ENGAGING IN MISSION WITH THE “SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS”, DRAWING ON A TRINITARIAN DIALOGICAL APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

The “spiritual not religious” (SNR) has become one of the largest social groupings regarding spirituality and religion in the UK, with around one fifth of the population fitting into this category, according to a BBC article. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that it is growing in significance throughout the post-industrial western world. From other research, exploring the “spiritual milieu” in Kendal, it was clear that many who call themselves SNR are doing so because they are seeking well-being. The BBC article also indicated that there was a high correlation between those who saw themselves as “spiritual” and those who struggled with anxiety and depression. Whatever else it denotes, SNR shows that the religious landscape of western, largely European, countries has significantly changed as we have shifted from a culture in late modernity through postmodernity to now what I and others would like to argue is a culture defined by post-secularism and the effects of the unrestrained market society.

Often in the church we are unaware of the effects of the commodification of church and the Christian faith as a consequence of such a market society, which adversely affects the effectiveness of what we the church seek to do concerning mission and evangelism with those who call themselves SNR. What is clear is that many SNR people consider the church and religion as having very little to resource them regarding their existential and religious questions of life. People are not searching for “truth” in my experience; they are seeking for some kind of transformation, or deep experience, or “what works for them”.

One fundamental mistake that many make is to assume that the starting place for engagement concerns what someone believes or does not believe. This assumes a conceptual or more rationalist approach to mission and evangelism. However, with the SNR, this context is very different. Rather than starting with the question “What should I believe?” many are asking a profoundly different and, dare I say, deeper question — “How shall I live?” — in the growing insecurity of those living in a market society facing the threat of global warming and ecocide. Such a question then is not seeking conceptual reassurance, but rather an entire way of life that opens up a deep spirituality and sustainability. If this is true, and I believe it to be so, then SNR people are not going to attend any form of discipleship course, no matter how interactive you make it; they are not seeking facts.

It seems to me than many SNR are seeking for opportunities to explore what it means to be human in the broadest sense, through a more trans-rational mode of knowing. In some of my writing I have defined “trans-rational knowing” as an act of intellectual modesty that states that rational knowing can only take you so far. To go beyond the limit of rationalism we need other means of knowing, through art, wisdom, experience, intuition and spiritual encounter. Yes, there is still an important place for rationalism in religion and spirituality — knowing facts about God — but the foundation of faith, knowing God through the experience of God — trans-rationalism — needs to be at the heart of faith or the spiritual path. Knowing through personal experience is a vital form of trans-rationalism that we are now rediscovering.

Whether we like it or not, many SNR are, I think, seeking for subjectively meaningful spiritual experience. This presents quite a challenge to the Christian church, which is still struggling to throw off the shackles of modernity and an overemphasis on words and rationalism. So how do we approach engagement with the SNR? What approach to missiology and mission practice do we take if we are to be authentic to the way of Christ? I hope in this article to explore

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5 Ibid., 5. I have incorporated several ideas into this essay from my book God Unknown, and for the sake of the reader where there is a direct correlation I have included the page reference.
a more Trinitarian-informed approach to missiology and mission practice, and then share some of the great work that has been piloted in what was called “Serum discussion groups” which have become the “SearchingSoul” spiritual dialogue groups that we have been experimenting with in central and south London.

A TRINITARIAN APPROACH TO MISSION PRACTICE

I do not believe you can ever really understand the Trinity by learning facts alone; you ultimately need to experience God as Trinity to “know” that it is true. A distinctly Trinitarian interpretation of the nature of God talks of the three “persons” of the Trinity, which creates the sense that the “Father”, “Son” and “Spirit” who have functional roles in the nature of God are often defined metaphorically as “Creator”, “Redeemer” and “Sustainer”. Further in the Eastern Orthodox Church is the concept of “perichoresis”, which explores how God can be one yet of three persons. This concept underlines the reality that God is a dynamic interrelationship of the “three-in-one” God. God then becomes a dynamic happening where people can encounter God directly as an unexpected event. We see this in the experiences of those in the Hebrew Scriptures with a mysterious other (for example, Gen. 18:1–3, where Abraham encounters what he thought were three angels who mysteriously become God); in the New Testament in interactions that Jesus had with people who found him shocking (for example, Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) and how Jesus is always something other); and, in the Gospels and the letters, the shocking experiences of encounter with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and in the early church (for example, Acts 9:1–9). So, in this way, God is something deeply spiritual to experience. The relationship with the divine is fluid and dynamic, a form of transcendent event, knowing God through experience rather than knowing God through propositional facts. This is a profound form of missionary encounter.

We encounter this experiential missional God in the Bible in texts such as that of the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), the ultimate being the experience of Paul to the reality of God – hence the words of Eph. 1:17–18:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.

Mission and missional encounters then become the work of the Holy Spirit, whose ministry is to unsettle people to the reality of God. So God is not absent; there is no need for Christians to speak for an absent God, more that Christians in a missional situation need to ensure they get out of the way of God, or prayerfully discern what God is already doing. It is the role then of the Holy Spirit to enable people to enter and progress on their unique spiritual path to the experience and reality of God. Ultimately you cannot do this through words, logic or argument. People need to experience God to be true for themselves. The mission of God is God’s, not ours. Ultimately the purposes of God as we understand them through Scripture is to enable people to become Christian and, further, to become disciples of Jesus. This deep theology of a God who is restoring or reconciling all things into right relationship with God is core to 2 Cor. 5:18–6:2, which states:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

In some Christian understanding of the role of the persons of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is sometimes called the “Comforter” and “Companion”, but this is far from my experience and understanding. I take this understanding further with the idea of the Holy Spirit as the “Holy Unsetter”. We encounter the divine through the subjective experience of the presence of God in the ordinariness of our lives. I would argue that this yearning for transcendence is the continuing work of the Spirit of God.

This then has an effect on what, in practice, mission is about. Too often mission and evangelism are about people using all sorts of manipulative power language or playing on emotions to make an impact on others.

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7 NRSV.
8 NRSV.
9 Mobsby, God Unknown, 104.

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as if God were absent, or that such an approach was akin to the very worst of a pioneer missioner as a form of second-hand car sales person. There is some evidence that such an approach just leads to increasing negative stereotypes of the “de- and un-churched” towards Christianity. A more Trinitarian-inspired approach to mission, to the contrary, requires the missioner or evangelist to be deeply discerning of God, and to in effect get out of the way of God. The role here then, I believe, is to create opportunities for people to experience God for themselves in the context of their own lives. In that way the role is more like that of a curator at an arts event or art exhibition. Much has been written by Jonny Baker and Mark Pierson regarding curation and worship coming out of the alternative worship movement. I would like to extend this metaphor further to the idea of “mission event curation”. I find this approach really exciting because it then becomes more creative, more playful and less controlling. By this I am not saying that we need to go back to exposing SNR people to forms of charismatic or alternative worship as an act of mission. I am saying that the ability to curate, the need to let go of the need to engage with “facts” or construct some form of course, and the need for mission to be open-ended and allow for subjectivity are essential.

If mission then is about enabling people to encounter God for themselves on their own terms, then it is ultimately about direct experience of God in some form, not exclusively theological thinking that leads to conversion of people to the reality of God. This is a really important insight if we are sincere about our increasingly postmodern post-secular context of the trans-rational (experience) over the rational (logic and thinking).

This more spiritual way of knowing through encounter of God, of the experience of God, then opens up an approach that is often attributed to St Francis of Assisi: “experience leading to understanding”, where people can grow into an understanding of the nature of God through their experience of God. It is the direct experience of the unfathomable love of God that ultimately reveals the truth of God, that leads us to our conversion and a transformation of our knowing – mind, body and spirit. True knowledge therefore involves both the rational and the trans-rational, and to know the Christian faith fully requires engagement with a trans-rational experience of the triune God.10

A recovery of a “Trinitarian-centred” mission practice also I think reflects a renewed appreciation of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in mission. Here the Holy Spirit is named as the person of the Godhead that unsettles people’s perspectives of God, and that the Holy Spirit operates in the space between people and God. This is why John Taylor, in his famous book,11 called the Holy Spirit the “Go-Between God”, who invites us to reimagine and re-encounter God. Our imagination becomes the place for seeing new potential and new concepts, as well as the place where we meet and encounter God through the Holy Spirit.12 So in my mission practice, I have often run activities such as the SearchingSoul groups used in the PhD research I am currently conducting. In these, the general approach is to expect God to be present in the details of the conversation, and that this does not need to be forced – but that the Holy Spirit will be unsettling people to explore the gap between themselves and God the Holy Trinity, and that the process of conversion is a road of various staging posts as people become aware of the presence and reality of God in their lives.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that this process did not begin as a purely New Testament phenomenon but began in the Hebrew Scriptures, where people attempted to make sense of disorientating experiences of God in their lives:

> Walter Brueggemann, in his exploration of the texts of the Hebrew scriptures, links language to the self-revelation of God: that is to say that the words and names used of God come directly from the revelatory experience of God.13

The mission of God, the missio Dei, then becomes an intermediated cascade to God as Trinity as the missio Trinitatis, and therefore the mission of the people of God, the church: the missio ecclesiae. We hear the connection between the mission of God and the Trinity in the Gospel where Jesus is “sending” the disciples out to go and make disciples of the nations:

> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.14

However, at the same time this approach is not solely redemptive, but again driven by God, and it cannot be controlled or decanted into a course or communicated through human words; ultimately Trinitarian mission is about people encountering God:

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10 Ibid., 9.
12 Mobsby, God Unknown, 64.
I am saying that God is mystically present to all things, and that we can have confidence that God is seeking to draw all things back into restored relationship with the Triune God, and that God will do what God will do. This transcendent and incarnational understanding of God’s mission to the world requires us to take a more mystical and trusting approach. Mission and evangelism is not about us representing the absent God; it is much more about us trying to catch up with what God is already doing.¹⁵

If God is a relational God, and if God as Trinity is demonstrating God’s unity in diversity, then the nature of God has something to say about “common unity” or community. It is not therefore, I think, a coincidence that there is a cascade from God as Trinity, through Jesus as the visible expression of the invisible God as the Christ, to then empower the church to again model mission as the heart of what church is supposed to be about. All expressions of the church should be a missional community – the visible expression of the invisible kingdom of God.

The missio ecclesiae, church – or rather, the ecclesial community – then reflects this deep dynamic of the Holy Trinity, where God seeks to actively draw people to the reality of God. God gathers a community of autonomous individuals that collectively become one, and thus participate in mystery, belonging and unending love. It shows us a God that is both absent and present, this-worldly yet other-worldly, a God that is immeasurable and uncontrollable yet knowable.¹⁶

There has been much criticism of the danger of social trinitarianism, of projecting the nature of God into the human context.¹⁷ But there has to be a connection between our understanding of God as Holy Trinity and the gathering of people as church. As God models the missio Dei as the primordial mission community, so the church is also called to model being a missional community. The Holy Trinity is beckoning the church to model a way of being a spiritual community that reflects the very nature of the Trinitarian Godhead. The Holy Spirit is drawing those seeking missional and contemporary expressions of church for our postmodern consumerist context, to experiment with forms of church drawing on a perichoretic model.¹⁸

If all this is true, then as Christians we are increasingly needed to get out of the way of God, to allow God to do what God wants to do. For me this is a massive relief from the pressure of so many fact-based and propositional approaches to evangelism and mission that are in danger of mixing power manipulation and coercion with mission practice. I have always felt such practice does damage to the church as it assumes that God is somewhat absent and therefore that we need to fight for God. No, this more gentle and Trinitarian approach to mission for me is ironically more biblically based.

The concept of God’s mission, not ours… should be no surprise to us… God is God and will move, by his Spirit, speaking to people, engineering encounters, listening to the cries and prayers of all sorts of odd outsiders in ways that God is completely at liberty to.¹⁹

This means then that God can self-disclose the divine presence in the ordinariness of the details of our lives, as a place of experiential encounter of God, to help people grow and develop in an “I–Thou” relationship. The postmodern turn has helped us to see that our very lives allow us to experience the Christian God as radically subjective. God’s immanence is hyper-present, so that we can encounter the divine through the subjective experience of the presence of God in the ordinariness of our lives. This yearning for transcendence is the continuing work of the Sustainer and Perfecter, the Spirit of God. I would pose the question: might virtual reality conceivably provide for the possibility of an “I–Thou” encounter? Have the vehicles of information technology and consumption, imperfect and flawed pursuits of humanity though they are, become an opportunity for a transformative encounter with the Holy Spirit? I believe this to be the case.²⁰

Taking inspiration from Jesus, the incarnation of the Redeemer, the Messiah, who came to us in human form as the revealed expression of God, the mission of God is therefore incarnational. As God came and entered human culture as a human, so we are called to engage in contextual mission fully embracing culture and the truth that Christianity is revealed through the contextualisation of the gospel. In Incarnational theology we encounter Christ the servant, the lover of people, who cared for the poor, the children and the marginalised. We encounter the Christ who performed miracles so as to include those excluded from society; essentially, the Jesus that we encounter in the Gospel stories, who is physically present in the world. Incarnational theology has a high regard for human

¹⁵ Mobsby, God Unknown, 122.
¹⁶ Ibid., 6.
¹⁸ Mobsby, God Unknown, 74–75.
²⁰ Mobsby, God Unknown, 104.
culture, the need for social justice and the desire to see the kingdom of God realised in the here and now. It is strong on valuing our common humanity, on inclusivity and the practice of love.\textsuperscript{21}

So as Jesus engaged with all sorts of people of different cultures, the Trinitarian God drives us to engage with people on their terms. This is also unique in that Jesus is the revealed image of God in the context of the Trinity, where Jesus as the image (icon) of the invisible God is self-revealed in all contexts and beckons all people towards the Trinitarian God. This is the focus of Col. 1:15–17:

The Son is the image [icon] of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Developing further the idea that mission is incarnational is the key truth that mission must be relational. My favourite New Testament text, 2 Cor. 5, emphasises the call that we are to appeal to people to be reconciled to God as we are called to be friends of God. It is into this mix that the vibrancy of the Trinity speaks to us, drawing us into intentional forms of relationship that change and challenge us to the core of our being. Who is it that we seek when we seek the Lord our God? How does this three-in-one God transform our way of life? How do we live in a strange land where we need to learn social skills, tolerance and love? What will inspire us to shift from being semi-skilled spiritual tourists to committed and passionate Christian pilgrims? It is my belief that God is seeking to draw us into deeper forms of spiritual community and relationship through God’s own experientially revealed nature. The challenge to the church then is whether it is willing to listen to the still, small voice of the God who, like it or not, never stands still.\textsuperscript{22}

This then means that true contextual mission needs to be conducted with a commitment to authentic relationships between the pioneer and the individual or group with the aim of establishing a relationship between the individual or group and God. With the gap between where people are and where church is being so wide, this has required initiatives like fresh expressions in the Church of England, which has again emphasised the importance of mission being truly relational. This has led to forms of training for lay and ordained pioneers and missioners to have the skills to learn how to do such relational mission, and to be able to do that in various contexts where you may have nothing in common culturally or in terms of ethnicity. Building relationships of integrity then become key to the basis of such mission activity, which then opens up the heart of a truly Trinitarian missiology, where mission is about leading people into an authentic relationship to and with God; this is where God self-reveals the divine nature and opens up the truths of the Trinitarian God as something to be experienced. At the heart of the Trinitarian mystery is the fact that God, previously unknown, chose to actively engage with human beings, and thereby reveal something of the divine nature. As we will see later, it took some time for Christians to be able to articulate an understanding of God as three-in-one. It took the Early Church Mothers and Fathers around 500 years to gather together the many hints that pervade Scripture and articulate the doctrine of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{center}
\textbf{EXPERIMENTS WITH SEARCHINGSOUL SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE GROUPS}
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As of spring 2019, we have now established four SearchingSoul spirituality discussion groups, which are gatherings of the SNR for facilitated dialogue in bars, pubs and eateries in central and south London, and there are plans for three further groups to begin in the summer. After some careful piloting, these groups are structured to discuss a theme with space for uninterrupted speaking and deep listening and then open discussion. They have been publicised through the “MeetUp” social media application and Facebook. Sessions begin with a quick introduction to the theme, followed by each individual speaking for up to five minutes uninterrupted, and people can ask clarification questions before entering into open respectful dialogue. These groups have been a wonderful experience for me personally as I have discerned God at work breaking down negative stereotypes, where people have come consistently believing that all expressions of Christianity were “fundamentalist” and are then shocked to discover that there is a contemplative spiritual tradition within Christianity. By not seeking to dominate conversation, by having a willingness to be open-ended, the interaction between Christians and the SNR has broken down misunderstandings, and in at least three situations participants have begun the process of becoming Christian, with four participants becoming members of various missional or fresh expressions of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 57.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., Xiii.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 11.
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church. It’s not always easy, as you never know if people are going to turn up, and it is often not easy curating the conversations of people you do not know, but early indications are that SearchingSoul” as an approach to mission with the SNR can be an effective approach to missional engagement. Once it is completed, I hope to share results and further reflections of the research PhD I am conducting regarding this study on the SNR. Anecdotal early evidence seems to suggest that the “SearchingSoul” dialogue groups are a significant approach to missional engagement with the SNR.

CONCLUSIONS

A Trinitarian-inspired approach to mission with the SNR is a particular open-ended way that assumes that God will make the divine persons of God present in the conversations and in the details of the lives of those who gather for spiritual exploration and dialogue. Trinitarian mission practice assumes that God is an event of grace, and that God the Holy Spirit functions as a Holy Unsettler to bridge the gap between where people are and God. Further, the role of the pioneer missioner as curator has been explored as a particular role and model to facilitate such an open-ended approach to mission practice. It is hoped that the SearchingSoul spiritual dialogue groups will help play their part in developing appropriate, contextually relevant and effective forms of missional engagement with the SNR. Further PhD research into this area continues, and the author will seek to share these results once completed.

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