EUROPEAN SPIRITUALITY

Not 'Either–Or' but 'Both–And'

George Pattery

SPIRITUALITY IS, IN A SENSE, very popular today. An internet search will reveal numerous websites devoted to it. Spirituality seems to be thriving across Europe, despite the fact that religious practice, including that of Roman Catholicism, is fast dwindling, at least in Britain.[1] Can we not hold that this enthusiasm for spirituality augurs well for religions? Religion is refined by the growth of spirituality, even if that growth happens outside the purview of any particular religion.

Several such refinements have happened in the past. The emphasis on reason as the principal tool of knowledge during the European Renaissance helped religion to find its proper locus and cleansed it of many superstitions; the separation of religion and state purified religion; the emergence of philosophy of religion helped it to shun unverified claims; and the study of comparative theology interrogated the superiority complex of some religions. Today a new spirituality is coming into being—sustained by the omnipresence of the internet, which enables many well-meaning people to nurture their inner space and to connect with other seekers while avoiding the label 'religious'—and inviting religions to shed some of their baggage. This does not mean that all is well with 'spirituality'; but certainly it is on the move.

What follows is not a researched argument, but a series of reflections on spirituality in Europe in the light of my own frequent visits to Europe, my interactions with people in spirituality workshops, and my acquaintance with some European literature. These can be considered at best as 'conjectures of a bystander'.

The Spirituality of 'Brexit-In'

On 26 June 2016, even *The Hindu* newspaper, published in Chennai, India, carried the headline 'Brexit Fallout: Call for a Second Referendum'.[2] Over

[1] See Diana Klein, 'Once a Catholic, Sometimes a Catholic', *The Tablet* (4 June 2016), 4 following.
[2] Available at http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-in-school/brexit-fallout-call-for-second-referendum/article8773920.ece, accessed 22 August 2016.

The Way, 55/4 (October 2016), 87–95

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one million people in the UK had signed a petition calling for a second vote on membership of the European Union.[3] Markets tumbled; fear and anxiety gripped EU workers in Britain; the Leave campaign talked about the beginning of the end of globalisation. The day before, 25 June 2016, Wales and Northern Ireland played each other at European Cup football. Scotland was arguing to remain independently in the EU. The rest of the EU was holding together and attempting damage control. The powerful, forward-looking and imaginative concept of the EU seemed reduced to confusion; this sixty-year-old experiment had been brought into question.

These news items do not present a conducive starting point for reflections on European spirituality. Apart from its political and economic ramifications, the closeness of the referendum vote speaks of a spiritual dilemma: to be rooted in, or to branch out? Unfortunately, the referendum and its politics give only an 'either–or' option; but spirituality can potentially offer a 'both–and' perspective: to be rooted in *and* to branch out—not so much 'Brexit' as 'Brexit-In'.

Spirituality looks at reality from a particular perspective: a perspective that invites us to be rooted in the here and now. The given geography, culture, history and people—all these matter. They provide the substratum of living. You have to be rooted in; you have to belong to somewhere or someone; you need to be at home. In each of us there is this thirst and desire to belong; to come home. The agony of 'Brexit' shows that Britain wants to belong. This perspective implies a longing for 'home'. But it also calls for a launching outwards, for branching out to surpass the here and now. Spirituality embodies a desire to go beyond, to look for 'more', not to be limited to what is given. Wherever we are, there is this desire to be somewhere else. Our proclivity towards the other takes us beyond ourselves. The other beckons us beyond ourselves. The agony of 'Brexit' also reveals that Britain wants to reach out, to connect, to network. Looking from this perspective includes a longing for the other.

'Brexit' in this way speaks less about politics and more about the need for spirituality: to connect the longing for home with the longing for the other. One cannot build a home without the other; one cannot reach out to the other without 'home-ness'. The vote reveals a longing for a perspective that is rooted in and branching out at the same time, like a tree. It is branching out because it is rooted; it is rooted because it is branching out. 'Brexit-In' defines the symptoms and challenges of an emerging spirituality.

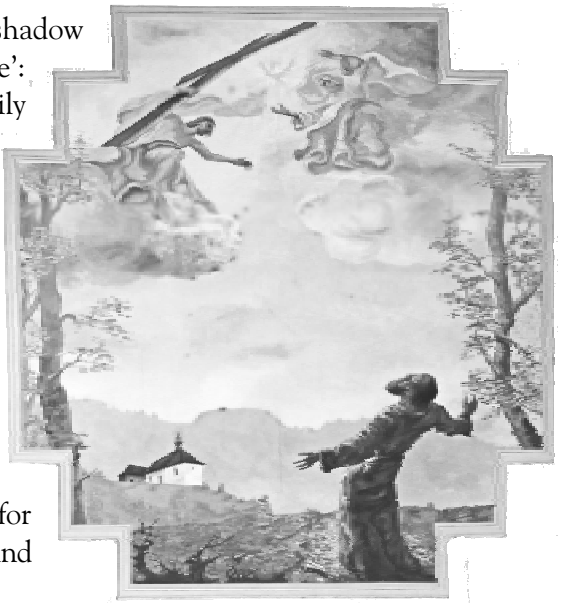
[3] At 22 September 2016 the figure was over four million. See https://petition.parliament.uk/ petitions/131215.

The Spirituality of Family–Hermitage

In our connected, globalised world, *family* and *hermitage* form an irreconcilable polarity. One excludes the other. Family is viewed as engaging with the world, in interpersonal intimacy and with the concerns of daily living; whereas hermitage refers to a way of living away from the world, in deep solitude and contemplation. So I was happily surprised to discover a non-dichotomous approach in the life of St Niklaus von Flüe (1417–1487), known as Br Klaus, who lived at Sachseln in Switzerland. His legacy still attracts seekers to the serene mountainous Sachseln locale. A friend led me to his cottage, which combined family and hermitage. True, his house was separate and apart from his hermitage, but not in his perspective on life.

Niklaus accepted responsibility in business and public affairs, in family and social matters, always supported by his wife Dorothea. Nurturing a family of ten children, Niklaus laboured intensely and wholeheartedly. Later in life, with the consent of his family, he left home, intending to go abroad and become a hermit. But he was led back by the Lord to the place where he had lived as farmer, father and politician. He made his hermitage in his own neighbourhood. In and through his life and struggles, within and beyond his family, Niklaus discovered a Trinitarian mysticism which he depicted symbolically, believing that everything proceeded from the Trinity and everything led to the Trinity.

Niklaus can be seen to foreshadow a spirituality of 'family–hermitage': an intensely and fully lived family life, and an equally profound and fulfilling eremitic life. The Christian tradition has tended to define spirituality in 'either–or' terms: you are either a family person or a 'religious'. Niklaus represents a way that is family–hermitage. You are a family person, but that need not be all; neither does being a hermit exclude the family. A family spirituality cares for and nurtures humanity in intensity and bodiliness, in mutual care and concern. But in our ecological search for connection, are we not



Niklaus von Flüe, fresco, Church of the Three Kings, Hittisau, nineteenth century

also looking for a hermitage from which to contemplate the grandeur of the whole? *Laudato sí* speaks of 'our common home', which embraces the earth and the whole of creation. Family is our 'immediate home', where we belong, and also where we are gradually led to belong to the larger home of the world. When the family lives in an eco-sensitive way, it is led naturally to the common home; it is introduced to the contemplation of the whole through the way it lives its part of the whole. Family helps us to belong, and the hermitage invites us to branch out.

Temporally these two follow one after the other in the life of Niklaus; but in our times we need to search for a way of integrating family and hermitage without privileging one over the other. Spirituality today seeks an integral approach in which family intimacy is combined with a search for the more, for a space to be alone. In our changing world we need not visualise family as all in all, nor should we imagine the hermitage as being 'without' any one. New forms of spirituality are emerging within the family setting that seek for more, that integrate family and hermitage in creative, joyful ways.

Spirituality as Journey to the Origins

Hermann Hesse's novel *Journey to the East* is a metaphorical narrative of a journey in a direction that represents spiritual quest. Origins are found in the East: the rising of the sun and the home of Light. For me, *Journey to the East* represents the European soul, in perennial quest for 'more' and in a journey towards the origins. Hesse's other works, such as *The Glass Bead Game* and *Steppenwolf*, describe the disquiet of the soul with the world as it is and its preoccupations, but in *Journey to the East* the journey itself is seen as the final goal of reaching.

Today science is a partner in our journey to the origins. We are told that the universe has been in existence for the past 13.7 billion years (we are a uni-verse, in spite of multiplicity). With the appearance of humans, 6 million years ago, the evolutionary process came into consciousness of itself and of its own story. Our story is thus part of this Great Story that originated at one point and has been unfolding itself in creative ways over millions of years. The unfolding of the universe happens in a *holon* movement—part and whole moving together where everything is a part and whole at the same time.[4] A part cannot progress by itself

[4] The concept of the holon was developed by Arthur Koestler. See *The Ghost in the Machine* (London: Hutchinson, 1967), 65: 'A "part", as we generally use the word, means something fragmentary and incomplete, which by itself would have no legitimate existence. On the other hand, a "whole" is considered as something complete in itself which needs no further explanation. *But "wholes" and "parts" in this absolute*

without the whole; neither can the whole progress without the parts. We journey together as one universe.

The creation of the EU acquires significance to the extent that it is viewed as a journey to the East—to the origins—with many nation states moving together and remaining at the same time as 'parts' and 'wholes'. This story makes sense when viewed in the context of the Great Story of evolution; apart from that Great Story, it loses its texture. The EU, including the phenomenon of 'Brexit-In', reminds us that, apart from the origins, our individual stories do not make sense. They look like unintelligible pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. But viewed in the context of the Great Story, individual narratives assume their significance.

The Great Story also reveals that everything and everyone are interdependent and interrelated. Beginning with the postulated Big Bang, everything emerged from a single point in time and space, when time and space were collapsed into One. This is not a momentary phenomenon; everything remains in continuous interdependence. From the smallest atom to vast galaxies, everything is held together by the same law of attraction-repulsion, in an ever-widening interrelatedness. We all move in the same direction in spite of our varied individual journeys. It is a sacred story of everything. As Teilhard de Chardin said: 'nothing … is profane for those who know how to see'.[5] This is the kind of spirituality that is emerging in Europe in spite of the many shadows.

Spirituality of the Margins: An Open Border Spirituality

On receiving the International Charlemagne Prize at a ceremony in the Vatican, Pope Francis said: 'Ours is not so much a celebration as a moment to express our shared hope for a new and courageous step forward for this beloved continent'.[6] He reflected on his comparison, in a 2014 address to the European Parliament, between Europe and an ageing, weary grandmother.[7] He challenged the people of Europe, asking,

sense just do not exist anywhere …. What we find are intermediary structures … which display… some of the characteristics commonly attributed to wholes and some of the characteristics commonly attributed to parts.'

[5] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life*, translated by Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 35.

[6] Pope Francis, address at the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize, 6 May 2016, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160506_premio-carlo-magno.html. 'The International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen is the oldest and best-known prize awarded for work done in the service of European unification.' See http://www.karlspreis.de/en/.

[7] See Pope Francis, address to the European Parliament, 25 November 2014, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141125_strasburgo-parlamento-europeo.html.

> What has happened to you, the Europe of humanism, the champion of human rights, democracy and freedom? What has happened to you, Europe, the home of poets, philosophers, artists, musicians, and men and women of letters? What has happened to you, Europe, the mother of peoples and nations, the mother of great men and women who upheld, and even sacrificed their lives for, the dignity of their brothers and sisters?[8]

By asking these questions, Pope Francis was laying the foundation for a new, humanistic spirituality that fosters the integration of cultures. His concluding words are very inviting: Europe is a place still capable of being a mother to life because she respects and offers hope for life: a place attentive to the infirm and elderly; a place where people 'breathe the pure air of honesty'.

This is the same humanistic spirituality that led Francis to Lesbos, alongside the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians and the head of the Church of Greece, to highlight the plight of refugees; he took twelve Syrian refugees with him to Rome, even as the European Union was debating a controversial plan to deport them to Turkey. During the same visit, Francis signed a joint declaration with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Archbishop of Athens, Ieronymos II, calling on the international community to make the protection of human lives a priority and to extend temporary asylum to those in need. 'The world will be judged by the way it has treated you', Bartholomew told the refugees, 'and we will be accountable for the way we respond to the crisis and conflict in the regions that you come from'.[9]

This is a very challenging, futuristic spirituality for Europe; Europe, in its commitment to human rights, is invited to develop a humanistic spirituality that impels it to open its borders. The EU initiated open-border thinking for European nations, but Pope Francis's invitation is for everyone: an open-border spirituality that cuts across nations, religions and ethnicities. It is the spirituality of tomorrow; unwittingly, through the turmoil of today, Europe is shaping a spirituality for tomorrow.

The Spirituality of the 'Less that is More'

On the banks of river Cardoner in Manresa, Spain—the site of St Ignatius' famous experience of enlightenment—I met a young couple who were

[8] Pope Francis, address at the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize.

[9] 'Visit to Refugees', available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/april/documents/papa-francesco_20160416_lesvos-rifugiati.html.

spending the summer camping, to experience closeness to nature and simplicity of life. Such searching souls are abundant in Europe, turning away from a technology-driven life the abundance of nature. The thirst for a new spirituality is expressed in the many ways they find to live in greater simplicity and communion. The challenge for Europe is to connect its Christian roots, for example the monastic tradition, to such new, environmentally aware forms of spirituality. The European soul is in search of a new spirituality that cares for the 'less' because the 'less is more'. In this search Europe is not alone; many other pilgrims are on the move all over the world.

In this context Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato sí* is timely: the celebrated writer Amitav Ghosh has called it 'the most important document that has been written about climate change'.[10] *Laudato sí* offers a new understanding of this pilgrimage, one in which 'the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation'.[11]

However, the sharp edge of *Laudati sí* is its connection of concern for the earth with concern for the poor. Environmentalism is not a preoccupation of the elite, but a significant commitment to the poor. When earth is plundered by the rich and the powerful, the poor, the women and children, are the most affected. They live on the peripheries, where pollution and waste are dumped. Soon after becoming Pope in March 2013, Francis said, addressing a gathering of students from Albania, the poorest country in Europe:

> Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education ….
>
> I tell all you young persons: do not let yourselves be robbed of hope. Please, do not let it be stolen from you. The worldly spirit, wealth, the spirit of vanity, arrogance, and pride … all these things steal hope. Poverty calls us to sow hope.[12]

[10] Amitav Ghosh, 'What Climate Change Has Laid Bare for Us Is an Enormous Crisis of Imagination', interview with Seema Chishti, *The Indian Express* (10 August 2016), available at http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/amitav-ghosh-books-express-adda-the-great-derangement-2964543/, accessed 25 August 2016.

[11] Pope Francis, *Laudato sí*, n. 9, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

[12] Pope Francis, address to the students of the Jesuit Schools in Italy and Albania, 7 June 2013, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130607_scuole-gesuiti.html.

This echoes the celebrated saying of Leonardo Boff: 'poverty is cured with poverty, freely accepted as identification with the poor'.[13] A new European spirituality needs to reconnect the earth with the poor.

Spirituality in the Face of Terror

Terrorist attacks of one kind or another are happening almost on a daily basis, especially in the Middle East and Africa, but also in European cities. People often seem to assume that this is 'religious terror': committed in the name of religious beliefs presumed to be held as absolute by the perpetrators. How to respond to acts of terror is a complex issue, embedded in the particular histories of different countries, their economic and political systems, cultural perceptions and identity. At the global level the search for a comprehensive response is still not bearing fruit.

What could a spiritual response to terrorism possibly be, especially when it claims religious legitimacy? Pope Francis made a good start when he told journalists that he refused to speak of 'Islamic terrorism', and claimed that 'terrorism grows when there are no other options, and when the center of the global economy is the god of money'. 'If I speak of Islamic violence, I must speak of Catholic violence … and no, not all Muslims are violent, not all Catholics are violent', Pope Francis said, dismissing Islamic State as a 'small fundamentalist group', not representative of Islam as a whole. 'I believe that in pretty much every religion there is always a small group of fundamentalists.'[14]

Elsewhere Francis has said, 'mercy is God's identity card'.[15] With this in mind, a possible response to the threat of 'religious terror' is to project, not the almighty and all-powerful God of an all-powerful and all-perfect religion, but a merciful and vulnerable God, not simply in opposition to terrorism, but so as to retrieve the true image both of God and of the human. A compassionate and vulnerable God provides space for vulnerable human beings.

An image that powerfully expresses this is the logo designed for the Year of Mercy by Marko Rupnik: Christ as the Good Shepherd carries the lost soul on his back, but their faces are superimposed so that the good shepherd's right eye is also the human soul's left eye. They see

[13] Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*, translated by John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 59.
[14] Pope Francis, in-flight press conference, 1 August 2016, available at http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/08/01/pope_francis_in-flight_presser_%28transcript%29/1248415.
[15] Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, translated by Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016), 9.

Logo for the Year of Mercy, by Marko Rupnik

through a common, divine–human eye. The spiritual response to terror is to see reality through this divine–human eye, beyond the dichotomies of a polarised world (sacred and secular, male and female, natural and supernatural), from the perspective of *both* the vulnerable God *and* the vulnerable human being.

A Vulnerable God

When Mary of Magdala met Jesus at the empty tomb, she was bewildered by the part of the story that she saw, only to discover that a whole new world and a new vision were dawning on her. For most people, it was just another day. But once we encounter the day with a vulnerable love, a new dawn will happen. Let us turn to a vulnerable God with our own vulnerabilities and woundedness and with people who share them: resurrection will happen again and again. When we are made vulnerable, we come close to the empty tomb to discover the Vulnerable Lord with Mary of Magdala in her own vulnerability!

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