

## The Changing World

For now we see through a glass darkly

St Paul: I Cor.13,12

Many Christians are very concerned at the way religious practice is changing. They see falling church attendances, young people rebelling, fewer people entering religious life. They see the undermining of the moral authority of religious leaders brought about by revelations of acts of cruelty and abuse perpetrated by people in positions of trust. Some people have reached personal crises of conscience in their own lives, looked to their religious leaders for guidance and been disappointed. Many women have sought greater involvement in the running of the Catholic Church and have been rebuffed. In the Anglican Church women clergy are being shunned by fellow priests who refuse to receive Holy Communion from them. Homosexual people feel that there is no place for them in any Christian church.

Some people have decided to give up their religion and become agnostics or even atheists. Some have felt afraid to change their beliefs because it seemed safer to stay where they were. Many of these people feel increasingly isolated or desperate. Some have decided to ignore the problem and hope that it will resolve itself eventually. Others have tried to change things from within. Outspoken critics of the Catholic Church such as Hans Kung have found themselves ostracised.

You may feel an empathy with some of the groups mentioned above. You may have looked for help within the traditional Christian community and found that you did not receive the kind of answers that fully satisfied you. If so, this book has been written for you. It will help you to arrive at answers to your questions without any threat to your religious beliefs. It will introduce you to a lot of new ideas and a whole new way of thinking about your faith. This may require you to change your standpoint but not your beliefs. I had to reevaluate the way I thought about my religion before I arrived at the ideas that lie behind this book. I would like to tell you my story.

I was brought up and educated in the Catholic faith, an education which I greatly appreciate and which gave me a very good moral foundation for life. But even from an early age I had questions which remained unanswered. As I grew up and married, I sought guidance on moral issues and found an unsympathetic ear. I remember, on one particular occasion, attending Mass and listening to the priest giving his sermon. His message was not to concern oneself with problems; just follow the Church's teaching and everything would be OK.

This stopped me in my tracks. Here was a priest telling me not to think, not to question, but to believe. I realized that, if this was faith, I did not have it. I asked myself what I should do. Should I settle for the apparent safety of trusting in what I had been told and

not having to question further, or should I listen to that little voice inside me that was telling me that I had to find the answers? I chose the latter and set out, in an unplanned sort of way, to satisfy my curiosity. I explored other religious beliefs, Eastern mysticism, philosophy and psychology and even modern physics. My journey of enquiry has taken over twenty years and I have come to a number of interesting conclusions.

I found that my religious education had been extremely narrow and had excluded me from some of the great truths known to other traditions. My investigations outside traditional Christian sources resulted in a much deeper understanding of the place of God in my life and my faith became stronger, not weaker. But it was a new faith, a more embracing faith which had room in it for all people, races and creeds and one which gave me a deeper understanding of the human condition and some ideas about how each of us should move forward in our own personal spiritual evolution.

I discovered for the first time that religion and spirituality are two different things. Religion (from the Latin word *religare* 'to bind back') is worship within a particular set of beliefs. Spirituality is a knowledge of the spirit or higher aspects of our self. Religions are exclusive. Did you ever hear of a person belonging to two religions? Spirituality, on the other hand, is inclusive because as we gain in knowledge of our higher self we begin to appreciate that we are part of the universal 'Self' and experience our connectedness with the rest of mankind. Many religions today are divisive. I only have to look at what has happened in the northern part of Ireland, my own country. I then ask, how can people from two Christian religions, both of whom profess to follow Jesus' teaching to 'love thy neighbour', be so mistrustful of each other? The answer, I believe, is fear, fear of the unknown. Trust is based on feeling. You trust somebody because you 'feel' that you can. Feelings are deepened through spiritual development. By experiencing your connectedness to others rather than your separateness, you are able to understand other people's thinking well enough to see how you can find points of mutual interest.

In short, I have come to the conclusion that much of religious practice today is not spiritual. People are often described as being very religious when what is meant is that they are very devout. The word 'religious' is more correctly applied to people belonging to a religious order. We very seldom hear of people being described as very 'spiritual'. Spirituality implies something extra: a feeling you get from somebody that they are in close communion with God. I am privileged to have met some spiritual people in the course of my travels but very few of them were religious and some of them were not even Christians.

The experience of meeting such people has widened my perspectives. The Christian religions have no monopoly on spirituality. In the course my education at school it was always implied that miracles were exclusive to the Catholic Church, whereas my researches suggest that miracles are common in other traditions also.

There is a revolution in spiritual thinking taking place but it is happening outside the Christian churches. I believe that many Christians want to develop with the times but are afraid to branch out beyond traditional Church teachings. This is the Christian's dilemma,

whether to investigate these new spiritual ideas or not. Many people have fears that they will lose their sense of direction. Such fear is generally based on a lack of knowledge or understanding. I hope that by giving a simple explanation of many spiritual ideas which are new to most Christians that I will help to dispel their fears. I also hope to show that the spiritual ideas which are new to them are in fact timeless and are not contrary to the basic beliefs of the main Christian Churches.

I want the reader to be able to accompany me through this book with an easy mind. Some of the ideas will seem strange at first. Broadening one's outlook means postponing judgement at least until one has had time to let the new ideas sink in. This book is not intended to turn anybody away from their religion, rather it is intended to give them a deeper understanding of it. If that causes some conflicts, personal or otherwise, then it indicates that some issues have not yet been addressed. Change may be needed and if enough people change themselves, the organizations they belong to will also change.

I remember when we were prohibited from eating meat on Fridays, when women had to sit on one side of the Church and men on the other and when women were not allowed to be on the altar: now they are serving Mass. It is not too long ago since the Catholic Church engaged in the questionable practice of 'churching' or purifying women who had been through the 'unclean' process of giving birth. I remember when Catholics were being constantly reminded of the infallibility of the Pope, who regularly spoke 'ex cathedra' on issues of faith and morals. The belief in the infallibility of the Pope is now privately admitted by many Catholic priests to be unhelpful in ecumenical times and is described by some theologians as erroneous.

When growing up, I was also troubled by the teaching that non-Catholics would go to Hell if they were not lucky enough to embrace the teachings of the Catholic Church before they died. This was still being taught when I was at school in the 1950s. A century ago the prayer below, was part of the daily recitation by the White Fathers for the souls of the 'pagans' they were sent to Africa to baptize:

'Do not suffer that these unfortunate creatures who like ourselves are Thy children should continue to fall into Hell...Obtain for them the knowledge of our holy religion, the grace to love and embrace it, and to practise it faithfully...wrest them from death and from Satan, and bring them into the fold of the Holy Church.'

This is quoted from *TM an Aid to Christian Growth* edited by Fr. Adrian Smith, a member of the White Fathers Missionary Society. I am glad to say that Fr. Smith is giving this as an example of changed thinking within the Catholic Church, which has considerably softened its position on Hell. In fact many priests are now openly calling for a more caring and a more loving Church. Too much religious teaching in the past was based on fear, fear of being in mortal sin, fear of damnation, fear of God's anger.

The opposite to fear is love. This message is being revealed to us from many sources at present. We must truly learn to forget our prejudices and love each other, even those we

regard with some distaste. The Bible is not the only source of revelation. We must be open to other messages which have some resonance for us. By developing our inner knowledge we can have an instinct for what is true and what is false. We are also being told that this is a time of transformation, of rapid spiritual growth for the world. We must not be too afraid to participate. If we hesitate we may find that we will be left behind. We are told that there is going to be a 'Second Coming' but perhaps it will not take the form that many people expect from reading the Bible too literally. The separation of the sheep from the goats on the so-called 'Day of Judgment' will be not so much a separation of good from evil but a separation of those who are truly prepared to love *all* their fellow humans from those who are not.

As a start to learning how to broaden the definition of those whom we might love, the next chapter shows that other religions are not as strange as many people think. In fact Christianity has much in common with Islam, and Hinduism and Buddhism have many admirable features that Christians could adopt. Hindus, for example believe in reincarnation, something that is largely misunderstood in the West. Reincarnation is not contrary to Christian belief and offers an explanation of each soul's purpose in coming to this Earth. It also helps us to understand death and to let go of the very deep-seated fear of dying which many people have.

In later chapters I hope to show that Modern Science and Eastern thought have both come to the conclusion that the world is not as real as we think it is. Reality is subjective. An understanding of this concept helps us to realize that other people may inhabit a reality somewhat different from ours and that they may not wish to share our views and beliefs. We will see that we can create our own reality and make our lives turn out the way we want them to be. No longer will we be like corks on the ocean, bobbing up and down with every wave. By knowing our inner selves we can learn to project our deepest desires into our daily lives and to find fulfillment in remembering who we really are.

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