

Spirituality as the art of real presence

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IT IS STARTLING HOW THE RHYTHM of the earth echoes in the human mind. Nature expresses itself in rhythm; even the smallest movement or moment holds exquisite structure. For nature time is rhythm. Each day has mythic shape – the varied transfusion of light, the theatre of twilight, the dead of night and the surprise of dawn. Darkness orchestrates the fluent aesthetic of the dawn. The wild tenderness of colour is born from the heart of darkness. In its urgency and freshness the dawn is the birth of light. In the inner landscape the act of awareness is the equivalent of the dawn. Consciousness is the incredible privilege and inalienable burden of the human. When new insight or recognition happens, it is like the dawn breaking in the inner dark. Awareness can be painful; what the blind dark concealed is suddenly and sorely revealed. It can also bring delight, healing and renewal.

Experience as the arena of presence

Each individual is an unknown world. Your name, address, role and acquaintances only indicate your outer identity. Who you really are within is barely known to yourself and to the intimate few close to you. The mystery of identity is opaque and reserved. This highlights the significance of experience. Experience articulates, incarnates and unfolds your identity. Your experience is the only mirror available; it remains, however, at an oblique angle. You will only manage to catch some glimpses of the one who hides behind your actions, words, feelings and body. As Elias Canetti said: 'Of all the words in all languages I know the greatest concentration is in the English word *P*.'¹ Similarly the word *who* suggests the infinite in-reach of personal intimacy which we call soul. Without experience, the soul would remain forever unknown.

Experience is the way we befriend and explore our hidden mystery. The diversity of our experience reflects the diversity of presence within us. Experience is expressive. Yet the depths and complexities of experience only emerge when illuminated by reflec-

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tion. Consciousness is the subtle light which coaxes experience to yield its meaning. The beauty of experience is its inexhaustible depth. Consciousness can visit and revisit the same experience and still discover new dimensions. Childhood is one such fascinating territory. Many of the vital secrets of your identity lie submerged there. Childhood is the time of forgotten acquaintance with the first showings of who you were and who you might become. Revisiting childhood can shock and surprise as memory permits you now to lie in wait and catch yourself in the moments of quiet and innocent becoming that you never even noticed then. Memory is the secret attic where all the initial excitements are still stored. Though some would turn sour and most would be forgotten, they are still present in the secret room of memory.

Memory is the place where our vanished experience secretly gathers. This is how we transfigure time. Memory is the personal eternity that we weave ourselves. It is where our own lives witness to our presence and confirm our identity. Each life is the biography of a hidden conversation between consciousness, experience and memory. In and through all that happens, each life strives to become present to itself. To gather in the circle of presence is the dream of life. This is the arena of spirituality. In and through the ceaseless dialectic of consciousness, experience and memory a person's spirit expresses itself. The spirit of a person is the ultimate and intimate signature of their individuality. It is the source from which consciousness, experience and memory unfold and the place to which they return and gather. Consciousness, experience and memory stand in a dialectical relationship to each other. They are different dimensions of the one emerging identity which define, counterpoint and reinforce each other. Deeper consciousness trawls experience and discovers more; the more profound the experience, the greater the call on and invitation to consciousness. Both extend each other and memory integrates their harvesting and in turn invests both consciousness and experience with further enrichment. This ever active rhythm constantly endeavours to extend and deepen presence; its work is often slow and painful in the areas of negativity and absence but its rewards are greater. Spirituality is then the awakening, articulation and integration of the diversities of possibility and presence within us. True spirituality is the continual dawn where illumination unveils the thresholds where darkness and light, memory and possibility, divine and human are sistered.

The beauty of the individual spirit is the way in which it is ultimately rooted in the divine. At our deepest level we are anchored in the divine presence. Consequently, the more we unfold our own depths and diversity, the more fully we inhabit the divine presence. This is the ontological subtext of all experience; it is always implicitly spiritual. Human limitation and blindness diminish presence. The great religious traditions are treasuries of revelation and healing which address the destructiveness of human negativity. When spirituality is grounded in a great religious tradition, it has access to its resources of illumination and healing. Yet spirituality somehow has a wider ambience and resonance than what is suggested by religious experience. The spiritual extends beyond the contours of any particular religion and our exploration of it intends to bring out its universal inner dynamic. In this article, we want to render the implicit domain of the divine somewhat more explicit. We will attempt to journey deeper than so-called religious experience and show how the deeper actualities of experience are immanently and ontologically spiritual; they derive from the dual activity of the human and divine spirit. Illuminating this nexus we will be within a perspective which enables us to attempt an integral definition of the spiritual and critique current spirituality and anti-spirituality.

Approaching a critical definition of spirituality

Experience is the heart of spirituality. Without rootage in experience, the concept of spirituality becomes empty. What is spirituality? It is the unfolding and articulation of the divine dimension in experience. Each person has a unique spirit. Each of us has a different spirituality. The divine dimension unfolds differently in each life. In a certain sense there is no such thing as spirituality per se. Much of what is called spirituality is merely ideological, an overlay of external concepts subsequently applied to experience. Spirituality in this sense is second-order reflection; it has become detached from the experience in which the divine is sensed, intuited or glimpsed. The danger of continuing to use the word 'spirituality' is that it is tautologous: it covers everything. It lacks edge and does not enable us to make crucial distinctions. Removed from the indigenous actuality and force of experience, the notion of spirituality risks the recification of experience in language that either fades towards safety and blandness or wheels into the demented polemics of narcissistic revelation.

Authentic spiritual writing should have the danger of the 'two-edged sword'. It should be taut and hold that creative tension between redemptive illumination and prophetic challenge. Most of what passes for spiritual writing nowadays is safe, bland and repetitive. It is 'flat earth' talk that spreads smoothly on to any thought surface. It lacks any infusion of the raw otherness or the danger of the transcendent. The God behind it seems to be asleep. It is patently feeble at awakening or engaging any of the deeper presences in the soul. Spirituality seminars, religious discussion groups and prayer circles seem to be submerged under great white drifts of this repetitive snow-talk. When a gust of questioning or a ray of criticism comes through, this snow-talk melts as if it were never there. Bookshops are full of spiritual books that are often empty and inane. The mediocre and the banal are necessary in offering us respite from the searing fire of the soul. The banal quietly sustains the normality of routines that save us from falling totally into the abyss of ourselves. However, when banality is fitted with a turbo motor as so often in contemporary spirituality, it becomes grating and unbearable. The proper echo of emptiness is silence, not intensity.

Authentic spiritual writing incarnates the divine presence. It mirrors the quality and direction of Christian revelation where the Word became flesh. The texts of Meister Eckhart offer a wonderful instance. His writing is not *about* the divine. It has none of the dross of sociological reportage. It is not the second-order reflection of an observer. It is the living, vital language of the participant. In contemporary culture observation and its facile ideologies have replaced participation and its explorations as the primary mode of being. The texts of Eckhart are condensed and taut. You begin reading Eckhart and after a while you become aware that the text is reading you. The texts have the reflexive disclosure quality of an icon. The more you gaze at them, the deeper they gaze into you.

Real spiritual writing inevitably has a high imaginative calibre. For too long the imagination has been excluded from spirituality. In most contemporary spiritual writing there is no imaginative depth or presence; it has been replaced by fancy. This is the facility to manufacture a new collage of spiritual language from piety and pop-psychology. It is an external garment which the first real breeze will rip asunder. In contrast the imagination is the faculty which mirrors and articulates the threshold between fact and possibility, visible and invisible, known and unknown, senses and soul, memory and dream. Simply put: the imagination incarnates the vital threshold where the

human and the divine are co-present. A concept of spirituality which recognizes the centrality of the imagination offers an inclusive hospitality to all areas of experience and, consequently, a more rounded portraiture of the diversity of divine presence. This is precisely in rhythm with orthodoxy which stipulates that all dualisms and frontiers derive from the fear and falsity of human limitation.

The divine has no frontiers. The imagination is the human faculty that is committed to the justice of wholeness. It endeavours to bring the voices from either side of a threshold into the one song. To attribute such vital centrality to the imagination also enables us to deconstruct the false distinction between holy writing and secular writing. Such a spirituality recognizes and welcomes the powerful evocation of the divine in art, literature and music. It senses the wonderful spiritual treasures that are unexpectedly concealed here. The creations of the artistic imagination often evoke a deeper spiritual authenticity than much explicitly spiritual writing; the work of art is no second-order reflection. It is a *sui generis* creation. Through the rigour and inspiration of imaginative attention it has cut the form of the poem, music or painting along the most vital line so that the outsider who engages it can enter and participate in the dance of presence. True spirituality invites and enables us to inhabit presence. It also naturally leads us to prayer and a style of action that seeks to confirm real presence in and for others. This confronts injustice and the famines of absence that it brings.

The postmodern spirituality of eviction

Experience constitutes the sacredness of being here. Yet the predominant tendency in our culture is towards externality. There is little patience with mystery. What cannot be grasped in the facile phrase or the one-dimensional image merits little attention. The surface has become the mercurial god who increasingly claims universal homage. The icon of our times is the blank image screen of TV and computer. The screen is the empty mirror where the simulated shadows of things relentlessly replace each other. In our craven fear of being forgotten, we remain glued to the empty window.

Technology has radically altered our relationship to space and consequently accelerated and diminished our experience. It evicts us from presence and makes the mind ever more homeless. In all mystical and literary traditions space provides distance and room. Distance enabled and protected otherness. It kept the disturbing and consoling presence of the transcendent alive and alert. The sense of

distance provided a whole space and substructure for an integral recognition and approach to the divine. It avoided the worst extremes of anonymous transcendence or suffocating immanence. It thus demanded a reverence of approach, the necessity of preparation and the personal excitement and celebration that encounter and entry eventually achieved. The approach to the divine had a tonality of respect and reverence. In such a context experience enjoyed depth and transcendence. The individual life had enough space to register the mystery of presence and beauty. In our times the electronic pulse has shrunk distance and otherness of the world. The Internet eats into the mystery of intellectual and spiritual travel. While it reduces labour, it also collapses the phases and stages of approach into the instant. Time controls space. Space loses its indigenous particularity and fades into an anonymous nowhere. Traditionally, the secret ground of otherness and sequence, space is now reduced to blank simultaneity. The digital instant governs duration. Almost without knowing it, we are becoming subjects in a vast, new feudalism. In this electronic kingdom all difference is homogenized. The flat surface welcomes the expected image that can now become a universal product within minutes. Yet difference cannot die that easily. To where does difference retreat when the surface is homogenized into a false unity? It seems to retreat under the surface and towards the margins. Though we are becoming vassals of the surface and the atomized moment, underneath and at the edges our spiritual hunger grows ever deeper.

Technology is the product of the linear and mechanical imagination. It is an imagination dedicated to the extension and refinement of function. We are its targets. It is practically impossible for us to function without heeding and employing such technology. Again this puts our very capacity to experience under extreme pressure. It somehow dislocates us and separates us from our deeper nature. While it may be somewhat naïve to draw an absolute distinction between technology and nature, given that technology is the actual product of a certain side of our nature, it nevertheless remains true that as we begin to reinvent ourselves in the image of technology, our deeper nature suffers. Consequently our experience becomes thin and fragmented. When experience becomes brittle or broken, the spiritual hunger intensifies. In the confusion we have lost our maps and no longer know where the wells of living water are concealed.

The spirituality of consumerism: regression to the oral stage?

The predominance of technology is closely allied to the ideology of consumerism. Contemporary economics is a huge driving force in society. Rather than being concerned with the vision and imagination of a statesmanship which would articulate and serve the common good, politics is now practically synonymous with economics. Property and possessions become the touchstone and hallmark of identity. The desire to have has gone out of control. The goods of the world fall more and more into the hands of those who have money rather than into the lives of those who desperately need them. Such consumerism creates the false polarity of bloated, over-saturation and emaciating poverty. Given the precarious fragility and invisibility of identity, it is easy to understand how possessions and quantity offer satisfaction and the confirmation of presence. However, at a deeper level, acquisition can neither fulfil nor transfigure hunger of spirit. It is in fact more reminiscent of Freud's 'oral stage', an infantile strategy to win acceptance in the struggle for identity and recognition. Consumerism has a dynamic of helpless, almost addictive attachment. It seems like a pre-critical drive to join oneself to the object of attraction and in this way win confirmation of identity and affirmation of presence. Consumerism propels an inverted creativity; the otherness and sacredness of the world is functionalized in the greed of taking all you can get. The lonely hierarchies of the corporate world strain with ever more personal sacrifice to appease the insatiable god of productivity. Hegel's fascinating portraiture of the master-slave dialectic becomes ever more actual.

Contemporary experience knows deep fragmentation, dislocation and over-saturation. This is the field of history in which we now stand. Without concretely acknowledging this, all talk of contemporary spirituality remains abstract and removed. Without its own sense of a critical hermeneutic, spirituality will either unwittingly feed into the anti-spirituality of eviction and end up worshipping at the altars of consumerism and technology or else diverge into the self-indulgence of New Age or the coarse frenzy of fundamentalism. To discern the nature of our spiritual thirst and discover the wells we could awaken, demands a real conversation with our times.

The rediscovery of the eternal

Since people have moved outside the prescriptive authority domain of religion and feel themselves thrown back ever further on

their own resources, the word spirituality has gained a broad currency. Spirituality seems to express what people now seek. People who would be avowed enemies of religion now readily admit to a spiritual dimension to their lives. Spirituality seems to permit individual freedom and provide a broad range of choices, pathways and meanings. The loosening of spirituality from religion was neither initiated nor encouraged by religion. It is primarily the awakening of people to the eternal dimension of their own lives which has sent them on a spiritual quest. Many people who have been long disillusioned with and distanced from religion are now enjoying the vitality, adventure and unexpected fascination of spirituality.

People who have seen through the sorcery of consumerism are learning that life has a subtle and concealed eternal dimension. Through acquaintance with spirituality they are now beginning to rediscover the mystery of the inner life and the riches and challenges of the invisible world. Contemporary society is hard and lonesome. At every corner the individual is targeted. Thomas à Kempis suggested that each time you go out into the world, you lose some of your essence. While this view belongs to a very negative theology of creation, it is surprisingly true in contemporary culture. With the loss of our ancient kinship with nature and the demise of religion, there are so few places of shelter for the modern soul. The postmodern mind is frighteningly homeless. This is one of the reasons why there is now such a desperate spiritual hunger. This is a primal and instinctive longing for the discovery of the eternal dimension of life.

Spiritual hunger as a new form of consciousness

The modern spiritual hunger is complex and deep rooted. It is not a desire to return to the shelter of old religious truths because the world has become so raw. One of the glories of consciousness is its irreversibility. Once an experience has happened, no authority can force consciousness to pretend that it has not happened. Naturally trauma is an exception. In general, however, consciousness does not de-conceive its own recognitions and discoveries. Consciousness has a faithfulness and loyalty to its own experience. This quality coheres with the deep-seated desire of consciousness to advance the question and enter deeper into its evolving and emergent truth. Consequently, there is no path open for consciousness to go back to old convictions that have become irrelevant and redundant. We can no longer fit into that which we have outgrown. Our spiritual hunger is a new

and complex form of consciousness. A spirituality capable of meeting this hunger must have a similar weave of complexity. Otherwise it cannot meet us where we are.

The tragedy of religion is its inability to see or engage this new stage of consciousness. In many instances it continues in a driven doxological idiom to parrot the old maxims, unable to realize that to the modern ear such language has become inaudible. In other cases there is an attempt to dress the old convictions in the language of contemporary relevance; pop-psychology or motivational theory are sometimes used. Where there is such a discrepancy between form and content, the intended message deconstructs before it ever reaches its intended hearers. Many of those who hold power positions in the modern Church are limited by the gift of a functional imagination. Functionaries are good and efficient administrators. In a more uniform culture where religion had unique prestige and authority and where questioning was kept to a minimum and dissidence driven to the margins, the functionary could reign supreme as an unchallenged lord of Spirit. The substance of the religion looked after itself. All that seemed to be required was a fairly linear didactic idiom and tonality. When culture broke into its modern plurality, thorough questioning replaced conformity and obedience. Suddenly the functionary was marooned. With the assistance of PR training he learned to parry the reasonable superficial media questioning and managed to avoid making a major faux pas. However, there has been little interaction with the deeper forces of change.

The postmodern mind is haunted. A great religious tradition is the home of wisdom. It is the public locus in a culture where the great eternal, spiritual questions are kept alive and kindled. Kept clear of unworthy answers, they invite each epoch to journey towards the inner and outer frontiers of its possibility and potential. This is the enthralling task of theology: to probe these frontiers anew in each generation. Never was there such possibility for ground-breaking conversation and exploration. But it is not happening. The hunger is intense. The keepers of the wheat treasuries are frightened, discouraged and blind to the nourishment of which they are custodians. The hungry ones now think less and less of revisiting religion as the granary of divine nourishment. The keepers of the food and the victims of the hunger pass each other by with little recognition of the enriching possibilities they have to offer each other. As a gentle first step it would be lovely to see the Church relenting a little on its driven didacticism in relation to sexual morality. The prescriptive

idiom finds few hearers now. It would be delightful and encouraging to discover in the Church a new loyalty to the idiom of description. This was the predominant idiom employed by Jesus; before it challenges, it first awakens and encourages. In a sense this is a different way around the fissure of the naturalistic fallacy. Concentrating on the riches and potential of the *is*, the dimensions of the *ought* would naturally emerge and disclose themselves. This would mirror the essence and inner direction of the faith which is after all grounded in the actuality and the mystery of the transfiguration and the resurrection. It is fascinating to explore the spirituality of Jesus. Too often we reduce Jesus to a divine guide or exemplar. We could learn more from him by imaginatively exploring the fascinating spirituality he worked out for himself. In his faithfulness to his own individuality, he found a path which allowed the human and the divine to disclose its deepest wells and unveil its furthest horizons.

The neglected mystical wisdom of the Christian tradition

It is lovely to see people developing a sense of the mystical, whether it is Buddhist, Hindu or ancient nature religion. It is, however, sad that so many drift over to other traditions because their Church has never even introduced them to the vast riches of the Christian mystical tradition. There is a wonderful treasury of mystical wisdom in the Christian tradition that would hold its own with the finest intellectual riches and enlightenment potential of the Tibetan tradition. There is Meister Eckhart, Tauler, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Hildegard, etc., etc. The depth and complexity of contemporary spiritual hunger requires the mystical. Imaginatively to retrieve and introduce the treasures of our mystical tradition would be a great service to the contemporary spiritual quest. The mystics are the ones who have helplessly fallen in love with the divine. This passion leads them to push thought, feeling and language to their furthest frontiers and profoundest depths. The mystical life awakens the deepest possibilities within experience. While still here in time, it calls us to live in an eternal way. The mystics are the ultimate nomads of the soul; they have gone into the furthest territories of intimacy and nothingness, the undiscovered regions. The mystics are the most trustworthy map-makers of the invisible world and the inner life. What they have described, they have travelled. In our tormented spiritual illiteracy, we urgently need the acquaintance and guidance of the mystical texts of our tradition.

The institution has always had a difficult relationship with mysticism. In one sense, this is necessary. Each mystic voyages to a different place in the individuality of the divine. Each mystical system is *sui generis*. Each is a unique taste of the divine. The possibilities for illusion and deception along this journey remain permanently huge. It is both appropriate and necessary that such writings be submitted to the most stringent and objective analysis and critique. In another sense, the mystical frightens the institution because it creates such an undeniable window for the wild light of the divine to shine through. Amidst the quotidian routine of rules, prayers and promises the touch of this wild light is the most urgent dream of every heart. This light brings such illumination and transfiguration that it threatens to displace the centre and unmask the functionary as a peripheral custodian. However, there is no excuse now for the neglect of the mystical dimension of our tradition. The texts are classics which have not only endured but grown brighter in the acidic hermeneutic of time.

The dialectical tension between spirituality and religion

Spirituality should retain its dialectical tension with religion. As Hegel saw, and every creative and courageous theologian knows, religion invariably tends to harden and reify. The wild flame tends to freeze into the positivistic deposit. This shows the wisdom of the old criterion of ecclesial authenticity: *ecclesia semper reformanda*. The nature of the true Church is relentless inner and outer reformation. Ironically the deepest duty of the functionary is to feed the flame, not turn on the ice. Spirituality preserves and continues the warmth, the cleansing and the transfiguration which the divine flame offers. Whereas religion in its rules and rituals tends to strive towards a common denominator presentation of the mystery for universal consumption, it is the task of spirituality to put the accent firmly on that threshold where the ineffable difference of individuality is met and engaged by the gracious and dangerous individuality of the divine. In the mystical tradition this meeting has often found lyrical expression in the metaphor of lovers. John of the Cross offers a wonderful instance:

When the breeze blew from the turret
Parting His hair
He wounded my neck

With his gentle hand,
Suspending all my senses.

I abandoned and forgot myself
Laying my face on my Beloved;
All things ceased; I went out from myself
Forgotten among the lilies.²

Nowhere else in creation is such absolute passion and danger of encounter available. To dare to bring your soul to God is to come before the haunting mirror of your origin, nature and destiny.

Cults and sects

Spirituality which cuts itself off from religion can go totally astray and become entangled in the worst networks of deception, illusion and power. We are all aware of the horror stories of individuals whose minds have been taken over by cults and sects. These individuals are offered emotional warmth and belonging. The price is the handing over of the individual mind. Cults are instinctively adept at mind-altering. They seduce and exploit the natural longing for the spiritual. Unlike a great religious tradition which demands and requires the critical loyalty and inner opposition of its theologians, a cult has no theology. The counter-questions are neither invited nor allowed. The cult manages to hold you prisoner while making you feel and believe that you are liberated and free. You could even feel pity and worry for those outside the cult, the lost ones who have not yet seen your light. The cult operates an efficient dualism which separates mind and heart and splits self and society. The rise of cults testifies to the awful loneliness of postmodern culture. They are attractive because they seem to present a way of belonging which offers consolation, certainty and purpose. Even though they do not actually deliver any of these possibilities in a real or truthful sense, their following certainly invites us to look at the vacancies in our society and religions.

Alternative spiritualities

One of the signs of the awakening of spirit in postmodern culture is the existence of a vast array of alternative spiritualities. These are practised usually by gentle, well-meaning people who are concerned about the deeper questions of life and meaning and above all with the vast destruction of nature. There is a tender light here. In a sense, these spiritualities send the prayer of gentle light out into

many of the haunted regions of modern being. However, cut off from religion, spirituality can slide in the direction of fantasy. It can start anywhere, claim anything and manage to mix things in combinations that would have been beyond the acumen of Hegel or Aristotle. One would wish that many of these spiritualities would work with a greater rigour and sense of self-critique. Sometimes they are uncritically syncretistic; different fragments are pulled from different traditions without adverting to the context or *Sitz im Leben* of these insights within their respective traditions; this results in a spirituality which is ahistorical, unaccountable and abstract. America furnishes numerous examples of how such spirituality can veer in the direction of surrealism. A friend was telling once how she participated in a workshop on reincarnation. The workshop eventually worked itself up to such an extent that its participants became aware of who they actually were in past lives. One very emotional woman testified with a fervour of integrity that she now realized that in a former life she had been Scarlet O'Hara. While all the participants affirmed her testimony, my friend decided that it was pointless to reveal that the worthy Scarlet was a fictional character! In its more substantial forms this spirituality initiates a fascinating conversation between elements of traditions that have never before been brought together. It invites the best insights of psychology, science, literature and myth into the heart of the spiritual adventure. It also tunes in very adeptly to the logic of our pluralist perception which has long ago vacated the monoformic temple and wants to create a new pantheon which reflects and engages the polytheistic nature of the psyche. The Christian concept of the Trinity offers a fascinating concept of deity where the utter intensity of the many and the divine stillness of the one are synchronized. This is a region of conversation that is still only in its infancy.

The spirituality of fundamentalism

Spirituality can also turn in the other direction. The illumination, critique and tenuousness of revelation as fragile human language about the divine becomes forgotten or repressed. The truths of religion are presented as divine facts which were clearly and cleanly deposited for human direction. This is the spirituality known as fundamentalism. It is a response to the genuine and deeply felt human need to eschew the vagaries and torment of relativism and so enter into an incontestable belonging in this broken world. But fundamentalism lives from false nostalgia, the conviction that at one time

long ago everything was as it ideally should be. Though it always wants to sound strong and solid, it rests upon a very thin surface of faulty perception. No such time or place ever existed. Its certainty is fictitious. It pretends to have found an absolute access point to the inner mind of the mystery. Such certainty cannot sustain itself in real conversation that is critical or questioning. The wonderful mystic and contemplative philosopher, Noel Dermot O'Donoghue,³ refers to fundamentalism as 'trapped light'.

Fundamentalism does not converse or explore. It presents truth. It is essentially non-cognitive. This false certainty can only endure through believing that everyone else is wrong. It is not surprising that such fundamentalism desires power in order to implement its vision and force others to do as prescribed. Fundamentalism is dangerous and destructive. There is neither acceptance nor generosity in its differences with the world. It presumes that it knows the truth that everyone should follow. There is often an over-cosy alliance between it and official religion. Disillusioned functionaries sometimes see fundamentalism as the true remnant which has succeeded in remaining impervious to the virus of pluralism. When people on the higher rungs of hierarchy believe this, the results are catastrophic. Blind loyalty replaces critical belonging. The creative and mystical individuals within an institution become caricatured as the enemy; they become marginalized or driven out.

Tentative criteria towards the discernment of the integrity of a spirituality

A spirituality must have an epistemology that holds the balance and tension of creativity and critique. Rather than applying an overlay of second-order reflections to experience from the outside, it must show itself as emerging from the truth and actuality of the inner conversation between consciousness, experience and memory. Such a spirituality will be able to account for itself and critically engage the challenges of its time. Furthermore, it will be on true ground in embracing and identifying the elements of possibility in the inrush of the future. Instead of being second-hand talk about experience, it will incarnate the real tension of lived experience and be audible to its hearers.

The value of such a cognitive approach is that it holds all the concepts alert and critical. The concept of God, Self, culture and experience would be continually revised in order to mirror and express new dimensions of the evolving truth. The inner work of

continual self-discernment will keep it free from the danger of idolatry. Regardless of how deeply we believe or how committed our convictions may be, tradition has proven that our surest protection against idolatry is the vigilance of the critical intellect.

Spirituality should enable people to inhabit presence. It should reintroduce them to the forgotten and neglected domains of their own experience. In this sense, it would be a spirituality of recognition. In the ways that it would open presence, it would enable people to disclose for themselves the divine presence in the matrix of their experience. Through recognition, disclosure and presence, it would help bring us home to the eternal and lead us naturally to an art of prayer that carries our life in all its complexity to the divine. It would help us to inhabit our presence and urge us to live to the full the one life that has been so generously given us. In this numbed and saturated culture, it would create an inner and outer space where people could begin to recover the very ability to experience. Since presence is the sister of absence, such a spirituality would help decipher the subtle vestiges of presence which are concealed in all regions of absence. In this sense, spirituality is sacramental. In the Christian sense, the sacraments are the highest live incarnations of human and divine presence.

Spirituality should have a clear ascetical dimension. The rediscovery of the ascetical is vitally necessary to re-balance us in these times. A certain activity of asceticism would help us refine our longing. This would transform the helplessness of our desire which makes us so vulnerable to the seductions of consumerism and technology. When desire becomes critical, we regain our autonomy. The integrity of the ascetical dimension would help create clearances in the thickets of thought and activity; this helps us to remember who we are and why it is that we are here. The ascetical reminds us of our pilgrim nature. This would also bring to expression the internal connection between spirituality and justice. A spirituality that is committed to the discovery and disclosure of the divine has to care about the exclusion and oppression of others; it would clear the human voice for truth and prophecy. We cannot approach the divine without carrying the longing of our sisters and brothers with us. Each day we should send light around the prisoners, the mentally ill, the ill, the refugees, the powerful, nature, our ancestors and successors, the starving, etc. We are continually blind to the winter of negativity in which so many people have to live.

The language and form of a spirituality should express and mirror its content. The language should awaken, confront and stretch the possibilities of experience of the divine. This is the language of participation, not observation. It has an involved and passionate tonality. As Wittgenstein said: 'The limits of my language are the limits of my world'. The language of a spirituality should be alive and help open the archaic wells of the divine in our interiority and enable us to glimpse the eternal horizons which always call us home.

Spirituality must have an internal relationship with nature. Landscape is the first-born of creation. We are made of clay. Our bodies are our clay home in this infinite universe. Our senses are gateways of soul. The earth is our origin and destination. Spirituality must recognize, as Celtic spirituality has, that nature is the theatre of divine presence. This enables us to see from the inside how vital our proper stewardship towards the earth is. It would be wonderful to see a spirituality which could enable the silent dignity and subtle wisdom of nature to come to voice. This could in turn radically enrich our prayer, presence and replenish our liturgies with ancient echo and resonance.

A true spirituality should have warmth and passion. The cold heart can believe nothing. There is a poised wildness in God that no concept can ever reach. It is lovely to find a spirituality which echoes the dignity of divine urgency and limitlessness. A true spirituality opens up the small thought-frames and the cages where feeling is locked; we come in to the mystery and intimacy of the divine. Spirituality should have great heart, a great flow of feeling that is held in worthy form. It should be able to show us again and again that our questions, needs and quest, our true longing, is already the presence of the divine, as the Lord whispered to the Lady Julian: 'Behold, I am the ground of thy beseeching'.

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NOTES

1 The quotation from Cennetti is from Elias Cennetti, *The human province* (Picador, 1986), p 236.

2 The quotation from John of the Cross is taken from the translation by Kieran Kavanagh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD.

3 Noel Dermot O'Donoghue is philosopher emeritus from New College, Edinburgh. His work is a wonderful presence; it is written from a source where the poetic lyricism of the Irish imagination converses with the lucid rigour of the western speculative tradition. He has written widely. His central works are: *Heaven in ordinaire* (T&T Clark, 1979); *The holy mountain* (Michael Glazier, 1983); *The mountain behind the mountain: aspects of the Celtic tradition* (T&T Clark, 1993).