

## A BRIEF LOOK AT HUMAN SPIRITUALITY

By Leslie Fielding

### Islam : The Elburz Mountains

I had taken myself off for a long walk, watching the shadows begin to lengthen, admiring the bold contours of the green and khaki landscape. It was then that the singing began. Perhaps a shepherd boy? His words – in Persian – seemed to convey something like this :

“Where are you, my beloved? Everywhere I seek you.  
But you hide yourself from me.  
My love of you knows no bounds. I am your devoted one, your slave.  
If only you would turn your gaze upon me”.

Taken together, the voice and setting were compelling. I stopped in mid-stride, the only other sound the bleat of distant flocks. Reality was *the voice* – unimaginably beautiful. Listening carefully, I came to realise that it was not the secular, lovesick dirge that I had assumed. Certainly passionate ; almost erotic. But I had caught one particular work : *Elāhi*. The Muslim shepherd boy’s song of longing and devotion was in fact addressed to God.

### The Golden Temple of the Sikhs at Amritsar

In Dublin, recently, I attended Eucharist in the Cathedral. Three to four hundred, in the pews ; very large choir and orchestra ; splendid female Celebrant ; in fact, the works. And, in the printed order of service, I found the words : “Wherever you are from and whatever you believe, you are welcome to receive at the table of the Lord”. Instantly, I was taken back to Amritsar in 1975.

The Sikhs, like the Gurkhas, have a fierce reputation. They helped put down the India Mutiny, and defeat the Japanese, in WW II. But (being themselves a small racial minority, and of a new – 15<sup>th</sup> Century – faith), they tend to be at daggers drawn with the Muslim and Hindu majorities in India – and a tad tense and tricky with others!

So, thinking back to places in the Middle East I had been advised in the 50s to stay well clear of, I found myself dead scared, in the Punjab, in the 70s : tightly wedged into a huge crowd of Sikh worshippers crossing the bridge to the Golden Temple, where a top Guru was dispensing communion. Not possible to back out, Conspicuous, colour-wise. Doomed to face a violent end?

Yet, when eventually pushed up face to face with him, the presiding Grand Guru looked me in the eye, smiled and pressed into my shaking hand a fragment of wheat cake.

I learned, afterwards, that “Prashad” is distributed without regard to caste, colour or creed.

Sikh and ye shall find!

### Buddhism : The Banks of the Mekong

In Cambodia in the 1960s, much good work was done in the name of Buddha in each village pagoda – education of the young, advice to the adult, charity to the few who were needy, care for the sick. The habit of some young men (particularly future rulers and leaders) of shaving their heads and living as a monk for a space, before returning to the world, was also impressive. I was lucky enough to have had a monk for a language tutor and I met others far and wide. They are almost all dead now, carried away by the genocide of Pol Pot. But in their ascetic life-style – their indifference to worldly things and the values of the “acquisitive society” – Western materialism received a well-deserved rebuke.

In my mind’s eye, I can still see those holy men in their saffron robes on the banks of the Mekong. Their rhythmic, compassionate Sutras lifted them up out of the cycle of Karma and re-birth, the changes and chances of this fleeting world, towards something which lay beyond space and beyond time.

Not long before his death, the Cistercian writer, Thomas Merton, visiting a Buddhist sanctuary in Sri Lanka, wrote :

“I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything .....”

### Shinto : The Shrines at Ise

That day, the setting was special. Light wind, soft rain, the shifting play of light and shadow, the noble lines of the cedar timbers, the gentle curves of the roofs, all came together for me, without my asking. The place was plangent. Somewhere, an unseen visitor clapped hands at a shrine, before bowing and praying, as so many Japanese generations had done at Ise, over fifteen past centuries.

There was nothing spooky about Ise. Yet here was the essence of the Japanese aesthetic genius – simplicity, elegance and restraint. Here too, nobility, loyalty and honour. But I also picked up something else, which I had not expected. Was it my deep Celtic response to a common, prehistoric, transpolar Shamanism? Was it some wider commonality, to do with simply being human?

To me as a Christian, it was the presence of the Holy Spirit, observing, sustaining, interceding – as in all ages, at all places and with all people, outside as well as within the catholic and apostolic community. And the words in the back of my mind, at Ise, were those of the psalmist :

“If I take the wings of the morning,  
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
Even then shall thy hand lead me,  
And thy right hand shall hold me”.

### Passion Play

The Passion Play at Oberammergau, a mountain village in Bavaria, is performed only once every 10 years. It relates the story of the last days of Christ, from His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem to His Resurrection from the dead. The performance is given, not by professionals, but by the locals themselves – the total cast of 1,600 adults and 550 children accounts for almost half the village population. They have done this for almost 400 years.

The story builds up over six hours, with a break in the middle. In the second half, beginning with the trial before Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, the Play builds up a realism and intensity which becomes in the end almost unbearable. In the howling mobs, the platoons of brutal soldiery, the Crucifixion itself and the final emergence of the resurrected Son of God from the tomb, one has the impression almost of being present at the real event.

When I went, there was an international audience of over 4,000 people, of all faiths and none, Japanese, Arab, whatever. Initially, they coughed and shuffled their feet and rustled their programmes, as people do. But, after a while, they fell progressively, and in the end totally, silent. Even the grossly overweight American sitting next to me lay aside his double handful of Mars bars and turned to stone. And yet, as we all filed out afterwards, it was with a sense of completeness : of a cathartic tragedy which had opened up a new vista of serenity and hope. As one Anglican theologian commented, after he had attended, it was if **WE** were the Resurrection!

### Witchcraft in the Wild

In his "The Screwtape Letters", C.S.Lewis suggests that The Devil detests being either laughed at, or plain ignored. I agree.

I think of that, long years ago. I have come into a little money, and been promoted. I buy a former Vicarage on Dartmoor with a view of the Tors, as a second home. The farmers seem friendly. I graciously offer employment, start to fund local charities and give general encouragement to all!

But once I begin as a trainee Lay Reader, as my side of a bargain with the Bishop not to close the ancient but little patronised Parish Church, odd things soon start to happen.

Animal entrails appear on my doorstep ; cabalistic signs are daubed in blood on windowpanes ; mis-shapen rag dolls congregate in the shrubbery ; a manikin with pins protruding from intimate places is propped up on a stick outside the study window where I write my sermons.

Discreetly, I ask around. No joy – only a few oblique and embarrassed looks. I feel I must get back to my Bishop. But my Rector, from two parishes away, a jolly former Vet, nevertheless laughs like a drain, and persuades me not to summon the Diocesan Exorcist, but to sweep it all under the carpet. And Behold! It all stops, as abruptly as it began (possibly the work of, if not that coven over the Tors, then of some wiccan holiday-maker), never to return. Thanks be.

But, as Saint Anselm once wrote ("Cur Deus Homo?", Chapter 7), "God arranges even evil things for good". After discussion with my Spiritual Director, it seems possible that I might conceivably have become a tad too self-important, too proud, too outright bossy, as the self-appointed "Squarson" of the village. So Humble Pie came back on the menu – for a space, at least!

But, in the end, I revert. As St Augustine tells us ("Confessions", Book III, Chapter 9): "The appearance of what we do often differs from the intention with which we do it". So, in the end, enough was enough. We're none of us perfect. I am whom I am. ("Jeeves, have you finished hoovering the Bentley yet?")

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