

## New Spirituality?<sup>1</sup>

Last November a great performer took the stage in Paris at the Bercy omnisports centre. He managed to sell it out for over a week talking just about religion, a feat that only the top musical acts or tennis players can achieve. And that in the country which is billed as one of the most secularised in the world!

I am talking of course about the Dalai lama who was promoting his brand of Buddhism for an ever-growing French audience. They say that over 3 million French people today are attracted to oriental religions and their spiritual practices. Retreats, yoga classes and initiation courses feature in the schedules of the already packed agendas of the French bourgeoisie. Immigrants turn to their religious roots for security on arriving in France, Islam for Arabs and evangelical Christianity for many francophone Africans or Caribbeans. But the French middle class is not returning to the Church but to the ashram.

One reason for the popularity of the East is that it bills well as a leisure activity. In spiritual self-realisation groups you will meet up with your own class of people, who generally share your salary bracket and your range of leisure interests (tennis, squash, horse-riding). It's not like going to Church where you find a mainly ageing and female congregation or some form of fundamentalism, such as in the influence of extreme right wing nationalism found in some Catholic youth movements.

Another reason for the success of the Dalai lama apart from his obviously charismatic presence is that his programme fits in well with what people are interested in anyway – self-fulfilment and personal development. His message comes across in the media in a remarkably attractive way. “We are for the full development of the capacities for peace and reconciliation that all human beings inherently long for.” It is not something that has to be ingurgitated like a dogma, or learned in catechetical fashion. It is already there in you and it's up to you to tap into it and bring it out. Inner peace is a message which is very attractive in a world where aggression reigns and competition is the daily bread of the workplace.

Just now with the continuing conflict in the Middle East many people are fearful, worrying as to the possible outcomes. One way of transcending the situation seems to come from the example of the Dalai lama himself and the idea of non-

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<sup>1</sup> Article published in the Dutch daily *Reformatorisch Dagblad* in 2003.

violent resistance as an alternative attitude. True, his cause is also aided and abetted by sympathy for the political oppression in Tibet and the role of China in that country.

Of course an abundance of literature is available on these themes, in France as elsewhere. Even the current minister of education, the contested philosopher Luc Ferry, has written a book “How to succeed one’s life” (*Comment réussir sa vie*). Just recently an important work has been published by a leading French sociologist, F. Lenoir, entitled *The Metamorphoses of God: the New Western Spirituality*<sup>2</sup>.

Lenoir analyses the assault on traditional western spirituality and, in the French case, that of Roman Catholicism. In spite of the attacks of the Enlightenment philosophy, the “maître-penseurs” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the “egg heads”, Hegel, Marx, Darwin) and Nietzsche at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and in spite of two catastrophic wars for Christendom, the Christian faith was able to adapt and survive, as it had done in the past. Not only that, but the present individualism characteristic of what is called post-modernity doesn’t seem to favour religious scepticism, but rather encourages the development of many different forms of spirituality. Far from being dead “God-talk” is very much in fashion, as our fellow citizens look for a deeper meaning for their life. Which has, of course, to be the meaning that is pleasing to them.

The big question is: what is the future for traditional orthodox Christianity in this new context? Lenoir points to the fact that contrary to Christian belief, the new forms of spirituality have an impersonal notion of God, which is closer to pantheism. “God” is simply a “spirit in the sky” which pervades all things and in which individuals float like peas in a cosmic soup. This impersonal view of God has great advantages for post-modern individuals. Not only are they not accountable to a personal God who counts them responsible, but also they can believe in a vague way in some kind of after-life. Immortality has always figured in human consciousness and desires and was prominent in ancient Greek paganism<sup>3</sup>. This kind of immortality suits modern man, who can say without any problem “in her we live and move and have our being”.

The new “God” also implies some form of universal salvation from which no-one is excluded. For this reason we often hear people say that a departed loved-one is still “with us”, in some kind of way looking down benevolently from above. “The spirit of Elvis is still with us”. The pagan character of such belief has been pointed

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<sup>2</sup> Frédéric Lenoir, *Les métamorphoses de Dieu. La nouvelle spiritualité occidentale*, Paris, Plon, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Pagan means “of the earth”, the religion of gods and goddesses, or natural Gaia.

out by the American scholar Peter Jones, in his books on the New Age. In his *Gospel Truth, Pagan Lies* the global nature of this mentality is described in detail. It is a view of God that makes no demands at all on the individual in the ethical sense and leaves them free to do exactly what they choose, without any consequences. After all, an impersonal God can have no personal requirements for us. New Age is even quite a distance from the classical theological Liberal view of God in which God is a non-judgmental God of unilateral inclusive love, unlike the so-called angry God of the Old Testament.

Obviously, the problem is that you can have no possible relationship with a god who is distant and impersonal and who has no personal attributes to speak of. You can know your dog better than you can know this god. In fact you may just as well pray to your dog as to a “spirit in the sky”. What we have in the New Age spirituality is not new at all, it is just a refined form of pagan idolatry.

According to Lenoir, however, it is to this new and unknown divinity that Christianity is called to adapt if it is to recapture the popular imagination. In addition to this, and quite logically, Christianity today must revise its script on the uniqueness of Christ and the one way of salvation. It must in some way become more open and accept the validity of many different paths up the mountain to God. What is demanded of traditional Christian belief, for it to survive, is an acceptance of the unavoidable fact of world religious pluralism. Non-exclusivity is the order of the day where a one-world mentality prevails. Anything less smacks of the ideological racism and mental exclusion that leads to persecution and torture.

Lenoir is doubtless right in pointing to this factor as one of the major problems for Christian belief today. However, his conclusion about the need for adaptation is faulted. The one constant fact about the survival of Christianity over the centuries has *not* been that of contextualisation and the willingness to adapt to different historical situations and beliefs, but that of *decontextualisation*. Christianity has survived precisely because it has freed itself from cultural pagan pressures to conformity and aligned itself with the teaching of Scripture. It was Paul with his “no other gospel” in Galatians, Athanasius “against the world” and Luther’s “here I stand” that made for the permanence of true Christianity, together with the reformational *solas* which have characterised the teaching of Protestantism.

For our forefathers this was not a both/and choice, but an either/or. When the *sola* is abandoned, what is left is a *tota*. And when everything is true, ultimately nothing is true. It is a matter of life and death for the Christian faith that the both/and version of the New spirituality be exposed for what it is – something which obscures the true way of salvation and the one way of Christ dying on the cross for the sins of

all who believe.