

The New Religious Landscape in Europe at the Dawn of the Third Millennium

Conference given at Avila
to the Meeting of the IEOP (Dominican Provincials of Europe), April 2002

F. Jean Vernet

The Acts of the General Chapter at Providence, RI last year noted in no. 100:

“We assist today on a global level at a multiplication of new currents and spiritual groups that represent a true challenge to evangelisation and that lead us back to the birth of our Order in a similar context of the springing up of new religious groups in the heart and at the frontiers of the Church.”

I would like to make a quick sketch of this new religious landscape today in Europe, to draw out from it some pointers for evangelisation and pastoral work.

I will begin in the first part by a description of the exposed - and hence most visible - summit of this large iceberg which is the new religiosity, namely the springing up of new religious movements and sects.

In the second part, we will study in a broader fashion the present return of spiritual searching and of mysticism - especially by the Gnostic path, but outside of Christianity.

In the third part, we will broaden our consideration to the ensemble of spiritualities and religions beyond the frontiers in order to propose (with a large grain of modesty!) some guidelines for evangelisation.

1. The New Religiosity in Europe: Sects and New Religious Movements

The sectarian landscape is substantially the same in the whole of Europe. The proliferation of groups (from 350 to 400) continues in all milieus, fed at once by a growing absence of religious culture and by the magnetism of oriental religions, of pursuit of spiritualities in the New Age sphere and of new therapies or mind-techniques elevated to the level of substitute religions. We thus see a multitude of pseudo-religious groups arising around a leader (guru, professor, shepherd, master, etc.). But in these upheavals, the frontiers between healthy groups and dangerous deviants are blurred. Is it not the case, for example, that each year in France more than 1,000 declarations of new spiritualist groups are counted in the “Official Register”?

1.1 The General Evolution

Groups based on the Bible, whether of Christian confession or not, are stationary or dropping. For the first time the rate of growth of the Jehovah’s Witnesses has turned negative in Europe with one proclaimer for 300 to 500 inhabitants: Portugal / Italy: 0%; Germany / Austria / Poland / England / Spain: -1%; France: -3% (in 1988: +7%). The Mormons are about 25,000 in France.

The groups usually called “new sects” (HSA-UWC [The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity] of S. M. Moon, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness etc.) are stationary (less than 500 adherents or sympathisers in France), if not in clear decline, as are the Children of God (“The Family”). Scientology, which continues a very active advance, is the exception.

The ensemble of movements which, yesterday were in the news by their practice of mind control by their breaking up of families, by their seizure of the goods of their followers and by recruitment in the streets in the marginalised milieus, have also become more discrete, under the blows of the converging actions of associations of families, of the Inland Revenue and the judiciary. They recruit today more willingly among white collar employees and the liberal professions, proposing a cocktail of new spiritualities (often borrowed from the East) and mind-techniques for becoming an efficient person and a winner, for whom everything succeeds. They have taken a low profile and recruit under the cover of cultural, educational or anti-drug associations.

The multiplication especially of mind-techniques and movements for the development of human potential, alongside methods of meditation and of exploration of consciousness express a need for interiority, for good relations, for “being at ease in one’s body, one’s spirit, one’s sexuality”. The same goes for certain “soft”, “alternative” medicines, in the use of which people search at once for health and salvation.

These groups sometimes act as “substitute religions” for many “searchers”, ill-at-ease in a society marked by rationalism and the primacy of the technical. Mind-techniques and new therapies thus represent today an important financial stream. It is therefore of interests to people who use sects as a fat source of profit (Scientology, IHUERI [International Human and Universal Energy Research Institute]).

Also to be noted is the success of new advances to do with the East (Zen and Yoga centres, Buddhist monasteries, particularly Tibetan, meditation techniques such as Transcendental Meditation). But here we are not in the precise domain of sects. This success signifies first of all that Christianity is no longer the sole pole about which spiritual search orients itself.

The ensemble of these spiritual searchers outside the Church are often of a good social and intellectual level, except for migrants, whose belonging to a sect rather reinforces their social marginalisation.

1.2 Groups Linked to the Esoteric and the Occult

This thick maze, in full expansion, defies classification:

- Groups: Theosophy, Universal White Brotherhood, The Grail, The New Acropolis, The Arcane, the Rosicrucians, the pseudo-Templar Orders.
- Practices: the acquisition of “powers”, rites of initiation, astrology, spiritualism etc.
- Beliefs: the Primordial Tradition as a place of revelation, consciousness as a path of salvation, reincarnation, the immanent arrival of a cosmic religion (of which they are the precursors).

The multiplication of these offers seem to respond, among other things to:

- religious need born from fear of the future and a disquiet about the beyond (22% of Europeans believe in reincarnation, many are interested in “life after life”, in “close-death experiences” and in communication from the “other side”)
- a need for affective and spiritual security which is satisfied by the acquisition of an initiatory knowledge, transmitted from the past and procuring individual salvation founded on knowledge
- a taste for the irrational, the unusual, for mystery (from parapsychology become a replacement religion, to religious groups having to do with aliens)
- the search for a wisdom more than a religion. Many desire to be “spiritual” (“searching”) rather than “religious” (members of a constituted religion). Rather than a “return of religion”, we should speak of the appearing of “new spiritualities”.

These upheavals also reveal a growing religious illiteracy joined to a basic craving for human warmth and for the spiritual at any price. Numerous Christians practice dual membership. This constitutes a call to the Churches for a formation which will accept being based on the needs and questions of people as they express them, and for a rediscovery of the great tradition and of its mystical practice.

1.3 Five Great Religious Groups Really Pose Questions to the Catholic Church, because they question it directly on essential points of its practice:

- The Jehovah’s Witnesses, for their preaching, their common life, their presence to young families, the time consecrated to Bible study.
- The Evangelicals, for their kerygma, their style of life and prayer.
- Eastern movements, for knowledge and practice of Christian mysticism and for the existence of identifiable spiritual masters.
- The esoteric micro-culture spread by the media, in that it creates in many the conditions of later adhesion to established movements and, even among practising Christians, undermines vital elements of the faith.
- Development of new spiritualities outside the Church, which call for careful discernment.

Born at the junction of a double crisis of societies and churches, the phenomenon of sects represents a “pastoral challenge” (Document of Rome, 1986).

1.4 The Emergence of New-Age

New Age is not a sect as one hears it said a bit lightly. But it represents the terrain on which a certain number of new religious movements are born today.

Its essential idea is that humanity is in the process of entering into a new age of spiritual and planetary awareness, of harmony and of light, marked by profound psychic mutations. It sees, in particular, the second coming of Christ, whose “energies” are understood as being already at work among us, at the heart of the proliferation of multiple spiritual quests and religious groups characteristic of our epoch.

New Age is an ensemble of apparently incoherent practices, which are unified by a vision of total, spiritual and

ecological humanisation. This new vision of things is a close relative of esoteric occultism. Their themes are similar: the expectation of a new epoch of the world announced by the law of cosmic cycles; reincarnation and the law of Karma; the divine nature of interior awareness as a spark of the cosmic God; a conception of the human being which gives a large place to the subtle, etheric, astral body, and a conception of the world which gives a large place to angels and spirits. New Age thus represents a utopia which is sufficiently vague so that everyone can project their own religious aspirations onto it.

It also represents an important challenge for Christianity in the coming years. Not by certain of its techniques, which have their own authenticity and their own value: oriental meditation, alternative medicine, dynamic psychology, protection of the environment. But by one of its explicit objectives: to propose a world supra-religion of the Age of Aquarius, which will take the place of a Christianity linked to the now ending Age of Pisces, knocking it about a little in passing to accelerate its fall. Many are the movements and personages presenting themselves as the new messiahs of the “second Christic coming”: from Theosophy and the “Pioneers of New Age” of Reverend Moon, to Ishvara, Maitreya, Hamsah Manarah, and it is often difficult in the many groups of new therapies and of development of human potential, to decide between the best and the worst.

Let us note that the appearance on a planetary level of a pagan religious sensibility which could be called a “new world religion” is one of the characteristic traits of the end of the century.

This type of religious sensibility has, besides, many of the traits of “eternal” Gnosticism. We will come back to this.

1.5 The Specific Approach of the Church to Sects and New Religious Movements

As opposed to the approaches of the human sciences, civil and judicial instances, defence associations, which have each their proper and indispensable competence, the perspective of the Church is quite specific: it is of the pastoral order.

It is marked by:

- concern for the evangelisation of persons and groups, of specific help for those who are most directly touched and of “pastoral” accompaniment
- a discernment of the healthy and the pathological, of the Christian and the pagan
- a theological decrypting of the “signs of the times”
- a search for inter-religious dialogue in so far as it is not compromised
- a doctrinal reflection in particular on revelation, the ways of salvation, the person of Jesus the Saviour, ecumenism, reading of the Bible, conversion, religious liberty
- a strong concern for the formation of Christians, especially biblical formation

In Conclusion: Towards a Spiritual Ecology

Two Overall Closing Remarks:

1. Today the sects only represent the emerging and revealing summit of a whole which is infinitely more important: the “new religiosity”, a sort of micro-culture with a wide spectrum in which one meets at once the tares and the good wheat, the admirable and the unacceptable. A culture to be evangelised and therefore, first of all, to be known.

2. This anarchical return of primary forms of religious disquiet is a sign of the times which questions society and the Churches. Smothered, repressed, religion returns at the gallop. But sometimes as a pitiable parody. And this teeming maze of doctrines consumes more spiritual oxygen than it produces. It is necessary then to take seriously at once the return of the religious, of Gnosticism, of paganism, as characteristic symptoms of our era, and to proceed to a serious de-pollution of their sickly manifestations. It is a labour of spiritual ecology.

2. Today Spirituality and Mysticism are Back

2.1 The Return of Spirituality...

Spirituality is back, especially in the form of a search for wisdom and a quest for meaning. This is a fairly recent social phenomenon but it creates a new “religious” landscape, which is settling in to last. And it allows us to have a better understanding of our times, characterised by a vigorous return of the metaphysical questions: where do we come from, where are we going, what reference points can we use to plot out the path of our existence? The collapse of great ideological systems, dissatisfaction linked to the materialism of everyday life, a certain emptiness in politics, incapable of providing reasons for action and hope, the absence of consensus on the great ethical questions, have opened up a void in the heart of the human being of the twenty-first century. They have freed up a space for spiritual—indeed mystical—search.

In this void are swallowed up the best and the worst. The worst, with its fundamentalisms, its cheap imitation spiritualities and its “sects” from everywhere. The best, with the return of the sacred, the rediscovery of “interior space”, the great religious paths, mystical texts and the sacred books of the East and West—from the Bible to the Baghavad Gita from the Cloud of Unknowing to the writings of the Sufis. Witness the growing editorial demand in the domain of religious and spiritual literature, even if mysticism is sometimes here the object of commercial instrumentalisation carried by the market. Here is the report of a well known editor specialising in spirituality:

“There was a time, not so long ago, when to speak of spirituality had an air of the incongruous, indeed of the indecent or the suspect for the so called well-developed people. The generation of May ’68 (in France) seemed to have tolled the knell on God, and left whatever from near or far resembled religion looking definitively ridiculous, characterised as the opium of the people or neurotic illusion. In the space of a generation, all seems to have been turned upside down... for the better and for the worse. The worse, as we know, is the return of a certain barbarism with a spiritual face which is also called: “integrisms”, “fundamentalisms”, “sects” “moral order”. The worst is also the “anything goes”, the tawdry pseudo-spiritualities which are served up to on this side and on that, this “New-Age” ruled by the most commercial laws of fashion, which prepares us for the arrival of a world without memory. But the best also exists: it is good that one can at last, without being taken for a dubious visionary, study Meister Eckhart, practice Zen or Yoga, reread the Bible in the light of the Rabbinical tradition. It is good that one can, without shame, nourish oneself on a whole mystical and—just how much!—pluralist literature: Christian, Sufi, Hassidic, Buddhist and Vedantic.”

Scientists publicly dare to ask themselves about the origin and last end, philosophers dare to turn towards the Orient, psychoanalysts—and no just among the followers of Jung—dare to reflect on the meaning of sacred texts.... Why should we turn up our noses at this banquet of the spirit where the most exotic dishes stand alongside more familiar foods of our own district?

... but outside of classical paths

But this spiritual adventure—and this is new fact—does not always take the received forms of “classical” spirituality. And it often plays around outside the field of the great religions—except perhaps Buddhism—and their dogmas. It often refuses them in favour of a quest without frontiers, freely going its own way.

And this “mystical” adventure is no longer exclusively “religious”. Under the form of a discovery of wisdom for our time, it becomes lay. It expresses itself in a quest for meaning which is more philosophical than religious, of which philosophers in France like Luc Ferry and André Comte-Sponville have been able to make themselves the voice in their joint work *La sagesse des Modernes* on the central question: how should life be lived?

“How to live? This is the principle question because it contains all the others. It is the question of the “good life”, as the Greeks used to say: it is the question of wisdom. The Ancients had theirs, which we would not be able simply to reproduce. What are we looking for? A spirituality for our times: a wisdom for modernity. Our problem? It is expressed in a question: what wisdom after religion and beyond morality? Because religion is the business of private belief and morality remains above all negative: it defines the conditions of common life, not the meaning or the price of this life. It is a question of knowing if life is worth living, and how to live it. We are not sure of either one or other of our replies. But we are certain in both cases of the pertinence of the question.”

This humanist wisdom emerges also through the new attempts to re-found a lay morality on the common democratic values of the West. Or in the promotion of Human Rights in the manner of a new Decalogue. Always outside of religion, the Gnostic ways proposed by many movements in the wake of the renewal of western esoterism offer paths of wisdom by interior illumination. We will come back to this.

The Meaning of the Holy, and the Immanent Absolute

But the call to transcendence is here played in the tonality of a mysticism of immanence. It is founded on a yearning for the holy, which unfolds from man himself and from the mystery of his freedom: by an extensive reflection on the meaning of our action and of our presence in the world. The need for the holy is thus seen as a function which is as natural as love or thought. It would link each human being in a unique way to an absolute which surpasses him, but an absolute which is in him. Each follows his own Path. That is why, in this perspective, there are as many paths and religions which link man to this absolute as there are men living and different:

“I believe that the time is ripe for recognising that the need for the holy shows itself as a natural function, as real as love, anger, perception, sensation, thought. It could be said that there are as many religions as human beings. In fact each being has his way of linking himself to that which surpasses him, each being negotiates in his own way the absolute which he clasps, each being reflects the mystery. And each being is unique.”

“Religion and “Mysticisms”

The mystical experience, then, for which people are looking, is a very personal experience, subjective, with a

religious flavour certainly, but which dispenses with the mediation of every religion presenting itself as the exclusive path to the divine. In the limit case, in the perspective of a modern Gnosticism, “spiritual” people—involved in a personal and free mystical process—are seen as opposed to “religious” people—perceived as allied to an institutional structure.

Moreover, many people who are newly spiritual look for their own interior master (cf. Paulo Coelho) by disconnecting themselves from the doctrinal teaching of the great religious institutions. But they also acknowledge anew the true value of spirituality and mysticism as constitutive parts of human life. These will be lived out, however, more at the level of the heart and of affectivity than at that of the head and of reason.

A spiritual quest in this style then would permit people to be reconciled with their profound being and with others. And, with this, it becomes therapy.

Spiritual Adventure as Inner Exploration

The spiritual adventure will be centred on the depths of the self, beyond the ephemeral agitation of the everyday. By the path of western meditation, but also of Zen, Yoga and Sufism. Or by that of simple exploration of consciousness, thanks to the techniques of “the development of human potential” - renewed mind-techniques - consciousness identified with the Absolute, as a spark of the divine in us. And here we meet again the intuitions of Gnostic esoterism and of traditional Hinduism: it is in self-deepening that the human being will find God. A God perceived as Cosmic, Great Energy or Universal Vibration, identified with the self in a westernised vision of the Hindu Brahmin....

And the nebulous “esotero-mysticism” which the media have globalised under the name of New Age, will assert - as we have seen - that the current rise and convergence of mystical experiences and spiritual paths everywhere in the world is the sign that a decisive turn is taking place in human history, marked by an emergence into awareness among a growing number of women and men of their divine, “transpersonal” potential.

What relationship will this return of the mystical have to politics? Many say that it will have an effect on the transformation of society. But this transformation will not come from a political or economic revolution. It will arise, as it were naturally, from a transformation of the personal consciousness of each individual, giving birth to a new humanity. And - why not? - to a new world “religion”, joining people anew to one another by way of their spiritual transformation.

These new forms of spirituality manifest themselves in the significant areas of the existential quest for meaning and wisdom: the exploration of consciousness and of the beyond, the search for new forms of the holy, and research on the irrational, the discovery of the philosophies of the East and of those of “the East which is in us”, the search for holistic health and the health of salvation, the approach once again to the great figures of mysticism, such as Master Jesus. But we should also take note of the renewal of interest in traditional spiritualities, which today belong fully to the religious memory of the West: Buddhism and Hinduism and also Islam and Judaism.

New Spiritualities and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

“Classical” spirituality was nevertheless carried until now by the Judeo-Christian tradition because it was part of the most ancient roots of Western culture. But now it is put in question. Because the founding demand of certain forms of mysticism, namely the quest for transcendence in the heart of immanence, marks the break-point with the great Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—founded on the alterity of a God who, certainly, makes a covenant with human beings and dwells “in their hearts”, but remains the “wholly Other”.

Indicative of this is the vigorous return of Western European neo-paganism and of its mysticism—paganism being a specific religious form in constant antithesis to biblical religion.

The Abrahamic religions do not, for all that, remain outside of the transformations of spirituality and of mysticism. In particular is to be noted a vigorous springing up of “revival movements”. This technical term designates profound impulses which periodically animate religious groups issuing from the Protestant reform and which aim at a return to origins and to the purity of primitive Christianity. Pentecostalism, in the Protestant sphere, is in full global development. The Charismatic Renewal and the New Communities in the Catholic sphere express a new mystical approach, more personal, more emotional and more aware of “the breath of the Spirit”. But Judaism and Islam know renewals of this same type: the spiritual master of Jewish Hassidism and of Islamic Sufism are even reedited following the example of the Rhineland Mystics or the Fathers of the Desert in Christianity. The drawing power of monasteries and of spiritual high places is revelatory of this renewal.

“At Bec-Hellouin (Norman Abbey in the West of France) all the guests, reports a journalist, know this Benedictine, full of humour, with an anchorite beard, who welcomes them untiringly. Never, according to the guestmaster, have letters and telephone calls been so numerous. The requests for retreats, he notes, have doubled if not tripled in twenty years. The building, as is well known, is superb, and some people like to profit from silence and the beauty of the place for meetings—without, for all that, assisting at the offices. Polite refusal is what the brother meets. But

mainly the requests are evidence of true desire to recover spiritual roots.”

Towards a “Re-enchantment of the World”?

Such a “soul-rush” with its outpouring of searches of all kinds creates a new religious landscape, at once prolific and splintered. The somewhat anarchic proliferation of mysticism in a so-called disenchanted modernity is a sign, perhaps, of a new awareness: as a re-enchantment of the world?

The fact is, the return of spirituality is indissociable from the strains of a society in search of a new equilibrium. The “religious” in particular is disseminated in all sectors of human and social activity. Everyone takes hold of scattered pieces of this deregulated “belief” to construct their own spiritual house. Also, in the opposite direction to the old received social analysis, it is to be noted that secularisation is not a synonym for irreligion. But the arising of alternative mysticisms continues to be situated in a “leaving of religion”, as Marcel Gauchet says, which is characteristic of the end of the twentieth century. Because here one must not mistake the perspective: the so-called “return to mysticism” occurs against the backdrop of an unbelief that remains massive. And an indifference heavy with disinterest for human things and for the things of God, indeed for things of meaning.

Nevertheless, at the very heart of this indifference, on certain occasions, the essential metaphysical questions continue to arise, as a call for meaning. Those of life and death, of suffering and of love. Questions which one cannot quite shrug off. Now every question about meaning is the seed of a religious, indeed mystical, question. It is often here that originates the rediscovery of spirituality by the twenty-first century human being. It is also a central place for the proclamation of the Gospel.

2.2 An Example: The Gnostic Path as a Quest for Illumination and Awakening

Gnosticism, says H.-Ch. Puech, is the fact a “me” in quest of its real and divine “self”. Mystical experience of realisation of self, that is to say of the divine in the self.

It is current in many groups that draw from the same esotero-occultist sources and in the parallel Western tradition: Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Universal White Brotherhood, the Grail Movement, the Martinist order, the Rosicrucians, Atlantis, Metanoia, New Thought, certain Free Masonries. And many others. The fact is, Gnosticism and Gnostic spirituality are in the air of our time. So much so that, alongside clear and identifiable belonging, it could be asked if there does not also exist a “soft” Gnosticism, which permeates the behaviour and attitudes of many of our contemporaries and which colours the way they go about spirituality.

What then are the broad lines of the Gnostic approach?

Strangers to a World which Does not Satisfy

In the background of these spiritualities appears the difficulty of accepting the world as it is. The presence of evil scandalises, evil under all its forms. As much the evil caused by human beings themselves—hatred, violence, war—as “natural” evil—suffering, illness, death—which appear all the more unjust as they touch innocent and therefore non-responsible beings.

From this state of affairs crucial questions have always arisen: who made the world, where is it coming from, where is it going, why is it damaged, and by whom? Is it the result of an original fall, or a sabotage, of an enemy? And, to all these questions, who can reply?

Hence the sense of feeling oneself a stranger to a world which cannot be one's true homeland. There must exist an “elsewhere”, and it is this elsewhere that must be looked for.

If the Gnosticisms of the start of the Christian era already reacted in this way before their world, we should not be surprised that in the twenty-first century and before the picture which reality offers, many should desire to search “elsewhere” for a spirituality.

- elsewhere than in militant action, as if the contribution to the amelioration of things appeared derisory and inefficacious in comparison to the breath of the problems posed
- elsewhere than in the established religions and spiritualities and, in particular, elsewhere than in the Churches, as if their word and their practices seemed more and more out of step with the questions posed by women and men today
- and, in a general way, elsewhere than in great discourses and great institutions.

People Look for Guides to Lead Them to an Illuminating Experience

The Gnostic of always is in quest of a reply which leaves no place for uncertainty. There can then be no question for him of remaining only with someone else's word. Only personal experience counts, that which produces an interior illumination, that which will make him say: “now I know” and not “I believe”. Gnosticism makes an appeal to each

person's interiority. What he needs then is persons able to indicate the road and to trace out the path, able, he hopes, to guide him towards the experience of illumination. He looks for the "wise", for "guides", those who know, those who have passed before him on the road. They are for him the living witnesses that this experience is possible and that, at the same time, they will be able to point out to him the stages, methods, techniques. Besides, their help will cease there. Because they can in fact do nothing else for him. Each person is reduced to being himself his own saviour. In finding his own interior Master.

There has been talk of the "supermarket of the religious" and of mysticism. It is true with respect to the abundance of products on offer, but also for the way in which they are presented: simply juxtaposed, one beside the other on the display shelves. It is up to each person to put his menu together as he wishes.

The searcher is therefore alone on his path. But this image of the "solitary searcher" corresponds to the image which many make for themselves of a spiritual journey, where one does not feel bound by belonging to any group or Church. Besides, it is unanimously held that "all paths are valid". Gnosticism accepts them all, while refusing those which are ruled by institutions.

The Search for the Divine Spark in the Depths of the Self by Illumination

The fact is that, for the Gnostic of always, it is not so much "elsewhere" that one must search as "within", that is to say in the deepest place of the inner being. For him, the light cannot come from a revealed word, but only from the depths of the self where it is hidden, the divine spark capable of bringing the searcher light and definitive certitude when he will have attained it.

In other words, his long search finally has to end in recognising himself in God, emanated from God, being part of the very being of God. Like the whole Cosmos.

This is what would explain the heart of the Gnostic mystical experience: it is inner illumination and not "conversion" to an Other, as in the Abrahamic mystics. Now many are the people who give themselves to one of these many paths as to a cause which mobilises their whole existence, sometimes in groups like the Universal White Brotherhood, Anthroposophy, Rosicrucians. But even if there is a certain "turning round" of the person, Gnostic mysticism does not look for conversion. It looks for saving illumination, to escape anxiety.

Illumination is also total knowledge considered as infinitely superior to faith and reason. Hence the study of all the spiritual traditions of humanity.

And Jesus, if he is recognised as a master of wisdom and of spirituality, as an awakener with a strong charismatic personality, is not recognised as such as the Son of God. He cannot be such a saviour, because salvation comes from the human being alone, from his degree of knowledge and the level of liberation at which he has arrived, in and by his personal progress. Salvation is not a grace but a natural right. The conversion in question in Christian mysticism is therefore secularised into a turning of one's attention inwards. And the "revelation" of the Word, in theological language, into an "awakening" of consciousness.

Becoming a "Realised Being"

"Personal realisation": such is the objective of this spirituality. It expresses itself in words of peace, of harmony, of serenity. How to arrive there? By initiation. This latter aims to make, out of a being which possess the capacities in germ—thanks to work on the self and to the reception of spiritual influence transmitted by the rites of the traditional heritage—a "realised" human being who has acquired liberating knowledge.

3. Calls on the Church for Evangelisation

We discern today, therefore, in the midst of the great global challenges facing human beings and their future, a diffuse and multiform religious expectation (spiritual, mystical?), which is part of social reality and of the life of the Church. It is fairly new in relation to the forecasts commonly received a few years ago. A new situation because it was agreed that, for the end of the century, the arrival of an unbelieving and secularised people was to be expected, while what turns up is a religious but non-Christian people, which was scarcely expected at all. And it is to this people we have to announce the Gospel. In their own language. Because if "the Holy Spirit sometime speaks by unbelief" (Paul VI), he also speaks to us by these pursuits, even if they are marked by paganism or Gnosticism in a kind of "new religiosity". It is not forbidden sometimes to spot "stepping stones for the Gospel", "seeds of the Word" at the heart of this "new Areopagus" (John Paul II). On the condition of listening to the members. With a view to discerning. And sometimes to exorcising.

It is a question then - urgent pastoral task - of:

- Taking this "spiritual" into account
- Evangelising it in so far as it is evangelisable

· Replying within the Church to the expectations which it expresses. Here on this point are four guidelines which seem particularly needed:

3.1. The Promotion of Religion Founded on Personal Experience, which Speaks to the Heart as much as to the Head

Recovering the Meaning of Personal Spiritual Experience

“People have to be helped to realise that they are unique”, wrote a Report from Rome on Sects as Pastoral Challenge (1986), “loved by a personal God, with their own story, which goes from birth to resurrection, passing through death. The old truth has, continually, to become for them a new truth.” And, in order to give again this taste of newness to old Christianity, attention must be paid “to the dimension of experience, that is to say of the personal discovery of Christ: numerous Christians live as if he had never been born!” The experience of catechumens and of those beginning again opens a path for us. As does the experience of people in many places today who benefit from spiritual accompaniment.

A Religion which Speaks to the Heart

The new forms of religious experience suggest to us new paths for a Christian initiation which will touch the heart. Because the heart is the preferential place of conversion. Now religious experience among our contemporaries knows of significant shifts of emphasis that we have to take into account in order to reply from within Christianity to this new sensibility:

· From religion to wisdom. Many are more in search of interior peace, of spirituality and mysticism than of dogma and religious institutions. Therefore Christianity as wisdom has to be re-emphasised: wisdom of the body, peace of heart, harmony with creation. Christianity as Path, which is worth more than all initiatory and oriental Gnosticisms. In returning to our most assured spiritual heritage and especially to the schools of spirituality which have enriched our Christian heritage.

· From belonging to search in a sort of spiritual nomadism. It is not that this wandering search should be swallowed whole, but we have to avoid presenting Christianity as a rigid and closed system on tracks, where all the points are set in advance. Because God is Someone who comes to meet us in his time, for whom we search and who reveals Himself, before being a statement enclosed in a definition. And Christian initiation is a journeying under the motion of grace.

· From the notional to the emotional. People want to experience God directly, in a sort of wild longing which drives them towards groups where there is singing, where there is dancing, where there is “love”, where people feel good together. Besides, there has been in Christianity a rediscovery of this sense of the body in prayer, of feast in the liturgy and of human warmth in celebration. Without slipping into emotionalism we sometimes have to ask ourselves about the cold and rigid climate and cerebral language of some of our liturgies.

· From dogma to personal experience. Hence the success of the religions of India, where religion is a matter of experience and not of doctrine. Also in our young generations the word is received from those who speak in the name of their personal experience as believers, as people who pray. The chatter-box word is refused, but that which is the fruit of a journey or of a personal search is acclaimed. “Awakeners” are in demand, Christian gurus.

· From asking for salvation to asking for healing. Many today expect, from a spirituality charged in principle with the salvation of the soul, that it also offer health of body and spirit. And, inversely, the value of a religion is often gauged by its capacity to help people feel well in themselves, in their heads, in their bodies, in their sexuality. A clear invitation to Christianity to rediscover the traditional tripartite biblical anthropology, and the place of charisms and of the work of healing in a spiritual journey.

Personal Experience in the Heart of a Community

Diversified communities, fraternal, missionary, open to those who feel excluded because of their status or culture. Vast program.... It is also a question of developing the participation of the Christian in the animation and direction of communities.

3.2 The Promotion of the Understanding of Faith

By continuing formation, more especially biblical and doctrinal. Because the religious illiteracy of young adults is growing and massive. It leaves them deprived of a critical spirit in the face of what's on offer in the contemporary religious supermarket (“spiritual”, “mystic”). But it is also the Christian formation of all adults that is a priority, and especially biblical formation. The success of the Jehovah's Witnesses is nourished in part by the absence of a biblical culture among Christians. The evangelisation of culture in the West becomes an urgent priority task in the context we are talking about.

3.3 Recovering a Holy Way of Dealing with the Sacred and with Religious Acts

Welcoming the Demands of Popular Religion

The demand for a sacred that is actually secularised is expressed within Christianity by the demands of popular religion. This is a form of religious belonging inseparable from popular culture, which consists at the very least in giving a public sign of one's belonging to the Church at the great seasons of personal and family life: birth, puberty, marriage, death. These religious acts remain strongly anchored and develop independently of our pastoral strategies. Under pain, therefore, of seeing them dangerously dealt with by others, it is important to take these still large and continuing demands into account. To evangelise them.

Recovering the Meaning of Parish as the Public Service of Religious Need

The parish is in fact the place where these demands are habitually received. The parish assures the largest surface of contact between Church and people. Now it is well adapted to receive these demands, which express the religious desire constitutive of the human being. These are the fundamental questions of life and death, of love and the beyond, those to which the new religious groups claim to give a response. If these persons are welcomed, they will be less tempted to look for response in the medium's consulting room or in the warmth of marginal groups. Besides, attachment to family values remains one of the rare stable points of reference in a chaotic society. Now the rites of passage celebrated in the parish are of a family character. They guarantee at once a function of social integration, of religious identification and of rootedness in a destabilised world—essential, in particular, for migrants.

Reintegrating Symbol and Fantasy

In the sacraments, parish offers the resources of a symbolic language, which permits the human density of the mystery of our life to be expressed other than by words. It allows many, therefore, to live birth and puberty, the loving relationship and the passing of someone close, to a depth never attained in secular life. By the mediation of symbols and fantasy. It is important not to clean up in the name of purism the religious compost (to be evangelised, certainly) outside of which faith cannot habitually take root.

Recovering the Meaning of Eschatological Expectation

In the face of millenarianisms and multiple illuminisms, and to loosen their hold, we must say what the meaning of eschatological expectation is: "Marana Tha". We silence it sometimes for fear of leading Christians into the temptation of reverie and escape, as do the Pentecostalist preachers of South America, encouraged in this by governments who look benevolently on this demobilisation of the masses. But the announcing of the Parousia in the New Testament (2 Pet. 4, 7-10) is, on the contrary, an encouragement to engage oneself in the service of one's brothers and sisters.

3.4 Rejoining People in their Search and Sometimes Moving out to the Frontiers

This is already to recognise that we are not the owners of either the spiritual or the religious sphere or, for that matter, of the Good News. But that the compelling duty of being its witnesses remains, because we are well and truly responsible for it. This is also to recognise that the Holy Spirit can blow outside the territories where he is habitually housed (Acts 8, 26-40; 10; 16, 7-9). One will also know how to find ways of dealing intelligently with the religious instinct that bubbles dangerously today, ready to loose itself in the swamps. In offering it a field where it can insert itself in the very heart of Christianity. In evangelising with discernment what is evangelisable in neo-paganism. In rediscovering the riches of our own Christian heritage, and in finding anew the current of the great river of Tradition, after having opened up its sources.

We find ourselves in the situation of Paul at Tarsus hearing in a dream the Macedonian urging him to cross over the straights to carry the Gospel to new lands. These regions where many of our contemporaries journey are, more especially today, those of "searchers for God beyond the frontiers". A fine adventure in which to be involved, under the impulse of the Spirit....