



FOREST CHURCH: FROM DOGMATIC DESERT TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

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Behind us, a tall wellingtonia tree whispers her many-voiced leafy welcome. Beneath our feet, unknown numbers of crawling, squirming invertebrates wind their ways, oblivious to us. Blankets are passed around and hoods raised against the December solstice wind. The church some way behind us lights up with the choir practising their carols while we, on our rugs and picnic chairs, huddled in near silence, feel somehow “connected”. But being religious? For some here today, that’s what’s happening in the building behind us.

Or is it...?

INTRODUCTION – FACING THE QUESTION

How did we get here? I believe this is the first question we have to ask when engaging with how to meet the needs of those who declare themselves to be spiritual but not religious. If we are unable to understand why people feel that way, then we will be unable to serve them. To me it feels that the answer is found in the postmodern death of the metanarrative. We live in an era where trust in any large institution has been eroded, yet people seem as thirsty, if not more so, for spiritual experience.

It is this understanding – that we crave an experience that is free from the constraints of a dogmatic institution – that dictates the path of modern spirituality and probably helps to explain the growing reluctance of ordinary people to engage with the church.

There is, however, a danger associated with abandoning religion. If the experience becomes the aim then the individual may flit from one path to another, always hoping for the next “hit”. Spirituality risks becoming a drug rather than a path and the experience is the end in itself rather than the divine encounter that can be life-changing. When it’s at its best, religion can be the framework on which we hang our spirituality in order to provide a space for discipline and growth. However, it has become abundantly clear that current religious frameworks are perceived, sadly often not without cause, as a series of “Thou shalt nots” designed to exclude rather than include. Maybe this repeating pattern is why John the Baptist offered baptism for the forgiveness of sins when there was already a perfectly functional, priestly ministered, sacrifice for that in the

Temple. Yet John’s path was one of discipline, not merely spiritual experiences. Have we lost that with the death of our desire for all that is “religion”?

In order to find a way through this and try and step away from the errors we seem to keep repeating in organised religion, it is necessary to ask what needs to be jettisoned in order to create a new framework that is fit for purpose and with which people can engage. In order to serve the spiritual, our “religion” led by “experts” needs to be replaced with a supporting community that travels together. The leader must become the accompanier and trust in rules must be replaced with trusting the Spirit to lead people towards being changed. Numerous emerging communities are looking to this model, one of which is Forest Church (although bear in mind that this is a loosely connected network – not an organisation with rules).

FOREST CHURCH AS ONE MODEL AMONG MANY

My wife, Alison Eve, and I have been part of a core group of five who have run Ancient Arden Forest Church (AAFC) since 2012. AAFC fills a particular niche, being Christ-focused but ritualistic and looking more pagan than churchy from a cultural perspective, which has meant that we have operated at or beyond the fringe of what most churches would feel happy with. Maybe half of those who come would feel uncomfortable in “normal” church, with visiting Wiccans and Druids not being uncommon. However, I felt that this touching place was too far beyond the fringe for many people who self-define as spiritual but not religious, and was also not “owned” by the parish church of which I am vicar. (I should add that this was intentional on our part so that AAFC did not have to conform to the expectations of “religious” outsiders.)

It was for this reason that I felt it was necessary to adopt a new approach alongside AAFC, and launch a new, more parish-based, forest church, simply called The Arden Forest Church (T AFC). Following in the contemplative footsteps of our monthly Celtic night prayer service, The Well, this was to be a dogma-free zone, always meeting in the round with no dog collars or signs of officialdom. There would be no excluding creeds nor any overtones that spoke of religious rules. All would be welcomed into a reflective outdoor space that would meet monthly, whatever the weather, reminding people of the old saying, “There is no such thing as the wrong weather, only the wrong clothes.”

After a couple of trial runs over the gloriously hot summer of 2018 where 20 to 30 people came to enjoy prayer in the late afternoon sun, with the support of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) we formally launched on

the fourth Sunday of October 2018, with our regular slot of “4th Sunday at 4” replacing the prayer book evensong on that evening that had dwindled to maybe two or three plus leader and organist. The timing, adopting the fourth Sunday, means that a third of our gatherings (never called “services”!) lie at or close to solstices and equinoxes, allowing us specific observations of seasonal turning points.

Each gathering follows, for the time being, a similar pattern. We meet in a circle next to a tall Wellingtonia tree in our large rural churchyard, where we can easily be found by newcomers. Given that the tree is at the east end of the church and the steeple is at the west end, it allows us to explain that we gather by nature’s tower rather than the one built by human hands. Some people bring folding chairs, others bring picnic blankets. The “liturgy” follows closely, and is inspired by, Tess Ward’s excellent resource, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year*,¹ although we alter the prayers to make them responsorial. So we begin with an opening prayer and words of praise. We then keep five minutes of silence to, quoting Tess, “Be still in the silence and aware of the Love with and within...” We suggest people might like, if they are unused to this, to close their eyes initially and count five separate sounds, allowing those to lead them into a deeper state of prayerful awareness of their surroundings.

From this state of alert stillness a meditation is given that will incorporate a Bible reading, but this is usually chosen for its connectedness to the season rather than necessarily following the revised common lectionary. The meditation leads us into at least 10 minutes of silent response where the gathered people are sent out into the churchyard to look for things in the natural world that reflect what they sense in themselves from what they have heard. For example, in November 2018 we read of the struggle Jacob had with the angelic/divine stranger at the riverside and then went into the space looking for signs of struggle in the natural world such as a gravestone being slowly overcome by moss and plants. The “call-back” is a singing bowl, which is chimed three times before “singing”. On this occasion, when we regathered in the circle people were given a chance to comment on what they had seen, from which we then reflected that back into the struggles that we or our loved ones might be facing at the time, including wrestling with God. I never cease to be amazed at the willingness of people to share in that environment and it has been through this sharing that the community is forming. When community forms, it helps people move beyond seeking a spiritual experience to the discipline of returning and developing.

After sharing we return to silence, opening a thanksgiving space with:

Leader As I end this day in your safe-keeping

All I count three blessings before my sleeping.

The gathering concludes with some other form of responsorial prayer, including a space for silent intercession (although that’s not a word we would use) and a blessing. We normally find that it takes a little while after that before people are ready to leave, although many of us then adjourn to the pub over the road from us to continue being together. Comments about the reluctance to leave speak volumes about how people feel about this type of gathering.

BORROWING FROM “RELIGIOUS” TO PRODUCE A DEEPER “SPIRITUAL”

On the face of it, how different is this from church for it not to be tarred with the “religious” brush? In part it is because we always meet outside but there are other aspects too, since just doing “normal” church outside can never truly be called “Forest Church”. The language, including the language about God, is always inclusive. Pronouns are rarely used of God to avoid the standard masculinising of the divine, and, following Tess Ward’s practice, the meditations will often use a title rather than a divine name, such as “Living Presence”. This kind of open language permits people from all kinds of spiritual path to place a meaning with which they are content on what we say. Furthermore, there are never any robes or accoutrements of institution, so not even a dog collar. The liturgical framework is present but, unlike so many of the more traditional liturgies, no attempt is made to crowbar in doctrinal statements. Given that the name of God is “I am”, we leave people to have their own encounters. Of course those of us with leadership responsibilities make ourselves available to help explorers go deeper with their questioning and their journeys, but the responsibility is with them to ask because the model of “religion” tends to be to impose truths that must be believed rather than enable encounters that challenge and change us. It is enlightening to discover that liturgy can be divorced from being “religious” and regain its place in the eyes of some as “spiritual”. (One of the conclusions I drew in my book *The Shaken Path* about understanding modern paganism is that a significant proportion of modern pagans are ex-Christians who left the church because it wasn’t spiritual enough. Liturgy need not be the problem, but our use of it and the words may well be.)²

¹ Tess Ward, *The Celtic Wheel of the Year: Celtic and Christian Seasonal Prayers* (Ropley, Hants: O Books, 2007).

² Paul Cudby, *The Shaken Path: A Christian Priest’s Exploration of Modern Pagan Belief and Practice* (Alresford, Hants: Christian Alternative Books, 2017).

However, to return to where we began, the danger of the “spiritual but not religious” label is that it replaces spiritual discipline and commitment with a thirst for eclectic new experiences. Those of us who frequent Mind Body Spirit festivals often see a parade of people thirsting for the next spiritual “hit”. This is something that we must try to avoid. The Arden Forest Church seeks instead to tread a fine line that provides a relational framework in which a contemplative spiritual experience can lead into a deeper commitment according to the place on the path that the individual occupies. The journey of each traveller is honoured with no pressure being placed on an “arrival” or crossing some in/out threshold. “Religion” risks being about rules regarding who is in and who is out; “spiritual” risks being about chasing the experience, but by blending the two we can produce new forms of spiritual discipline, and it is by adopting these that real change can come. It is all too easy to declare that we are “spiritual but not religious” but unless we tap into the better part of the discipline that religion can offer as well, our new forms of worship risk being just another “hit” that the spiritual traveller can dip into when they feel like it before moving on. Our aim at The Arden Forest Church is to bring the discipline that religion at its best can offer into a spiritual space so that an ongoing encounter with Christ, mediated by the Holy Spirit in the natural world, becomes life-changing and life-long.

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