

Below is the text of a paper given at the Catalyst-for-Renewal Forum by David Tacey in the Crypt of St Patrick's Church, Sydney, April 6, 2008. It is published here with permission.

The Return of Interiority to Western Religion

David Tacey

The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all. (Rahner 1986: 149)

1. the separating ways of religion and spirituality

Many people in Australia insist on the difference between 'spirituality' and 'religion'. When they speak of *religion* they are speaking mainly of Christianity, given Australia's historical background, but we also see Buddhists and Hindus, for instance, making similar distinctions between spirituality and religion. 'Spirituality' is used to refer to a personal and self-directed search for meaning, and is hugely influenced by the individualism of our time. In this new tandem, 'religion' usually refers to collective or communal forms of worship, supervised by traditions. 'Spirituality' in this context is the re-emergence of the religious instinct in secular times, but because this innate instinct is emerging outside traditions, it is often felt to have little to do with 'religion' as such. Hence, a great many Australians, and especially young Australians, claim to be 'spiritual but not religious'. They want the essence of religion without its forms; or as Derrida would put it, they want 'religion without religion'.

This new use of the term 'spirituality' is potentially confusing, because in its traditional meaning, spirituality meant – and still means – the lived practice of a time-honoured faith. William Mahony defines spirituality as 'the means by which people find their fullest potential in the context of any particular religious ideology' (1987: 19). In formal religious life and in orders, spirituality refers to a person who is *very religious*, who seeks a personal connection with the forces and figures of their religious cosmology. However, the idea of spirituality has been hijacked by the secular world, and in this context it most often refers to someone who is *not* very religious. This shift from 'very' to 'not very' seems to have taken place in a short period of time, perhaps less than 50 years according to Schneiders (2000). It reflects the upheaval of modern society, and the reduced role of traditions in secular culture. Many today want the spirit of faith, without its inherited forms, disciplines or authorities. People want to take their religious lives into their own hands, and 'reinvent the religious wheel' in their personal experience.

In religious traditions, however, we hear of Jesuit, Carmelite, or Benedictine spiritualities, and in Buddhism we learn of Theravadan or Zen or Tibetan spiritualities. Although deeply inward and personally transforming, the practice of spirituality in traditional contexts is at the same time collective and shared, and there is no hard and fast division between spirituality and religion, since there is no perceived dualism between experience and tradition. On the other hand, in secular society the individual's subjective life is felt to be radically disconnected from traditions and hence 'religion' is not seen as relevant. In secular discourse, the word

'religion' has contracted and become much smaller in its range of meanings. It used to mean everything we did that touched on our relations with the divine, including our spirituality. Now it refers only to the behaviour of signed-up members of traditions, and points to attendance at church, mosque, synagogue or temple, and to the following of laws and precepts.

2. wings and roots: freedom and connection

We live in a post-traditional society where spirituality is very often idealised, and religion is given a negative coloration. In some people's vocabulary, 'spirituality is good and religion is bad'. It's that simple, and being that simple it cannot be a fair representation of the situation. This simple dualism suggests that some things are being denied, and that the 'bad' in spirituality and the 'good' in religion is being suppressed. For many secular people, religion signifies doing things by rote, rather than by inspiration. Religious authority is viewed as constraining rather than helpful. Spirituality is seen as liberating, a quest for the wings of the spirit, upon which the individual takes flight from the mundane.

If spirituality is about wings, religion is about the roots which bind us to the past and keep us earthed in tradition. Today the roots of religion are seen as oppressive and heavy, as a network of interlocking structures that bog us down. Not much thought is given to the fact that a growing tree, for instance, needs roots to survive, and that without roots it will not grow at all. If spirituality is all wings and no roots, it won't survive either; it will be ephemeral, transitory and unremarkable. It won't impact on society, become organised or contribute to human history. Without roots, it won't feed lasting nourishment to the soul, nor will it be able to be passed on to future generations, because it will disappear as quickly as it arose.

There is a great deal of optimism about personal spirituality in the Western world today, and much of it is unfounded because it is not grounded in the earth. People need to understand that history can be a boon and a gift, not just a dead weight or a form of oppression. Today many appear to forget that personal spirituality is often lonely and isolating, while religion gives support in the form of community. But in an age of individualism, community is often discounted and the emphasis is on the personal experience or private revelation. For this reason, the religious often attack the idea of 'secular spirituality' because it seems to them to be narcissistic and self-indulgent.

However, in defence of secular or nonreligious spirituality, there *are* communal and collective contexts for 'spirituality' in the secular domain, which religious people often fail to discern. For instance, we find such 'new traditions' as creation spirituality, Eastern spiritualities, Twelve-Step spiritualities, feminist spirituality, earth-based spirituality, eco-feminist spirituality and men's spirituality. Each of these spiritualities develops a body of literature, networks and societies, leaders and followers, and thus constitutes a tradition of a kind and offers community support. So it is by no means the case that spirituality in the secular domain is narrowly confined to the life of the individual. It is often explored in the context of wider, social, political and ecological interests and affiliations. It has to be said that religions do not hold a monopoly on community, and that community is an organic, growing thing which finds new forms of expression in society. However, it is often the case that

new forms of community are fragile and easily lost or eroded, often too dependent on charismatic or creative individuals.

While the term 'religion' has contracted, it appears that 'spirituality' has expanded, and has an almost limitless range of reference. At one level, this is a strength, in that it is used in so many contexts to refer to different cultural and personal pursuits. However, it can also be a weakness, because if spirituality refers to almost everything, it can mean nothing, in the sense of lacking any precise core of meaning. It is inevitable that once a term is liberated from its traditional moorings and used in non-specific ways, it becomes fuzzy, vague and imprecise. In some ways, spirituality is a buzzword of the postmodern era, and appears to be on everyone's lips, even though many have no idea what it precisely means.

A cheapening of the term 'spirituality' is evident today, since it does not necessarily refer to anything that might be considered sacred or holy. Sometimes people talk about their 'spirituality', and they really mean their health, vitality or quality of life. I have heard the term used in psychiatry conferences with no reference to a sacred other, only to the personal self. Some psychiatrists use it as a synonym for such things as 'resilience', 'wellbeing' or equilibrium. In that case, we can forget about the term as one that refers to the transcendent. The term has been so secularised that I wonder if it is still useful in carrying the idea of a search for ultimate meaning. In a parallel universe, the religious traditions continue to deploy the term in its original meaning, as the deepening of faith in a religious setting. As such, it may be necessary to interrupt our conversations with each other and ask: 'Excuse me, but what do you mean by the term spirituality?'

3. the trouble with religion

Meanwhile, the religious traditions, marginalised and disempowered by historical developments, feel shocked by the new spiritual landscape. They have lost their monopoly on the spiritual life, and traditions wonder what their usefulness could be in a postmodern world which appears to get along fairly well without them. As Sandra Schneiders has said:

If religion is in trouble, spirituality is in the ascendancy and the irony of this situation evokes puzzlement and anxiety in the religious establishment [and] scrutiny among theologians. (2000: 1)

How could it happen that people could want spirituality without religion? How could they take authority into their own hands in such a brazen manner? How can history and tradition be dismissed so lightly? These are some of the questions that are being asked by religious institutions in Australia, and in every secular society where this same process is being replicated.

Some religious traditions have been making doomsday pronouncements, about a widespread loss of faith, disrespect of spirit and God. For my part, I see a falling away of traditional practices, but the religious instinct is strongly constellated today, because the lack of public expression of this instinct has caused it to become intensified in society and personality. What we are witnessing today is the 'return of the repressed'. The *repressed* is no longer the sexual instinct, as it was in Freud's

time, but the religious instinct, since today sexuality has relatively free reign and a lot of public expression, but the religious impulse is the carefully guarded impulse, and therefore the one to watch. The religious element is the one that the designers of modern society have left out, and it is the one that is due to make a comeback. As Mircea Eliade argued, humanity is *homo religiosus* and when an old religious system breaks down, we need only wait a certain time before the religious instinct seeks outlet again.

It is starting to come back already, only it seems not to have reached the point where it seeks social or collective expression. For the most part, it is still caught up at the personal level. It is welling up in the individual psyche, 'invading' us from within and overcoming our defences, but the rational defences of society – which are formidable – are still able to deny its influence, and stifle its expression. At the individual level, it is sometimes revealed in the therapist's consulting room, as a secret element of the 'unconscious' or unexpressed life which is causing disturbances in the personality. It is perhaps more difficult in our secular world to admit to religious urges, than it is to 'come out of the closet' and admit to homosexual longings. The religious life often seeks outlet in the arts, in nature, in cultural, social, and sporting activities – many of which act as 'religious substitutes' in a secular age. But as a growing literature on personality and society attests, the religious impulse is far from inert, but should be treated with respect, as a sleeping monster in the secular psyche.

We live in tense, dangerous and difficult times, and it is no small thing when religion and spirituality separate like two continental plates drifting in opposite directions. When people feel a conflict between religion and spirituality they are experiencing a battle royale between the religious impulse and religious form. When spirit and form sit opposed to each other, this means nothing less than the breakdown of our social structure. We have come to the end of a phase of civilisation, and everything has to be rebuilt. An old religious view of the world has collapsed, and a new one is in the making, but in this transitional period, can be a lot of confusion, pain and misunderstanding. Religious authorities see the problems, but blame them upon the faithless people, rather than see how they have contributed to the problems by failing to move with the spirit of the time. Paul Tillich writes about 'religious sin', that is, the belief that one's religious structures are perfect, do not need to be changed, and are sanctioned by the holy; therefore, it must be the people who are ungrateful and wrong

4. a reaction to disjunction

Why do I try to bring religion and spirituality together? People sometimes tell me I am wasting my time; the split is deep and irrevocable. Perhaps I am inspired by an irrational impulse, by a dream of unity or reintegration. But when I think about this problem, the words of the philosopher Derrida come to mind: 'What is at issue', he wrote, 'is indeed a reunion, a re-assembling, a re-collecting. A resistance or a reaction to disjunction' (37). I am resisting, or reacting to, a disjunction that makes my soul uneasy, even though my intellect understands it. I cannot rest content when I see the continents of religion and spirituality drifting further apart. My impulse is to rejoin what has been divided.

In this attempt to bring religion and spirituality into a new relationship I would have felt out of step with society and my university community twenty or more years ago, when it was very fashionable to criticise religious traditions and to put them down. But during the course of my teaching career, I have seen a softening in student attitudes towards religious traditions, and indeed toward all beleaguered traditions. They are more conscious these days of living in a collapsing world, where everything that was important in the past is vanishing before their eyes at tremendous speed. In the wake of the dramatic rise of mental illness, pathological symptoms, psychological instability, broken families and broken lives, young people today are far more cautious about the anti-traditional mood of the recent past. They can see that all wings and no roots creates an instable personality and an unreliable and untrustworthy world. Hence, from about the early 1990s to the present day, I have noted a change of attitude in this regard. More students realise that stability, grounding and earth beneath their feet are very important to their personal happiness, and that to some extent the dichotomy between tradition and experience is a false one. I would say that there is a revival of interest in traditions, the ancient past, roots, human bearings and origins.

Society needs religion because it needs a communal and shared experience of the sacred. Such experience forms the basis of ethics, morality and social cohesion. I don't know how else we can arrive at an ethical community except through a shared experience of the sacred, an experience of what matters most. Traditionally, the sacred has always given rise to shared values, and despite the claims of secular ideologies, I am not persuaded that the ethical and communal life can be cut off from our experience of the sacred. If our sacred experience becomes privatised and withdrawn from the public sphere, there is the danger that society and public morality will no longer be informed by the human encounter with the sacred.

Recognition of the sacred is indispensable to the moral life. Such recognition builds and sustains social capital and intensifies our ethical commitment to others. Without this, we are in danger of drifting into ethical barbarism and moral savagery, and the signs are that we are in fact headed in this direction. Religion is much more than a bureaucratic institution, despite the popular view that it is merely an institution with no essential or living core. Religion is the traditional container and transformer of human energy and instinct. I do not believe we have developed beyond the need for institutional support for our ethical lives.

Today, the Western world is living on ever-diminishing Christian capital. If religion collapses, we ought not expect that society will automatically act ethically and responsibly toward its citizens. Indeed, the ethics of consumer capitalism are flawed and capricious, do not always work for the public good, and cannot be expected to act in our best interests. I wonder what those who want to see religion disappear have in their minds about ethical models in society? The idea that everything will work out for the ultimate good is naïve and socially irresponsible.

5. God on both sides

Society is in a crisis concerning its spiritual life, despite emissaries of the New Age movement telling us that we are edging closer toward enlightenment every day. The

negative things that are often said about religion are sometimes true, though generally distorted and exaggerated by those who have become jaded and disenchanted. For their part, the Western religions, if they are to survive, much less thrive, need to respond to the arguments that popular spiritual opinion levels against them. These criticisms come not just from a rancorous and uninformed rabble, but from the human spirit itself, which can find no bridge between its immediate longings and the traditions that are supposed to contain and express those longings.

I would say that the people are to some extent ahead of the church in its formal structure. There are, of course, intuitive priests, ministers and clergy who know exactly what people want and where the church is stuck, but they often work alone, without much institutional support or understanding. Sometimes they can even be punished by the church and treated as traitors to the cause. Meanwhile, a split deepens in our society and becomes more serious, the split between religion and spirituality. The people long for *experience of God*, whereas the church continues to minister to a former age, calling for *belief in God*.

I am going to sound contradictory at this point, but my sense is that God is on both sides of this divide. God is with tradition and traditionalists *and* with the new spiritual hunger. God as Great Heavenly Father still stands by his tradition, but God the Holy Spirit, who is an indwelling presence in the world, and who (as scripture tells us) 'makes all things new', is with the people in their hunger and quest. God as indwelling Spirit wants to call us into a more intimate association with his nature. God wants to be a reality, and the best way to do this is to be born in the human soul. This event has long been forecast in Christian mysticism, and now, I think, it is happening around us as a public phenomenon.

Clearly, Christianity is at the crossroads. It can no longer be a formal belief system, but must become a lived experience. In philosophical terms, religion must move deeper into the territory of the soul. This means the church needs to find out much more about the human soul and the interior workings of our experience. Received faith is no longer enough; faith has to be tested against, and drawn from, the pulse of immediate experience. The 'passing on' of faith from one generation to another is no longer possible, and religions have relied upon this generational succession for centuries. It was based on the authority of tradition, the stability of the family and society, and the power of conscience or the superego to instil values and moral order. Now, however, the superego of society has broken down, as has generational succession. To instil religion now we need to start further back than tradition, the superego, conscience or morality. We need to start with the heart, to appeal directly to the soul and gain an existential purchase on human life.

6. mysticism speaks to the contemporary need

Religion will have to start speaking a new language to the post-secular age. It will have to start speaking the language of religious experience. Preaching and moral lessons no longer work or have any appeal. Now we need conversion at the core, that is, mystical experience. In metaphorical terms, religion will have to move from water to fire.

Mysticism speaks to the contemporary need in a way that much orthodox religion does not. Why is this so? I think there are two reasons. Mysticism is based on experience and not on belief. It seeks to know the reality of God through direct experience of the mystery, as that mystery is discovered in the immediacy of one's own life and interiority. Traditional worship usually begins with revelation and tradition, and works from that basis, asking people to assent to what they presently do not know. But today people won't believe what they regard as unbelievable. Faith has been described as believing in what you know 'ain't so'. That era is over, as we have developed too much respect for our cognitive and intellectual capacities. Today, people will not arrive at an appreciation of faith until such time as they have had their subjective experience engaged. We could say that faith requires an inner life. Today we need to work from the inside out.

Karl Rahner said we have to stop trying to put religion into people, and start drawing it out from people. To do this requires knowledge of the mystical traditions, practices and exercises, and that is in short supply in the modern churches. But there are encouraging signs that this is changing. For instance, across the world, many nuns have developed an interest in practising and teaching the art of the interior life. Here in Melbourne, nuns have set up spirituality centres across the city and beyond, and all have as their focus the interiority and uniqueness of the person. This is certainly the way forward for religion, although significantly, the hierarchical authorities, dominated by men, often frown upon what the nuns are doing and do not encourage it, and even actively discourage it. I will return to this point in a moment: the interior life often seems to be a domain of the feminine principle.

Secondly, the mystics begin with an encounter with emptiness, and they seek to fill the emptiness with an experience of the sacred. No matter how much they assert God's presence in the world, their emphasis is on the need to empty oneself of the familiar, including the familiar images of God. They travel by way of the *via negativa*, the absence of certainty, and they seek God passionately because they sense his absence acutely. The mystical quest begins because God is felt to be too far away, and the mystic strives to overcome this distance and to practice the art of spiritual intimacy. It is the sense of absence that is the driving force, and that – of course – is what many of us feel today. We are 'poor in spirit' and begin in secular society with an overwhelming sense of spiritual emptiness and a lack of intimacy with the cosmos.

By a surprising turn of events, the secular world has unknowingly prepared us for the mystical quest, since it has landed us in a wasteland in which mere belief is no longer enough to extricate us from our alienation. Only a direct experience of the numinous is compelling enough to satisfy our longing. Starting with the emptiness of the heart primes us not only for Western mysticism, but also for Eastern philosophies and Buddhism in particular. All pathways that begin with the empty or derelict state can help us find our way out of the wasteland in which we find ourselves.

Tradition has typically not engaged our emptiness, and has been reluctant to focus on the interior reality. It says: why focus on interior emptiness, on such a bleak place, when we have the great riches of tradition to draw on? Why bother with emptiness, and become depressed and even full of despair, when we have so much to celebrate? Why focus on nothing when we have something, when our spirits can be lifted by the gospel, the example of Jesus' life, and the rituals and liturgies of worship? In other

words, the tradition has tried to take us up rather than down, up to the heights, rather than down to the depths. We need to summon the courage to go into our emptiness, and see what might be at the centre of it, what might emerge from it. We imagine and fear a terrible abyss, but it could be the God within who awaits us there, hoping that at least some of us have the courage to seek him out in the place where we least expect it, in the interior wastes of our own experience.

The eruption of the subjective spiritual domain has caught tradition unprepared, and clergy have not been trained in the psycho-spiritual mode. The mystical science of the God within is found in the old dusty books on the spiritual life, but these have been forgotten in favour of modern religious texts on systematic theology, Christology, liturgy and church history. Moreover, the old treatises on the spiritual life often use obtuse theological and mythological language that is not accessible to us today, as we need to understand the spiritual life through psychology rather than through mythology. Something erupts in our midst that is older and more primary than modern religious concerns. The post-secular psyche says boldly: I want to experience the reality of God, before I can believe in it cannot be content with hearsay and scripture; a religion of the Word is not enough, I want more.

The bursting forth of the subjective spiritual hunger comes as a rude shock to tradition. Suddenly, it seems that the laity expect the church to understand the inner life, to companion people on the spiritual way, and provide psychological support and a therapeutic environment. The typical postmodern person sees faith as a journey, involving a few stages of doubt, questioning and exploration, and tradition is not prepared for this. In the past, faith was a package deal and not a journey customised to suit individual temperament and personalities. Some clergy would prefer it if the lid were re-fastened upon the Pandora's box of the unconscious. Why all this restless striving? Traditionalists argue that the truth has already been revealed, and everything is already clear. Truth is apparent in scriptures, rituals, practices and creeds. People simply need to practice them more fervently and study them more closely. Why do they wish to depart from what tradition has already made plain?

These very questions point to the gulf that exists between tradition and society. A theologian once wrote to me, questioning my interest in the interior life and in the little scraps of truth that we pick up from dreams, hunches, intuitions.

Why [he said] do we have to mess around in the psyche, in the dirty work of personal experience, when the great and abiding truths have already been worked out for us by religion and dogma? Why play in the sand like children, when we can already accept the completed and final work of revelation? (personal communication)

Here is where tradition and society speak different languages, and why the churches and 'spirituality' do not understand each other. Bernard Lonergan, however, seems to understand the spiritual need of our time, when he writes:

The fruit of the truth must grow and mature on the tree of the subject, before it can be plucked and placed in the absolute realm. (Lonergan 1968: 3).

A few years earlier, Jung was thinking along similar lines:

The advocates of Christianity squander their energies in the mere preservation of what has come down to them, with no thought of building on to their house and making it roomier. Stagnation in these matters is threatened in the long run with a lethal end. Jung, Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self, CW 9, part 2, 1951. para170.

No matter how great the religious system is, no matter how noble its truths or authentic its wisdom, unless a 'connection' is made with experience, it does not have existential purchase on the soul, and thus is not valued by the person.

Jung summarises the predicament for faith when he says:

Faith ... has to be empirically real if it is not to lose all significance. Only that which acts upon me do I recognize as real and actual. But that which does not act upon me might as well not exist. (Jung 1950, 'Answer to Job': 757)

Almost echoing these views, a student of mine wrote:

I trust my own experience above all else. I cannot trust outside authorities, which might be right or wrong, but I cannot afford to believe in them in case they are wrong, or right in theory but corrupt in practice. For instance, the parish priest of my childhood is now in gaol for sexual offences. Religious authorities can no longer be trusted, and in my view, if I have not experienced something, I cannot be sure about it. (Carrie, 18, 2003)

This might seem a drastic philosophy, and in the past such views might have been regarded as immature, self-obsessed or autistic. But today such views are common and we can see how the collapse of trust in institutions has given impetus to the turn within.

We are seeing the impact of scientific ideas and education on the realm of beliefs, values and truth. We appear to be applying the strategies and methods of science to beliefs and religious issues. We are saying that we don't want to accept anything at face value, we don't want to believe what tradition has upheld, but we want to find out for ourselves. There is a kind of scientific method in our 'madness'. It may not be an exact science, it may look arbitrary and random to outsiders, but it does have its own internal logic. It is a 'good enough' science, in the sense that once we make landfall on the sacred in our experience, we are able to go forward with confidence and surety. The spiritual journey is then based on something real and this is a time-honoured reflective science.

David Tacey: The Return of Interiority to Western Religion

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