praying together at Western and Eastern liturgies.

### *Monastic hospitality*

Amidst our secularized world abbeys continue to inspire. Most remain havens of prayer and silence for an astonishing number of people searching for doors which will open onto another dimension. At a recent stay in the German abbey of Maria-Laach in the Rhine valley, I was told that the Benedictine monks receive yearly about two million visitors. Many abbeys are being forced to expand their guest-houses. Some, such as the abbey of La-Pierre-Qui-Vire near Grenoble, actually could not survive the huge number of visitors, so they sold the buildings and moved away in order to safeguard their identity. The Sisters of Bethlehem, a very strict order inspired by the Carthusians, have in recent years had to open several new abbeys for the steadily increasing number of candidates, often holding academic degrees. Clearly, the call for a lifelong inner life is stronger than anything our rich consumer society tries to offer. Sober monastic liturgies attract people from greatly varied walks of life.

However, most abbeys are not only 'little deserts' or bulwarks of the Spirit. For many they are wells. Wounded people, believers or not, find here an oasis of tolerance. They are accepted as they are. More than just bread and water, they receive peace and silence. In the abbey where I

am often a guest, I meet divorced people, atheists, priests in conflict with their bishop, many people who are spiritually handicapped.

### *Encounters with other and new religions*

Teachers of religion, alert for what is happening in young people's minds, admit that even in Catholic schools pupils are under the spell of 'ways' sometimes quite different from the Christian. In the bookshops even of smaller cities the visitor often finds more works on other religions than on Christianity – the Bible excepted. In hundreds of small circles the wisdom of these religions is scrutinized. Spiritual syncretism is the answer. Former dogmatic teaching is replaced by choices according to one's own feelings and tastes. In France, for instance, the so-called 'eldest daughter of the Church', with close to five million Muslims and about half a million sympathetic to Buddhism, conversions to these religions are on the increase. In the house library of my former students I find *The Tibetan book of the dead*. Everywhere personal experience is the keyword.

Many find in Eastern religions with their cosmic dimension an answer for their thirst for wholeness. Often they link it with an 'ecospirituality'. Research reveals the impact this approach has on the 'Greens': nature, with trees, flowers, water, sun and moon, birds and squirrels, offer symbols for this aspect of the mystery of life. 'Gaia' has become a divinity and rock festivals adore new Venuses. Often quite unconsciously, many are influenced by the vague Milky Way of the New Age and its esoteric literature.<sup>4</sup> This is an important trend for those who prefer to return to a pre-Christian religiosity with strange cults, druids and dances round a fire. As a consequence the old link between ethics and faith, asceticism and the mystical, is disappearing. Divine transcendence is replaced by one's own divine immanence. In this atmosphere the former concern about sin and sacrifice is replaced by the freedom of the Children of the Earth.<sup>5</sup>

In this context one has to refer to the phenomenon of the 'awakening' of many Europeans to a fascination with psychology, considered as the way par excellence for a personal spiritual life. It seems a lasting trend. The school of Carl Gustav Jung has long opened new insights on to the nature of the 'self'. Many Catholic spiritual directors, such as M. Bellet, J. Sullivan and J. Sudbrack, have cautiously been drinking at his well. Most famous of all, probably, is E. Drewermann, a successful author in Germany, France and the Lowlands. They have found in the Bible an immense reservoir of symbols for their spiritual depth

psychology. It strikes one also how often a rather obscure author such as the medieval Meister Eckhart is taken as a companion on the way.

For a cool observer this trend raises a series of questions. Some of the new spiritual masters are tempted to reduce the mystery of God's Self to their own mysterious self. On the other hand, it is a potent sign of the times. Where Vatican II did not read God's absence as such a sign, many Christians, bewildered by the 'death of God' and influenced by a post-Nietzschean soft nihilism, look for an experience of the presence of the Absent. Some turn to St John of the Cross. Others find help in the authentic writings of the 'little' Thérèse de Lisieux, where she resists the temptation of a black positivism.

Certainly one has to admit that for many Europeans the former well-defined Christian identity is now lost. They behave like wanderers in a labyrinth, desperately looking for a way out and switching from one direction to another.<sup>6</sup> One will not be surprised to learn that, according to the third wave of the *European Values Study*, Europeans are moving steadily towards a vague agnosticism.

### *Shadow spirituality*

Europe's spiritual history teaches that so often in folk religion, as much as in castles and universities, quite overt as well as hidden forms of out-of-the-way spirituality have developed. These are still alive today and offer the strangest forms of fast food for the soul. As already mentioned, esoteric literature is in the ascendant. For some it is a way of escaping the disturbing contradictions in life. For many it replaces previous eschatological emphasis on such teaching as heaven, hell and the devil, on the last judgement and the second coming of the Lord. Astrology and horoscopes are now fashionable. In some parts of Europe, it is said that between 10 and 30 per cent believe in reincarnation (among the younger age groups as many as believe in resurrection). Extremes strike the observer. In Northern Italy, such as in Turin, about forty thousand people are said to belong to satanic cults. Scientific congresses study the phenomenon. The Italian bishops have had to publish a pastoral letter warning against the increase of magic. In Austria the bishops had to react against the cult of 'angels', since these had become more influential than devotions directed to Jesus or Mary. In France fortune tellers number about forty thousand, far more than the number of priests. Central Europe and Russia are facing all kinds of new sects and movements, trying to fill the spiritual void after the collapse of communism. While many describe Europe as the most

secularized part of the world,<sup>7</sup> it seems that, underneath, wild religiosity is as alive as ever. The unchurched majority of the younger generations are easy victims. They belong to cyber-communities and consider the Internet almost as if it were a sacred book.

### *Atheistic spirituality*

More balanced agnostic and atheistic searchers, often with a Christian background, try to develop an atheistic spirituality. After a period of rationalistic refusal of traditional Christian faith, younger philosophers, refusing the dogmatic aspects of the faith, find meaning in the rich heritage of biblical symbols and prepare a spirituality for unbelievers. A typical example is the widely read and translated French author Luc Ferry.<sup>8</sup> He stresses human love as the key to an immanent transcendence. These thinkers refuse absolute materialism as well as the existence of God and of an afterlife. A radical apophatic 'emptiness' is not considered as an answer to the search for meaning. Rather, a certain *agape*, solidarity and commitment for justice, are accepted as all that remains after the demythologizing of the Christian heritage. But this is without any reference to a personal God. Jesus is admired as a great and inspiring humanist. Many have left their anticlerical prejudices and are open for dialogue with theologians. It is a trend I note even among teachers in Catholic universities.

### *Conclusion: tensions in European spirituality*

The brief picture offered here reveals many tensions which will continue to characterize Europe's spiritual life tomorrow. On the one hand the earlier dualism is, at least in general, disappearing. Body and mind, nature and grace, are no longer the poles of spirituality. People are longing for a new wholeness that allows a salvific liberation. The former mysticism of penance and self-inflicted suffering is now considered an unhealthy masochism. Even the post-war theology of a suffering God is not received by the majority. The paschal mystery is at the centre of the mainstream of Christian prayer life. Many seem to be entering the era of the indwelling Spirit. On the other hand, the terrible experience of the Holocaust, and the new insights into biology and palaeontology, have forced people to ask about God's absence in the hell of human brutality and in the labyrinth of human evolution.

Meanwhile many of the most serious Christian searchers feel as if they are 'Christians without a Church'. As a consequence, the spiritual life has become a question of trust in the darkness. As an old and wise



contemplative nun once told me: 'For more than forty years God has been for me a blind wall where I stand, silent, listening to His Stillness.' This non-artificial but existential pain seems typical of the most alert of the spiritual searchers. They are inspired by Bonhoeffer's well-known quotation, 'etsi deus not daretur', to live with God 'as if he did not exist'. I am reminded of Karl Rahner's prophecy: 'The Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic; if they are not, there will be no Christians left.'

**Jan Kerkhofs SJ** is emeritus Professor of Pastoral Theology at the Catholic University of Louvain. He is the initiator of the *European Values Study Foundation*.

## NOTES

- 1 E. Korthals Altes, *Heart and soul for Europe: an essay on spiritual renewal*, with a foreword by the Archbishop of Canterbury (van Gorcum, Assen, 1999). Two Catholic centres in Brussels try to promote dialogue between the European Union and Catholic faith and spirituality: Ocipe (directed by Jesuits) and its network, with offices in Strasbourg, Budapest and Warsaw, and Comece, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences, belonging to the European Union. Both are closely co-operating (with monthly Europe Info's).
- 2 Summary Addresses by President Delors to Churches, European Commission, Forward Studies Unit 14, May 1992.
- 3 Eamon Duffy, 'Popular religion', *Priests and People* 14 (2000), pp 218–222.
- 4 S. Bruce, 'Good intentions and bad sociology: New Age authenticity and social roles', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13 (1998), pp 23–35.
- 5 H. Holzer, *The new pagans* (1972).
- 6 J. Kerkhofs, *Het labyrint en de wegen* (Tielt, Lannoo, 2000); J. Subrack, *Gottes geist ist konkret: Spiritualität im christlichen Kontext* (Würzburg, Echter, 1999).
- 7 Grace Davie, 'Europe: the exception that proves the rule' in P. Berger (ed), *The desecularization of the world* (Washington, 1999), p 65.
- 8 L. Ferry, *L'Homme-Dieu ou le sens de la vie* (Paris, Grasset, 1996).