

**THE JOURNEY OF MAN.
BLESSING AND CURSE IN THE CHAIN OF GENERATIONS.**

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I. Introduction : a meditation under the arch

From this position I can see you all very well. In spite of this, however, I don't know exactly where you are right now. I do know that you are in Sigtuna. And I know that most of you have travelled a long distance this day to come here. But, never the less, I don't know where you are since I don't know anything about the movements and dynamics of your life. I don't know what kind of existential landscapes that unfolds around you these days, or what kind of personal experiences that colours your self-understanding and your life expectations.

So, we meet each other and see each other, but are at the same time hidden to each other. With this in mind, I want to invite you to slow down for a moment, and take a seat in the calm shadow of the arch. Perhaps even close your eyes for a while, for the benefit of seeing things a little better.

_____ Picture of The Arch is shown on the overhead _____

The arch is a meeting point. It is the symbolic place where past, present and future meet. I can touch them all. Therefore, it is a place for retreat and reflection.

Now, sitting in the silent shadow of the arch, what do I see?

First : -----Second picture on the overhead -----

With closed eyes – looking backward on the road that leads up to the present moment - I can see the emerging context of my own life story. It is a long road, a complex and fascinating journey. I can see a long generational link that ties my life to the past: I see life-bearing relations; I see actions of creation and moments of destruction. Blessings and curse in the chain of generations. My own fragile life journey from childhood up to this day - yearning for freedom, identity and self-expression. And I can turn my eyes towards the other side of the arch. Looking forward toward the future. What do my longings and desires tell me ? In what direction shall I move? I find myself in a mixture of hope and anxiety, ambivalence and determination.

But then, With closed eyes under the arch, I realize that not only my individual life journey becomes visible. I also get some glimpses of our common history – the journey of our common culture moving up through the ages. I see generations following generations, cultivating metaphorical landscapes and creating images of a meaningful human life. I can see them kneel down before The Almighty in prayer and praise. I can see them raising up in social interactions; developing communities of language and discourse, and struggling hard to overcome the destructive power of injustice and poverty.

Thus, the meeting point in the shadow under the arch is a fascinating place to rest. The pictures of my individual and our collective life journey uncovers complex realities. It is a story of victory and defeat. And I realize that this history – this cultural heritage - shapes the conditions and contexts for our present and future life in profound ways. Therefore, sitting under the arch, I have to ask: Where do we go from here? What kind of signature will my personal and our communal future carry? What kind of spirituality waits for us on a fragile earth - bound together by strong forces of globalization, and at the same time threatened by the powers of destructive conflict and fragmentation ?

Thus, there are silence and rest under the arch, but it is accompanied by uneasiness, perhaps even anxiety. The present is a time of ambivalence and ambiguity.

II. The journey : divergent and conflicting realities

Why this meditation ?

I want to establish a certain perspective for my further reflections. Thus, exploring ‘a spirituality for our time’, inevitably places us in the meeting point between past, present and future. We have to struggle with the blessings and burdens of our generational heritage - the traditions of the past. And we have to engage ourselves in the critical analysis of the divergent demands of the present as well as the possibilities of a future not yet here. This is, indeed, a challenging task, but also a deeply meaningful and inspiring one. My first step here, then, will be to lift up the concept of “*Becoming*” as a fundamental perspective in a theological interpretation of human existence.¹

2.1. “Becoming”: a fundamental perspective

Seen through the perspective of “Becoming”, human life is understood as a unfulfilled project. The story of our humanity is an open one. The God of the eschatological fulfilment is doing his work now, and thus, we are not yet ready made. This perspective, then, actualises *the eschatological dimension* in human existence, and carries with it the powerful challenges of such words as *Exodus, Pilgrimage, Counter-culture* and *Hope*.

What does that mean for our discussion of ‘a spirituality for our time’? I will return to this later on, but let me here just point very briefly to three issues:

First; When our human existence carries the signature of *becoming*, we realize that our life journey – both in its individual and collective sense - is an open, unfinished project. Although I am embedded in the chains of generations and determined by relational bonds and cultural patterns, my life is still ‘*open*’ in the sense that there is still room for new beginnings, creative explorations and further development. As long as there is life, there is hope – which means that dynamic forces of change and renewal touch my life.

What are the implications of this concerning the exploration of a spirituality for our time ? Seen through the perspective of “becoming”, we realize that there isn’t any one spirituality given to humankind once and for all. Human life is a journey of profound diversity,

¹ To this perspective and the following reflections, see J. Macquarrie: *In search of Humanity. A Theological and Philosophical Approach* (London, 1982); J. Moltmann: *God in Creation. An ecological doctrine of creation* (London, 1985/1997); A. Peters: *Der Mensch. Handbuch Systematischer Theologie*, bd. 8 (Gütersloh, 1979).

developments and change, and so is our search for a meaningful spirituality. Therefore, it is a permanent challenge to search for and give concrete shape to ‘a spirituality for our time’. We can’t find it somewhere – fixed, circumscribed and ready for consumption. *We have to create it* – in a complex, never ending interaction between personal experiences and social realities, historical traditions and the symbolic resources in our own cultural context.²

Second; Regardless of what name we put on ‘our time’ – whether we call it ‘modernity’, ‘late modernity’, ‘postmodernity’ or something else - the interplay between ‘*the secular*’ and ‘*the sacred*’ shapes our cultural and personal life in fundamental ways.³ This interplay is a vital part of our cultural heritage. It has given us many precious gifts of freedom, creativity and prosperity. But today we also realize the destructive power in our cultural heritage, among them threats of fragmentation, and the uneasiness of alienation and boredom in a culture of entertainment and endless consumption.

Thus, the perspective of “becoming” helps us realize the present situation as a profound and meaningful challenge. The processes of secularization do not carry us on a one-way-street away from God or from possibilities of developing a viable spirituality. It is part of our “becoming”, and therefore we have to listen carefully to the dynamic forces of secularization as well as the counter-forces of re-sacralization which play a prominent role in our present cultural climate.

Third; The perspective of “Becoming” always also implies a social or relational dimension. Our life journey is never a one-man-show. We are embedded in relational and cultural communities. Thus, only as persons-in-relations and as members of social and symbolic communities, is it possible to develop a meaningful spirituality.

This has many important implications, among them also this: The exploration of ‘a spirituality for our time’ has to learn to look in two directions: First, we have to ‘*look inside*’ – this is *the interior way*, which means that we are in need of critical analysis from a *psychological perspective*. And then, we have to ‘*look around*’ – this is *the social way*, which means that we are in need of critical analysis from such perspectives as *sociology, cultural analysis* etc..

2.2. Complex and divergent realities: meeting with ‘John’ and ‘Lisa’

Before moving further in my argument concerning I will try to make my reflections somewhat more concrete by relating it to the context of clinical practice. So, what follows is a brief presentation of two persons searching for help in the context of pastoral counselling. I do not intend to give an extensive case study or something like that, but rather to give a clinical illustration to a certain points in my presentation. Therefore, I invite you to meet John and Lisa.

² See to this, M. Downey: *Understanding Christian spirituality*(New York, 1997); Ph. Sheldrake: *Spirituality and history: questions of interpretation and method* (Maryknoll, N.Y. 1998).

³ A comprehensive discussion of this is found in O. Krogseth & J.-O. Henriksen(red.): *Pluralisme og identitet. Kulturanalytiske perspektiver på nordiske nasjonalkirker i møte med religiøs og moralsk pluralisme* (Oslo, 2001). See also R. Williams: *Lost Icons. Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London, 2003); M. McCarthy: “Spirituality in a Postmodern Era”, in J. Woodward & S. Pattison(eds.): *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford, 2000).

John is a tall and strong farmer in his early 40ies. Nearly 2 meters tall, he is an impressive figure, the oldest boy in a family of seven. He is single, and lives together with mother and father on their family farm, a rather lonely place up in the Fjords in the Western part of Norway. For tourists passing by on their cruise ships, it looks like a wonderful, romantic and peaceful place in the middle of nowhere. For *John*, it is quite different. He is number five in a proud generational chain of hardworking, modest fathers and sons. For generations they have cultivated their small piece of land – with strong bodies, and silent, pious souls.

For *Lisa* this is in every respect a completely unknown world. She is a handsome, lively, expressive girl in her late 20ies. After learning more of her personality and way of life, I secretly come to call her “the dancing queen”. She lives for the time being in a suburb outside Oslo, together with her mother and the mothers last boyfriend. Although still relatively young, *Lisa* has enjoyed the happiness and despair of several romantic affairs, also within the framework of co-habitations. She hardly knows the name of her biological father who left his wife when Lisa just passed two years of age.

John is referred to pastoral counselling from a clinical psychologist. He says that *John* suffers severely under a neurotic, dysfunctional religiosity due to a very authoritarian father and a strict religious upbringing. *Lisa* on the other hand, comes on her own. She is driven by what she calls “a painful restlessness” and “a desire for authentic spiritual life”.

Now; meeting *John and Lisa* is –as you understand – a complex pastoral challenge in many different ways. I do not intend to go into that here. I restrict myself to the following remarks:

John is definitely not something like ‘a prodigal son’ coming to himself in a land far away, and longing back home to his fatherhouse. John is in every respect ‘the son at home’, and he is not coming to himself. Rather, he is caught up in the power of repressive social structures, psychological dynamics and religious traditions. His soul carries heavy burdens of anxiety, guilt and anger. His is a spirituality that threatens life and closes his existential space behind heavy doors of fear of God and eternal condemnation. His image of God is a mixture of what the German pastoral theologian Karl Frielingsdorf calls “der strafende RichterGott” and “der dämonische TodesGott”.⁴ I think he was quite right when he once during the process said: “My God is not a God of mercy or a God for life. As long as I can remember, He has only promoted anxiety and despair”.

Lisas world is a very different one. Although she for long periods enjoy the many pleasures of modern, urban life – including sex, theatre, concerts and Christian services in the Cathedral - she often feels threatened by feelings of emptiness and confusion. She does not know of anything like a threatening God or a guilt-driven anxiety for condemnation. But she knows moments of deep despair and emptiness, and she carries a desire for reunion with what she calls ‘the divine power of the universe’. “Can the church give me anything?“, that is her question. She has met with a group of charismatic women, and their strong and lively spiritual experiences has challenged her. “Is there anything in the Christian faith for me? If so, can you help me find it ?“

Now, this is *John and Lisa*. Very complex and divergent realities. If we take a step back and see this in the context of our search for a spirituality for our time, what can we learn ? Let me make the following points:

⁴ K. Frielingsdorf: *Dämonische Gottesbilder* (Mainz, 1997).

First, In every single consultation, the ambiguity of our heritage – the burdens and blessings of generations before us – is a hidden, but powerful reality. This is of importance not only related to dys-functional, psychological dynamics, but also in relation to issues of spirituality and religious experience.

Second; Both *John and Lisa* struggle hard to find a viable personal identity. Coming from very different stories, they both searched for an existential position that could open up a space for meaningful and liberating self-expression. And in this struggle, the search for a viable spirituality plays a key role, and is of crucial importance for both – although in very different ways.

Third; I think the relation and interaction between the challenges of identity construction and spiritual formation is a significant one. In *John and Lisa* we see this interaction in the context of very troublesome life stories. But I think we can observe the same significant interaction as a vital element in our present cultural life. Thus, the search for a viable spirituality interacts with and functions in many ways as an integral part of the search for an existential meaningful self-interpretation – and vice versa.

If this observation is valid, it is obvious that the development of viable forms of spiritualities ‘for our time’ requires the complementary co-work of (at least) *psychological, cultural and theological* knowledge. Only within the framework of this kind of co-work can we realize how divergent and complex the histories behind our present situation are, and search out the best possible ways forward.

Now, where does this take us?

I want to proceed in two steps: First, in line with my former argument, I will try to establish a historical perspective on our common cultural heritage. My hope is that the picture I will draw, can help us see our present situation in a relevant historical context. And then, second, I will give a description of what I regard as characteristic features of the spiritual search in our Western societies today.

III. Spirituality and culture : a historical perspective

Every presentation of a certain historical development is a construction and a simplification.. So is mine. It carries the subjective colours of the constructor, and simplifies a whole lot of complex historical processes. Never the less, I hope it can help us to see some important lines and patterns in the historical journey of our Western culture.⁵

3.1. Traditional societies: fixed and stable patterns

If we moved some centuries backwards in our history, we meet what researchers in disciplines such as anthropology and cultural analysis call “ traditional societies”. Daily life in those societies is characterized by two important structures: (1) a holistic and stable social organization, and (2) a unified symbolic universe. As a consequence of this, every person has

⁵ A comprehensive discussion of this is found in Ch. Taylor: *Sources of the Self. The making of the modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.,1989). See also R.F.Baumeister: *Identity. Cultural Change and the Struggle for Self* (New York, 1986); J.D.Levin: *Theories of the Self* (Washington DC, 1992).

his or her predefined place within the social system, and possibilities for movement, change or choice are minimal.⁶

In such a cultural context, issues of personal identity and spirituality are, in most cases, not a matter of discussion. They are to a large extent a function of predefined social roles and traditional systems of myths. The religious or ideological system circumscribes the realm of thought and behaviour in a rather rigorous way, and the authority of religious institutions and their representatives, is by and large unquestioned. Within such a framework, one's life trajectory is fixed in advance, and questions of spirituality is therefore in one sense unproblematic: As father and mother, so son and daughter in the robust and stable chain of generations.

In our Western culture this kind of social and spiritual life is – according to the overall picture - no longer there. Although it is important to observe the many striking similarities between this picture of 'traditional societies' and for example (1) our friend *John* from the Norwegian fjords (cf. the socio-cultural and religious traditions related to the keywords: Protestant, Puritan and Pietistic), and (2) the interior life in various fundamentalist religious movements and sects.

But by and large, with the breakthrough of the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution and the development of the modern, liberal democracies, radical changes gradually occurred, and the forces of modernity re-shaped our social and cultural world in profound ways.

What does the further development of 'the modern project' have to say in relation to questions of spirituality? Let me point to some important elements

3.2. Modern societies: flexibility, change and choice

In modernity the whole structure of social and cultural life gradually became more mobile. The possibilities for movement, choice and changes within social and religious life increase radically. The processes of modernization (differentiation, individualization and secularisation) open up a radically new - much deeper and wider - existential and cultural space. Here the individual have to find his or her place by the virtues of *critical reflection and personal choice*.

So, with processes of early modernity, one can observe that the project of identity construction and spiritual formation gradually become *more mobile, more multiple, more personal and more self-reflexive*.⁷ It becomes possible to gain critical distance both to social order, cultural traditions and religious authority. Through the development of scientific rationality and technological power, through political engineering and cultivation of cultural life, both society and the educated individual gradually liberated themselves from religious authorities and social boundaries, and realized a new freedom and dignity of their own.

Now, we all enjoy the benefits of this 'liberation movement' in our culture. What is of relevance here, however, is how this 'liberation movement' has influenced our way of spiritual self-understanding and self-expression. In the context of my argument, it is relevant to make the following point:

⁶ To this and the following presentation, see also D. Keller: "Popular culture and the construction of postmodern identities", in S. Lash & J. Friedman(eds.): *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford, 1992) .

⁷ See D. Keller, op.cit.

The processes of modernization have gradually weakened the bond to historical tradition, to traditional religious institutions and to communal religious life. A self-confident scientific rationality developed a strong critique of religious faith, and presented atheistic and anti-religious interpretations of human life. As a consequence, spiritual life gradually resides - either to an irrelevant matters of superstition, or to subjective matters of private (aesthetic or emotional) interest. Modernity's scientific *Weltanschauung* – with all its self-confident cultural prestige – is a world where *critical ratio* reigns, and religion therefore fades away to the marginalities.

As a consequence, our spirituality becomes not so much a matter of socialization into established traditions. One could express an important change in this way: *Spirituality is not so much discovered and learned as it is created*. It becomes more a question of personal preferences and choice. The individual has to construct his or her personal spirituality from the material of personal interactions, social roles and available cultural resources.

3.3. The development of a postmodern consciousness

As we have seen, there is a strong connection between spirituality and culture. When the cultural web changes, so does the processes of spiritual formation. And when the processes of cultural transformation speeds up and go deeper, the pressure and possible crisis in the search for a viable spirituality also deepens.

I think this is exactly where we are today in our Western societies. Several profound experiences in our culture during the last century, have work together on the creation of what mounts to a new cultural and collective consciousness. This is often called “the postmodern consciousness”. Let me, very briefly, point to some collective changes that are often mentioned as important factors in modern spirituality literature: ⁸

First; Experiences of *human evil and destruction* (jfr. the Holocaust and Hiroshima) has deeply hurt the enthusiastic belief in continual cultural progress, and the naively optimistic confidence in the goodness of human nature. Second; postmodern philosophy, especially *epistemology*, has undermined the self-confident posture of the Cartesian ego. Scientific ideals of ‘objectivity’ and ‘universal rationality’ have been replaced by a new kind of uncertainty in positions of ‘*perspectivity*’ and ‘*contextual relativity*’. Third; astronauts on space travel has shown us the fabulous pictures of our lonely planet, “mother earth” on her endless journey through the universe. This has given us a new powerful visual symbol: We are bound together – one vulnerable humankind on one fragile earth; a deepened awareness of our finiteness, fragility and uncertainty. And forth; We have witnessed a whole array of new technological innovations which have led to an explosion of information and an enormous proliferation of relationships. New electronic communities have developed within the www, and the individual is – as a consequence - exposed to an overwhelming complexity of divergent personal, cultural, and religious worlds.

Thus, what gradually takes shape, is a new culture of intellectual, political and religious *diversity and pluralism*. We develop a new awareness of *the particular*, a sensibility for *the different* and the *divergent*. But also an attitude of suspicion towards established authorities and historical tradition. We have to develop our self-understanding and our existential

⁸ See to this the analysis in Ph. Sheldrake, op.cit. (1998 og 1999) ; M Downey, op.cit. (1997); M.McCarty, op.cit. (2000).

commitments in the midst of what Ricoeur calls “conflicts of interpretations”. So, we construct our ‘local theologies’, ‘local psychologies’ and ‘local spiritualities’, and with them our tentative self-interpretations and private spiritualities. But we realize – from the beginning to the end - how contingent and fragile they are in terms of their transient historical and cultural “Sitz im Leben”.

People react different to this kind of situation. For some, the diversity and pluralism of the postmodern condition is a wonderful social and symbolic place. It opens up arenas for creativity and liberation. They enjoy the possibility of playing with divergent and shifting roles and relations, and celebrate the freedom from religious authority and metaphysical commitments.

For others, the situation is much more difficult and demanding. The multiplicity of conflicting possibilities does not create liberation and freedom, but rather uncertainty and confusion. The never ending changes in cultural life, accompanied by endless processes of self-reflection, makes it difficult to find a meaningful and enduring existential position. The strong moral imperative of self-realization becomes a burden. And for many, the most obvious solution to this in our society, is perhaps a silent resignation and retreat to the role of the consumer in a ‘culture of entertainment’.

But at the same time, the prevailing uneasiness in our culture asks for more than entertainment and consumer goods. The hunger of the hearth is still there, in search for deeper levels of meaning and commitments. And so, ‘the secular’ and ‘the sacred’ meet and interact, and this is what shapes the spiritual quest in our culture.

IV. Between freedom and fragmentation : Consumer Society and the Spiritual Quest

What can be said about the characteristic features of the spiritual longing? Let me point to four different issues:⁹

4.1. Re-sacralization and the search for the sacred

‘The search for the sacred’ is a significant hallmark of the current spiritual quest. In modernity the sacred and the secular was separated, and ‘the sacred’ was marginalized. In the new spiritual quest, we witness a reaction against this ever-increasing secularisation. And so, ‘the sacred’ return as a highly relevant existential category with the power to vitalize human life. Although the meaning of this category apparently is diffuse and divergent, two things seems common: First; it reflects a growing awareness that there are levels of reality not immediately apparent. It seems as if the secular materialism has created a hunger of the soul for more then meets the eye and feeds the stomach. Second, there is a conviction that a personal experience of those sacred levels of reality might help overcome threatening fragmentation and boredom, and stimulate life-integration and meaningful commitments.

In this way we can observe, as indicated above, that the search for a viable spirituality also stimulates processes of identity formation. As I see it, there is an obvious existential logic in this, and it points to what the British scholar Hans Mol calls a *sacralization of identity*.

⁹ To the following discussion, see O.Krogseth & J.- O. Henriksen, op.cit. (2001) and M. Dowey, op.cit. (1997).

4.2. Re-traditionalization and the search for authenticity

The search for deeper commitments and meaning in life, also seems to stimulate a new interest for traditions of wisdom that has proved their validity through the test of a history. That is to say, we can observe a longing for spiritual traditions and practices that have stood the test of time, and therefore can be valued as authentic resources for spiritual renewal. Thus, , we find a multitude of spiritual wanderers, seeking authentic spiritual life through study of and devotion to old-aged Occult traditions, words of wisdom from the Desert Fathers, or the Gnostic gospels, or medieval Mystics, or the great Starets of the Orthodox tradition, or the Spiritual heroes from Eastern religious traditions etc..

Everywhere, the central point seems the same: A personally motivated re-traditionalization in search of a valid, authentic spirituality. Thus, the interplay between *'the personal'*, *'the original'* and *'the authentic'* appears as an important configuration in the present spiritual quest.

4.3. Individualization and the search for vitality and self-realization

Perhaps this is one of the most important issues in the postmodern search for a viable spirituality. The American social scientist Philip Rieff has presented an important cultural analysis of relevance here. The title of his book is *"The Triumph of the Therapeutic"* (1966), and what he demonstrates is this: The symbolic resources for self-interpretation in the American culture has changed in a significant way during the last century from what he calls the language of *"religious man"*, to the language of *"psychological man"*.

I think what we see on the spiritual scene now is, in many ways, an similar effect. The result is that the meaning and purpose of the spiritual quest is dominated by quasi-psychological language and what could be called *'issues of the self'*. There is a marked 'turn inward', perhaps as an understandable reaction against all the uncertainties and complexities in the outer world. This leads to a pre-occupation with what kind of effects spiritual exercises and experiences can have for the development of my personal maturation and well-being. In this sense I think it is fair to say that large parts of this spirituality is self-centered, which is also why some scholars in this context speak of a *"sacralization of the self"*.

The positive side of this 'turn inward' is, as I see it, the recognition that human and spiritual development are not opposing or competing dynamics, but interrelated and complementary. The problematic side, however, is the apparent possibility for *a flat pragmatic reduction* or even *a narcissistic perversion* of the spiritual quest. This happens when the attitude of *"what's in it for me"* becomes the dominant motivation. I therefore think everyone who engages in spiritual search today, should listen carefully to the warning coming from the catholic scholar Michel Downey when he says: *"The spiritual journey can become nothing more than a narcissistic ego trip wrapped in the rhetoric of the sacred"*.¹⁰

¹⁰ M. Downey, op.cit(1997), p 20.

4.4. Retreat from established religious institutions

It is important to realize that rather often within important sections of modern spirituality literature, we find a rather sharp polarization between the two concepts 'religion' and 'spirituality'. The point, then, is this: Religion tends to be viewed as institutional, rigid, authoritarian and (therefore) bad, while spirituality is viewed as individually oriented, flexible, creative and (therefore) good. While religions tend to anchor the spiritual quest in established traditions, doctrinal systems, certain patterns of devotion etc., the postmodern search takes on a much more subjectivist attitude. Questions of spiritual validity and authenticity are measured by the standards of subjective experience, and not in relation to, for example, doctrinal formulations.

This subjectivist pattern could be viewed as in tension with the drive towards re-traditionalization which we described above. But this tension or contradiction is not real. The point here is this: In the context of postmodern self-interpretation, the individual human being should be free to choose elements from those spiritual traditions which one experiences as relevant. And if, eventually, I realize that 'there is nothing in it for me', then I will drop it in search for another spirituality that suits me better. And no one has any legitimate reason to critique my decision or stop my personal, spiritual search.

V. The Hunger of the Hearth: a Spirituality for our time ?

Our life conditions are not stable and fixed, but fluid and in change. The dynamics of cultural and personal life requires in many different respects, the ability to move on, to change, to keep on going. This, then, is the cultural and existential context where the classical figure of *the Christian pilgrim* enters the stage. How? And what can he offer in our search for a spirituality for our time?

5.1. The Pilgrim: Exodus, Journey and Hope

As portrayed by the French intellectual Michel de Certeau, (post)modern man lives a life characterized by what he calls '*perpetual departure*'.¹¹ He is a restless and rootless wanderer. He or she cannot settle on any one *moment* or *place* or *circumscribed self-definition*. He is, therefore, at home anywhere and nowhere. I understand his existence as located on the border between freedom and fragmentation. I think our young 'dancing queen' Lisa lives here. One day this wanderer enjoys the gift of freedom, the next he dwells in the despair of homelessness and what novelist Milan Kundera calls "*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*". Thus, the old-aged myth of Ahasverus and the root-metaphor of '*journey*', represent highly relevant interpretative perspectives on his life experiences.

Now, what is of special interest here is what de Certeau does when he points to the analogies between the postmodern wanderer and important elements in the language of classical Christian spirituality. For metaphors of *journey*, *movement* and *change* have a prominent position within the Christian spiritual tradition, and are firmly rooted in interpretations of *man as pilgrim*.¹² And the pilgrim is a man or woman who lives within the eschatological

¹¹ See Ph. Sheldrake, op.cit.(1998), p 4 .

¹² For a discussion of topics related to christian pilgrimage, see P.G.Post et. al. : *The modern pilgrim : multidisciplinary explorations of Christian pilgrimage* (Leuven, 1998).

perspective of “Becoming”. He lives in a permanent *exodus*. It is an existence that *is not* settled in this world, but continually moving towards an unknown future. Life is a journey, an open, unfinished project, marked by the virtues of *endurance and hope*.

Thus, when the postmodern wanderer meets the Christian pilgrim, we discover common metaphorical landscapes. Which – at least on a principal level - means that possibilities for mutual critical dialogue opens up. For example: Both the classical Christian pilgrim and the postmodern wanderer are often described as human beings marked by *desire*. They share the experience of a *existential uneasiness*. They live with a critical awareness of the *finitude, contingency and fragility* of human existence. Therefore, there are possibilities of mutual dialogue and critique, at least with a Christian spirituality that is marked by the standards of the eschatological Kingdom of God, and not too self-satisfied and at peace with life-patterns in a culture of entertainment and narcissistic self-occupation.

Therefore, in the light of this argument, my concluding point will be a reflection on what traditions of Christian spirituality could offer by means of a critical dialogue with a postmodern spiritual quest.¹³

5.2. In search for an authentic spirituality – four concluding perspectives

(1) The necessity of critical hermeneutics

This point refers first and foremost to our basic attitude. We should – as scholars, pastoral counsellors and spiritual seekers ourselves – meet ‘the spiritual quest’ with an attitude of serious openness and respect. But this openness must, of course, be a critical one. I think it should be realized in the mood of a double hermeneutical stance:

First, a ‘*hermeneutic of suspicion*’ (Ricoeur) is needed. This is necessary in order to uncover - not only “what’s in it for me” - but ‘what’s in it’ in the sense of a critical examination of both personal experiences and spiritual traditions. This is necessary because the phenomenon of ‘spiritual experience’ is never a ‘naked’ one. It is always involved with values, language and assumptions drawn from faith traditions. Nor is it entirely private, but always resonates with the particularities of my own psychological setup etc. Therefore, a critical stance of suspicion is important.

But so is also the more constructive ‘*hermeneutics of restoration*’. We should not only help in the critical analysis of authentic or inauthentic expressions of spirituality, but also contribute to the development of valid and viable forms of spiritual life. In the context of the Christian tradition, this actualizes the relation between spirituality as an expression of lived experience, and theology as a more cognitive and critical reflection in relation to normative Doctrine and historical tradition. This is an important topic, vigorously debated. As a theologian, I will here just say: ‘Spirituality’ and ‘theology’ belong together ‘in holy matrimony’, and should – according to God’s will - never depart !

¹³ The discussion that follows is inspired by the analysis presented in M. McCarty, op.cit.(2000) and M. Downey, op.cit. (1997). See also the challenging discussion in K. Leech : *The Eye of the Storm: living spirituality in the real world* (San Francisco, 1992) and N.S.T. Thayer: *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia, 1985).

(2) A spirituality anchored in community

A prominent feature of a valid spirituality for our time, must be the grounding in a community of devotion, celebration and hope. Which means that the continuous search for an authentic spiritual life, should be grounded in a social and sacramental community of interaction and critical discourse. As a Christian community it should be continually engaged in critical issues of the present situation. But at the same time realize the relevance and importance of the historical and ecumenical dimensions of the Christian church.

A social environment with such qualities, has the potential power to overcome destructive effects of alienation and fragmentation on both a social, intellectual and spiritual level. In a culture deeply troubled by relational starvation and loss, this would be of utmost importance.

(3) The capacity of listening awareness

This point is, in one sense, only a qualification of the former. Thus, most traditions of spiritual life are engaged in the development of an environment where people can cultivate the ability to ‘centeredness’ and listening awareness. The reasons for this are obvious: First, spiritual renewal and personal maturation requires the ability to listen carefully to *the processes of our interior life*, to identify thoughts and feelings, and express them in prayer and dialogue. Second, spiritual renewal and personal maturation requires the ability to *listen carefully to others*, that is: to open our own life in silent attentiveness and compassion for the benefit of our fellow human beings.

Again we see how a central feature of spiritual life concords with basic elements in the process of identity formation. Thus, the capacity for listening awareness – in interaction and dialogue with others – is a central virtue in on the road to personal maturity.

(4) The necessity of discernment and action

Occupation with the vicissitudes of the self and the movements of interior life, is a central feature of modern spirituality. There are, obviously, many reasons for this. It is in many ways understandable, but nevertheless potentially damaging.

My point, then, is this: Although the movement towards stillness and solitude, and the ability to listen attentively to the interior life is an integral part of spiritual life, this is only one side of the coin. Genuine contemplative life – at least as understood in the Christian tradition – always should lead to deep immersion and creative action in the world. Thus, critical scrutiny – what the tradition often labels as ‘discernment’ – is required. And the aim of this process of dialogical discernment, is purposeful involvement and action, both on a personal and a communal level.

Thus, the main point here is this: I can’t learn to know myself - neither the world, nor God - in splendid isolation or in lonely, introvert self-reflection. I have to express myself - my potentials, my values and my ambitions - as *a responsible acting agent* in the human community. Without the test of practical action in the world – without learning by doing - neither spiritual wisdom nor personal maturation is possible.

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