

Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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MESSAGE FOR SPIRITUALITY SEEKING

Today a paradigm shift is taking place between institutional religion and personal spirituality. The new paradigm is all about wholeness, mysticism, creativity, compassion, cosmology, creation-centred spirituality. Many people feel the churches have lost the capacity to lead them to the kind of self-transcendence or wholeness they feel a need for.

Because a majority of people today in our society don't find an organized religion an effective means of expressing spirituality they are abandoning the churches. More are meeting in groups to seek and celebrate their spirituality. There is a renewed interest in mystics and mysticism. There is the beginning of a sharing of spirituality between various religious and ethnic groups throughout the world.

There is a growing interest and vitality in spirituality as people seek identity and purpose in an increasingly secular world, states Jesuit priest, Douglas McCarthy, writing in the summer issue of the Jesuit magazine Compass.

The writer of the New Testament gospel known as the Gospel of St. John, found in Jesus' teaching a strong spiritual meaning, and so he attributed to Jesus the words: "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth . . . God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth". (John 4:23f).

One of our problems is our understanding of the word spirit.

Often we think of the spirit as an ethereal quality which is irrelevant to our practical, everyday lives. The biblical concept of our humanness as being made up of body, mind and spirit is more realistic.

According to the Old Testament creation myth of the Hebrews "God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being".

This is spirit - the breath of life, which when received brings to life an otherwise powerless body. Hence, although spirit is described by the analogy of "breath", it is a living force which comes with visible effect upon an individual or a people.

When God is understood as spirit then God becomes a force, a strength, an energy. God is inextricably bound up with humanity. The mystical experience of God is a subjective experience that involves an inner journey using the image-making part of the mind.

Ours is not a spiritually healthy society. Life is losing meaning and some are looking for a new focus of meaning in spirituality.

UNIVERSAL MEANING

There is no need to be concerned about a conflict between science and the spiritual life. People have turned to the spiritual in many ways since the beginning of humanity. Some are tribal and primitive, some very emotional, some focused on ideas and philosophy, some centred on tradition.

But, Albert Einstein once declared "The most important function of art and science is to awaken the cosmic religious feeling and keep it alive."

Perhaps in the very centre of our humanness is a spiritual compass. When we disown that orientation we lose some of our humanness. Life is an exploration and where our awakening will lead as it unfolds.

A PLACE FOR PRAYER

The following quote is from a letter written by Alfred Bader in his autobiography, Adventures Of A Chemist Collector, (Little, Brown).

"I am greatly bothered by the entire problem of State and Religion. No doubt, the Church - whether Catholic or Protestant - has brought great unhappiness to our People over the centuries and yet, a world without churches is no better place. We are creating a secular, materialistic, permissive society, which has not enhanced the general feeling of brotherhood and mutual understanding that we look for.

I sometimes feel therefore that (public) Christian prayer in a Christian land is not quite as detrimental as people think, and I have felt uncomfortable with some of the extreme positions taken by the American Jewish Congress."

THE GIFTS

The Giver of the gifts had been
Most generous with me;
Along life's road
He had bestowed
My blessings lavishly.
The morning years brought joy,
and it was good;
Too seldom, though, I kneeled in
gratitude.

One cherished treasure of my heart
He chose to take away;
In its dear place
He left me grace
And courage for today.
The mystic gift of pain may often be
A doorway to the soul's tranquility.
-Martha R. Cordes

A WORLD TO CARE FOR

The following poem was submitted by
Dr. Bruce McDonald, New Brunswick.

I asked God for strength, that I
might achieve
I was made weak that I might learn
humbly to obey...
I asked for health, that I might do
greater things
I was given infirmity, that I might
do better things...
I asked for riches, that I might be
happy
I was given poverty, that I might be
wise...
I asked for power, that I might have
the praise of men
I was given weakness, that I might
feel the need of God...
I asked for all things, that I might
enjoy life
I was given life, that I might enjoy
all things...
I got nothing that I asked for
- but everything I had hoped for
Almost despite myself, my unspoken
prayers were answered.

-by an unknown soldier

CHRISTIAN ADVOCACY

It has been assumed by some that although Christian theology might be difficult and unattractive its ethical teaching is so simple and satisfying that it only has to be stated to win admiration and assent.

Now, however, there are many to whom the ethical teaching of Christianity seems to conflict with their experience of reality, and for others an assumption its ethical demands are now impracticable.

More knowledgeable today informed Christians are seeing in the historical Jesus (as opposed to Jesus the Christ portrayed by the myths created by church fathers), a man who was committed to being an advocate for the poor, the disadvantaged and the needy. He was a champion in the battle for human dignity.

According to Maude Barlow and Bruce Campbell, co-authors of a new book entitled, "Straight to the Heart: How the Liberals Abandoned the Just Society", we must reclaim "our collective memory" challenging the corporate propaganda, eliminating industrial subsidies, enforcing environmental and workplace regulations and "disarming the banks."

Since no political party is prepared to do this, they stress Canadians must work through community action, in churches, unions, advocacy groups, professional groups. The heart of the fight will be the struggle to protect the universal social programmes "upon which our national narrative was built."

Whether you consider yourself a Christian or not, we are all challenged today in the creation of

a new just and helpful society and world.

WHAT WE NEED IS JOB CREATION, NOT WORKFARE

Working for minimum wages pays poorly, but working for welfare is even worse. The proposed workfare programme in Ontario, if a job can be provided for a single, employable person, will earn them \$3.71 an hour. As a society that's something to be proud of to support.

In addition, let it be noted that welfare recipients who participate in provincial employability programmes are not covered by standard labour codes, cannot join unions, have no rights of minimum wage, and cannot take statutory holidays, rest periods or vacations.

Workfare becomes a fully legal policy option for Canadian provinces on April 1. At that time the Canadian Assistance Plan (CAP) will be replaced by the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) act. The CHST imposes far fewer restrictions on social spending rules and will allow provinces using federal money to implement work-for-welfare programmes.

Because CHST is a block transfer payment that covers the costs of health care and post-secondary education as well as welfare and social services, provinces are more likely to spend more on health and education, as these are more politically popular.

With approximately three million Canadians receiving welfare benefits, more than a million of these are capable of employment and could well be demanded to work as a condition of receiving benefits. It is when

(Job Creation, cont'd)

calculation of the cost of providing jobs for these people is made that we find there is no saving. Where such programmes have been tried in some American states it has been found to be more costly to deliver.

If the purpose of workfare is to save tax dollars, then it fails its purpose. If it is to help the recipient then we must be prepared to pay much more for it.

In actuality, demeaning the unfortunate by compulsory make-work jobs is shameful, and to give them standard jobs in the end does not create jobs but replaces them.

What is needed is job creation.

REINVENTING THE WELFARE STATE

While appearing to be falling into disrepute with the majority of our society today, welfare has had a beneficial and meritorious contribution to our social order.

At its best, it has been making available funds to help protect citizens and promote their social well-being.

Its weakness has been to discourage free enterprise and individual initiative for some less motivated members of society.

The first has greatly surpassed the second.

The post-modern conservative belief in the privatization of the welfare state and the method of chopping social programmes without contemplating the price society will pay in chronic poverty, wasted talent and destructive anger is unsettling and unproductive.

What is happening among us presently is a serious maldistribution of wealth. The government cutbacks are exacerbating the problem. They hit the poor, the elderly, the unemployed and children - those who depend on public support - the hardest.

What is essential, along with welfare reform, are programmes for job creation. Government funds must be paired with private funds and specifically directed at well-targeted opportunities in which people can exercise initiative. Most of us would like to see welfare monies acting as seed money to enable people's efforts to become independently supported.

I would like to see strong and knowledgeable plans worked out to encourage and develop innovative ways of breaking the poverty cycle and creating employment for more people.

Assistance must be given to the needy and the poor in a democratic and caring society. That assistance should be primarily directed at helping them to be independent and productive, according to their particular abilities, reducing the inequalities in Canadian society.

Hacking away at the Canadian social safety nets as the conservatives are doing, looking only at the balance sheets, is trapping more deeply those who need help the most.

We need a goal, beyond a balanced budget, a plan for job creation for the unemployed and business growth in the new global economy of today.

We are responsible for each other, but we are not responsible to each other.

JESUS, A SOCIAL REFORMER

Authorities seldom like to be challenged. When a crowd gathers outside Queens Park, barricades and riot police are brought out.

Jesus was watched carefully by both the civil and religious rulers of his day when he stood up for the poor, downtrodden and needy, and became popular with the people.

The cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem by Jesus is considered by many students of the Bible to be the immediate cause of Jesus' arrest and condemnation.

In this one act - when he upset the tables of the money changers and drove some of the salespeople out of the Temple courts - he summed up his challenge to the religious authorities, especially the chief priests and those in control of the Temple.

In this dramatic and revealing act, Jesus challenged the establishment, the power structure of his society at its most sensitive point, its religious practices. Jesus gave a prophetic witness, one symbolic act that stood for all the rest.

Jesus showed himself to the authorities as an angry crusader, a social reformer dangerous to them, a counter conscience for his society.

Why did Jesus take the side of the people, the poor, the disadvantaged, the abused and the sinners? He made it plain that it was not because they were all these things, nor because they were different, but because he saw all people as the children of God and equal in God's sight.

The Christian faith is more than

personal religion. It is a witness made in and through the economic, social and political institutions of the world. Sometimes this means challenging the status quo and those in power.

NEO-CONSERVATISM

William H. Whyte Jr., in his book, "The Last Landscape", has pointed out that, if you examine the thousands of plans that now exist for shiny, new, wonderful cities, there is always one thing certain to be missing. That one thing is a cemetery. In a properly planned city, the fact that people die is taken to be such unwarranted intrusion into an otherwise marvellous equilibrium that city planners simply cannot face up to it. After all, if people die and are replaced by new and different people, then the carefully prescribed "mix" of jobs, of housing, of leisure time activities is upset. Modern city planning is inherently and radically utopian in that it aims to bring history to a stop at a particular moment of perfection.

BEGINNINGS WITHOUT END

I remember the past with gratitude because it brought me to this moment.

I look to the future with excitement because it allows me an open space in which I am free to become.

I take pleasure in the present moment because it is the meeting point of all that has been and might yet be.

Sam Keen

"The sun, with all those planets revolving around it and dependent on it, can still ripen a bunch of grapes as if it had nothing else in the universe to do." - Galileo Galilei

SPIRITUALITY VITAL PART OF TODAY'S
JAIL PROGRAMME

More and more, religion is becoming a serious part of our prison system and programme. In fact, a religious renaissance is sweeping prisons across the land. And our multicultural society is demanding opportunity for the variety of faiths to be able to perform their own faith practices and beliefs.

Although coming from particular religions, the prison chaplains in Canada are considered to be coordinators and providers of a multifaith service.

In addition to the spiritual and religious care provided directly by them, chaplains ensure that the services of specific faith representatives are provided where needed.

There is acknowledgment that there is a spiritual dimension to human existence. So, in keeping with the principles of human rights, our multicultural and multifaith society, spiritual well-being and human dignity, effort is being made to assist those under their care to follow their own religious beliefs and practices, whatever they are.

The Ontario government, through the ministries of community and social services, health and correctional services, has been responsible for approving policies to ensure the provision of, and access to, adequate religious care for those under their responsibility. Unfortunately the present Ontario government is placing a very low priority on this.

Today's prison and jail officials are finding that they now have to

take religion seriously in their institutions.

The former Christian chapels, with altar and cross are inadequate, even offensive in some cases, for the worship of other religions.

One prison I visited found Muslims upset with the chapel arrangement because before they worshipped in it an AA group used it and left cigarette butts on the floor. The Muslims kneel and bow to the ground in prayer. The problem was alleviated in this case by having the chapel floor swept after the smoking group met there.

Native worship is yet to be taken seriously. Because native spirituality believes their souls can be cleansed by sweating in a tent-like "sauna" heated by steam from scalding water poured over hot rocks, our prisons classify this religion under recreation.

As well, for some native items such as eagle feathers and personal medicines are just as important as crucifixes and Bibles are to Christianity.

Today's chaplains may find themselves checking that specific foods and diets are available in prison kitchens for certain faiths required on their holy days. Hare Krishna, an ancient religion of East Indian origin, complains that pork placed on their plates in chow lines contaminates the rest of their food. Jews are no longer forced to eat pork in jail or be punished.

Correctional staff naturally have a fixation on security and for that reason often are reluctant to give way to religious practices unfamiliar to them and which disturb the disciplined routine of the prison.