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Spirituality and Contemporary Culture

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I'm going to talk today about the relationship between culture and spirituality.

Piety is cultural. Holiness depends on our choosing the pieties proper to the times. Now I am definitely not saying that there's anything wrong with our past pieties. I would argue that past piety is the reason that most of us, starting with me, are even here today. It isn't that past pieties were wrong. It's that past pieties are past, that there is a present that calls for a piety applicable to the present. Culture and spirituality, in other words, are of a piece. They are the same thing. If you want to know your spirituality, ask yourself about your culture. The function of spirituality is not to protect us from our times. The function of spirituality is to enable us to leaven our times; to stretch our times, to bless our times, to break open our own times to the present will of God. And what does all that mean to us today?

To spirituality?

To ministering?

To being a progressive Christian here, today; now?

If culture is the way people think and feel and behave as a people, and if spirituality is the way we live out the life and teachings of Jesus in this particular culture at this particular time, then the questions for thinkers, writers, theologians, and religious professionals must become: What cultural realities are challenging the Gospel now? And how can the Gospel best challenge the culture, if we, here and now, are really to be a holy people, a progressive people, Christians at all?

The history of spirituality identifies three basic responses to culture. If we go back through the strands of Christian history, we can find three streams converging as common responses to cultural periods of one age or another: (1) the intellectual, (2) the relational, and (3) the performative.

An intellectual spirituality the scholars define as a spiritual life that is creed-centred. People who are creed-centred are committed to a checklist of beliefs, and they're committed to union with God somewhere else. They're waiting to get to God. God is the brass ring – if they stay on the horse long enough. An intellectual spirituality, in other words, is very good at drawing denominational lines and maintaining orthodoxy. These are the people who can tell you at any minute of a 24-hour day who is in and who is out. They're the heretic insists that the function of humanity is to nurture, and cultivate, and care, and procreate, and take responsibility for. Carrying on God's work in the world is, in other words, the spiritual life.

Put no hope in the younger generation unless you have listened very carefully and heard that this only will happen in the next generation provided that someone from the older generation, you and I – the theologians, the thinkers, the teachers, the preachers, the progressive Christians – insist that this generation is brought up with, confronted daily with, required to think about the new questions and the new insights.

We need to intervene for one another. We need a new world view that puts the old one in new light, and we need the character and the courage to say it where it is least welcome to be heard – in every office, in every cocktail party, at every family gathering, in every conference everywhere – no matter who gets bored, no matter who gets tired, no matter who gets mad.

So we go on blindly as a culture in our search for goodness, oblivious of new moral imperatives. Our institutions counsel and educate for individuality and autonomy and control and independence in a world that needs community and mutuality and cooperation and interdependence and human responsibility and a new spirituality for contemplative co-creation. Instead, our churches divide over pronouns. And our sermons float high, high above the fray because, “Sister Joan, if I said what you are saying, do you know what would happen to my collection? Do you have any idea what would happen in my church?” I think I know. I heard of one pastor who met another one downtown. He said, “How’s it going at the church?” The first guy says, “It’s terrific. We had this absolutely fantastic revival meeting this weekend. We’ve never had anything like it.” The second guy said, “Is that right? How many signed up?” He answered, “Signed up? Five hundred of them left.”

Indeed, we counsel and educate for individuality and autonomy, when we need community and mutuality. We do all that while we go to church, and we go to church, and we go to church.

An ancient people tell the story of a seeker who asked, “Before I follow you, tell me, does your God work miracles?” And the Holy one said, “Well, it all depends on what you call a miracle. Some people say that a miracle is when God does the will of the people. We say that a miracle is when the people do the will of God.”

Clearly the role of progressive Christians is, like Jacob, not to die until we have assured the rise of those questions, the life of those questions, in a dynamic and meaningful spirituality as the next generation comes to grips with them. It is like Moses to recognize where we are – with all the depression that it brings us day after day, week after week – as the gate of God’s grace and the cult of God’s work.

We need socially-just Christian communities now. For the sake of the people, for the sake of the poor, for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of the planet, I’m begging you to maintain this group, to build this group, to speak out as a group, to challenge your own as well as the others. And I’m praying to have rise in you again the kind of holy anger that makes the Christian life of the new millennium even holier than the last. Though nothing we do changes the past, everything we do changes the future.

So do it.

Change it.

Go on.

Now.