

SPIRITUALITY IN THE MARKET-PLACE

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THE MANCHESTER CENTRE FOR URBAN SPIRITUALITY,¹ which I co-direct, was established in 2005 by an ecumenical group of practitioners to explore how the spiritual is found outside the Churches in local communities. In October 2006 we took a stall at the Mind-Body-Spirit festival when it came to Manchester. The festival started in London in 1977,² but this was our first visit and the first time that I had entered the ‘spiritual market-place’, with its ‘pick and mix’ culture that is so often derided in mainstream Christian apologetic or missiological literature.³

This idea of an oriental bazaar, a ‘spiritual circus’⁴ or even a flea market⁵ was confirmed by the first impressions on entering the hall of the festival. The first obvious focus of the festival was the many ‘items from the East’—representing a highly simplified DIY approach to ‘Buddhism’ through a selection of statuary, ‘singing bowls’, audio tapes and assorted esoteric material. There were also rows of stalls selling crystals, tarot cards, dowsing rods (*‘Do you have the gift? Have a go here.’*)

¹ See www.manchesterspirituality.org.

² For a history of the festival and its development see Malcolm Hamilton, ‘An Analysis of the Festival for Mind-Body-Spirit, London’, in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, edited by Stephen Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), 188–200.

³ Philip Seddon, *The New Age—An Assessment* (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1990); Carl A. Raschke ‘New Age Spirituality’, in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, edited by Peter H. Van Ness (London: SPCK, 1996), 203–221; Diarmuid O Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1997), 21–28; Gordon Lynch, *After Religion, ‘Generation X’ and the Search for Meaning* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002); *Mission-shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), 9–10; *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), 101–107; *Making Sense of Generation Y*, edited by Sara Savage and others (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 143–146, 152–153; Rob Frost, *A Closer Look at New Age Spirituality* (London: Kingsway, 2002).

⁴ See David Lyon, ‘A Bit of a Circus: Notes on Postmodernity and New Age’, *Religion*, 23/2 (1993), 117–126.

⁵ One thinks of the way that Hildegard van Hove uses the term *bricolage* in ‘L’émergence d’un “marché spirituel”’, *Social Compass*, 46/2 (1999), 161–172.



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Figures of the Buddha on sale at the Mind-Body-Spirit festival in London

and a wide range of 'collectables' connected with 'Middle Earth' and the magical world of fairies (one stall was called 'Away with the Fairies'), which clearly represented a second theme at the festival. A third domain was that of organic health foods, presented both as tempting treats ('Because you're worth it!') and wholesome and aspirational choices ('You can *actually watch* as they put the fruit in!').

The prominent and immediately obvious unifying element to this strange festival phenomenon was that things did not come cheap. There was a great deal of competition between stall-holders; but there was also a sense that a personal spiritual lifestyle was not something to be offered at a discount. An ambiguous sign at one stall, offering 'credit card cleansing', summed this up rather nicely.

About seventy per cent of those attending were women aged fifty years and over, mostly in pairs or small groups. Apart from the stall-holders (split roughly fifty-fifty between men and women, though the healers were mostly women) there were relatively few unaccompanied

men, and even fewer men under about 35.⁶ What young people there were appeared to be accompanying older people and they looked remarkably uninterested in the whole event.⁷ About half of the visitors seemed to be making purchases; and there were large groups staring at those receiving the individual attention of clairvoyants and tarot card readers, and at the two stalls taking photographs of people's auras. There was a feeling of curiosity and expectation.

It was very noticeable that, having paid to come in, many people circulated either avoiding eye-contact with stall-holders or only venturing a glance after they had examined what was on offer. When people did make eye-contact there was a good chance that they would be receptive to information, and those who read handouts, even cursorily, were very likely to agree to complete one of our questionnaires—though one woman dramatically declined to touch the paper in case it contained 'some malign property'.

The Panacea of Personal Healing

The most striking aspect of the entire festival was the emphasis on personal healing. This reflected an observed change in the nature and content of the festival over the years, away from outward-looking issues such as environmentalism towards an unabashed concern for the self and inner growth.⁸ There were at least half-a-dozen groups, and several individuals, offering physical and emotional healing—including 'distance healing—for anyone anywhere'. All the healers charged or requested a 'minimum donation', except in the case of 'free demonstrations' on stage, which were accompanied by invitations to paid follow-up sessions later. There was always a designated healer or healers (identified by team sweatshirts or, in one case, by white coats), but at least one group also asserted that 'all people are healers'. It was suggested more than once that people could in fact heal themselves, if they were so minded.

⁶ This rough analysis fits well with the findings of the 'Kendal Project', published in Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead and others, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (London: Blackwell, 2004).

⁷ This would appear to agree with the claim that 15- to 25-year-olds—'Generation Y'—have markedly different spiritual aspirations from the older generations. See *Making Sense of Generation Y*, edited by Savage and others, 136 and *passim*.

⁸ Hamilton, 'An Analysis of the Festival for Mind-Body-Spirit', 190–191.

For the demonstrations of healing, individuals were invited on to the stage—those who appeared uncertain were encouraged from the sidelines—to sit alongside a healer who then performed a ‘healing rite’ described by the ‘senior healer’ as a process of ‘directing pure healing light, energy, love and positive feelings’ over the body. It was emphasized that a person ‘didn’t need to be sick to receive healing’ and that people could receive healing on behalf of others.⁹

One ‘faith healer and psychic’ announced that he would conduct an experiment and asked for audience participation. People were asked to stretch out their hands towards those on the stage and project ‘love and positive thoughts’. After a moment or two of silence and thoughtful nodding, the healer asked the audience whether anyone had seen a purple light surrounding the stage. The majority responded affirmatively. When one woman said that she has seen white light, the healer paused, then nodded sagely: ‘Yes. White light is very good.’ He then asked whether anyone had felt a tingling feeling in the hands. Again most people concurred with his suggestion, which led him into something like a short homily about the ‘good news’ of healing: ‘this is surely *good news* for today’s world’, he reiterated several times. After this he conducted what he called a ‘time of prayer’, during which the audience was asked ‘silently to send out loving thoughts to the animals who give us unconditional love, then to the children of the world and finally to the people of Iraq’. His healing practice, it seemed, was one that we could all perform nightly as we watched the television news. Finally he shifted smoothly into an advertisement for his latest book, transforming himself effortlessly from healer into entrepreneur.

The faith healer’s prayer was the only instance I encountered at the festival of a religious observance recognisable to mainstream Christian faith. It was also the only attempt to connect with a wider world of social justice beyond the concern for personal well-being that was the sole focus of the healing effort.¹⁰

⁹ This is the standard Reiki methodology, described in J. Gordon Melton, ‘Reiki: The International Spread of a New Age Healing Movement’, in *New Age Religion and Globalization*, edited by Mikael Rothstein (Aarhus: Aarhus Press, 2001), 73–93.

¹⁰ This would appear to challenge Rebecca Nye’s idea of ‘relational consciousness’ as the perceived growth of attentiveness to the needs and well-being of others resulting from people having personal religious and spiritual experiences that may lead to the ‘radical divestiture of possessiveness [and] self-centredness’ (David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* [London: Harper Collins, 1998], 153).

Sizeable and enthusiastic audiences gathered for the free healing demonstrations, and it was clear that personal healing was a major concern for many of those present. The ease with which they appeared to relax unselfconsciously into the process and remain undistracted by the circling crowds suggested familiarity with the techniques and procedures. They seemed very different from most church congregations during the awkward periods of silence and intercession in public worship.

Two quite different approaches to personal healing could be seen among the practitioners at the festival. Some claimed that, once people had received some basic guidance (from the practitioner's book, 'an investment at only £40'), healing was something that most, if not all, could practise for themselves and on behalf of others. There was little need for an actual 'healer' to administer it; healing could be part of everyday life, something that 'anyone might try at home', and not the preserve of a specialist. The second and contrary approach suggested that, while personal healing was everyone's concern, it should be addressed through regular paid sessions with an 'experienced' (the white coats of one group just hinted at the word *professional*) healer.

This latter approach serves to challenge the perception that New Age beliefs are likely to involve suspicion of leaders, professionals and experts of all kinds.¹¹ And both approaches illustrate a change in New Age priorities: healing has moved away from the fringes, becoming a



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¹¹ See Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 227 and *passim*.

‘radical alternative’ and then a popular complementary therapy.¹² Both approaches also demonstrate the unspoken assumption that *people are in need of healing*, although—with the exception of the session already described—no one at the festival made any explicit connection with the wider world, despite the sense of malaise that is often reported in contemporary Western society.

The parallels with the healing ministry of Jesus are interesting in this respect. While the need and desire to offer healing to individuals was a mark of Jesus’ ministry, his many healings also took place in a context where the whole people of Israel was in need of healing. Living under enemy occupation, the body of the nation itself had been attacked and possessed by an alien force. Not for nothing was the ‘unclean spirit’ controlling Mark’s Gerasene demoniac (5:1–14) called Legion, sharing its name with the Roman military units that controlled the land. There was no sense at the festival, however, that there might be a similar link today between the need for individual healing and the wider political and social context. One possible explanation for this—and for the assumption of a universal need for healing—might be a popular perception that ‘healing’ has more to do with spiritual growth than with the cure of specific disorders.¹³

Meeting the Punters

Our own stall attracted visitors from the whole range of those attending the festival, and we distributed around 1,500 finger-sized fliers. We had some fascinating conversations with the 400 or so individuals who completed our research questionnaire. Only a very small minority were openly wary or antagonistic towards the Church or Christianity, though it often became clear that people felt hurt or rejected by the Church. More were simply bored or alienated, lacking any feeling of connection to the Church and its public worship.

A woman in early middle age, who described herself as a ‘spiritual seeker’, approached the stall with her son, who was in his late teens or early twenties. She explained that she had brought her son along in

¹² Harold Wicks, ‘Introduction: Health and Healing’, in *The New Times Network: Groups and Centres for Personal Growth*, edited by Robert Adams (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1982), 4.

¹³ Steven J. Sutcliffe, ‘Practising New Age Soteriologies in the Rational Order’, in *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*, edited by Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 159–174, here 166.

order to ‘fix him up with something’ that would give him a set of values and access to ‘what was important in life’. She continued:

Now, I didn’t bring my son up religious. I wanted him to make up his own mind. That’s why we’re here. I’ve brought him along so he can choose a spiritual path for himself.

The son looked decidedly uncomfortable and made a nervous noise. I asked him, ‘So, have you seen anything?’

Son: I’m not sure ... [Pause]

Mother: Well, we’ve only just got here. There are other stalls to visit [looking at the next stall after seeing ours had nothing more than a few leaflets]; what’s this one offering? [She pulled her son towards the next stall.] Let’s see if this’ll do

I encountered this sense that spirituality was a commodity to be purchased, a lifestyle to be chosen or enhanced, many times at the festival, and it has already been well documented elsewhere.¹⁴ It was also evident from many comments and observations (‘try this—what have you got to lose?’) that, when a new lifestyle had been selected, it could just as easily be laid aside if it failed to suit or work out. Ideas of choice, variety, personal preference, trial and error and disposability dominated this spiritual market-place. Once the packaging had been removed and the contents tested, moreover, the short-term nature of the effect was already clearly anticipated (‘to achieve a lasting effect and to change your life, you’ll probably want to come back to us for more treatments’). Here there were no lifetime guarantees of anything.

What was on offer was always aimed at making life easier, more successful, more satisfying and, therefore, somehow more meaningful. There was no hint that life might inevitably continue to bring difficulties, sacrifices or the experience of hardship and tragedy. The commodities on offer were not designed for times of adversity, frustration and discomfort; on the contrary, they presented themselves as the very solution to misfortune. One stall even offered a sort of ‘credit card’ that could be charged with a number of different cosmic

¹⁴ See for instance Michael York, ‘New Age Commodification and Appropriation of Spirituality’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 16/3 (2001), 361–372; Rob Frost, ‘Evangelism Beyond the Fringes’, in *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age*, 107.

energies, forces and blessings, depending on how much the consumer was prepared to pay.

Is Time Running Out for the Church?

Many of the people who visited our stall had been brought up to attend a place of worship and, of those who completed our questionnaire, most said that nothing would tempt them back there. More disturbing was the fact that those who still attended a place of worship often felt impatience with what was on offer and a growing need for 'something more'. There were two memorable examples of this amongst many.

The first was a middle-aged man who visited the stall twice, enquiring about the work of the Centre:

Man: Actually I'm a church organist. My dad was a vicar in the Church of England.

TB: What do you make of all this [the festival]?

Man: Well, it's fascinating, and I'm searching for something a bit different.

TB: Different?

Man: Yes. I just find the same old service at church is just getting a bit tedious.

TB: How do you mean?

Man: Holy Communion every time, week in, week out. It's just getting to me. I need something different. What do you do [at the Centre] ... ?

The second was an elderly woman, over seventy, who also wanted to know what we were about:

Woman: Oh, I'm a Christian too. Methodist [Pause while looking at the stall.] Don't you think there are a lot of sad people walking round here? [Pause.] People with empty lives, searching for something?

TB: Searching?

Woman: Yes. You see they've got no faith. That's what's missing. Faith. [Pause.]

TB: Are you enjoying being here?

Woman: Yes. But [looking at a ticket in her hand] I need to go now. I'm booked in for a talk.

TB: A talk?

Woman: Yes. Working with angels, or something

Many people at the festival felt that the Church had—at worst—failed them, or was not engaging with their needs. This was expressed in the dissonance between their experience of Christian faith and practice and their perception of what alternative practices might offer. While there may, of course, be reasons for this feeling within the Churches, locally and institutionally, the prevalence of the healing theme at the festival provides an important hint. Although a number of Churches and Christian groups use forms of healing service, they would seem to be missing the source of a deep, but often unarticulated, common feeling of dis-ease and dissatisfaction, and are hence failing to offer resolution.

The people with whom we spoke felt that the Churches—in their long-term preoccupation with authority and institutional self-preservation—had failed to address issues concerning the individual person: the *integration of belief and practice* and the meaning of the Christian life in the modern world; *personal empowerment* and the experience of a *fulfilling spiritual life*; the exploration of the *manifestation of mystery* in the universe; and the need for a sense of *organic connection* and of responsibility to the rest of humanity and to creation.

These five headline concerns suggest the basis for a pastoral practice that is better able to serve the needs of contemporary Christians and to appeal to those who have ceased to find institutional religion meaningful. The practice of faith, whether inside or outside religious institutions, often appears too cerebral and detached from embodied existence in the world. It is perceived to be dominated by intellectual adherence to a moral code and to series of (often unexamined) doctrines. Incarnation sometimes seems to be functionally denied, as though the Word never really became flesh at all, merely remaining an idea about which believers could intellectualise, or not.

For many of those attending the festival a *lifestyle*, rather than a set of beliefs, was paramount—sometimes in its negative sense as something superficial and disposable, but also in the deeper sense of a whole way of life. To connect with them it would be necessary to start

from and to value embodied need and experience, rather than intellectually formulated belief¹⁵ based largely on revelation alone, as the guide and measure of theological reflection. This would open the way to a faith *integrating belief and practice* in terms of an informed, self-reflective and cohesive way of living.

The practice of such a faith would *nurture personal empowerment*, something which has not historically been a major concern of the Churches, though it is clearly part of the inspiration of Jesus' ministry: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). Those who have given up, or who are giving up, on the Churches often do so because their experience has not been about nurture or flourishing, but rather about maintenance. Attendance at a Christian place of worship should enable them to live life more fully, and to experience the 'shalom' and wholeness of which Jesus spoke.

This might then lead them to the discovery of the *fulfilling spiritual life* that they desire. Ironically much in the culture of the contemporary Churches is predisposed to frustrate that desire. The Churches are, demographically, a haven for those who instinctively resist and even fear change.¹⁶ But engagement with the dynamics of change (after the

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example of much of the biblical witness about journeying, trust and eschatology) is vital to a spiritual life that is open to growth and development. It should be part of the charism and the remit of all church leaders and mature believers, as well as being the explicit goal of a life of faith. And yet so few people of faith, and especially clergy, are willing or equipped to offer spiritual care to those who need it; to see the spiritual life as much beyond the dogged practice of a few well-worn daily rituals; to see the connections between spiritual renewal and community regeneration; to see change as the positive resort of faith-in-action; and to empower other people to explore for themselves and to trust the guidance of the Spirit of God in each individual soul. Few are able to prioritise this work in their

¹⁵ The word 'belief' has Germanic roots in common with the word 'beloved', connoting a more physical embracing of, and engagement with, reality.

¹⁶ In the Myers Briggs Temperament Indicator system it tends to be STJ (Sensing, Thinking, Judging) personalities who are the most resistant to change. Called *guardians*, they like the traditional way in which things are done and protect and preserve agreed practices. They make up approximately 50% of the UK population who have taken the test, and a significantly greater proportion of the church-going population. See *Introduction to Type and Change*, edited by Nancy J. Barger and Linda K. Kirby (London: CAPT, 2004).

communities over the routines imposed by institutions seeking primarily to maintain themselves. All too often those who are called to be explorers and guides to the *mystery that manifests itself* in myriad ways in our universe are turned into managers and administrators. So few are able to help others realise themselves to be *organically connected* to the rest of humanity, and jointly responsible with them for creation; so few can be open to discovering the Spirit of God in strange and confusing places, in unexpected and surprising forms, and in speech and language that require us to learn new ways of communicating.

Can the Church Set Out Its Own Stall in the Market-place?

One young woman, asked about her response to the vast array of goods, ideas and practices at the festival, epitomized what many other visitors were saying to us:

What's sad is that the Church doesn't take any of this seriously. So it's good that you're here.

Another, slightly older, woman was amazed that we—whom she perceived as 'representing the Church'—were interested in what she thought and in what she was searching for on her own spiritual journey:

TB: Would you like to fill in our questionnaire? We'd like to know what you think

Woman: You want to know what I think? Ooh, yes please

Both the festival organisers¹⁷ and most visitors welcomed our interest and participation, which leads me to believe that there is an important opportunity for dialogue between the established, institutionalised religions and those who are outside them, or on the edge and struggling to remain inside.¹⁸ This must necessarily be two-way communication: there are many things that the Churches should learn from it; but Christianity can also offer a positive critique of the often confusing and contradictory messages and practices available in this

¹⁷ Hamilton, 'An Analysis of the Festival for Mind-Body-Spirit', 194 records the festival Director talking of the 'considerable kudos [amongst New Age groups] in being chosen' to have a stall.

¹⁸ For similar reactions see the analysis of Coventry Diocese's 'Beyond the Fringe' research project in Nick Spencer, *Beyond the Fringe—Researching a Spiritual Age* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005).

busy market-place. One necessarily thinks of the witness of Paul during his visit to cosmopolitan Athens and the Areopagus (Acts 17:16–32).

Paul began by observing the varied religious practices of the city dwellers, and proceeded to share his own insights, which many struggled to understand. He was invited to a meeting of the Council of Elders, where he was able to compliment the Athenians on their religious spirit and on their openness to all that was new, novel and—in the case of his Christian gospel—strange. In having an altar ‘to an unknown God’, they recognised that there was always the possibility of some further religious or spiritual experience. This ‘unknown other’ was the starting place for Paul’s rhetoric and his message. While many found his words too much to take, others granted him a second hearing, and several came round to his point of view. Dialogue took place, the outcome was varied and uncertain, but, in the course of time, Christianity itself was shaped enormously by its contact with Greek thought and culture.

Throughout the festival I endeavoured to be respectful towards all I found, and what I found was curiously moving. A colleague observed: ‘there are no stupid people here’. Despite the numbers queuing to pay for goods or for the services of healers and other practitioners, few of those we spoke to seemed any more, or less, ‘gullible’ than the average church-goer. Without a doubt this was a place of great belief; here were believers visiting the temple of their hopes and fears, seeking healing, peace and wholeness. Here were people who, for the most part, were untouched by the mainstream Churches, or else damaged and rejected by them. A great deal of creativity was expressed in a way that allowed physical embodiment, psychological integration, artistic endeavour, and some concern for humanity’s place in the natural world to be integrated into belief and spiritual practice—in a way that put much mainstream religious practice to shame.

There was also a downside to my experience of the festival. I was acutely aware of the opportunities for the unscrupulous to take advantage of the desperate. I did occasionally want to shout ‘Stop! Could you all just listen for a moment ...?’ I did baulk at those groups who called themselves ‘the College of ...’ and who appeared to offer courses accredited by unrecognisable bodies in order to claim an uncertain authority. I was amazed at how easy it seemed to set oneself up as a spiritual guru and ‘earn good money online’ from those who were desperate for attention and support. And I was disturbed by the



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apparent universal lack of interest in the crucial social justice issues facing humanity across the globe.

And, yes—spirituality here was about *lifestyle*, consciously so. But perhaps mainstream Christianity could learn by becoming more clearly aware of itself as the daily exercise of certain life-giving disciplines and the transformative practice of particular embodied beliefs. It could also benefit from greater openness to what has not yet been revealed, either to humanity at large or to the faith groups in particular.

I left the festival aware that the task, for Christians at least, was to discover how to let Jesus Christ live imaginatively for us as the focus of our practical, embodied daily living. Christians need to see how his openness to what was new and unexpected led him to unanticipated new places and life-changing encounters, and to the discovery that—even for him—there was always mystery, always ‘something more’. For the Spirit of God, wherever it is found, demands the most creative possible response in order to make humanity more fully in the complex and wonderful image of God.

On my way out I passed an elderly man walking on coiled metal springs and eating a sandwich with a label saying ‘Fulfilled’. His eccentric ‘walk of witness’ told me something, not only about the

endlessly surprising spiritual aspirations of people, but also about the ready opportunities that the Churches still have to share in the rich creativity of our spiritual resources and to help us surprise ourselves by the rediscovery of our own fulfilment and purpose.

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