

Unknown gods, declining churches, and the spiritual search of contemporary culture.

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Introduction

There has to be something special about being the 200th preacher in a long and illustrious historical heritage. As I look back at the list of those who have gone before me, much of it reads like a roll-call of the great and the good of the Church of England, particularly in the early days. Then as we come nearer to the present time, there has been an increasing recognition of the growing significance of the world church, with the inclusion of key figures from other countries, particularly those with a historic connection to CMS. Now, as CMS stands before a new door of opportunity, ready to engage in new ways with the mission-field that is today's Britain, it is my turn. Delivering this sermon in three quite different venues (Westminster College, Cambridge, St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe, Blackfriars, London, and Fulford Parish Church, York) has for me been a most encouraging experience, not only because of the warm reception that was given to what I had to say (something that any preacher would relish), but also because of the way it spanned two worlds that do not always interact as productively as they might, the theological academy and the church. Since I have spent almost my entire life straddling the two, I was especially grateful for this.

Right from the outset, though, I wanted this to be a sermon, and not a lecture. In delivering it, I think I stuck quite closely to that intention, though in producing this written version I have introduced some footnotes, so that I can provide references for some of the quotations that I used more freely in the

spoken versions. The structure of what I want to say is straightforward enough. I begin with some reflection on the theological and practical challenges facing us as we engage with the task of effective mission in today's world - challenges that to a considerable extent are related to our own baggage, both historical and personal. Then we move on to some reflections about the nature of the contemporary spiritual search, before coming to the story of Acts 17:16-34, which featured as a scripture lesson in the worship in the two church venues, and which I want to use as an entry point, if not a paradigm, for relevant evangelistic engagement with today's culture. Those who like to know about such things will recognize that this is very much what the pundits would call a praxis/reflection way of doing theology.[1] In that sense it models what I think practical theology today should be all about, not least because it takes seriously those non-western ways of 'doing theology' that have so effectively commended the Gospel to increasing millions of people in diverse cultures all over the world. One final qualification: in using the term 'contemporary culture', my starting point is Western culture, though in truth the influence of globalization (and what I have elsewhere labelled 'McDonaldization')[2] conspires to ensure that the spiritual concerns of Western people are rapidly becoming the concerns of world culture, something that is especially evident already in parts of south-east Asia and South America, both of which are key emerging centres of the so-called New Age, or new spirituality movement.

Revisiting our Baggage

A few years ago my wife Olive and I had the privilege of visiting Jamaica, at the invitation of the United Church of Jamaica and Cayman. After leading a conference on renewal of worship, we moved on to spend some time in a parish in the north-west of the island, not far from the tourist resort of Montego Bay. One place we visited was Rose Hall Plantation. Originally built in 1780, Rose Hall Great House is today one of the most prestigious tourist attractions in Jamaica, but its claim to fame - or notoriety - is connected to Annie Mae Patterson Palmer, wife of the last owner of the plantation, John Palmer. This

woman had an unenviable reputation for witchcraft and brutality, and was said to be the daughter of an Irish missionary and a Haitian voodoo priestess. The fact that her three husbands all died in mysterious circumstances only served to enhance her reputation as a person of magical powers, not to mention great cruelty. Standing today in the grand rooms of this wonderful residence, we found it hard to believe some of the stories we heard - of how Annie Palmer would send for slaves to amuse her before dinner, regularly insisting they fought to the death for her pleasure, of how after dinner she would often send for a slave to have sex with her, and would then murder him, instructing others to carry out the body for burial, whom she would in turn push into the open grave and bury alive, to conceal the evidence of her lifestyle. Eventually, when Annie and a slave girl both fell in love with the plantation supervisor they invoked voodoo spells against one another in a battle that ended with a general slave uprising in 1831, in which Annie Palmer was killed and the sugar fields destroyed. As we wandered round the magnificent grounds, with their metal traps to catch runaway slaves, and stood on the balcony from which Annie Palmer watched slaves mutilate one another for her amusement, which in turn was only a few steps away from the bedroom where she murdered so many, our one overwhelming impression was of the unimaginable cruelty of life in that place during the 1820s, when it was home to more than 2000 slaves, every one of whom must have been in fear for their life.

Just a bit further up the hillside overlooking Rose Hall stands a church - Mount Zion - and, like the plantation, this also is a little bit of colonial history. It especially fascinated us, for it reflects Scottish colonial history. This church began life in Glasgow, and the whole of its fabric and furniture was physically transported to Jamaica as ship's ballast in the 1820s. Slaves then spent several years of their spare time carrying the materials to the top of the hill, and reconstructing it there. It must have been hard labour, for it took us forty minutes in a four-wheel-drive vehicle to get from sea level up to where the church now stands. Eventually, the work was completed, and to celebrate its completion, and to acknowledge the hard work that had gone into it all, the minister responsible for getting it there gave the workers a reward. It was a

bell that would be used to call the people to worship, and inscribed on it was a verse of scripture: 'Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' (2 Corinthians 3:17).

I have to say that if I had read a story like that in some Marxist deconstruction of the missionary movement, I would certainly have thought it was exaggerated, possibly even untrue. But there it was, before my very eyes. I didn't know whether to be more surprised by the fact that the inhabitants of that place are still Christian, or that they were prepared to open their hearts so warmly to someone like me. Of course, I don't want to be too harsh on those previous generations of Christians who engaged in such activities, because I know that if we had been there, we would all have done the same things back then. But as I continued to reflect on what I had seen, it occurred to me that here was a commentary - and a challenging one at that - on the way in which we western Christians have often understood the nature of mission. It reminded me of how easily mission can become merely an exercise in marketing, or even conquest. It brought me face to face with the perennial temptation to impose faith from the top downwards, by insisting that other people look the same as us, think the same as we do, and indeed become clones of us and our churches in order to be considered fully Christian. Then I also reflected on why my forebears would ever have thought of sending a church building across the world in that way - for Mount Zion in Jamaica was by no means unique. I can only conclude that they must have assumed that God somehow lived in Scotland, and that Christians 'own' God, and that if their forms of religiosity were not exported to other places, then God would never get there. There is a strong contrast between that and the more Biblical starting point for mission, which affirms that this is God's world, and therefore God must already be at work in it - the *missio dei*. The assumption that God only lives and works in the church has led to one of the most insidious errors of much traditional thinking about evangelism, namely the idea that God is therefore only to be found in the spaces and places where we ourselves feel comfortable, and where we can be in control. This has arguably been one of the most damaging and debilitating opinions in relation to effective mission in recent years, especially in the West. As a consequence, many Christians

operate with an unhealthy - and certainly unbiblical - dualism, which places God in opposition to the world, and which in practical terms creates 'no-go-areas' for God, and therefore for the evangelist.

The Spiritual Search

Bearing all that in mind, we now turn to what is going on in contemporary culture. It is often observed that for increasing numbers of people today, there is a clear distinction to be drawn between 'spirituality' and 'religion', certainly in the cultures of Britain and north America. The terminology might be slightly different in other parts of Europe, but the reality is still to be found there. On this understanding, 'spirituality' is generally seen as something life-giving, holistic, enriching, and open-ended, while 'religion' is characterized by the opposite qualities, being perceived as oppressive, exploitative, and hierarchical, quite probably because it is seen as male-dominated. Even when the language is not overtly used, these understandings have been accepted by significant numbers of people, and can readily be found in the popular media. Shirley Maclaine neatly summed up the contrast when she wrote in her spiritual autobiography: 'Your religions teach religion, not spirituality'.^[3]

In the mid-1980s I was invited to become mission convener of what was then the central ecumenical body for the Scottish churches, the Scottish Churches Council. As I began to engage in serious reflection on what was happening in the wider culture, and what the consequences might be for the churches, one of the very first things that I became aware of was this growing trend away from conventional religious institutions, and towards 'alternative' or 'new' spiritualities. By 1989 I was sufficiently convinced of its importance to make it a major focus for my academic research, and in early 1990 I had the opportunity to visit the west coast of the USA, to meet with some of the leading lights in what was then called the New Age movement. I remember returning to Scotland from that visit, and shortly afterwards being at a dinner party with one of the key leaders of the Scottish churches. In the polite kind of way that people do on such occasions, he enquired after my welfare, and asked what particular aspect of the theological agenda was concerning me

right then. I imagine he thought I was going to explain some arcane aspect of textual study or historical criticism, which would have been a predictably safe topic of conversation, at least for a few minutes. His body language spoke volumes when I mentioned the spiritual search of our culture, and he made it very clear that it was quite beyond his comprehension why someone he imagined to be intelligent, and with future prospects, should be wasting time on such matters. Today, little more than a decade later, no responsible church leader could possibly afford to adopt such an attitude. It is no longer an option for religious institutions to ignore the evidence, which shows all too clearly that at the same time as the churches are in serious decline, interest in spiritual matters of all kinds has scarcely been greater.

Back then, it was not too difficult to dismiss the testimony of people like me as being anomalous and selective, or at least purely random and anecdotal.

Even now, when I speak of the spiritual searchers I regularly seem to meet in all contexts of life, some Christians still tell me that they never meet such people. That must surely be because they spend too much time engaging only with the church, and not enough meeting with people in the wider culture.

For there is a growing body of empirical research now available to help ground the stories in hard evidence. In 2000, the report entitled

Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to church was

published.[4] This built on earlier research inspired by the work of Alister

Hardy, and published in 1987 by David Hay (one of the authors of the present report) and Gordon Heald.[5] Historians involved in the task of researching the

history of this "lively and provocative" period are in a precarious position. This

most recent report contrasts the state of the churches with the rising tide of spirituality in the wider culture. Though church attendance in England has

fallen by 20% between 1987 and 1999, reports of 'spiritual experience'

increased by some 60% in the same period - and some forms increased

dramatically, most notably people who claimed to have had some specific

personal awareness of an evil presence, which went up by more than 100%

over that period. Indeed, Professor Hay claims that his research shows that

some 76% of British people now say they have had a spiritual experience - a

figure that he believes is probably on the low side, because there is still a

cultural inhibition or embarrassment in this country about speaking openly of such things. Moreover, the things of which people speak in such a context can all be recognized as authentically 'spiritual' from the perspective of the Christian tradition, for they include such things as discernible meaningful life patterns ('somebody is looking out for me'), awareness of God's presence, answered prayer, awareness of a sacred presence in nature, or of the dead, or of an evil presence.

Alongside such empirical research, there is also an increasing consensus among cultural commentators that spirituality is definitely on the agenda, at the same time as religion is falling out of favour. Callum Brown's book *The Death of Christian Britain* concludes with these words: 'The culture of Christianity has gone in the Britain of the new millennium. Britain is showing the world how religion as we have known it can die.[6] For him, 'religion' means 'religious institutions', which in turn means the churches. At a time when it is entirely possible that one or more major British denominations might literally cease to exist within a generation, no-one will argue with that - though there might be some debate about the causes. But other commentators highlight just as plausibly the rising tide of spiritual concerns. In their book *The Experience Economy*, Harvard professors Joseph Pine & James Gilmore seek to identify the business opportunities that will arise in the course of the next few years. They suggest that people are now seeking '...experiences to learn and grow, develop and improve, mend and reform'. As they explain what that will mean they affirm that '... [such] transformations turn aspirants into a "new you". with all the ethical, philosophical, and religious implications that phrase implies' and go on to make the extraordinary claim that 'We see people seeking spiritual growth outside the bounds of their local, traditional place of worship ... the rise of spiritual directors will become a business opportunity. [7]

In addition, the anecdotal evidence still persists, and many people will have their own stories of times and places where they meet with this phenomenon. Even the academic institutions of our land - which you might have imagined would be bastions of rationalism and materialism - are not immune from this new wave of spiritual exploration, and I personally know university professors

who are advocates of spiritual paths as various as Hawaiian shamanism, western Buddhism, and the White Eagle Lodge. And that is only in Aberdeen, which is hardly the trendy centre of the spiritual universe!

Paul at Athens

The leap from all this to the New Testament is not as great as the hermeneutical experts sometimes try and make it out to be. For what is described in Acts 17:16-34 is, in effect, the pluralistic context in which we live and minister today. It is the proverbial supermarket of faiths, and came about as a result of very similar cultural trends in the ancient world. Several centuries before the time of St Paul, the philosophers of ancient Greece had questioned the usefulness of the traditional religious faiths of their own culture. Ordinary people had a feeling that the things that inspired their forebears no longer made sense any more - but for the most part, they found that those who debunked the traditions had failed to offer any meaningful alternatives. The sceptics might be right, but their ideas were inaccessible to all but an educated elite, and for most people their teachings appeared arid and meaningless as a foundation for everyday life. And so a spiritual vacuum was created, into which came flooding all manner of esoteric spiritual beliefs from other times and places, out of which eventually emerged that mish-mash of mythology and speculative psychology that came to be known as Gnosticism - and which has more than a passing resemblance to much of the new spirituality scene today. For despite all the claims of a 'new age' having arrived, the one thing that characterizes so much of what is happening today is that it is not new at all, but is a rediscovery of what is old - even ancient. [8] Given all these similarities between Paul's circumstances and our own, we can do worse than ask ourselves what we might learn from the paradigm of mission set out by Luke in this story. At the same time, we should not miss the fact that, to first century people in the centre of the Roman empire, Christianity itself held an intrinsic fascination as a faith coming from a mysterious and little-understood culture on the outer edges of the empire, and that undoubtedly added to its attractions. In that sense, the apostles perhaps had

it easier than we do, for there was no cultural or historical baggage that would skew the way their message was perceived, such as we have to deal with in a post-Christendom world.

I want to highlight three very simple observations from St Paul's evangelistic praxis as reported in this story:

We should be listening before we start speaking There are two elements in this as Luke reports it. The first is that Paul had certainly done his homework, and he knew enough about Athenian history and spirituality to be able to relate the Gospel relevantly to it. Back in the 6th century BC Epimenides, the Cretan hero and philosopher, had been called to Athens to help the city to overcome a terrible plague. The Athenians' own oracle had declared that the city was under a curse because of war crimes committed in the past, and none of the deities they worshipped seemed to have the power to lift the curse. Epimenides therefore proposed that maybe there was a god whose name they did not yet know, and as a way of testing this hypothesis he sent some sheep out onto Mars Hill to graze. He further decreed that if any sheep lay down they should be sacrificed on an altar dedicated to this unknown god. They did, and they were - and the plague was duly lifted. It can hardly be coincidence that the story in Acts 17:16-34 not only refers to such an altar, but also quotes from Epimenides.

But in addition to doing some historical and cultural research, Paul also invested time in just being there, wandering round the city seeing, hearing, observing, and listening - even though Luke remarks that he was definitely uncomfortable with what he saw. It would be interesting to know which particular bit of listening to the culture of Athens was the more challenging to Paul - what he heard on the streets, or what he learned in the academy.

There is a major challenge for us today with regard to who we listen to, and how we listen. Generally speaking, the church has always been committed to high culture. We have happily engaged with philosophers and other ideologues, often at a highly intellectual level. There is nothing wrong with that: such people need to hear the Gospel just as much as others. But the idea that we will communicate with the majority of people through that route - however appropriate it may once have been - is simply mistaken in the

context of today's world. There was a time when things changed in accordance with the whims of the chattering classes, for the simple reason that these people were also the ruling classes. There are of course still vestiges of that around today. But the rise of the worldwide web, and the consequent democratization of knowledge, has sounded the death knell of that way of being. Anyone can post a message on the web, and have it taken seriously. Cultural change happens today as ordinary people see a need and do something about addressing it. There is a very real sense in which our beliefs and habits are no longer determined by the intelligentsia - nor even by our political leaders - but by ordinary people who make their own choices. In reality, this has been going on at least since the 1960s. I often wonder where we might be today if, instead of listening to the voices of those few theologians who spoke of the 'death of God' back then, we had paid more attention to the icons of popular culture - people like the Beatles, who never had any problem at all with transcendence, but inspired a whole generation to head off in new directions to search for spiritual meaning in some unexpected places. The people of that generation are now the cultural and business leaders, and their understanding of popular spirituality has been one of the major forces facilitating the rise of today's 'alternative' faiths.

Tex Sample is a professor in a United Methodist seminary in the USA, who has issued eloquent warnings about what he calls 'the class captivity of the church' as a major hindrance to effective mission. Even though he is himself a theologian - perhaps precisely because he is - he recognizes the potential weakness of the fact that our traditional theological discourse is so closely connected to high culture, and he describes it as 'highly differentiated language used to comb the innards of the privileged' - something which can only serve to consolidate the 'rituals of supremacy' whose dominance he believes to be a significant factor in the accelerating decline of the church throughout the West. Indeed, he goes further and suggests that our continued love affair with cultural élitism undermines what he regards as central themes of the Gospel, by implying that other people's preferences are simplistic and inadequate and therefore those who make such choices will need to be controlled and improved by others who know better. In the process, he raises

the obvious, but fundamental, missiological question: 'Who would want to join that kind of organization.[9]

All this is just another way of saying that the Gospel needs to be people-centred and not predominantly idea-centred. We need to listen to what ordinary people are saying, and recognize that in many ways it is not the same as the ideologues of intellectual post-modernity. The events of September 11th 2001 raised some major questions for our understanding of the cultural trends of our day. Philosophers of the post-modern have invested much time and energy in the effort to convince us that today people no longer believe in absolute truth or values, and have no place for metanarratives in their worldview. Christian apologists, for their part, have largely accepted this opinion. But why, if this is true, did no one respond to those terrorist atrocities in this post-modern way? Why did we not distance ourselves from the actions, but not also allow that, for those who found meaning in such things, they were perfectly permissible? Why did we not say, 'That would not be my way - but if it's yours, then who am I to stop you?' The answer can only be, because we do actually still have some absolute values, and a shared metanarrative that has no place for that sort of mindless violence and destruction. Post-September 11th, our understanding of what is going on in today's world will need some significant refinement. If post-modernity is indeed an actual phenomenon (as distinct from a label that we apply because, in truth, we have no idea what is going on), then it will certainly need to be redefined.

This is an appropriate point at which to be reminded that, if we listen to people, we may well not like what we hear. I remember being at a conference in Hollywood, of filmmakers, theologians, and storytellers, who were discussing the spirituality of recent movies. Because they wanted to hear from 'ordinary' people, they had also invited a small group of young adults from Los Angeles to be there. Some of them had experience of the gang culture of that city, and all of them had a different life experience than the predominantly middle-aged, and certainly middle-class 'experts'. When asked what the filmmakers could do to enrich life for young people, one of them said: 'Stop making movies'. And she went on to observe that the values the directors were putting across were, in her opinion, destroying the possibility of young

people ever finding relevant role models that they could follow. This was not what the filmmakers wanted to hear! And if we listen to what people say about church, their comments can be every bit as challenging as that. In one of his surveys of popular spiritual opinion, American researcher George Barna reports the experience of a young woman who commented, 'I honestly tried the churches, but they just couldn't speak to me'. [10]

We need to journey with others Paul's starting point was the spiritual journey of his hearers. It always was, according not only to Luke, but his own epistles (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). In many instances, Paul began in the synagogue with people who were readers of the Hebrew scriptures, something we find quite easy to accommodate as an appropriate starting point for evangelism. But it is only in a story like this that the radical nature of Paul's practice becomes apparent. For the starting point here was a collection of things that, in his heart, Paul did not like - not only the altar to an unknown god, but much more besides. It is significant that he did not begin by dismissing these things, and telling the Athenians what they had got wrong. He did not enter the supermarket of faiths in order to empty the shelves. On the contrary, he affirmed what he found there, and accepted other people's concerns as valid starting points for the spiritual journey.

Developing a willingness to do that is possibly one of the biggest challenges for today's Christians. For it means we will need to learn new ways of being. Instead of expecting other people to be concerned with our interests, we will need to engage with theirs. For practical inspiration on how to do it, we will need to pay close attention to the evangelistic style not only of Paul but also of Jesus, for both of them exemplify this. And for theological grounding, we will need to revisit our beliefs on creation and incarnation, asking what we really do mean when we say that people - as human beings - are 'made in God's image' (Genesis 1:27). Since our traditional evangelistic endeavours have been based more on doctrines of fall and redemption, this will require a major paradigm shift. It is instructive that, in his magisterial account of mission through the ages, David Bosch was unable to find a single historical model of mission that began from a doctrine of creation. [11] Yet here in Paul's engagement with Athens, creation and our shared humanity is the starting

point, as it always will be if our evangelism is to lead to the establishment of communities which will be effective outposts of God's kingdom. If it is the case, as has been argued elsewhere, that mystery and community are central aspects of the search for spiritual meaning, then we need to be reminded that robust doctrines of creation and incarnation are at the heart of both those things. [12]

It will prove to be even more challenging still, when we move on to ask the specific question: where are the altars to unknown gods in today's culture? A non-Christian commentator raises the question quite pointedly: 'There's no arguing that Generation X is largely unmoved by the language of traditional Christianity, but you don't see many church leaders wondering if maybe the message itself is the problem. With so few people believing in hell, what's the point in getting so worked up about salvation, whether it's by grace or otherwise? [13]

So what should be our starting point for the message? It's worth reminding ourselves that the church has always recognized that different generations will have their own distinctive questions. In the very earliest days of the church, Jesus was often portrayed as the Good Shepherd, not because that was an exhaustive christological title, but because in a time of ruthless persecution people needed to know they could be safe. In the Middle Ages, European people suffered from the Plague and Black Death - and so Jesus was portrayed in art as an emaciated figure on the cross, who knew what it was like to endure such tormented pain. At the time of the Reformation, guilt was a major burden, fuelled by a church that placed a premium on doing things in order to win God's favour. In that context, the rediscovery of Paul's emphasis on simply trusting Christ swept through Europe like a liberating breeze. Then in the Victorian era, death was a major preoccupation - which explains the emphasis on the after-life in so many hymns of that time. The church has always recognized the changing ways in which people articulate their concerns. These things were the 'altars to the unknown gods' in previous generations. If the Gospel is indeed some universal truth, we can expect there to be a Christian angle on all these things. Different emphases will be relevant in addressing different concerns. It will not be that some are right, and others

wrong, but more that some aspects of Christian belief come into the foreground at different periods, and become more clearly focused. To change the imagery, think of a traditional jazz band, in which different instrumentalists step forward to take the lead at different points. It is not that the others are unnecessary, but that each one speaks most relevantly at different points in the performance.

In Mark 12:30 (referring back to the book of Deuteronomy), Jesus characterizes discipleship as being concerned with 'loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength'. That is a very holistic vision. It embraces all aspects of the human psyche - and, of course, is followed by the transpersonal invitation to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. Things vary from one tradition to another, but we will not be far from the mark in suggesting that most of today's Christians are quite good at loving God with the mind, but are generally unsure about what to do with heart, soul, and strength. What would it mean for our spirituality to include our emotions, [14] and our bodies - not to speak of the rediscovery of something transcendent or mystical that might be called the 'soul'? I suspect that many of us simply don't know - especially in the traditionally evangelical wing of the church where CMS has its roots. For others, of course, the question will need to be phrased differently, for increasing numbers of churches seem to require the worshippers to leave their brains behind at the door. Either way, you will look a long way to find Christians who take seriously the need for this kind of holistic balance in their life together.

Another aspect of holistic spirituality that would bear further examination is to ask ourselves how what we do in church relates to the rest of life. Probably 80% of all Christians spend more than 90% of their time at work in the secular world, and yet much of our church strategy is concerned to ask how we might get these people involved in what goes on in the church. Instead of asking how lay people can be involved in the ministry of the church, should we not be asking how the church can get involved in the ministry of the laity, and how people can be empowered to be truly Christian in every aspect of their lives?

Yet another aspect of this is our perceived inability to share our faith in effective ways. Many Christians seem to scarcely speak about their faith at all. Just a few weeks before this CMS sermon was delivered, I had been one of the leaders at the first Scottish Ecumenical Assembly. It so happened that earlier that same week I had moved my office in the University. When the work was done, the porters who had been assigned to help joined me for coffee, and it was natural for them to ask me about my work. I told them I was going to the Ecumenical Assembly, and that the topic for which I was responsible (along with my wife) was 'Breaking into Dynamic Ways of being Church'. I asked them what they would say, if they were to go in my place. Without hesitation, one of them said: 'Tell them to learn to speak about God'. By way of explanation, he added that to him the churches had become just one pressure group among many others, and as a result he knew what they thought about many social issues, but really had no idea at all what their core message might be. It wasn't that he disapproved of Christians being involved with politics or economics - but he was struggling to understand why they had so little to say about things that he imagined should be central to faith. Living, as he does, in a world of reality TV, where people will go on shows like Jerry Springer, Kilroy, Oprah, and so on, and speak openly about their most intimate hopes and fears, he found it odd that Christians had little to say about distinctively spiritual matters. It may be that temperamentally, Christians do not like to share themselves in this open way. Or perhaps that we genuinely do not know how to speak with confidence without also being arrogant. Or maybe we have misunderstood the personal nature of faith as meaning that it should also be private. Whatever may be the explanation, in today's world we will have to learn to speak more openly about faith, otherwise people will conclude that we have nothing at all to say.

But let's move away from style, and reflect on substance. For this is where, if anything, the questions get even more difficult in terms of journeying with others. To many Christians, today's 'altars to unknown gods' are not just 'alternative' spiritualities, but are regarded as dangerous and misleading. This is particularly true of much that is associated with the label 'new age'. Can things like astrology, the tarot, channeling, and the many distinctive therapies

that are on offer really be openings for us to share the Gospel? I recently wrote a book with two Australian colleagues, designed as an evangelistic tool for people whose unknown god is the Tarot. [15] We did not write it in a vacuum, but rather on the basis of several years of experience of sharing the Gospel in psychic fairs and similar places, we knew that the tarot was indeed one of today's most popular altars, and also that it could be used to introduce people to faith in Christ - not least because we know people who have actually come to faith through this route, some of whom are now in training for full-time Christian ministry. Moreover, before engaging in this ministry we did our homework to discover the origins of the Tarot cards, and the ways in which other people use them. All this and more is documented in the book, so I will not repeat it here. But when the book was published, it produced two very opposite reactions from other Christians. On the one hand were those who acclaimed it as an innovative and truly incarnational form of evangelism for today's world. On the other were those who denounced it in the strongest possible terms, even accusing us of being demon-inspired.

This is neither the time nor the place to engage with that discussion, except to point out that recognizing and using the 'altars to unknown gods' as a platform for evangelism is likely to raise significant theological questions, of a sort that most Christians never think about. Put simply, does the *missio dei* have limits? Can God be found at work, at least potentially, absolutely everywhere? Or is God's activity limited in some way? Are there 'no-go' areas for God? And if there are, what does this imply about our view of who God is? Is that not just another form of the view I identified in mindset of those who would export a church from Scotland in the 19th century, that God only lives and operates in places where we feel safe? In the light of the consistent practice of both Jesus and Paul, however, how can we justify that? Does not the Gospel call us to be radical in the way we share it, as well as in the way we apply it to our own lives? Can we afford not to engage in a constructive and meaningful way with whatever today's altars to unknown gods might be - and, I hasten to add, the tarot is by no means the only one. If these are the places where people are searching, should we not be in there, as Paul was, accepting their starting points even when we dislike them, in order that we can journey alongside

them, and in the process bear witness to Christ? It has been well said that if you scratch where there is no itch, you only cause a rash. That is what we are in danger of doing in mission today, which is one reason why so many people see us not only as irrelevant but also as bullying and oppressive.

We need to remember that faith is a process We live in a time when people expect instant results, and Christians are no exception to that. This is one respect in which my application of the McDonaldization thesis to the church is undoubtedly correct. We imagine that everything can be achieved by the application of a formula. Some have looked at Paul's achievements in Athens, and wondered if he did not reap a very meagre reward for all his endeavour. It has even been proposed that he went away a defeated man, and changed his strategy thereafter. There is of course absolutely no evidence for this, and much to the contrary to suggest that in writing the book of Acts Luke offers us a series of models of how mission might be carried through in different social contexts. It is true that Paul apparently had fewer converts in Athens than in a place like Corinth - though there is still a church in Athens today, two thousand years later! But we need to remember that Jesus never suggested that it would be easy. He spoke about people taking up their cross, and about the first becoming last, while Paul himself wrote about the power of foolishness over wisdom. Discipleship was never meant to be a bed of roses, but a challenge that would be great enough and worthy enough for it to be worth our while giving our lives to it.

I wonder if we have replaced this sense of spiritual process with a misguided sense of optimism, and whether that has not obscured some key features of our faith? Have we missed the central importance of the balance between the tragic and the comic, which is endemic to all human life? Have we ended up with a faith that is all resurrection, and no cross?[16] These are some of the questions I would use to help me identify what might truly be 'altars to unknown gods' in today's world. Are they things which focus on matters that are central to the Gospel, even when the name of Christ is never mentioned? That was certainly one of the things that convinced me the Tarot could appropriately be used in this way, for its images all originate from the Bible, and specifically from those aspects of the Bible that might be called

archetypal, in the sense that they deal with ultimate matters of life, death, and meaning - things like creation, sin, the cross, the after-life, judgment, and above all the one central character who brings new life to others through his own self-sacrifice.

Finally

I began with a story, so let me end with one. Earlier this year, we decided to have some building work done in our home. We called a local builder we had dealt with before, who came to measure up the job. After giving us the advice we were looking for, he sat down to chat. It turned out that a few weeks later, he was to play a part in a passion play, along with others in the small village where he lives. He described his experience a year earlier, when he had done this for the first time. On that occasion, because there was only a small cast, he had to play more than one part. He started out as one of the apostles at the Last Supper, then became a soldier by the side of Pilate, before finally becoming one of the soldiers at the cross and tomb. He was careful to assure us that, though he thought of himself as 'a believer', he was not a church person, but he then went on to describe this as 'the most spiritual experience of my life' - not least the questions raised by being on different sides in relation to Jesus. He invited us to go and see the production he was currently rehearsing for. When we got there, a large crowd of several hundreds had gathered outside in the churchyard, which was where the action would begin. He spotted us in the crowd and called us out from where we were standing, with the advice that 'If you really want to see Jesus, you have to be out at the front'. I couldn't help wondering who was evangelizing whom, and whether that also tells us something we need to hear if we are to be faithful to our evangelistic calling in today's world.

Notes:

[1] For a classic exposition of this, see Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991). And for a non-western

example, Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1988).

i[2] John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton Longman and Todd 2000) .

i[3] Shirley Maclaine, *Out on a Limb* (London: Bantam 1986), 198

i[4] David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church: a report on the findings of the Adults' Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham*. Available from CSHR, Jubilee Campus, Nottingham University, Nottingham NG8 1BB.

i[5] David Hay & Gordon Heald, 'Religion is good for you', in *New Society*, 17 April 1987. For another recent survey which produced similar results, see Gordon Heald, 'The Soul of Britain', in *The Tablet*, 3 June 2000; and David Hay & Kate Hunt, 'Is Britain's soul waking up?', in *The Tablet* 27, June 2000. (Oxford: University Press, 1996).

i[6] Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge 2000), 198.

i[7] B Joseph Pine & James H Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press 1999), 163-4, 183.

i[8] On the connections between the New Age and ancient Gnosticism, see John Drane, 'Ancient Gnosis for a new millennium: Nag Hammadi and the New Age', in *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2000), 36-56.

i[9] Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church and working Americans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1996), 13, 32, 45.

i[10] George Barna, *Baby Busters* (Chicago: Northfield 1994), 93.

i[11] David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1991).

i[12] John Drane & Olive M Fleming Drane, '*Breaking into Dynamic Ways of Being Church*', in *Breaking New Ground: the First Scottish Ecumenical Assembly* (Dunblane: ACTS 2001), 139-154.

i[13] 'Marketing the Church' in *Gadfly* 4/1 (2000), 30.

i[14] Of course, I know that the Hebrew concept of 'heart' includes more than just feelings - but they are certainly not excluded.

i[15] John Drane, Ross Clifford & Philip Johnson, *Beyond Prediction: the Tarot and Your Spirituality* (Oxford: Lion 2001)

i[16] All questions raised by George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber 1961)