



*Stirrings  
of the Soul*

Evangelicals  
and the  
New Spirituality

Michael Raiter

# Contents

GIVING CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE	7
1. THE SPIRITUALITY EXPLOSION	13
2. DEFINING THE INDEFINABLE	35
3. THE RISE OF CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY	47
4. THE APPEAL OF SPIRITUALITY	73
5. SPIRITUAL SEEKERS?	107
6. HEARING THE MYSTICS	135
7. THE LURE OF MYSTICISM	167
8. TRUE SPIRITUALITY: LISTENING TO THE APOSTLE OF THE SPIRIT	195
9. THIRSTY EVANGELICALS	223
A FINAL WORD	253

# Giving credit where it's due

IN LATE 2000, Dr Paul Barnett, then Bishop of North Sydney, invited me to participate in a series of lectures to be held in his region of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, entitled *2001: A Faith Odyssey*. Paul asked me to address the topic of 'The Spiritualities and God's Spirit'.

Little did I realise, at the time, that I was about to open a Pandora's box of spiritualities. And what a collection of spiritualities! New Age, feminist, environmental, evangelical, occult, mystical, animal, vegetable and mineral ... now I'm getting carried away! Books have been written on any *one* of these spiritualities, and I was being asked to survey the whole field.

Mind you, I could hardly have been asked to comment on a more important topic. The explosion of interest in spirituality in our society, and I suspect in Western societies generally, is nothing short of phenomenal. If you advertise a public address on religion or Christianity you will be hard pressed to muster up much interest from a disinterested and cynical public. However, if your theme is 'spirituality' then you are far more likely to draw a crowd. Very few people today would not willingly admit that they see themselves as spiritual beings, and such people are open to explore and experience some of the many and various spiritualities that are readily available.

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

As I began to investigate some of these spiritualities it soon became clear that, diverse as they are, they also share a great deal in common. I suppose, in that sense, they are like people themselves. You hear two apparently conflicting comments about people. On the one hand, we're told that no two people are alike. We're all like snowflakes, each with his or her own unique character and design. Yet, we're also told that people are basically the same, again like the proverbial snowflake. Despite the considerable cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences between people, what we share in common as human beings, made in the image of God, is much greater and more profound, than what separates us. And, it must also be said, what we equally share as fallen creatures, "without God and without hope in the world", also transcends any other group or individual differences.

So with spirituality. While the characteristics of different spiritualities vary greatly, they all express common features. Contemporary spiritualities, while they may differ in their details, appear to be largely addressing the same questions. Further, the answers that they give to many of the most important questions of life and the remedies they offer also bear striking similarities to each other. Increasingly, spirituality as a topic, and as a part of people's self-identity, has moved in from the margins of life and society, to a place near the centre. The spirituality phenomenon is now such an important feature of our cultural landscape that it can no longer be ignored. It demands to be taken seriously. It demands some analysis.

This book is not designed to be a comprehensive survey of even the major spiritualities on offer in our society. That would require a far longer work, and would demand a depth of study and level of expertise that, quite frankly, is beyond me.

Besides, should someone want to read further on, let's say, New Age spirituality, there are already a number of very fine books written on this topic by experts in the field. What I hope will be useful, though, is a broader survey of the topic of spirituality. 'You can't see the forest for the trees', is often heard. Well, here we'll look at the forest. We won't be walking around the forest and examining each and every kind of tree in depth. Rather, we'll be standing on a nearby hilltop and surveying the forest as a whole. Certainly, we will notice that each kind of tree has its own distinctive features, but at the same time it can't help but escape our attention that all trees, as trees, share a great deal in common.

Further, as well as drawing upon a good deal of very fine work that has been done in the North American context, I will also try to examine the roots of the current spirituality phenomenon here in Australia. Of course, I am not breaking new ground in doing this, but it is important that we write in and for our own unique situation. Australia is not America, and in a brief and preliminary way, I want to help Australian Christians in their own encounter with this remarkable phenomenon. We will try to examine what the appeal of contemporary spirituality is for Australian evangelical Christians, and examine some of the issues that it raises for our own understanding of the Christian life. At the same time, these issues remain relevant for most of the developed, Western world in its post-Christian grasping for spirituality.

As I delivered my lecture at the 2001: *A Faith Odyssey* lectures series, and answered questions from the floor, it became very clear that most people were far more interested in satisfying their own spiritual thirst, than learning about the spiritual desires of others. What I heard from the floor, in

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

question after question, is what I subsequently read in book after book on evangelical spirituality. And that is, that there must be something more in living the Christian life. Many Christians who love the Lord Jesus Christ and long to please him, seem frustrated that their spiritual lives are too often dry and lacking in vitality. Church services too often leave people flat and empty. They walk away bored, as emotionally, relationally and intellectually unsatisfied as when they arrived. And some walk away, and don't come back. To be quite honest, I felt some sympathy for their questions. Too often, over the years, I've visited a church and wondered, why do people come here? They must be indwelt by the Spirit of God, because there's no earthly reason why you'd endure a service like this week after week!

When you're thirsty you may be tempted to try anything which you've been told is tasty and refreshing. And there are plenty of alternatives, even on the shelves of the Christian supermarket. I knew then that I had to address the question that was being posed that night: is evangelicalism selling people short? Is there, after all, something 'more'? This is all tied up with the greater question, what is true spirituality? If we were to meet truly 'spiritual' people, what would they look like? It is these sorts of questions that this little book will try to begin to address.

I want to thank Paul Barnett for his invitation to address that conference, and for the course of study and reflection that it has led me to subsequently pursue. I want to thank the council of Moore College for kindly granting me six months study leave, which made possible the writing of this book. My sister, Ruth, put in countless hours of typing after a local thief, presumably a seeker after spirituality (!), broke into my house

## GIVING CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

and absconded with my computer. Tony Payne and Kirsten Birkett from Matthias Media are two of the most perceptive editors a writer could hope for. Their advice has been invaluable. And, thanks especially to Peter O'Brien, Tim Bowden, and Andrew Cameron for casting wise, critical, but gracious eyes over the text. If the book's a bomb, it's comforting to know I can pass the buck!

## Chapter I

# The Spirituality Explosion

## **A walk around the Mind Body Spirit Festival**

Twice every year, for four days, Sydney hosts its annual smorgasbord of the spiritual and the supernatural, the otherworldly and the inner life, the mysterious, the mystical and the magical. Clairvoyants, consultants, soul channelers, and curers of the human spirit, compete to win your mind and soul (and, let it be said, your dollar as well), while they offer you physical, spiritual, social, economic and sexual wellbeing. It is the Mind Body Spirit Festival.

The centrepiece of the festival is the exhibition centre where over 200 different booths play host to a fascinating array of New Age philosophies, natural health cures, and traditional remedies. You can learn to relax with some aromatherapy or transformational breathing. You can open your mind—and, presumably your mouth—to holistic dentistry. Or, you can unlock your full potential with a few whiffs of fragrant bush flower essences. There are booths offering innocuous health appliances, like the ‘Pure Magic’ water distiller, and the ‘Green Life’ juicer. Or you can purchase an easy-to-attach support for back pain, whose “sturdy straps draw reverse pressure from your knees to keep your pelvis stabilized” (only \$57, or \$107 for two!). Or you can take a brochure for a bathhouse where you can escape the stress of city living, cleanse the body of those yucky unwanted toxins, relax the mind, and “emerge feeling wonderfully refreshed and rejuvenated” (for just \$49 for 15 minutes).

However, by far the bulk of the displays offer therapies and healings which are far from innocuous, and introduce you to the multivaried world of modern spirituality. You can dabble in some tarot card reading or numerology. Or you can take a fast track to success by enrolling in neuro-linguistic program-

ming. You can find lights to direct you along life's path by connecting with angels and spirit guides. The more adventurous among you can take a journey to another dimension in search of knowledge with Astral Travel. Or you can just explore the mysterious and esoteric truths of capoeira, ear candling, iridology, and auyurveda (making sure that you carry with you a not-so-concise Oxford dictionary!).

Like the food hall of a large department store, the exhibition hall caters for a variety of shoppers. There is the spiritual nibbler. This casual inquirer is someone who just wants to sample some of the physical and spiritual foods on offer. Such a person may not be a committed customer and is attracted there by simple curiosity. On the other hand, there are the more serious shoppers. These are the sort of people who are aware of that large empty space in the living room of their lives and are looking for just the right piece to fill that vacuum and give their spiritual home the balance and ambience it is crying out for. For these more serious inquirers the festival also offers a range of seminars and workshops.

I've paid my \$13 admission fee. I've grabbed my show bag (courtesy of Nature Care College) and now join me on a stroll around these seminars and meet some of the festival's more colourful characters.

There's Madi Nolan, whose impressive credentials include the fact that she has cured wandering spirits in an Indian burial ground and brought new life to failed businesses. She offers Black Hat Feng Shui Cures for her clients who will develop the skills to "capture the images of earth ley lines, vortex centres and nature spirits". Part of the secret of her success is that she has a "powerful magic altar cloth from a monastery in Nepal". The customer is advised that if they

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

bring a camera to her workshop, wear something red, and have their photo taken with the altar cloth, then 'spirit guides' often appear in the photos. The cures that will flow from learning these skills can change your life and health, and increase your income. The latter is particularly important, as this workshop will cost you \$33 a ticket!

Or, if your love life has been a bit flat lately, you can learn from Oceana and Icarus. For just \$66 a ticket you can get tips on Tantric lovemaking and relationships, and learn how to reconcile your sexuality and spirituality. They promote themselves as the world's foremost Tantra teaching married couple "who met at sunrise at the top of a mountain in the Himalayas". I can only assume they must have been wearing more on the top of that Himalayan mountain than they're wearing on their promotional brochure!

I am now beginning to watch my dwindling wallet more carefully. Still it's hard to resist an expert on the human soul, its origin in the universe, and its history on this planet. That's Ruthe Rendely, who has channelled angelic energies since 1995 when a high angel approached her to bring out the Seraphim Blueprint, an angelic system that was developed for the benefit of humanity in Atlantean times. Ruthe will also tell me how I can establish an abiding connection with one of the highest angels in the universe, the archangel Michael. I will learn that while this angel is often depicted as a warrior, his deeper essence is profound love and pure being, and that I can experience direct transmissions from him which will bring me into an experience of unconditional love and God-consciousness.

Then there's the workshop of Kerrie Edwards-Ticehurst where, using creative visualizations, meditation, chakras, clair-

voyancy and clairaudience, you can learn to speed up your vibrations, so making it easier to make contact with the other side. Then through palm reading, jewellery reading, and interpretation of your aura you can “travel to your temple to meet your guides and then journey into past lives with these friends”.

Finally, you can be tempted and charmed by Deborah Gray who, the advertisement tells me, is Australia’s number one seller of books on white witchcraft. She followed up her successful first book, *How to Turn Your Ex-Boyfriend into a Toad* with *How to be a Real Witch*. Her workshop will teach you the basics of spell casting and sorcery.

The Mind Body Spirit Festival, however, is much more than a kind of New Age supermarket. Indeed, to brand it ‘New Age’ is not really accurate. Few today would own the expression. Of itself, it is confusing and ambiguous. Most people at the festival prefer to describe the advice and experiences which they offer as spiritual therapies. Clearly, these practitioners are offering different paths to enlightenment, but each with the same ultimate goal in mind: the attainment of wellbeing. Jesus said that “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matthew 9:12), and what all these folk are offering is holistic health and well-being to fractured, sick and frustrated people.

To people who are aware of the brokenness of their lives, or have experienced disappointments in their relationships, or are terrified by their own mortality, the therapies offered by the mind, body and spirit practitioners hold an undeniable appeal. Just listen to how some of these advocates promote their products. The neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) workshops claim they will help you “increase your income, enjoy better relationships, improve your health and fitness, increase your

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

competitive edge and profitability, communicate more effectively, achieve all your goals, and give you a fast track to success". Clairvoyancy and hypnotherapy will lead to emotional fulfilment. Discovering the healing power of sound will enhance your relationships with the self and others, as well as giving you "energy, creativity and joy". Ayurvedic daily rituals will result in optimal relationships, fitness and health. Body-psychotherapy will enable your relationship with your partner to become "truly intimate, passionate and happy". Discovering more about the colours of your aura will "change your life, empower your decisions and assist the healing process".

The focus is clearly on the here and now. Success in this world. Wellbeing for the present. Yet, at the same time virtually all these therapies present themselves as being fundamentally 'spiritual'. That is, there is a recognition that if we are going to realise our true potential as human beings and find wholeness in our lives, then we are going to have to be willing to accept that there are realities to human existence which transcend the physical and material.

Devotees believe that the secrets to unlocking the meaning of life or, more importantly for most people, the power to live a holistically healthy life, are not found, ultimately, in the test tube of a scientific laboratory. Neither will they be unravelled by sending more space probes into the far reaches of the cosmos. It is the conviction of the festival that there is another dimension to people and the world which can be explored and experienced. This is what is consistently promoted as 'the spiritual'. As human beings form spiritual connections, then natural bonds are re-formed which then can release people to experience their full physical, spiritual, intellectual and social potential.

Some people make these connections through channelling

into the rhythms of life, and the sounds and colours of the world, all of which can be explored. For others, the path to wholeness is through making contact with the worlds of supernatural beings: angels, witches, and nature spirits such as elves, fairies and gnomes. Then others direct us to the wisdom of ancient sages from long forgotten cultures, or guides and masters who, having investigated and discovered spiritual truths, can today lead us along the same paths of self-discovery. For some, “the truth is out there”. For others, the truth lies within. Yet all would agree that this truth, this power, this deeper reality, is both available and, having been connected with, carries the potential for the profound personal transformation of every part of a person’s life and being.

In the free programme to the Mind Body Spirit Festival, the Founder/Director offers his welcome to all this year’s visitors. He summarizes the overall theme of the festival as “natural wellbeing”. The shopper will find little here that one could term familiar or traditional. The therapies on offer are deliberately alternative. He is confident that somewhere in the myriad of therapies each person will find “something that is right for you at this time”. Welcome to the warehouse of wellbeing. Taste and see. Mix and match. Browse or believe. The salespeople are eager to win your custom. This is twenty-first century spirituality. Marketplace mysticism. And it is very, very popular.

### **A surf around the net**

*Time* magazine on December 16th, 1996 ran an article entitled ‘Finding God on the Web’. It began with the story of a community of monks who live and worship in a sanctuary deep into the desert of New Mexico. They live a simple

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

lifestyle, twenty miles from the nearest power line, twice as far from the nearest phone, and an hour from anything that resembles civilization. In order to reach these monks, one follows the simple hand carved wooden sign which invites, 'Ring this bell'. There is, though, one other way to communicate with this remote group of Benedictines: e-mail! Using electricity from a dozen solar panels and a data link through a cellular phone, these monks have developed their own website, and can be contacted on [porter@christdesert.org](mailto:porter@christdesert.org). Indeed, so successful have these monks proven to be that they have now developed a business designing and maintaining other people's websites.

Over the past ten years religious groups have rushed to go online. Indeed, the number of sites dedicated to religion and spirituality have grown at an astonishing rate. If you search on the internet for 'spirituality', you are presented with a myriad of sites, including one simply called GOD.com. GOD.com proudly announces that spirituality is the biggest thing on the world wide web. In a world hungry for experience and satisfaction, religion is more popular than sex. It boasts that if one asks the internet search engine Alta Vista to locate sites related to 'Sex' it will return 683,643 documents. But, request 'God' and it lists nearly three times as many: 1,772,945. So, the internet which is often portrayed as the domain of sin and sleaze is even more the home of the supernatural and the spiritual.

The variety and ingenuity of the new websites is staggering. The *Time* article reports that Mormon sites offer links to vast genealogical databases. 'YaaleVe'Yavo', an Orthodox Jewish site, forwards e-mailed prayers to Jerusalem, where they are affixed to the Wailing Wall. There are two websites devoted to a tiny, obscure Vietnamese group called 'Cao Daiism', a sect which

worships the French novelist, Victor Hugo. Even the technophobic Amish people of Pennsylvania now find themselves unwittingly on the web, thanks to Ohio State University. This site, among other things, offers guidelines for installing a rear warning light on a horse-drawn carriage!

Not surprisingly, an increasing number of churches and parachurch organizations have jumped onto the internet bandwagon. If the adage used to be 'publish or perish', it is now 'online or outdated'. More and more churches have their own websites, both to keep their members in touch with church programmes and policy changes, but also in the hope of catching the attention of a web surfer, who may just happen to grab the wave of St Hildebrands in Netville, and enjoy the possibility of a surf in her direction. So, what would one find if one were to surf the web waves crashing down on to Spirituality Beach?

Firstly, 'surfing' isn't really the operative word. Once again, the invitation is to 'shop'. What we find here is a busy, highly competitive marketplace of holistic wellbeing, with each hawker seeking to outsell and undercut his or her competitors with a product that is simpler, cheaper and more effective than any of its rivals. Let us join the spirituality shoppers in this superstore of cyberspace.

The first site that I log onto is 'Enlightenment 101' and there I meet Marilyn and Donald Schnell, who will help me to discover and explore the inner realm of love and higher consciousness which is available to everyone. It looks like I have struck the jackpot first time, and will need to shop no further! The Schnells (rather self-deprecatingly) see themselves as standing in the same spiritual traditions as other Grand Masters of spiritual self-understanding like Moses, Christ,

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

Buddha, and Mother Theresa. The wisdom they offer is both old and new. It is in a continuous line with the teachings of sages from ancient days, and in that sense what they offer is ancient truths. Yet at the same time, they discern that this is a new spiritual era, in which people have been reawakened to their need for enlightenment. The shopper is enticed by the prospect that he or she may be one of few who will discover this life-changing truth; it is “What 99% of the World’s Population Doesn’t Know”. Where does one look to find this secret of spiritual power? One need only look inside, for all the sufferings of the human condition are a result of one’s disconnectedness with the “Inner Power, the Sacred Inner Sanctum”.

What benefits are to be obtained through membership to this exclusive club? Astonishingly, the Schnells can guarantee nothing less than “unprecedented happiness”, and “greater health, prosperity and peace to the world”. With Enlightenment 101 dreams do come true, whether they are of greater financial success, finding one’s soulmate, or building one’s dream home. And all of this for only a \$49 per month membership fee (Visa and MasterCard accepted).

But, of course, we want to know, does it work? Well, there are testimonies from those who have paid their dues and tried it out. Susan Witt says that she and her husband have been improving daily since they began. Bruce Brincklow finds the course more meaningful than a church service (which may say more about the church he attends than the course!), and Evie Boss, having completed the course and learnt to follow her heart, has found a new and satisfying career in music. Indeed, so dynamic is Enlightenment 101 that the Schnells tell us, “many people say that just by holding one of these Inspirational Letters in their hands, they feel the powerful

buzz of spiritual energy”. My mind begins to spin at the possibilities of what might happen if I was to wear something red, and hold one of these letters in one hand and Madi Nolan’s magic cloth in the other!!

With such a commendation, I wonder if I should look further, but having emerged from the Mind Body Spirit Festival a trifle cynical, I decide to keep on shopping. My next website is ‘Divine Revelation’. Once again I am told that the truth is not out there, but in here! There is a “still, small voice of God within” which, when listened to, spiritually connects us and enables us to solve the everyday problems of life. Inside of me is the source of wisdom, healing, intelligence, inspiration, peace and happiness. Through this course I can experience higher states of consciousness and inner contact with my higher self.

I confess that, at this point, this is all beginning to sound a little familiar. But what can it promise to do for me? I am told that I will gain more self-confidence, enjoy life more, have greater peace of mind, clear away negative feelings, improve my personal relationships, have the power to change anything I do not like, and take command of my destiny. Does it work? Susan Silverman testifies that this course “has transformed my life on all levels”, while Connie Huebner says, “no matter how much sleep I get, I have lots of energy. I feel much more full of vitality and energy and dynamism than ever before”. And if you ask Jay Reynolds more crudely what is the cash value of the course, then he will tell you “I’ve almost doubled my income”.

It is a little difficult to decide between these two courses, which sound like different brands of the same cereal. I will try one more. ‘Spirituality-4-all: a Proven System of Spiritual

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

Healing' shows promise. What will this do for me? I am informed that it "has melted away AIDS, cancer, broken bones, broken hearts, depression, poverty, fear, hate, desperation, terminal illnesses etc". What is the power that will release this state of utopia? It is the power of Love. Where is this power? Again, it is found within. The author writes, "I realized that God, Love, was not far off somewhere, but right there in my heart. We all have access to Love (which is) the most powerful force in the universe and it is yours for the sharing in unlimited supply".

How can it be that a spiritual force which reportedly can heal broken bones overnight, has remained undiscovered and untapped for centuries? The answer is, that we are now on the verge of a new and historic moment of discovery of the power of love. I really do not have to ask if it works, but just to satisfy my quickly diminishing curiosity I, again, read the testimonies. One person lived with ceaseless torture for fifteen years, and having read this book on spiritual healing, the next night slept like a baby and awoke refreshed, with no traces of former complaints. Another bears witness to having been "lifted from sickness to health, from sorrow to peace, from lack to plenty, and the most beautiful of all, from darkness to light". What will it cost me to have this experience of heaven right here and now? Just \$12.95, with a 100% guarantee. Paradise would be cheap at twice the price!

It is clear that while each product presents itself as offering unique and distinctive guidance and help, there is a remarkable sameness about the kind of spirituality which is being promoted on many websites. There are recurring themes. There is the notion that today is the day of salvation. Or, to put it in more theological terms, there is an eschatological dimen-

sion to these spiritualities. The masters and gurus perceive that this period of history is unique and climactic. Another website, 'joy2meu', which offers a 12-Step formula for Spiritual Integration, asserts that we have entered into what Native American prophecies call the 'Dawning of the Fifth World of Peace'.

Another theme that pervades most, although not all, contemporary spiritualities is that they direct inquirers to look within for their wellbeing. Again, 'joy2meu' asserts that "the Saviour does not exist outside of us. The Saviour exists within". Vivation is a method of spiritual enrichment, which allows spirit energy to enter every cell in the body. Advocates believe that we have parallel senses through which we perceive our inner world; we are internally visual, verbal, and emotional. By connecting with all this inner energy, then we can begin to discover health and happiness. Finally the benefits these programmes offer to their potential customers are uniformly extravagant and utopian. Heaven is available here and now.

Some of these websites are traditionally religious, some are atheistic, but all are spiritual. God appears with many names on the web. He is That Which is Greater, Higher Power, Truly All Powerful and Unconditionally Loving, Universal Force, Creator etc. His names and, indeed, his ontological essence may differ, but he is uniformly loving and supportive of his creation. He is not a God who comes accusing or judging. He is the God who banishes fear, and in its place offers and supplies the love and happiness which is the birthright of each of his creatures. For the medium of the twenty-first century, the internet, there is a god tailored to meet the likes and aspirations of the people of the third millennium.

## A browse around the library

Let us make one more stop on our journey into the wonderful world of contemporary spirituality: the theological library. We are now in the realm of explicitly religious, and especially Christian, spirituality. Typing in 'spirituality' on the library computer, I am immediately greeted by ninety subjects which all, in one way or another, relate to spirituality. I can pursue spirituality and emptiness, or spirituality and emotion, spirituality and leadership, spirituality and liberation, spirituality and morality, spirituality and sexuality, spirituality and prayer, spirituality and remembering, spirituality and time, spirituality and work. I track down the spirituality sections of the library and wonder where to start amongst the almost 4000 titles that have been catalogued under the heading 'spirituality'. Let us sample a few.

Until recently, for most people the word 'spirituality' conjured up images of monkish-like practices of praying, fasting, and taking vows of silence. It was a term once associated largely with Catholic forms of religious devotion. Coming out of the contemporary Catholic tradition is *Soul Wilderness: A Desert Spirituality*. The author, Kerry Walters, tells me that, "To find God, we must go to the desert. Once there we discover that the desert, like God, is a great mystery".<sup>1</sup>

However, the desert is not just that physical wilderness, distant from the hustle and bustle of civilization, it is also a metaphor or an emblem of the inner life. This is the interior desert. In Christian monastic tradition the wilderness was the place where the soul had to journey if it wished to be purged of all its sinful accoutrements and find union with God. Similarly, the author argues that if we long for God to speak to our hearts then we must turn inward, into our individual

inner desert and there remain until we break through into its secret. This kind of spirituality transcends and, ultimately, rejects reason; our inner desert is “a mysterious realm that stubbornly resists the battering ram of reason”.<sup>2</sup>

While presenting itself as a form of spirituality consistent with a long line of Christian mystical tradition, it embraces the pluralism of the age. Walters draws upon insights from Zen Buddhism and his religious world view resonates with Buddhist themes. He writes, “If a person is ever to achieve enlightenment, she must first clear her mind and soul of all intellectual preconceptions about the nature of things”.<sup>3</sup> In essence, desert spirituality is offering the seeker a profound relationship with the divine. Indeed, the final state in the abandonment of self is such a union with God that the soul becomes God. This is the true meaning of atonement, or at-one-ment; the great act “in which the nothingness of God-without unifies with the nothingness of God-within”.<sup>4</sup> Desert spirituality presents itself as an invitation to the discerning reader, aware of his or her own spiritual alienation and isolation, to leave behind the safe, but tepid form of Christianity which has proven so unfulfilling and unsatisfying, and join this mentor on “the greatest human adventure”: the quest for union with God.

If desert spirituality eschews the world and invites the reader to dive inside himself, *Asian Christian Spirituality*<sup>5</sup> is dismissive, almost scornful, of any spirituality which ultimately does not engage the individual with the realities of life. Here is a spirituality coming out of the ecumenical Christian stable. “Spiritual life”, the book maintains, “is human life, the whole of human life inspired and led by the Spirit, the energizing presence and activity of God”.<sup>6</sup>

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

The authors of this compendium of essays live and minister in Asia, in a world of many faiths and spiritualities. The authors discern the presence of the Spirit of God in all these faiths and, therefore, it is necessary to develop a spirituality that is universal and comprehensive. This spirit, which permeates all people, is the spirit of justice, freedom and struggle, and a spirituality that is appropriate for that context is seen to be one which is responsive to these existential realities. In short, then, spirituality is the response of the human soul to the diversity and condition of the world in which it lives. This reality is all-inclusive: sand, stone, earth, grass, trees, worms, birds, and humans in all the diverse cultural contexts. Samuel Rayan writes,

The more open we are, the more spiritual, the more realities to which we are open, the greater the spirituality, the greater the depths and the profounder the meanings of reality to which we are open, the more authentic the spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

If 'spirituality' was once the domain of Roman Catholicism, and a term rarely heard from evangelical pulpits, or in discussions in evangelical home groups, this is no longer the case. Indeed, no one has taken hold of the rediscovery of spirituality with greater enthusiasm than evangelicals. *Satisfy your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality*; *Streams of Living Water*; *The Soul's Quest for God: Satisfying the Hunger for Spiritual Communion with God*; *Subversive Spirituality*; *The Spiritual Quest*; *The Soul Search: A Spiritual Journey to Authentic Intimacy with God*; and *Authentic Spirituality* are just a few titles published in the last ten years by well-known evangelical authors.

Luder G. Whitlock's *The Spiritual Quest*, is typical of many of these books. Two premises appear to underlie the book. Firstly, there is a spiritual hunger and restlessness in the heart of many people, not least of all evangelical Christians, for deeper intimacy with God. Many Christians find the existing piety of their own churches or traditions stultifying, and long for a more experientially satisfying relationship with God through Christ. Whitlock, like others, begins his book with the famous words of St Augustine, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you". For Whitlock, the answer, in part, is to recapture some of the lost 'disciplines of the Spirit', in particular, prayer and fasting. He notes that "these ancient spiritual disciplines, recently rediscovered by Protestants, may be of considerable benefit spiritually [as] they help people develop a focused emphasis on the inner life, on the all-important relationship with God".<sup>8</sup>

The second premise which drives Whitlock's book is that the current infatuation with spirituality by millions of non church-going people may well provide a critical 'window of opportunity' for the gospel. In almost unprecedented numbers, spiritual seekers are searching to connect with God and experience him personally. Whitlock observes that many of these seekers have been turned off by the church but are still open to a relationship with God that is authentic and meaningful. With the unbounded optimism that is such a feature of his American culture, Whitlock believes that this could herald an Awakening as great as the one which gave birth to the evangelical movement in the eighteenth century. Indeed, he believes that if Christians can seize this moment, then it may result in the twenty-first century proving to be the Christian century.

While other evangelical books do not reverberate with the same spirit of triumphalism that permeates *The Spiritual Quest*, nevertheless they all identify a spiritual malaise in the church. Very often, this dryness is something they, as writers, can testify to in their own lives. These books offer both counsel and practical guidelines to help parched souls find the spiritual sustenance and refreshment that they believe the Lord is longing to pour out upon them.

### **The sacred in Australia**

This has been the briefest thumbnail sketch of, what is arguably, the greatest religious phenomenon in the Western world in this generation. While most of the contemporary analyses of the new spirituality are written from a North American perspective, there is evidence that spirituality is now well and truly part of the Australian landscape, as well.

When Sydney celebrated the new millennium with the most spectacular fireworks display in the city's history, it selected as its motto for the millennium the word 'Eternity', which was spectacularly lit up across the city's most famous structure, the Harbour Bridge. This word, in its readily identifiable cursive writing style, was made famous by the enigmatic reformed drunk, Arthur Stace. Stace wrote himself into the folklore of the city when, after his conversion, he spent the next twenty years of his life writing this one-word sermon across the walls and pavements of the city. In a city that is frequently touted as being one of the most secular in the world, which hosts and boasts the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, one of the most popular events on the city's social calendar, it is striking that such a theme was both chosen, and warmly embraced by

its population. While the word carried undeniable Christian resonances, for most people its appeal lay in the fact that it symbolized their awareness that there was something transcendent about the changing of the millennium.

Further, Aboriginal spirituality is now very much a part of the religious landscape of the country. The much-heralded Opening Ceremony of the 2000 Olympic Games included a presentation of features of traditional Aboriginal religious beliefs. Indeed, much of the Games was overtly religious: the sacred symbols of the Olympic movements, the flame and flag, the ancient Greek priestesses paying homage to the flame, the Olympic hymn and other sacred music. Once again, Australians enthusiastically embraced these religious allusions.

On my day of writing this opening chapter, the leading Sydney newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*,<sup>9</sup> makes repeated references to the religious and spiritual life of Australia. The front page carries a less-than-sympathetic report of a public address by the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, in which he called on Christians to take every opportunity to share their faith. The same front page introduces a five-part series on teenagers by profiling a 17-year old girl called Katrina who, we're told, is a practising member of the Greek Orthodox Church. Indeed, two-thirds of teenagers surveyed claim that they believe in a supreme being. Later in the newspaper, we will read of the work of two young Australians who are trying to teach motivational skills to teenagers. These young entrepreneurs are practitioners in neurolinguistic programming, timeline therapy, and hypnotherapy. The *Herald* also reports the visit to Australia of our most famous expatriate and feminist, Germaine Greer. A well-and-truly lapsed Catholic, Greer

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

nevertheless argues for Aboriginal reconciliation because “we have to understand what sacredness is”. She goes on to affirm that the land is “very holy”, and that the nation ought to sign a treaty with Aboriginal peoples in order to “recover from our spiritual blight”. The tone of the report conveys the paper’s warm approval of the spirituality of Germaine Greer. In a nation where it is continually reported that formal religious affiliation continues to decline, there is an unembarrassed acknowledgement that we are people with spirits, and a nation with a soul.

As Christians, how are we to interpret this phenomenon, both on the wider front in society at large, and as it manifests and expresses itself in the church? Are we on the verge of a great spiritual awakening? While we may scoff at some of the more ludicrous and crassly marketed features of the new spirituality, does the movement testify to a deepening spiritual hunger in the hearts of men and women? If so, who is creating this hunger? Is it simply the natural and understandable response by a generation of baby boomers who, having swallowed the lie that “greed is good”, and indulged themselves in unrestrained pursuits of material wealth and sensual pleasure, have now discovered that the consumer society which promised so much has, in the end, left them hollow and unfulfilled? Or are we seeing the promptings and urgings of the Spirit of God in these people? How truly spiritual is the new spirituality?

And what of evangelical spirituality? Have traditional churches presented people with an emasculated gospel, doctrinally pure, but stripped of all its relational and experiential dynamism? Or is this entire movement just another social phenomenon which the church blindly and unthinkingly has

got caught up in? Rather than being spiritual leaders and prophetic spokespersons, are we once again part of a herd of spiritual thrill-seekers, bleating like the rest of society about the need to connect with the divine, and to experience his/her/its presence in our lives? These are some of the questions this little book will seek to address and answer.

Treatments of a topic like this usually attempt to be either sociological analyses, or biblical critiques, as if one cannot do both. In his examination of this phenomenon, evangelical psychologist Gary Collins asks how this new interest in non-traditional spirituality has become so popular. He argues, “The answer is not found in theology. Instead, the roots of the new spirituality are grounded in psychology and history”.<sup>10</sup> Such a dichotomy is unwarranted. This new spirituality is profoundly theological, and scripture, even more so than history and psychology, informs us as to the ultimate origins and purposes of this movement. Any analysis of human society that is not refracted through the lens of scripture is both myopic and distorted. The word of God is God’s timeless perspective on the human condition, and while it was written in, and to, particular historical contexts, its statements about the nature of men and women, and God’s workings in his world, are universal and timeless.

Of course, we must also recognize that Christians live and minister in particular times and places and are subject to the same trends, movements, and events that order and mould the character of the society around them. To analyze evangelical spirituality, for example, in isolation from what is happening on the wider front with spirituality generally, would be as short-sighted as leaving the Bible out of the analysis. For all their insularity, Christians do not live in a

## STIRRINGS OF THE SOUL

bubble, and are as subject to the wider social trends as anyone else—although, hopefully, we are more discerning and critical.

In short, then, come with me on to a mountaintop from where we can see the entire landscape open before us. Hopefully, such a survey will help you to understand the spiritual character of the society in which God has placed you, and better equip you to speak the liberating gospel of the Lord Jesus to this society. But, also, from this vantage point, you may even better understand yourself, and your own spiritual yearnings and questions and, in the end, return with renewed confidence to the source of fresh water which is deeply and endlessly satisfying.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Kerry S Walters, *Soul Wilderness: A Desert Spirituality*, Paulist Press, New York, 2001, p. 1.
- 2 Walters, *Soul Wilderness*, p. 3.
- 3 Walters, *Soul Wilderness*, p. 4.
- 4 Walters, *Soul Wilderness*, p. 104.
- 5 Virginia Fabella *et al* (eds), *Asian Christian Spirituality: Reclaiming Traditions*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1992.
- 6 Samuel Rayan, 'An Asian spirituality of liberation', in *Asian Christian Spirituality*, p. 20.
- 7 Rayan, 'An Asian Spirituality of Liberation', p. 22.
- 8 Luder G Whitlock Jr., *The Spiritual Quest: Pursuing Christian Maturity*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2000, p. 23.
- 9 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday 20th August, 2001.
- 10 Gary R Collins, *The Soul Search: A Spiritual Journey to Authentic Intimacy with God*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1988.