

Some reflections on Christian Spirituality

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There is no *one* "Christian" Spirituality or view of spirituality. As Franciscan Monk Richard Rohr likes to say "every viewpoint is a view from a point." And Christians have many viewpoints.

In some ways this could be regarded as a *strength* of Christian spirituality, just as it could be regarded as a weakness. Throughout the ages, many different expressions and experiences of the Christian faith have been birthed and have found a place in the landscape of spiritual expression. The Roman Catholic Church, for all its rigidity on some issues, has proven to be one of the most resilient institutions in this sense... it has, over the centuries, managed to accommodate many revivals and revolutions, somehow managing – sometimes reluctantly – to make space for a new understanding or expression of spirituality. An example of this is the Franciscan movement which was a challenging response to the excesses of the church and a challenge to return to the simplicity of the Gospel.

As we read in the Hebrew Scriptures, prophet Isaiah writes:
"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? (43:19 - NIV)

Christian Spirituality could be said to be attentive to the surprising and spontaneous, renewing and reviving work of God.

Having said that there is no one Christian view, let me begin with a few general comments before taking a few moments to toward express some personal convictions...

Firstly, ***Christianity is not primarily text-based religion.***

I say this for 2 reasons. One, because the majority of Christians world-wide belong to the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), and the RCC existed long before the Canon of scripture was finalised. The RCC would say that the Church has given scripture to the world – so that scripture is in fact always secondary to the tradition of the faith, as it is carried on through the generations of faithful men and women. Secondly, the Christian scriptures themselves indicate that the text is not to be used in a legalistic or mechanical way. We read in John's gospel about the Word... and that this Word (this message) was embodied ("became flesh"). This is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of Christian spirituality – and one that unites almost all Christians: the conviction that Truth and Life is not found

primarily in a written text, but in the Living Message, the living Word of God. And by this we mean the Message contained in the life, teaching, example, death and resurrection of Jesus...

Colossians 1:19 expresses this well: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell".

Now there are a few Christians who will appeal to the literal authority of the written text, as the inerrant "Word of God", but this view of the Bible as is a very recent thing in history and is better understood in the context of the rise of Religious fundamentalism. I would say that the vast majority of Christians (perhaps the silent majority) recognise the Word of God as a person – a very special person, and not primarily the scripture texts.

Another observation that I sense is general and not just a personal observation is that **Christian Spirituality recognises the Majesty and Sovereignty of God**. God is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all things. The Christian mystics have a field day here, reflecting on the fact that Creation is not just a reference to the beginning of the universe, but an ongoing process whereby all of reality is birthed and sustained by God, each moment a gift and a miracle of creation. This is Tillich's notion of "the Ground of Being". God is *Creating* – holding all things together. From this perspective, Christians might approach God with a great sense of awe and reverence, perhaps even fear. A key word here would be Surrender.

And yet despite the importance of God's Sovereignty, the most common experiences of Christian Spirituality are not primarily defined by fear. Most commonly, **Christians encounter this living God in a personal and relational way**. This intimacy, not always well captured by the academic theologians in the university, is a central part of the Christian and Hebrew scriptures. In fact, this kind of intimate relationship with the God of all creation is encouraged in a variety of ways:

- a. Jesus is God coming near – the doctrine of Incarnation
- b. Jesus encourages intimacy in prayer: "When you pray say *Our Father*" – Luke 11:2
- c. Jesus says "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but **I have called you friends**, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (John 15:15)

One of the wonderful gifts Christians have received is the wisdom and spiritual vitality of the Hebrew Scriptures (what are sometimes

referred to as the Old Testament). Christians have sometimes neglected the special gift of the Hebrew view of reality in favour of a Hellenistic Dualism. The Hebrew scriptures encourage a wholistic vision of the world, of the person, and all of life. In this vision, there is no separation between the sacred and the secular – all of life is significant. And God is present in all of life. Sexuality (Song of Songs; song of Solomon), Politics and Social Life (Esther), Prejudice in Society (Ruth), etc. These are all addressed in the light of God's presence and activity. Christians have therefore inherited this understanding from the Jewish tradition, that **God is Spirit – meaning unseen – but not unreal**. Spirit is simply all of reality that can not be seen. Everything that I am, that you cannot see, is my spirit. I say that I am spiritual, because I believe that there is a significant reality which is me, but cannot be contained or observed. This does not make it unreal, just not visible – therefore not material, spiritual. God is spirit. And I have spirit. This is the essential nature of God that is present in me – and in every person who is alive.

I have now outlined an understanding of the Christian Doctrine of Trinity – not three Gods as some critics might want to argue – but rather God – One God – active and real to humanity, but difficult to describe in words. No words could really contain and explain God, so we settle for this mysterious formula – God: Father, Son and Spirit. Or if you prefer, One God acting as, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Even better for me, God: Mom/Dad, Friend, Strength/Power.

One God: Source of all Life, Grace and Power

May I now offer some personal reflections:

The need that some Christian people have to *be right* is a severely over-rated concept. Jesus, the person that all Christians honour, never insisted on a right interpretation of the Law. He often challenged dominant views, occasionally refused to answer and sometimes gave ambiguous answers to questions... What he was always clear on was that ***a tree will be judged by the fruit it bears.***(Matthew 12:33) This is the Truth that Jesus offers the world: not a right way of believing, but a right way of living. I trust Jesus to lead me into Life. The main reason I trust him is because he manages to live with integrity (he does what he says – practises what he preaches) even to the point of death. This is the kind of person I want to follow. This is the kind of person I want to be. More than that actually, this is the kind of person I trust to lead me into vital and intimate connection with God, who he calls "Abba" – Father – Daddy.

Ghandi suggested he didn't have anything against Christianity – he just couldn't deal with Christians. He is quoted as saying: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

May I close with the words of my Prophet, my High Priest, my Rabbi, my Teacher and my Lord:

MT 7:15 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

MT 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

MT 7:24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

MT 7:28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, ²⁹ because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (NIV)

If we Christians are to take our spirituality seriously, especially in the light of the Global Village and the growing market of spiritual commodities... we will have to sit at the feet of the Rabbi again – and take his words – *the Word* – very seriously...