

Spirituality and Spiritual Formation

Spirituality is an ancient word with a growing contemporary popularity. In general, it describes that aspect of humankind, which reaches out towards the transcendent and divine, and the practices employed to assist in this quest. Spirituality need not be Christian, and all religions, whether ancient or modern have their own spiritualities. Even those who would describe themselves as agnostic or even atheistic may regard spirituality as an essential part of being human. They may not regard the quest for the transcendent as a quest for the divine, but as a quest for that which is of ultimate, unique, or unifying value to humanity or indeed to the universe.

However, Christian spirituality is more than a quest. In one sense, it begins at the end of the quest, for it begins when God finds us, and we in turn find Him. It continues as a journey in which we are promised His presence through Christ in the Holy Spirit. If spirituality is understood in this way as a gift of God then it would seem to presuppose that there can only be two kinds of spirituality: true or false, Christian or non-Christian. However, individual temperament, predisposition, cultural, religious and historical context work together to create the possibility of alternative spiritualities. To speak therefore of Catholic, or Protestant, or even of Salvationist spiritualities is not to speak of great differences in vision or values but simply to speak of historical actualities.

Spiritual formation describes the process and the means whereby spirituality is fostered, encouraged and developed. The language of spirituality has in the past had greater currency in Catholic than Protestant circles. Man's innate hunger for God and dissatisfaction with the merely secular or even religious is evidenced by the current vogue for the language of spirituality in Protestant, Evangelical as well as non-Christian circles.

From the earliest days, the Army has held 'Spiritual Days' in its training colleges, headquarters, and centres. Indeed there is evidence of an extraordinary openness to a rich ecumenical tradition of Christian spirituality during the Army's formative years, perhaps surprising in such a mission orientated movement.

Salvationist spirituality gains its character from four formative influences.

The roots of William and Catherine Booth, and other members of the Army's founding generation in Methodism account for the strong influence of Wesleyan doctrine and practice. A strong emphasis on heart conversion and holiness of life are rooted here. Here too is found a root of the Army's ecclesiology, an ecclesiology that is paradoxical in that it is rarely stated theologically, but is lived out spectacularly through the adoption of military forms and terminology, an ecclesiology, which restores to the church a primary role in spiritual discovery and formation¹. The Army adopted the Wesleyan class system, a system

¹ 'Under God, Wesley made Methodists not (only) by converting sinners, but by making well instructed saints. We must follow in his track, or we are a rope of sand.' William Booth, in a letter to his son Bramwell, quoted Begbie, *The Life of William Booth*, 1:367-68

of small groups or cells of believers, committed to each other in discipleship, and implemented it as the ward system. The values of Methodism were seen in the sergeant's role within local officership, which ensured that within each of the various groups within a corps, whatever their function might be, one person was clearly identified as the spiritual mentor of the group. The encouragement of life long patterns of discipleship through Junior Soldiership, and Corps Cadetship, may also be in part attributed to the Army's heritage in Methodism.

A second major influence is to be found in various mid-nineteenth century movements of renewal and revival within the Church. The holiness teaching of Phoebe Palmer, the revivalism of Charles Finney, and the evangelistic endeavours of such as James Caughey made a strong impact upon the spirituality of the early Army. The use of the mercy seat and the call to decision, the pragmatic exploration of all means to proclaim the gospel, the encouragement and expectation of a passionate and powerful experience of religious and spiritual realities, 'red hot religion', find in part their source within these movements. 'All nights of prayer', 'Days with God', 'Holiness Meetings' fuelled this passionate spirituality. The Army was not only influenced by these movements. It was caught up with them. The movement's earliest names: 'The Christian Revival Association', 'The Christian Mission', evidence its role as a rallying point for Christians across the denominations who recognised the priorities of revival within the church, and mission to the world. Quakers, Anglicans, members of many other denominations joined the movement and left their mark upon its emerging spirituality.

Thirdly, encouraged by these examples and antecedents, the Army's founders engaged in a deliberate attempt to recover primitive New Testament Christianity. One of the few changes made to the articles of faith of the Methodist New Connexion when they were edited and adopted as the Army's Articles of Faith was to make the article stating 'we believe the scriptures of the Old and New Testament were given by inspiration of God, and that they only constitute the divine rule of Christian faith and practise' the first. Thus these first Salvationists claimed a great freedom to explore all possible means of spiritual formation².

The fourth influence was that of popular culture. Freed by these various influences from the constraints of outdated and irrelevant ecclesiological and religious practises the Army's founders looked to the world for models and methods, which would assist them in their God given mission. Many of the popular heroes and role models of the mid to late nineteenth century were Generals and soldiers. The romance of wars and armies had yet to die in the trenches of the Great War of 1914-1918. The Christian Mission adopted the military metaphor and a quasi-military form of government and became The Salvation Army. Hymns were thrown out with all the other terminology and trappings of nineteenth century church culture. Brass Bands and music hall tunes provided the musical backing for simple

² 'We have seen that it is clearly laid down in the texts I have read that the law of adaptation is the only law laid down in the New Testament with regard to modes and measures.' Catherine Booth, *Aggressive Christianity*

songs, which conveyed gospel truths and enabled worship in the most straightforward way possible.

Salvationist spirituality has four identifying characteristics, although these are by no means unique to the spirituality of Salvationists.

First, Salvationists are both pessimistic and optimistic concerning the possibilities of spirituality before and after conversion to Christ. They concede that grace, truth and goodness may be found in non-Christian forms of spirituality. The Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of all life. The heart's hunger for God is evidence of God's prevenient grace towards lost humanity. Humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. However the impact of the fall was radical, touching all of creation with corruption. Alternative spiritualities can be dangerous and confusing. Ultimately they are untrustworthy paths towards a God who has chosen to reveal Himself in all His fullness in the person of His Son.

Christians too may be misguided and mistaken. There are false prophets as well as true ones. Christians may fall from grace if they persist in disobedience and wilful doubt. The Christian prays 'test me, O Lord' (Psalm 26:2) and tests 'the spirits to see whether they are from God.' (1 John 4:1). However the possibility of holiness remains. Christians have the capacity to be Christ like.

Second, although Salvationists do not practise the traditional sacraments of the church they affirm the value of sign and symbol. The gift of Christ is a gift beyond words. Sight, touch, taste, and sound together can communicate and stand for realities beyond the reach of words alone. The signs and images of scripture: water, bread and wine have a special authority and power. However God chooses to give Himself, not merely in sign and symbol, but in reality. He gave His Son. He gives His Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit ensures the possibility of a radical immediacy of grace for every believer.

Third, Salvationists do not accept that there is a necessary conflict between the desire for a deep spirituality and an equally passionate concern for evangelism and mission to the world. The first is often characterised as an inward journey of self-discovery, the second as a self-forgetting adventure towards a needy world. However the journey within is towards the Christ who invites his disciples to 'come to me', to find rest and refreshment; and it is the same Christ who commands his disciples to 'go, into the world' and set out on the adventure of mission. This is an adventure to which Christ sends us and on which he accompanies us for He promises 'I am with you always even to the end of the age.' Salvationist spirituality is therefore not compromised by but finds completion in Salvationist mission.

Fourth, during the course of the twentieth century the Pentecostal movement has grown to become a third force in world Christianity. Through various movements of charismatic renewal historical denominations have come to expect and experience signs and wonders and evidence of the supernatural dimension of life. The Army's founders had a similar expectation and experience of God the Holy Spirit. Although it would be anachronistic to describe the movement as either Pentecostal or charismatic, Salvationists have always remained open to the supernatural dimensions of faith, and have expected to experience the fullness of the Holy Spirit's work and gifts in their lives. This expectation has been

balanced by a deeply practical and fully Biblical approach to mission. Mission must be holistic, meeting the needs of body, mind and spirit if it is to be truly Christ like. Such are the origins and character of Salvationist spirituality.

Historically three main phases can be identified in Salvationist spirituality and spiritual formation.

The first phase was a period of intense innovation and experimentation. During this time Salvationists drew, as if on a blank piece of paper, the outlines of their spirituality and the means by which they would foster and develop it. They claimed for themselves the freedom under God to use any means and to pursue any path which was authorised by or in accordance with the rule and governance of Scripture, and which helped them achieve their aims.

The second phase could be characterised as a time of achievement and implementation. During this period Salvationists implemented the means and methods discovered in the first phase and the result was the emergence of a worldwide movement marked by a common spirituality and by an equally strong commonality of means.

Salvationists are at present living in the third phase. To some it appears to be a phase of change and confusion. Others characterise it as a time of renewal and exploration. In any movement each succeeding generation must rediscover and reinterpret, even redraw the vision and values of the movement's founders. Within the Army the establishment of the International Spiritual Life Commission is just one example among many of that quest.

This process of renewal is undertaken at a time of rapid technological and social change on a global scale. The International Spiritual Life Commission identified and restated the core values and distinctive character of the Salvationist's common spirituality. However the Commission did not attempt to specify or prescribe in depth or detail the methods and means of spiritual formation. Instead it set in place an agenda for the exploration of new and old methods and means. This third phase may be marked by the renewal of a deep common spirituality among Salvationists world wide, but also by an increasing diversity of means.

This is the challenge Salvationists face at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium, and a third century of Salvationist mission: to recover, renew and redraw in depth their common spirituality and to discover and explore all means possible in its expression in the processes of spiritual formation. Salvationists pursue this quest in a world hungry for spiritual reality, hungry for spiritual life, hungry for God.

*Major John Read
Territorial Ecumenical Officer - UK Territory with the Republic of Ireland*