Spirituality, cultural wisdom and salvation

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The aim of this speculative paper, rooted in a variety of concepts derived from social anthropology, theology, and the history of religion, is to develop the broad notion of spirituality in terms of what might be called cultural wisdom. This I do alongside a discussion of the human proclivity for meaning-making understood as a process expressed in numerous religious traditions as 'salvation'. This latter issue can be posed as the question of how the drive for meaning becomes a process of salvation. To bring these topics together is to identify spirituality, cultural wisdom, and salvation as cognate terms whose clustering may aid the understanding of each.

With a psychiatric readership in mind this paper is also alert to issues encompassed in *Spirituality and Psychiatry* edited by Cook, Powell and Sims (2009), and to its working definition of spirituality grounded in human creativity that fosters reflexive or transcendent awareness in relation to meaning, purpose and ultimate values.[1] While my basic argument accepts their universalizing tendency I represent it more in terms of cultural wisdom and salvation with an eye to specific historical-cultural constraints and to the elders, ritual specialists and heroes of conflict who generate meaning within them. In traditional terms such actors often invoke supernatural worlds, classically in the case of shamans, who engage with forces in supernatural domains and return all the wiser from their trances to help those seeking their aid. In small-scale societies, cultural wisdom was, and often remains, the outcome of reflection upon surviving or enduring life-experience. Harvey Whitehouse, for example, has interpreted traumatic forms of ritual endurance allied with initiation in terms of an 'imagistic' form of religiosity, a mode he contrasted with the 'doctrinal' mode of religiosity gained from formal Sunday-school or theological-college style formal learning of religious belief. Both forms of acquisition of emotional-knowledge and formal knowledge furnish their own sense of the depth of insightful reflection upon living that is a resource for survival and, even, of flourishing of groups. Indeed, what we call religion has tended to become the repository of such wisdom. In increasingly developed societies, however, especially where secularization has witnessed the demise of religious authority, individuals or small groups are left to create their own forms of wisdom through eclectic choices as in André Comte-Sponville's work.[2] It remains to be seen just how successful individualism can be in developing appropriate forms of wisdom in the absence of group support and a sense of cumulative tradition. However, it is important not to forget that world religions continue to furnish both a background resource and a dialectical partner of 'new spiritualities' even in the secularised contexts of Western Europe.

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[1] Chris Cook, Andrew Powell and Andrew Sims (2009: 4). Cf. Robert M. Lawrence and Julia H. Head's allusion the 'the quest for meaning' (2007:284).

[2] André Comte-Sponville (2007).

Background, personal and theoretical

Here, a brief personal bibliography may help illuminate my interest in this theme of cultural wisdom in that my first monograph, of 1984, was entitled *Meaning and Salvation in Religious Studies*, while another of 1987 was entitled *Mormon Spirituality.* The first posed that question of how the generic drive for meaning might become an experience of salvation whether in local, tribal, or preliterate traditions or in the so-called world or salvation religions. The theory behind it, of the sociology-phenomenology of knowledge, remains highly germane for our discussion of contemporary spirituality in its many local forms in developing and highly developed societies, including secular contexts. The other book explored 'Mormon Spirituality' as a 'life of inspired imagination' that generated a culture of its own, one of profound consequence for American history, geography and culture, one now present across the world at large.

During the twenty-five or so year period of the writing and publishing of those studies the word spirituality has migrated from the domain of concrete religious traditions where it referred to the formation of a distinctive character and cultural way of life, one easily typified in the history of religions by the term *Homo religiosus*, or in the sociological use of an earlier religious term, that of *habitus*, into much wider contexts.   Indeed, as already noted for the Cook, Powell and Sims volume, much contemporary writing on spirituality begins with some definition of the word. We might, almost at random, also have used John Cottingham's more philosophical definition from his *The Spiritual Dimension* with its focus on 'certain kinds of intensely focused moral and aesthetic response or on the search for deeper reflective awareness of the meaning of our lives and our relationship to others and to the nature of the world'.[3] Certainly, this looks like cultural wisdom even if it could be construed as an individual venture apart from a corporate base. Cottingham also refers to the 'vagueness of the term' spirituality, a factor that can be turned to advantage if it is taken as an example of a 'deutero-truth'. The anthropologist Roy Rappaport deployed this term for words used in an easy fashion on the assumption that everyone knows what they mean, even though that meaning may fragment once any precise definition is sought. Derived from the Greek *deuteros* or second, 'deutero-truth' indicates a second-order or meta level of understanding that facilitates conversation on complex topics without having to be neatly precise in the process.[4] Words such as love, hope, and trust are, often, of a similar status within particular speech communities. And this is a crucial factor, for such terms foster discourse within a group but can hinder discussion between groups if they are not alert to potentially crucial differences of significance.

Supercession-superplausibility
Turning to the theme of meaning and salvation, as spirituality-related matters, my approach highlights those aspects of human behaviour that may be described in terms of supercession and superplausibility, processes whereby

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[3] John Cottingham (2005: 3).

[4] Rappaport derived this term from Gregory Bateson's earlier work and developed this idea alongside what he called the 'ultimate sacred postulates' of each tradition, but we will not pursue that idea today

one state of affairs is replaced by another that is deemed better and which constitutes the arena of salvation. Supercession is relatively obvious in contexts of missionary or evangelistic contact and conversion but can also be seen in some indigenous communities where 'each rite of passage' may, for example, initiate 'a male into a world transcending that in which he had hitherto lived', in 'a life transcending the former limited reality'.[5] The notion of superplausibility, derived from the plausibility theory of the sociology-phenomenology of knowledge, refers, in this paper, to the higher order meaning associated with supercession. Generally speaking, the Christian theological tradition describes this world as fallen and needing restoration or transformation - life in the flesh needs transforming by life in the spirit, with the motif of new-birth often used to symbolize this, while in Indian-derived contexts this world involves an enormous illusion through which we need to gain an insight into the way things really are. This insight of superplausibility refers both to rational-logical and sensory domains of human embodiment, a realm well captured by the existentialist German-American theologian Paul Tillich in his notion of 'depth', which he allied with human 'ultimate concern', whatever that might be for a person or group. In his existential grammar of discourse, salvation is the process of movement from existence to being: God is being itself, God is the very ground of being. This approach interprets the Christian notion of the Fall in terms of our naive perception of ourselves as flawed or fractured and not being what we sense we should and could be. For him the salvation process involves a transition from existence to new being, with God, for example, being 'being itself' and Jesus the 'new being'.

Many cultures have engaged with some-such sense of shift from one level of knowing to another, often through actual or the induced life-crises of ritual initiation. One seminally important interpretation is W. E. H. Stanner's classic work on the Murinbata, native to Australia, whose cultural wisdom lay in an embodied appropriation of what he called the awareness of 'refuge and rottenness' in life, all as part of what he saw as an 'ontology of life'.[6] This example influenced my thinking in that 1984 volume on meaning and salvation in religious studies, raising the issue of 'salvation' on a wider canvas than usual and, now, prompting the idea that there is something endemic to the human animal in first coming to know the world-environment and then to take it as a symbol of another world or of another perspective upon this world that invites deeper knowledge. And it is this insight within a group that contributes towards cultural wisdom. Hitherto it has been the context of what we call world religions that has focused such wisdom by furnishing ritual-symbolic contexts in which experience of life has been intensified to stimulate such insight and through the role of the priest, the guru, the shaman-healer, or the exemplar. These persons are reckoned to embody wisdom; they have 'seen' and 'know' and as people of 'depth' possess that allure that, in distinctive cases, appears as charisma. But here, in passing, we should not forget the increasing role of secular ritual and, for example, the contemporary ritualizing of the British Humanist Association in relation, for example, to funerary rites. Were we to use the ritualizing of core values as a definition of religion then, certainly, modern British Humanism would easily be identified as

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[5] W. E. H. Stanner (1960: 275).

[6] W. E. H. Stanner (1960: 264, 245 respectively)

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a religion, not that such an appellation would be recognized as welcome.[7]

Wisdom
As already indicated, forms of wisdom have frequently taken different turns in major world traditions. In Indian traditions, notably in some schools of Hinduism Buddhism and Sikhism, the foundational notion of illusion (*maya*) drives entire schemes of religious thought and practice as devotees seek to move from evil in the sense of illusion's captive snare to a freedom of enlightenment. Here wisdom lies in the prime goal of a transitive 'seeing-through' the way things appear to be in order to see them as they 'really' are. This fosters both a philosophical program of reflection alongside meditative practice and a control of certain emotions in order that others may arise. What this approach does in and of itself is to provide a 'religious' framework for understanding the relative nature of existence. This mirrors Loyal Rue's 'formal definition of wisdom' as 'living in harmony with reality'.[8]

The Jewish-Christian-Islamic traditions took a different path to knowledge originating in ideas of divine revelation of information, the core of which appeared as laws or principles of action, to be received and obeyed. Instead of regarding the world as an illusion it portrays it as 'fallen', fractured or disrupted by sin. Even so, within this broad tradition that emphasized the cultivation of devotional attitudes to the divine, there also emerged esoteric and mystical traditions seeking distinctive forms of knowledge of the divine. Many native traditions of knowledge-acquisition also have their own forms of mystical and secret knowledge often controlled by older people and imparted to new generations as and when deemed appropriate. Moreover, human creativity may exceed its prevailing cultural and traditional base, as Kees Bolle argued over the way some mystics may take 'steps beyond an accepted tradition'.[9]

Social scientifically, these schemes deal with the idea of wisdom as the nature of understanding of and the quality of participation in the core-values of a group. To highlight wisdom is to invoke a word replete with an enormous history of meaning in the overlapping worlds of religion and philosophy, whether in the 'wisdom literature' of ancient near-eastern and biblical material or in classical philosophy's reflections on how best to live. It is, for example, a central theme in Comte-Sponville's atheist spirituality where it appears as 'tragic wisdom'. [10]

For our purposes, the key to wisdom lies both in 'understanding' and 'participation' in social life on the one hand and in the sense of a certain 'knowing-naivety' on the other. When Aristotle, in the fourth century BCE, analysed what he called 'practical wisdom', he gave due weight to the importance of experience as the arena within which the general principles developed by 'theoretical wisdom' have to be worked out. Accordingly, while a

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[7] It probably takes time for adequate ritual to develop. Cf. Comte-Sponville's secularist comment on his sense that 'a non-religious funeral almost always seems flat, artificial and impoverished' (2007: 10).

[8] Loyal Rue (2007: 135).

[9] Kees W. Bolle ([1968] 1993:151.

[10] André Comte-Sponville (2007: 51).

youth may become a mathematician and deal with abstract principles very well, 'no young man is ever considered to have practical wisdom' quite simply because he lacks that experience which time alone can furnish.[11] Aristotle is clear that the ability to act lies at the heart of practical wisdom[12] and that emotions play their part in it.[13] The biblical outlook roots wisdom in an experiential familiarity with the divine and in an enacted implementation of the knowledge gained. So while 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' subsequent action is its proper complement.[14] Wisdom becomes the desired outcome of an insightful person, engaged and embedded within a particular culture; it is the stuff of myth as much as philosophy or theology. Long before Aristotle, for example, the Epic of Gilgamesh gave us the Babylonian insight into the joys of friendship, love and adventure all brought to an end by death, the fear of which drove the desire for eternal life which the hero Gilgamesh both found and lost; only to end the tale wiser by half and accepting that his eternity would lie only in the remembrance of him and his life-time achievement.

That myth shows how wisdom involves the kind of insight into the rationale of a culture's meaning-making process that leads to a 'seeing-through' it. Here to 'see-through' should be understood in the two ways offered by the verb itself. In its transitive form we come to see or understand things by means of our culture and its classification of mundane reality. In its intransitive, however, someone can be said to 'see-through' a culture in the sense that the person now understands that the way this culture does classify and view the world is not the last word on 'reality'. He sees in a reflexive fashion that his is but one way of understanding life. In terms of the phenomenology of religion, this approach fully acknowledges the different universes of meaning that exist in the world and the forms of 'tensions of consciousness' and emotional patterns found in each.

Knowledge of more than one way of life or of one society can be a trigger for this process of knowing. Just how a person will respond to this kind of seeing-through his society is hard to predict. Some may think that they have been deceived by their home society and come to adopt a cynical cultural relativism in which nothing matters. Another response is intimated in the 'knowing-naivety' model mentioned above. This form of theoretical wisdom accepts that 'everything is relative' but also develops into a practical wisdom by accepting that life has to be lived in some social context and commits to living by one particular cultural scheme of things; this comprises its own form of spirituality.[15] What is more, such a spirituality then begs the question of ethics as the motivational scheme directing its application. In briefest compass we propose that one viable ethical base for this spirituality conceived as cultural wisdom lies in 'compassion'.

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[11] Aristotle (1963:128).

[12] Aristotle (1963:156).

[13] Aristotle (1963: 57).

[14] Psalm 111: 10. Proverbs 1: 7.

[15] I intend cultural relativism to apply to distinctive ideas about life present in the broad cultural values of societies and not to empirical issues of science.

Compassion
This simple assertion, of course, begs much complexity and while this is not the place to engage with a comparative study of compassion, it is important to note its Buddhist resonance given that tradition's longevity within human thought and practice. Buddhism has paid great attention to emotions, to naming them and explaining the part they play in the pursuit of Buddhist living as exemplified in Peter Harvey's account of 'the development of heart-felt feelings of loving-kindness and compassion' that are intimately linked with 'one who has thoroughly seen through the delusion of the 'I am' conceit'.[16] This Buddhist critique is not unlike the sociological analysis of the social construction of 'reality', of cultural relativism, and of seeing-through 'the 'I am' conceit'. But what Buddhism has developed, and what scholarly analysis lacks, is a life-practice of emotional education to serve as the medium within which to come to terms with the intellectual insights over the provisional and fragile worlds of culture.

Coming to 'see'
Just how we 'make ourselves' remains of profound significance, especially within complex modern life with its variety of world-views, even within a single religious tradition or 'secular' profession there are often many perspectives and individual angles available, each allowing an emotional patterning of belief, theory and ethics. The case of Albert Schweitzer, one of the most influential individuals of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, will make this point. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize of 1952, Schweitzer produced major theological-biblical studies on Jesus and Paul as well as on the history and culture of civilization and the music of J. S. Bach. His combination of intellectualism, practicality and a powerful if unorthodox faith, brought him to a decision to study medicine when aged thirty, thus realizing the decision he had taken when twenty-one, to devote himself to intellectual activities until he was thirty and after that 'to the direct service of humanity'.[17] He described his childhood and youth as a time of happiness enjoyed alongside good health. With time, however, he came to interpret the direction of his thought and action as demanding 'a deep sympathy with the pain which prevails in the world around us'. 'We must', he argued, 'all carry our share of the misery which lies upon the world'.[18] He decided to practise medicine in a missionary context and did so in what was then French Equatorial Africa where he established himself and his newly married wife in 1913. This distant venue of Lambaréné on the Ogowe river became his home and hospital base for much of the rest of his life and it was in a kind of intellectual insight-conversion on that river that his ethical discovery of the attitude of 'reverence for life' came to him as the ground for his 'spirituality'.

Sympathy-empathy and spirituality's narrative frame
This ethic of 'reverence for life' was its own form of compassion and enervated his long-standing Christian spirituality. It also brought a new frame for his life-narrative. It reflects something of what Darwin called the 'power of the imagination and of sympathy' that allows us to put ourselves into the

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[16] Peter Harvey (2000: 103-105).

[17] Eugene Exman (1955: 12).

[18] Eugene Exman (1955: 11).

position of another person. Indeed, Darwin even refers to sympathy as 'a separate and distinct emotion',[19] and elsewhere speaks of the human capacity 'to sympathize with ourselves' when in some current context we recall our feelings of a former time and place.[20] This is an important reflection, highlighting, as it does, the human capacity for reflection and bringing to present experience memories of former times in such a way that those memories are given new emotional force and are, as it were, felt again. For our purposes, however, this sympathetic capacity is significant for understanding spirituality as a capacity for sharing a sense of 'depth' in life's emotional currents and in the stories that frame them. Spirituality demands a narrative frame, whether in Gilgamesh or the 'history' taken in a consulting room. Narrative is ubiquitous in rites that help school devotees in their sympathy with symbolic religious figures while the repetitive and often periodic nature of ritual helps forge feeling states.

Refraction: religion as spirituality and ethics

While still focused on issues of spirituality and ethics my argument now takes a turn of direction to suggest that, whereas traditional religions framed cultural wisdom and ethical codes within a narrative-embedded form of worship, the process of secularization largely removes this integrative worship-factor allowing the erstwhile complementary phenomena of spirituality and ethics to separate. In relation to this, my current hypothesis is that the rise in usage of the word 'spirituality' has paralleled that of 'ethics' as more or less free-standing areas of concern.[21]   In other words, secularization involves a process of fragmenting religion into its complementary elements of ethics and spirituality, but with the loss of worship in the process. Within the United Kingdom 'ethics' has increasingly become a focus of concern within most social-welfare, work-based, and leisure institutions with 'spirituality' slowly emerging alongside as a concern over the quality of life of the members of those institutions.

One valuable way of differentiating between this ethics-spirituality pairing lies in Rodney Needham's notion of dual-sovereignty which distinguished between jural and mystical forms of authority, where the jural concerns the formal control of social groups through legal procedures while the mystical has to do with the sense of their well-being and flourishing associated with ritual blessing and festive occasions of goodwill: the negative forms of jural and mystical lie in the criminal verdict of guilt and the ritual form of curse.[22] Needham was interested in how jural and mystical forces complemented each other in social life. Potential examples might include the Lords Temporal and Spiritual in our Upper House, or of doctors or clergy and police, as well as parental sources of discipline and encouragement within families, or of mentors and line-managers in companies.

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[19]   Charles Darwin ([1872] 1998: 306, 215, respectively).

[20]   Charles Darwin ([1872] 1998: 215

[21] This currently awaits empirical demonstration.

[22] Rodney Needham (1980: 63).

Worship, secularisation and significant others

As already intimated, one element lost in this assumed secularization process of transformation of religion into ethics and spirituality is that of worship, behaviour that relates a group to a most significant other, usually a deity-figure, ancestor, or personified principle. In this category we might also include contexts of meditation on the nature of the self, though even this often involves a strong relational grounding in monastic communities or guru-disciple relationships. Most such worship-contexts express or intensify the mystical dimension of authority. In terms of ethics, the 'significant other' takes a jural form, often focused upon the ethics committees of medical, educational, commercial, industrial and leisure institutions. Indeed, the rise of such committees may well represent one of the most significant indices of the secularization of religion. Moreover, the demand that religious institutions create their own ethical codes, as with dealing with adult-child contact, marks the incursion of wider ethics-marked society into the religious establishment whose own canon law once sufficed. In terms of spirituality, the mystical domain predominates. In its para-religious mode this retains the form of some significant Other as in nature-spirituality where Gaia, the earth, or cosmos, stands as an arena within which worship occurs. Or it may be more radically self-referential and seek self-development quite apart from transcendent Others and the mystical component arises from the inner resources of the self. The use of meditative or other body-techniques allows access to these resources.[23] Doubtless, the role of the counsellor, life-guide, or psychiatrist as a significant other or as a facilitator of such processes of access to mystical resource and personal flourishing is germane because it is often difficult for one role to include both forms of control, a paradoxical issue in, for example, the doctor-psychiatrist and patient relationship when issues of sectioning under the Mental Health Act arise.[24]

Conclusion - wonderment and mystery

I have argued that the human drive for meaning involves a complex development of cultural wisdom through cumulative insight often allied with ethical codes and resulting in some form of salvation in which jural and mystical forms of legitimation play their part. I have also argued that secularization fragments religion into ethical schemes and intuitions of spirituality, albeit in contexts lacking worship. My final comment is, in effect, a post-script on this presence or absence of worship, expressed in the notion of wonder.

My colleague, Andrew Louth, has contrasted theological modes of understanding from those of the humanities and sciences on the basis of the notion of 'mystery'. His *Discerning the Mystery,* subtitled an 'Essay on the Nature of Theology', drew from Josef Pieper's emphasis on 'the sense of wonder' as a 'receptive attitude to reality': 'Wonder shakes a man, it disturbs

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[23] As Marcel Mauss ([1936] 1979) once called them such aspects of embodiment.

[24] I am indebted to a discussion at the November 20th Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists for this observation.

him'.[25] Louth adopts this perspective to dwell on the way western philosophy, following Descartes, transformed wonder into doubt: 'wonder becomes reduced to doubt'. Louth joins Pieper in following a different path that accepts a Cartesian method of doubt as a trigger for philosophy in its full sense of *philo-sophia*, the love of wisdom, and 'the quest for wisdom'. For Louth the pivotal point of the humanities has to do with the nature of individuals focused on 'the mystery of the person'. As a priest and theologian he then argues that 'theology holds before us, and holds us before, the ultimate mystery of God'.[26] For Louth, that wonder in mystery is not simply a matter of philosophical or theological ratiocination but of religious practice, and that is also the conclusion of Cottingham's philosophical analysis. Louth not only invokes the importance of 'performance', citing Gadamer in the process, but also cites John Henry Newman on 'anticipations and presumptions' aligned with the nature of faith, involving 'the practice of love, humility and trust in God.'[27] Here we are faced with the obvious difference between those with a theistic world-view and those of a naturalist perspective. Nevertheless, debates on the ultimacy of explanation are important, and the topic of wonder valuable. Wonder challenges theists and naturalists in discussions they may have with each other; it seems to be a proper response of self-aware persons alert to the puzzlement of their own processes of engagement with their external and interior worlds. Wonder can be an index of our own sense of limit in the face of apparently unlimited challenges to understand - a proper naturalistic conclusion. It can also be an index reinforcing the implicit belief in a deity. In its positive mode, wonder exists as a phenomenon of joyous challenge to perception. Just what does a beautiful day or flower 'mean'? Such a question is reminiscent of the anthropological discussion on whether ritual is 'like' a language that can be decoded to yield its 'meaning', or is simply an un-decodable action that comprises an end in itself.

This issue of perspective was well understood and expressed by the great nineteenth century Scottish theologian and exiled heretic William Robertson Smith whose 1889 *Religion of the Semites* influenced Durkheim's sociology and Freud's psychology of religion:

> Intellectual culture say some is apt to make a man less spiritual. This supposes the spiritual part of the mind to be a peculiar faculty. In fact the emotional is meant. But a man may as readily err by trusting his own emotions as by trusting his own intellect. Spirituality is not the development of one part of the mind but the development of the whole mind *in a special direction*.[28]

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[25]   Andrew Louth ([1983] 2003: 143).
[26]   Andrew Louth ([1983] 2003: 146).
[27]   Andrew Louth ([1983] 2003: 137, 139, 140).
[28]   J. S. Black and G. W. Chrystal (1912: 64).

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