



STUDY PAPER

Fellowship of the Kingdom 2007/2008

Spirituality and Reality

The FK Conference in May this year, 'Spirituality and Reality', was led by John Pritchard, author of the first four studies, and Jan Sutch Pickard, who wrote the last two studies. While their styles were very different, their concerns are complementary.

1 Four Strands of Discipleship

Four important elements of the Christian life are:

- Nurturing my relationship with God – prayer and the inner life ("justification" = "being right with God").
- Working for the wellbeing of God's world and its inhabitants (the outworking of the prayer "Your will be done on earth"): loving my neighbour, practical kindness, working for justice and peace and ecological sanity.

- Using my mind, my God-given reasoning power, in quest of a coherent world-view that takes on board the critiques of thoughtful unbelievers and sceptics.
- Belonging to a supportive community that welcomes and cares.

All four strands are vital. Like the strands of a cable, they reinforce one another; and if I neglect any one then my life is the poorer. Praying must not be confined to monasteries, and the quest for a joined-up belief-system that takes due account of the insights of scientists, historians and anthropologists must not be left to academics.

For many people, the route into discipleship is via Belonging: some, still, can rejoice that they have belonged from childhood; others testify that they

found friendship first and faith later. Some people point to an experience of Conversion – getting into a right relationship with God – as the entry-point, even if preceded by a period of belonging.

For yet others, discipleship began with a focus on the transformation of society rather than personal salvation, expressed primarily in Activism on the model of Matthew 25.31-46.

And there are those who have found God as they struggled to make sense of “life, the universe and everything”.

Whatever the starting-point, in the full-fledged Christian life all these strands are cultivated.

It is instructive to explore the parallels with other faith traditions. A good way into understanding them is to ask about their prayer and worship, codes of conduct, core beliefs and corporate life.

Group Exercise: Meet with someone of a local faith community and tease out these questions. Share with one another and your guest how you answer them yourselves.

2 A Christian World-View

To be a Christian you do not have to

be irrational or superstitious. True, there are millions of Christians who defy the scientific consensus and proudly espouse Creationism in one form or another. (The lowest estimate for the USA is 30 million.) They reject Darwinian insights as categorically as did his 19th century opponents. Their intransigence is based on a mistaken view of the Bible. The work of particle physicists, cosmologists, palaeontologists and biologists fatally undermines this view. But it cannot make God a redundant hypothesis.

For God is not a God of the ever-diminishing gaps, but the supreme and loving intelligence who devised the ever expanding universe in all its sub-atomic detail. God is not part of the space-time continuum (with its nearly 15 billion-year history) in which we live and move and have our being, but its creator.

The compilers of the Bible knew nothing of the age and extent of the universe or of the shape and variety of this planet; and their concepts of God were even more limited and flawed than ours today. The Bible records how God-fearing, God-loving people thought and lived in a succession of different contexts and within the limitations of their contemporary world-view: sometimes hidebound by it, sometimes breaking the mould. The question it puts to us is: “If that is how those people in those circumstances thought and lived, how are we to think and live today?”

World-views changed comparatively little from Biblical times to Wesley;

whereas the last 200 years have seen an amazing advance of knowledge, which serious Christianity cannot ignore. Sales of books like Dawkins' *The God Delusion* show a widespread interest in the arguments for an atheist world-view. They must not go unanswered, but answers which hide behind the veil of "miracle" and "mystery" are unworthy cop-outs.

A 17th century Dutch ambassador to Siam related to the King that in Holland in winter water could get so cold that people walked on it, and it could become strong enough to bear an elephant. It was so far from the King's experience that thereafter he treated the ambassador as a liar. We must not let the limitations of our experience call others' testimony delusional; nor should Dawkins. But it is reasonable to assume that, as with water freezing, there is a coherent explanation awaiting discovery which does not require blind faith in "miracle" and "mystery".

Group Exercise: Share with one another examples of beliefs, attitudes and values found in the Bible which you do not share; and examples which have the ring of eternal truth.

3 The attributes of God

Many who do not believe in God describe the God in whom they don't

believe in terms which caricature the God of thinking Christians. Here are some pointers to a credible account of God.

- Creator: the mind that devised the universe, and loves the creation that has evolved out of the original "big bang". God did not simply set up the experiment and observe dispassionately how it unfolds. God cares; and God's creativity is built into the DNA of creation.
- Yet God is not an interventionist, tweaking the controls to keep creation on a pre-ordained course. The 2004 tsunami underlined that God's is not, after all, the "arm that binds the restless wave and bids the mighty ocean deep its own appointed limits keep".
- Nor is God a selective interventionist, according special favours — either to those with enough faith, or those for whom the right prayers are said, or for particular favourites.
- In fact, God is not omnipotent at all: for a God who is both almighty and loving would not allow innocent suffering or permit evolution to produce (for example) the ichneumonidae, creatures that feed within the living bodies of caterpillars. Either God is good and loving but not totally powerful, or God is powerful but not totally good; and it is the notion of omnipotence that is mistaken.

Any notion of God that restricts the supreme intelligence, creator and lover of all creation, to a personal deity is inadequate. All our concepts of the ultimate are human constructs and all are incomplete. One of the most re-

markable concepts of quantum mechanics is the concept of wave/particle duality: particles sometimes behave like waves, and waves sometimes behave like particles. Light can be regarded as both a wave and a particle. And God can be regarded as both personal and non-personal; as both substance and energy. The same reality may be variously experienced and described: if this is true of waves and particles it is equally true of the divine being.

This may provoke the criticism (as once voiced by Freud) that “Philosophers stretch the meaning of words until they retain scarcely anything of their original sense; by calling ‘God’ some vague abstraction that they have created for themselves, they pose as deists, as believers, before the world; they may even pride themselves on having attained a higher and purer idea of God, although their God is nothing but an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrine.” Nonsense! The ultimate reality is more than a personal deity, but is not impersonal: for Jesus, Abba; for a modern rabbi, our Eternal Friend.

Group Exercise: Consider the divine attributes represented by the 99 Names of God beloved of Muslims (www.islamic.org.uk/cncptgod.html). Which do you find most helpful in deepening your own relationship to God?

4 Intercession

What can we expect of a non-interventionist God? Dare we speak of the “power of prayer” when war, hunger and disease continue to bedevil the world? Perhaps we would do better to focus on the power of love — the power of God’s love for us, and the power of human love for one another, since we humans are in some sense made in the image of God.

God’s love does not have to be turned on by somebody’s prayers, and cannot be turned off by a failure to pray. It is God’s nature to love, whatever we do or neglect to do, and it would be arrogant folly to suppose that it is in our power to stem the flow of God’s love.

Human love does not carry the same eternal guarantee. The image of God in us is marred and our loving is selective and unreliable. Yet it is when we love, practically rather than romantically, that we enter into God’s likeness; and it is through the practical expression of our love that God’s power enters into human lives. Praying can be a practical expression of love. Because I love someone, I want to share with God my concerns, hopes and fears for that someone and as I pray, I review and revise them. So prayer helps my love to mature but the point of departure and the point of growth are the loving; and the praying is but the means to the end.

Praying could equally be an evasion of love. I say my prayers and I have done my duty, but please don't ask me to do any more: to pay a visit, write a letter, give money or support or help or even a word of encouragement (I know it costs nothing but it just slips my mind). Prayer without practical consequences for the one who prays is an impotent gesture. Such praying is not loving; maybe it isn't really praying either.

When Christians pray together, formally (for example, in church on Sunday) or informally, the concerns of some can be shared with others. New occasions for love-in-action are born. Lives are changed — both the lives of those who are touched by our love and the lives of those who do the praying and who do not leave it at that but then get on with the loving. And so it is that, believing in the power of love, we can recognize the importance of intercessory prayer.

Group Exercise: Take an 8" length of string each and individually tie a knot in it for each person/situation/event (say up to six) that calls for your prayer. Share your concerns with each other. Then untie one knot for each action you are called to take. Encourage one another to be practical

5 Engaged Spirituality

In these first years of the 21st century, Christians, and others seeking meaning in life, have been attracted by the idea of Celtic Spirituality. Sometimes this becomes a remote and romantic ideal, potentially escapist. We have to recognise that Celtic Christians, like Columba and other monks, lived in demanding and dangerous times.

They were inspired by the Desert Fathers. Their practices were austere; their faith expressed in pilgrimage to the edges of the known world, in poetry and prayer which uses imagery from the natural world, framed by a terrifying cosmology, and in engagement with the power-struggles and politics of their day. There was a strong practicality — qualities of seamanship and leadership, survival skills, the ability to bring a harvest out of barren land and to create great art (like the Book of Kells) in the most basic working conditions. It was a hands-on spirituality.

The present-day Iona Community (founded 70 years ago by George MacLeod around the practical task of reconstructing the cloister buildings of the Abbey, and the urgent need to rebuild community on the Scottish mainland) has inherited this ethos of engagement, along with the emphasis on hospitality and worship of the Benedictine community which flourished on the

island during intervening centuries.

Community Members are united by an exacting *Justice and Peace Commitment*, of which just the first three points are quoted here.

“We believe:

- that the Gospel commands us to seek peace founded on justice and that costly reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel;
- that work for justice, peace and an equitable society is a matter of extreme urgency;
- that God has given us partnership as stewards of creation and that we have a responsibility to live in a right relationship with the whole of God’s creation.”

Group Exercise:

a) Share in the wider group — bringing books to recommend if possible — what you imagine, know, have read, have found inspiring about Celtic Christianity. Does it square with what you have read here? Does the idea of “engaged” spirituality make sense to you?

b) How about these three points from the Iona Community J&P Commitment? Where in the world do you feel there is “extreme urgency”? What have you been able to do about it?

Share with each other your different areas of engagement.

Is there anything in particular that you as a group could do together?

6 Prophetic Witness

This (commentary on the present, not prediction about the future) is one possible form of discipleship. At the FK Conference, Jan used the example of Christian groups, among others, demonstrating and risking arrest at Faslane (the Trident submarine base in the West of Scotland).

She also described her experience of a three-month placement on the West Bank with the *Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI)*. (See article in the Summer 2007 edition of *The Bulletin*, page 3 “A View from Jayyous” for Tom Patton’s view). The programme is a response to a call for help to the World Council of Churches from churches leaders in Jerusalem. In the five years since the Programme started, the several hundred people who have joined small international teams for three-monthly stints have included twelve people each year from the UK.

Ecumenical Accompaniers are present in that troubled region:

- ‘to offer protection through non-violent presence;
- to stand in solidarity with all Palestinians and Israelis struggling non-violently against the occupation’;
- to engage in awareness-raising and

advocacy.

At a recent Quaker Conference in Stirling, exploring how to discern various forms of ministry, one day focused on *prophetic witness*, described in terms of: *speaking out; symbolic and practical action; prayer, praise and celebration; building and demonstrating the alternative.*

It is possible to see how each of these might relate to the aims of EAPPI. For instance, “building and demonstrating the alternative” would include good communication; the quality of relationships with neighbours in local communities and colleagues in the EA teams and other peace-keeping groups or human-rights groups. It would also include ways of dealing with the soldiers of the occupation: all of these relationships demand openness, clarity, courage and (where possible) cheerfulness, recognising the humanity of the other. It’s particularly important to treat with respect people who are humiliated daily. Practical help — eg with the olive harvest, and willingness to learn, go alongside readiness to receive — for instance sharing meals (not a hardship, and very Biblical!).

So the “alternative” would be demonstrated where resources are shared more fairly, people are not separated by mutual fear as well as physical barriers, differences are faced honestly, different “narratives” of the past acknowledged, and there is a constant awareness of our common humanity.

Many of these alternatives would be equally relevant in a non-violent de-

monstration in this country against weapons of mass destruction.

Group Exercise:

The examples of Prophetic Witness that Jan chose may be challenging or even questionable to your group. You may want to discuss your reactions.

You might find it helpful to think of other examples, from your experience.

Or, with forward planning, invite someone local whose area of concern and way of witnessing have moved members of the group to come and answer your questions and help you think through the issues.

