DIALOGUE WITH THE WESTERN WORLD

(Chapter 4 of Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World)*

[Note that this was written some years prior to the time when Pope Francis became pope]

How does one engage in religious dialogue with a *secularised* world? The first step is to recognise that to be 'secularised' does not necessarily mean that one has no sense of God or of the sacred. There would not be much point in seeking dialogue about spiritual issues with people who have no interest in things of the spirit. The secularisation of the West does not mean that most people have lost interest in spiritual matters. It is true that in Europe (much more than in North America) there has been a great decline in Church practice, that very many people do not belong to any Church, and that the Churches have lost a lot of the credibility which they had in the past. But many people who have become disillusioned with Church, and perhaps with all official religions, have a deep interest in spirituality—even though not all of them would use the word 'spirituality' to describe the deeper aspects of their experience, or the profound questions that concern them, or the fundamental values to which they are committed.

I want to argue here that Christians should see the Western world as a prime candidate for religious dialogue—but only under certain conditions. The first of these conditions is that the dialogue be conducted in a style and language that finds echoes in people's everyday experience, rather than in an old-style 'churchy' language which leaves them cold[1]. The second condition is that the dialogue should begin, not with the transcendent God or with other-worldly questions, but with the deep spiritual dimensions of everyday life. It is at this point that there is a convergence between two worlds that seem at first sight to be very different from each other—the world of the adherents of primal religion and the modern 'secularised' world.

'SEARCHERS' AND 'DEEP ECOLOGISTS'

The dialogue must focus on the concerns of those who take part in it; and these concerns vary a great deal from person to person. There are some people in the Western world today who are engaged in a very serious and conscious search for spiritual meaning and values. These 'searchers' are people who have become quite disillusioned with the competitive, exploitative and ruthless style of much of modern living; and have devoted themselves to finding an alternative way of life. Such people will be interested in sharing with us and listening to our experience of meditation or mysticism or divine energy and spiritual healing—provided we can talk from personal experience rather than giving them book knowledge or abstract theology.

There is an increasing number of people in the West who have committed themselves to respect for the Earth and to living in harmony with nature. Some of them are interested in what has come to be called 'deep ecology': they seek to develop or re-discover the more spiritual or religious dimensions of care for the Earth. They are intensely interested in the rituals and myths of various primal religions—for instance mid-winter or mid-summer celebrations, initiation rites, funeral celebrations, and the 'spirit quest' of Native American peoples or the Dream World of Aboriginal people.

They are quite likely to have a negative view of Christianity, seeing it as the monotheistic, patriarchal, legalistic religion which ruthlessly wiped out as much as possible of the earlier religious beliefs and practices, which were centred on Mother-Earth and which gave a far more prominent role to women. But they will be interested in a dialogue which indicates that Christians have something to offer in relation to respect for nature and living at peace with others and with all of creation. They may be particularly interested in the way in which in Ireland, down to the present day, Christianity has managed to accommodate itself to the continued celebration of the four great seasonal festivities of the primal Celtic religion: the Spring festival of Brigid on February 1st, the celebration of the beginning of Summer in May, the harvest festival in August, and the festival of the dead in November [2]. What was lost and what was gained when Christianity took over in the Celtic lands—and in so many other places where primal religion was partly replaced by, and partly subsumed into, Christianity? This is a topic of particular interest and urgency today.

MORAL VALUES, MORAL VIRTUES

It must be acknowledged, however, that only a minority of people in the West today are seriously engaged in a conscious search for religious meaning and values. On the other hand, there are many deeply committed people in our world whose primary interest is not in such overtly 'spiritual' values but rather in moral and political values. I think of one friend of mine who has devoted her life and all her energy over the past ten years to working with refugees in Liberia. Or there are those well-known people (and others who work behind the scenes) who have dedicated their lives to the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. In giving themselves totally to this cause they seem to find resources of energy which appear almost superhuman. Much the same applies to those who find the meaning of their lives in living with autistic people in the Camphill communities or to living with people who have learning difficulties in the l'Arche houses inspired by Jean Vanier. There are courageous journalists and lawyers who campaign tirelessly for human rights. There are theologians and Church ministers who have sacrificed comfortable positions to make 'an option for the poor'. The list goes on and on.

Some of these dedicated people are Christians or belong to some other religion; others have no religious affiliation. What they have in common is that their lives are built around some noble moral value which has inspired them and almost 'taken them over'. It has lifted them 'out of themselves' in the sense that they are willing to give up comforts and careers to follow their cause. In a 'primal' world, people would have no hesitation in saying that a god or goddess or a spirit had touched their lives, inspiring and perhaps even possessing them. We in the West today do not use that language, but the reality is the same.

The kind of people I have in mind have devoted themselves to some *virtue* such as justice, love for the poor, the vindication of human rights, care for the Earth, etc. It is interesting to note that the word 'virtue' means, literally 'power'. So one might say that they have dedicated themselves to a spiritual power. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a spiritual power has taken them over, enthused or inspired them to a point where it has become the central purpose and meaning of their lives. From that point of view there is not much difference

between them and primal people who are 'taken over' by a deity which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is a spiritual power or energy which is not personal in the strict sense.

A SOURCE OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

In a primal culture various categories of people such as shamans, warriors, and lovers devote themselves to a god or goddess who then inspires, directs, enlivens and gives purpose and meaning to their lives. In much the same way many modern Western people devote themselves to rich spiritual values or virtues and find in them a meaning, a purpose, a driving force and a source of energy. They find themselves enthralled, almost 'possessed'—and are often quite willing to serve their values 'unto death'. In this way they are saved from the emptiness, meaninglessness, and selfish individualism which is fairly common in our world.

People can be 'taken over' and driven by other spiritual powers which are not so obviously 'good'. There are people who are sports fanatics and people whose ruling passion in life is to climb mountains. Some scholars devote their whole life and energy to the study of an arcane subject. And it would seem that some people find the meaning of their lives in doing battle with others; in a primal culture they would be seen as devotees of a god of war.

Another example: a friend of mine recently gave up a safe and comfortable career to marry, at a time and in a situation which many thought quite 'crazy'. If this had happened in ancient Greece, people would have had no doubt that it was the work of Aphrodite. Nowadays we simply say, he fell in love and decided to follow his heart rather than taking the safe option. The reality of what happened is the same, even though we label it differently. The significant point here is that what happened was not something that we would normally see as 'religious'—in fact many people would not even see it as 'good'!

Something similar happens in cases where people devote themselves single-mindedly and whole-heartedly to art. There are poets and dramatists, painters and sculptors who may well have made a mess of their 'ordinary' lives but who are inspired to create great works of art. Even in our secularised Western world it is considered normal to speak of such people as touched by the Muse—though most of us probably see that as a figure of speech. For the artists themselves, however, the experience of being inspired is very real.

All these are examples of the kind of experiences which feature in primal religion. Surely this indicates that our so-called 'secularised' world may have more in common with the primal world than one would have expected. And we may conclude that this kind of event provides an opening for religious dialogue with the modern Western world. For we are talking of situations where people give their lives to a spiritual power of some kind and where the power in return gives them life.

RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE ABOUT MORAL AND POLITICAL VALUES

In order to engage in meaningful religious dialogue of this kind we need to find a language which will help both partners to recognise the 'depth dimension' or spiritual aspect of these experiences of devotion,

dedication and inspiration. If the Christian partners fail to name this dedication as truly spiritual then they will be unable to see how it can be a basis for *religious* dialogue; they will want to hasten on to 'other-worldly' topics which may be of no immediate interest to those on the other side. If modern Western people do not have an appropriate language they are unlikely to notice just how important it is to be rescued from aimlessness or self-absorption by commitment to some spiritual virtue, or value, or 'power'.

One advantage of the kind of dialogue proposed here is that it can help us to re-connect morality with religion. I am taking it for granted that morality has its own integrity as a personal response to ethical values such as justice, truth, or love. But when we recognise this 'autonomy of morality' there is a danger that we assume that moral and political values such as social justice and concern for human rights are not matters about which we can have *religious* dialogue. The effect would be to confine spirituality to a rather limited sphere of very 'private' religious values and practices such as meditation or the search for inner wisdom. [3] By naming moral values and virtues as spiritual energies or 'powers' to which one can be devoted, I hope to widen the sphere of religious dialogue very considerably. From this point of view the sharing of experiences and views about fundamental moral values can be seen as a genuine religious dialogue.

ISSUES OF THE LAST TWO CENTURIES

Looking back on the past two centuries we can identify several major areas which could and should have been occasions for

fruitful religious dialogue between the Christian Churches and modern society. But, sadly, in most cases what took place was 'a dialogue of the deaf'. The French Revolution brought the notion of democracy into the arena and for the next hundred years there was a very polarised debate about this issue. The leaders of the Catholic Church took a strong anti-democratic stance and failed—or refused—to see the deep spiritual values embodied in democracy. They remained blind to the enrichment brought to the lives of those who devoted themselves whole-heartedly to promoting democracy. It took a further fifty years before the Catholic Church came fully to terms with the values of the democratic State.

On the issue of human rights, the story was much the same. The quality of the 'dialogue' over a very long period is indicated by a statement made by a pope about ninety years ago: 'We have heard enough of the rights of man but what about the rights of God?' It is only within the past generation that leaders of the Catholic Church have spoken out strongly in favour of human rights and made it a central emphasis of Catholic social teaching[4].

Even more striking is the absence for over a hundred years of a truly open dialogue on the issue of socialism. It is quite evident that Church leaders on one side and Marxists on the other got locked into blind opposition to each other's positions. Some Protestant Church-people showed an openness to socialism early in the twentieth century. But in the Catholic Church the first serious attempt by a pope to engage in dialogue with Marxism came in Pope John Paul's 1981 encyclical 'On Human Work' (*Laborem Exercens*). Even after that, the Vatican has shown itself quite unsympathetic to liberation theology and in this way missed an opportunity for very fruitful dialogue within the Church itself.

A more recent example of a 'dialogue of the deaf' is on the issue of the ordination of women. On one side stands the official Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, and significant segments of the Anglican and Protestant Churches. On the other side is the main body of 'the women's movement' (including very many committed members of all the Churches), as well as many men and a large number of theologians. The argument has become very acrimonious. The Vatican imposes heavy sanctions on those who refuse to accept that this whole question is a closed issue. Those on the other side tend to see the theological arguments put forward against the ordination of women as an ideological defence of patriarchal and clerical power; and they fail to recognise how far the Church has moved in recent years on 'women's issues'. Furthermore, they often fail to appreciate the major contribution which the Church has made down through history towards the recognition of the gifts and dignity of women. (I think, for instance, of the way in which over the past century devoted missionary teachers—Sisters and lay people—have changed the lives of millions of young women in the so-called Third World and, in doing so, have raised the status of women to a level which it never had before.) The breakdown in communication between the women's movement and many of the Churches has done enormous damage to the Church itself. Just as the Church lost the working classes in the nineteenth century, it is now losing the allegiance of a very large number of women who used to be 'the backbone of the Church'.

Why have the Churches failed so notably to open themselves to sensitive dialogue on such fundamental spiritual issues? Probably because behind the debate was a power-struggle. Protagonists on either side of each of these major issues sensed that they had a great deal to lose if they failed to win the argument. Church leaders—particularly those of the Catholic Church—allowed the Church to become allied to authoritarian and unjust regimes. The result was that they became blinkered in their views. Much of what they said and wrote on these controversial issues was simply a defence of entrenched positions, even when they were convinced that they were engaged in an unbiased search for the truth. The conclusion is obvious: if Church-people are to be open to genuine dialogue they must not allow themselves to get tied into power-structures which they feel they have to defend at all costs.

At the present time the Church finds itself engaged in debate or dialogue about a number of major topics such as, questions relating to ecology and development, the women's issue, the nature of human sexuality, and bio-ethical issues including questions about when human life begins and ends, and about cloning and gene-manipulation. Unfortunately, on several of these issues the battle-lines have been drawn up; and even on less polarised issues such as ecology there is no great openness on either side to real dialogue.

If the Church is to exercise its mission to engage in dialogue with the world, it must be more open to the notion that the Spirit speaks not only in the Church but also in the world—even in our present Western secularised and sinful world. In fact all the evidence is that the Spirit has been speaking very powerfully in this world, quite outside the context of the institutional Churches. The lead in the struggle for social justice was taken by people outside the Church. On ecological issues, too, the lead did not come from Church authorities. (The ecological theologians Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox were treated as rather maverick figures in the Church.) Many—

perhaps most—of the great moral and political ideals which inspire people today came from non-Church sources—and sometimes in the teeth of fierce opposition from Church-people. Examples are the concepts of human rights and of gender equality.

SPIRITUAL HUNGER

Nevertheless, the Church has much to offer the Western world at this time. For there is a real spiritual hunger for ultimate meaning and values. We live at a time when the West is exercising an economic, political and cultural imperialism over practically the whole globe. The driving forces of this imposition and expansion are dis-values such as competitiveness, exploitation, and greed. Under the pressure of this apparently unstoppable system, people's traditional ways of life are collapsing and ancient belief-systems are being eroded and losing credibility.

In many respects we find ourselves in a situation similar to that which prevailed shortly after the time of Christ. At that time, too, the expansion of an imperial power (the Roman Empire in that case) had undermined people's traditional value systems and ways of life. Then, as now, the imperial power was not content to control people's lives but sought also to impose its own belief-and-value system on all. People were required to worship the empire—just as nowadays we are expected to give allegiance to 'the laws of (capitalist) economics'. Then, as now, many people were in this way turned into idol-worshippers. But in that period, just as today, a lot of people found that their lives were becoming drained of meaning and purpose. They were searching frantically for some alternative system of meaning and for worthy spiritual values by which to live. The mystery cults and Gnostic teachings provided a partial answer. But Christianity offered a more satisfying faith-system which met both the 'private' and 'public' religious needs: 'private' needs for life-giving religious experience and wisdom; and the 'public' need for a spiritual power which could effectively challenge even the Empire itself. This helps to explain the rapid expansion of the very early Church.[5]

This pattern could, in principle, be repeated today. The rapid growth of Islamic fundamentalism is an indication of the hunger of people in the Muslim world for an effective alternative to Western capitalist ideology. Many people in other parts of the world, not least in the West itself, feel a similar hunger; but few in the West feel drawn to meet it with any kind of fundamentalism. The Christian faith could provide answers to many—provided they are not distracted from its core by 'baggage' which has become attached to it, and provided it is embodied in a language and ritual which speaks to their hearts. Furthermore, their need will not be met if the Christian faith is presented in a mode of old-style one-way mission. It will be appreciated only if it comes to them in the context of genuine and humble dialogue, where Christians are willing not only to share their own faith but also to learn from the profound spiritual experiences and wisdom of those who profess little or no formal religious beliefs.

A TREASURY OF OLD THINGS AND NEW

I have been dealing with issues where there are tensions in the dialogue between the Church and the Western world. But now it is time to look at some of the many topics which could provide opportunities for a very rich dialogue. These are aspects of life on which the Church has valuable experience and insights to contribute to interested people in the West. I shall group them under three headings—(a) Rites of Passage, (b) Moral and

Political Values and (c) Religious Symbols and Practices. In relation to all of them I shall focus particularly, though not exclusively, on the prospective contribution of the Catholic Church because it is the one I know best.

(a) Rites of Passage

By rites of passage I mean significant stages of life, such a birth, marriage, sickness, and death. Over the centuries the Church has developed profound rituals and ceremonies which bring out the deep meaning of these experiences and help people

to respond to them in a fully human way. For instance, the ritual of baptism includes the notion of sponsors, where family friends willingly commit themselves to care for the spiritual welfare of the child. The marriage ritual is one of enormous solemnity and power—expressed, for instance, in the words, '….for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.' Also very valuable is the tradition of having a 'wake' when a person dies—an all-night vigil which combines communal support and sympathy with reminiscences, prayer and a certain amount of muted conviviality. Then there is the funeral liturgy which helps relatives and friends of the dead person to let in the reality of the death and begin the process of becoming resigned and resuming everyday living. (Unfortunately, there is a tendency nowadays to omit some of the more powerful aspects of the ritual—for instance, the singing of the *Dies Irae*, and the throwing of clay on the coffin in the grave with the words 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust'; and funerals nowadays are often more private than in the past.)

The whole issue of how we account for illness and how we respond to it is one of those 'depth' topics which are of as much concern to people in the Western world today as they are to those who live in a primal culture. It is an ideal subject for dialogue, and one where Christianity has much to offer. It may often be better to begin the dialogue not with theology about why God allows sickness and evil but with much more practical matters such the value of the Christian tradition of having a ritual anointing of people who are seriously sick. Even very secularised people often recognise that such an anointing can be a very moving occasion—and very effective in helping sick people, and their friends, cope with the illness. Dialogue about it could easily lead on to a sharing on more profound issues around the spiritual aspects of healing.

It frequently happens that a community of people feel the need to celebrate some important event in the life of the group, or to make a solemn beginning of some joint enterprise, or even to foster a deeper harmony and sense of solidarity in the community. If such people are Christians—and more particularly if they are Catholics—they almost automatically decide to organise and celebrate a special Eucharist on such situations. Here they have ready to hand a very rich ceremonial and ritual which meets all these deep spiritual needs and which can be 'tailored' to the particular occasion by the choice of suitable readings, prayers, and symbols. Those who are 'unchurched' may have to start from scratch in constructing rituals for such occasions—and they probably will not have any rich tradition to draw on. So they may be open to dialogue on this whole topic of celebration and spiritual community-building.

People with little or no Church affiliation often turn to the ancient Christian rituals to celebrate the turning-points of life; for these rituals give expression to the sacredness of such experiences. There is here an

opening for a fruitful dialogue about the meaning of such sacredness. But Christians must not assume that they are the experts on experiences of the sacred who already have all the answers. They must be open to learning from others and to be willing, together with them, to adapt existing rituals and design new ones in accordance with the aspects of the situation which the partners in the dialogue find sacred.

b Moral and Political Values

Perhaps the most striking moral value which could be a topic for dialogue between Christians and 'secular' people is how to respond to the plight of the poor. Over the centuries the Church has garnered a wealth of experience in this regard. Those who are concerned to respond to, or alleviate, or overcome poverty today have much to learn from the diverse spiritualities which have animated Christians on this issue. These range from the approach of those in the Middle Ages who set up the 'Lazar houses' for the care of people suffering from leprosy, to the radically new approach of Vincent de Paul (in his time), to the more recent (and very diverse) spiritualities of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Jean Vanier, and Charles de Foucauld.

The concept of an option for the poor was developed by Christians who were in dialogue with Marxism. They brought into the dialogue a rich new notion which, as I shall say in Chapter 8 below, owes more to the bible than to Marxism. The values underpinning such an option have already had an effect far beyond the Latin American Catholic ambience in which the notion first emerged; and the topic is one of great relevance for a dialogue with committed people in today's world.

This leads on to the issue of liberation. Of course the struggle for human liberation is a moral-political issue rather than a strictly religious matter. But behind the immediate ethical and political questions lie background issues which are truly spiritual and religious. When we look at the hope and the energy which animate those who engage in the struggle for liberation we have to ask: 'Where does this power and this hope come from?' A lively dialogue on such issues developed in Nicaragua and in South Africa where so-called 'secular' activists struggled together with Christians against oppression; and interest in the topic is by no means confined to places where tyranny prevails.

A further moral-political topic that should be of general interest is the recent practical experience of *team leadership* practised in so many religious orders in the Church (especially in women's congregations). This new model of authority is of enormous relevance to all the institutions of our world, from multi-national companies to small businesses, and from government departments to medical bureaucracies and educational establishments. It is an area where religious orders and congregations have something very valuable to contribute to the wider society. There are two aspects which are significant: the very idea that authority is seen as *leadership* rather than as control; and the experience of exercising this leadership in *teams* rather than bureaucratically or hierarchically. Also relevant to secular institutions is the further experience of religious congregations and societies in re-defining their purpose and mission corporately through large assemblies or 'general Chapters'.

Still in the political sphere, there is another very sensitive topic about which we could have dialogue. It is the centuries-long attempt by Church leaders to defend orthodoxy through the Inquisition. How does this compare with the attempt of Marxist-Leninists to preserve 'the party line'? And, if the Church's experiment with 'thought police' has proved immoral and unviable, how can we hope to develop at least a minimum measure of practical consensus on major public issues of morality—for instance, on the morality of nuclear weapons, or of genetic modification of plants, animals and humans, or on the attitude of the State to abortion or euthanasia? Does the Church's historical experience of having a 'Holy Office' to safeguard orthodoxy have anything to teach us and our partners in dialogue about how to cope with the rigid orthodoxies of today in, say, departments of economics or philosophy in the Universities, or the so-called 'liberal agenda' of much of the media?

If people are looking for yet another topic for dialogue in the political sphere, then it might be very interesting to take up the question of the Crusades. What have we learned from this channelling of religious fervour into militant action? It is well to remember that we still have 'crusaders' in our midst today—for instance, animal rights activists, eco-warriors, militant nationalists, and the governments which continue to bomb Iraq even as I write these lines. Do these 'crusaders' of today's world have anything to learn from the history of past crusades?

Another moral topic which may be of interest to secular people is that of fidelity. In situations where society as a whole had a strong belief in a personal God it was customary to call God to witness our commitments—for instance, in the making of marriage vows. What basis can people nowadays find for the sacredness of such commitments? And how absolute should such commitments be? Where the situation changes (e.g. where one partner in a marriage develops schizophrenia) should people still feel bound by the 'vows'? This is a good example of a moral question which leads on to deep religious issues.

(c) Religious Symbols and Practices

Finally we come to the matter of specifically religious practices. My starting-point here is the fact that, even within our secularised world, very many people experience a need for some spiritual practice or some sacred space or time or some object which opens them up to a deeper dimension of life. This is an area where the treasury of the Church (especially the Catholic Church) is so rich that it is almost overflowing.

We can begin with the very many styles of meditation and prayer which have been used by generations of believers in the past. These include the mantra-like prayers of the Rosary or 'the Jesus prayer', the public or private recitation of the breviary (built around the psalms and Scripture readings), and solemn liturgical celebrations of the Eucharist. They also include discursive meditation, Ignatian 'contemplation' of the mysteries of Christ's life, the prayer of quiet and mystical prayer, as well as personal or communal *lectio divina*. What a rich menu this is, a menu from which each person or group can choose the style that suits their own temperament.

Alongside this, the Church has a wealth of experience in relation to appropriate postures for prayer and meditation (kneeling, bowing, genuflecting, stretching out of hands, etc), as well as in relation to ascetical

practices such as fasting (or celibacy?) which may dispose one to pray or meditate more effectively. Why is it that people in the West who become interested in the practice of meditation nearly always turn to the East and seldom ask or hear anything about the rich tradition that is available nearer home? Does it perhaps indicate that the Churches are focusing their attention on issues where people do not want to hear them rather than on a topic where they might well find willing partners in dialogue?

Then there is the whole concept of 'a sacred place'—not just Churches and prayer-rooms, but holy wells, holy mountains, way-side shrines, holy islands, and sacred journeys (pilgrimages). All of these were very common in the Ireland in which I grew up. Even though Ireland has now become quite secularised, there is still a great interest in sacred places, where people have an opportunity to step back from the routine and pressures of daily life. We can also note the sense of the sacred generated by stained glass windows and sacred vestments. Very striking, too, is the power of the Tabernacle, the sanctuary lamp, and the monstrance as sacred objects which become focal points for meditation. Furthermore, even today many Irish homes have a 'St Brigid's cross' made of rushes pinned to the door as a sign of protection. There are other holy objects, ranging from medals and blessed candles to Rosary beads, from statues and icons to the relics of saints, and from holy water to incense. As Christians became more secularised in recent years they tended to discard or downplay such objects. So they are surprised to find that many unchurched people in the West are using these or similar objects to nourish their spirits. This provides an interesting topic for dialogue.

The Christmas crib still has an almost magical power to entrance people and give them a sense of the sacred. The crib—like the pictures of the Sacred Heart—remind us that from a Christian point of view the Incarnation is the focal point for everything that is sacred in our world. In the person of Jesus there is a convergence of the full transcendence of God with the lower level of transcendence (the depth dimension of worldly realities) to which I referred in the previous chapter. Christians see the Incarnation of Jesus as the definitive presence of God our world—a presence which is foreshadowed and prepared for in the myriad of intimations of transcendence found in everything

we find sacred. So in one sense the Incarnation ensures that our respect for holy objects is not idol worship. But from another point of view the Incarnation of Jesus is just the peak moment of a more generic incarnation—a presence of the Divine which permeates all of creation. The whole topic of the sacred and sacramental dimension of our world is a rich area for joint exploration and dialogue.

COUNTER-CULTURAL COMMUNITIES

Quite a lot of idealistic people in the West today—many of them with no Church affiliation—are interested in forming counter-cultural communities. In dialogue with such people and groups the Church has a rich experience to draw on. Over the centuries the Church has built up a great deal of practical wisdom about the management of such communities. I am referring here to such issues as how best to organise the common ownership of goods, how to foster the practice of a simple life-style, what are the most appropriate models of formation for those who wish to join, and how to manage the governance of such communities in a respectful and participatory manner. Some of this wisdom has even become embodied in law—either in the official Canon Law of the Church itself or in the Constitutions and Directives of various religious congregations. If Church people

develop a truly open and sensitive tradition of dialogue with interested 'searchers', they may come to see such laws as a rich resource—a record of approaches that work well and ones that run into trouble—instead of cringing with embarrassment at the very notion of Canon Law!

Furthermore, the whole concept of the 'charism' of a community could be a topic of great interest for such communities of 'searchers'. They may welcome the opportunity to hear and share about the many different spiritualities which have been built around such charisms—and to explore how a particular spirituality can become embodied in a tradition which is handed on to succeeding generations. It can be very helpful for those who would like to form a community to explore the structures that have been developed over the centuries to support those who feel called to live in contemplative communities as distinct from those whose call is to a more active life of service of the poor, or those who wish to live as hermits. Furthermore, there is the fascinating topic of how reformers within each of the great traditions have at times felt a call to restore the charism of their group to its pristine purity.

RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

Another subject for dialogue which some people in the so-called 'secularised' West may find fascinating is the very notion of a 'minister of religion'. Is there need and room in the secularised world for spiritual leaders or people who can speak with some kind of sacred authority on issues concerning the meaning and purpose of human life? How could one become qualified to play such a role? What gives such a person authority? Is authority different from credibility? What are the similarities and differences between a shaman, a guru, an imam, a priest in the Jewish tradition, and a Christian ordained minister, etc? What about religious charlatans—how can they be dealt with in a pluralist world such as ours?

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

A further possible topic for dialogue is the whole area of intense spiritual experiences such as visions or special 'messages'. Nowadays it is not uncommon to find people who have such experiences, even though they may have little or no attachment to any Church. Frequently they have no idea how to handle these experiences; they are afraid even to talk about them lest people think they are going crazy. Over many centuries, the Church has developed a wise pastoral approach in relation to such happenings. The official Church does not authenticate such visions or messages but neither does it deny that they may be valid. The distinction made in the Church between a 'private' and a 'public' revelation is itself an important contribution, because it lessens the pressure on individuals to go public with their personal spiritual experiences.

PROVIDENCE AND GUIDANCE

The final item I want to mention as a possible topic for dialogue is one of the most important of all. It is the question of a sense of providence and of guidance. Traditionally, Christianity has preached a very 'strong' doctrine of providence, namely, that God's care and love are active at every moment and in every event of our lives. One traditional way in which the intimate personal quality of this care has been communicated is through

the belief that each one of us has been given a personal guardian angel, who watches over us. As children we learned to pray to this angel, 'ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide'. As the prayer indicates, we learned to believe that God, through the angel, was not only protecting us but also guiding our choices.

One of the obvious aspects of secularisation in the West today is a widespread lack of belief that God is at work in the detail of our lives. Even within the Church the doctrine of the providence and guidance of God seems to have become somewhat attenuated. Yet ironically, at this very time when *public* belief in the doctrine is absent or weakened, the question of a very *personal* sense of providence and spiritual guidance has come quite strongly to the fore. Many people have the feeling or conviction that they are 'being looked after', either on special occasions or over a long period. And many people have a distinct sense at times that they are being guided in their choices by some benign spiritual power. Television programmes about Guardian Angels have become remarkably popular. In this situation there is an opportunity for fruitful dialogue between Christians and non-Christians as they explore together their experience of being cared for and guided and/or their hunger for such an experience. My own experience in dialogue of this kind indicates that a revival of our belief in angels as 'spirit guides' can be a very good starting point.

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the place to start the dialogue with many Western people may not be with our transcendent God but with the depth dimension of everyday life—the spiritual experiences which people have or the profound questions which they are asking about the meaning of their lives and the values they feel called to live by. This is the holy ground on which we can walk together with reverence and humility as we share and search together for the mystery which illumines our lives. Here is perhaps the most striking place where the Christian mission has to be exercised in the mode of dialogue.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1 Suppose a person who is not attached to any Church asks your advice about developing a practice of meditation, what would you say?

2 Christian faith has been understood as a call to struggle for liberation, but also as a basis for putting up with injustices imposed by legitimate authority. How would you explain this to an interested agnostic?

NOTES

1 Cf. Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, 113: 'There is not so much a generation gap as a credibility gap of languages, where the typical mediations of Church can be experienced as a foreign tongue.'
2 Dáithi Ó hÓgain, *The Sacred Isle,* 216.
3 Cf. Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, 114, who speaks of post-modern people who have an 'anchorless spirtuality.
4 Cf. Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor*.
5 Cf. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 191; and Donal Dorr, *Divine Energy*, 136-9.