

JESUS TODAY

A Spirituality of Radical Freedom

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I

THE SIGNS OF OUR TIMES

The following four chapters cannot count as much more than a *glimpse* at the extremely complex and ever-shifting signs of our times. Yet even a cursory glance at what is happening today will enable us to see that the signs of our times are, to say the least, *startling*—not only because we can now see that we are living on the edge of chaos, but also because a giant leap forward in our history and our evolution seems to have become a real possibility.

The signs of our times are ambiguous. Things seem to be moving in several different directions at the same time. Some trends seem to be reactions to the direction others are taking. The different signs become like strands of wool that are woven together into a complex pattern. What we see today is the pattern as it is at this particular moment in the long history of the unfolding of the universe.

The signs of the times are pointers to the future. It is not that they show us clearly and definitively where we are going. Rather, the value of these pointers is that they challenge us. And what matters here is that we *allow* them to challenge us. Or, to put it in terms of faith, what matters is that we allow God to challenge us through our reading of the signs. What we have to

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avoid is the imposition of our pre-conceived ideas upon the reality of today. Our aim must be to face the truth about what is actually happening—whether we like it or not. Pointing fingers and finding people to blame for today’s problems will simply blind us to the significance of the signs we are looking at.

The four chapters of Part One will help us to establish what we mean by “today.” After that we will explore the relevance of Jesus.

CHAPTER 1

Hunger for Spirituality

Published early in 2004, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has become the biggest selling novel in history.¹ And the movie is set to break any number of box office records. What is it about our times that makes books and movies of this kind so extraordinarily popular?

The Da Vinci Code is a historical novel. However, it abounds in historical errors and displays considerable ignorance when it comes to the history of art and the structures of the Catholic Church. It has released an avalanche of criticism from academics, ecclesiastics, theologians, and especially historians.² But this just seems to add to its appeal.

In Dan Brown's novel, the great secret, kept hidden for two thousand years but handed down in a code known to only a few people, is that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and they had a child called Sarah, and that this royal bloodline continues down to this day. It makes for an intriguing storyline, especially in view of the present-day scholarly interest in the role of Mary Magdalene in the early church.³

The significance of *The Da Vinci Code*, however, is not to be found in the accuracy or inaccuracy of its contents, but in the book's accuracy as a barometer of where we are today and what people are looking for. More and more people, and especially young people, have given up all the certainties of the past: religious certainties, scientific certainties, cultural certainties, political certainties, and historical certainties. Everything

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is being questioned. They feel that one can no longer believe anything that authorities of any kind are saying and have been saying for centuries. Ours is an age of unprecedented skepticism. One opinion is as good as another. All one can say is that some opinions are old and boring, while others are *interesting*.

Readers are fascinated by *The Da Vinci Code* because it rides roughshod over certainties or supposed certainties of the past and offers a story that is much more intriguing. Revelations about what might really have happened in the past are interesting. They may or may not be true, but they are at least not slavishly following some infallible authority, religious or secular. *The Da Vinci Code* is experienced as freeing the imagination to consider any number of other possibilities. It liberates the mind from what is perceived as the straitjacket of imposed certainties and dogmas.

Academics call this attitude of mind *postmodernism*, and the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* is a barometer or measure of just how widespread this way of thinking is. It is a sign of our times.

Postmodernism

Modernity was the age of reason that began with what is generally known as the Enlightenment. It coincided more or less with the scientific age shaped by Newton's mechanistic worldview.⁴ It has also been the age of industrial capitalism and unlimited economic growth. Modernity's optimism about the future was based upon the absolute certainty that the progress of science, technology, and reason would overcome all human problems, and that pre-modern religious superstition and the belief in magic would gradually fade away. Religion, morality, and art were relegated to the sphere of private belief. What really mattered for the human race was economic and political progress.

Gradually, during the first half of the twentieth century, modernity's house of cards began to collapse. Even the most industrially advanced countries, such as Germany under the Nazis and other Fascist states around the world, began to act irrationally and inhumanly. Their violence, cruelty, and methods of torture could simply not be squared with the ideals of human progress.

At the same time, the Communist bloc of nations, with its own form of modernity and its own vision of human progress, began to manifest the same kind of totalitarianism and oppression. Toward the end of the century these regimes collapsed, leaving us with one superpower that now seems to be hell-bent on war to wipe out terrorism while it ignores the ecological destruction of the earth. Is this human progress?

No wonder we now have a generation that is skeptical about any ideology at all. No grand narratives, they say. No schemes for saving the world. They don't work.

Religious ideologies have suffered the same fate. Scandals have rocked the churches and undermined their authority. For many people today, all religious authorities seem to be exclusive, divisive, and oppressive (especially of women). On the other hand, the scientific rationalism of the past that excluded all miracles is also being questioned. There is a fascination with vampires, aliens, and magic, with the occult, the supernatural, and the preternatural. People don't necessarily believe in any of these things, they are just fascinated by them. Hence the phenomenal interest in Harry Potter, the child magician, and other similar books.

Deep down, though, most people today feel totally *insecure*. All we ever seem to hear is bad news: wars, murder, abuse, institutional violence, terrorism and our destruction of the environment, not to mention earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes. In the face of all this, feelings of insecurity and hopelessness are inevitable. Most human beings today live in a state of suppressed despair, trying to find ways of distracting themselves

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from the hard realities of our times. As the spiritual writer Joanna Macy puts it, “A dread of what is happening to our future stays on the fringes of awareness, too deep to name and too fearsome to face.”⁵

In the past, most people relied on the certainties and practices of their respective cultures. Today, all traditional cultures are slowly disintegrating: Western cultures, African cultures, Asian cultures, and smaller indigenous cultures. There is nothing much left for people to hang onto. We are slowly sinking. Blaming this one or that one is of no help in a situation like this.

Some turn to drink or drugs. Some commit suicide. Some still find their imagined security in wealth and possessions. Others, quite understandably, use sport, entertainment, or sex to divert attention from the worries of life.

One very strong response to the uncertainties of life in our postmodern world is the attempt to return to the past.

The Return to the Past

Fundamentalism is a particularly vigorous, appealing, and dangerous attempt to return to the fundamentals of the past, or to what seem to have been the fundamentals of the past. In the past there was certainty, authority, and absolute truth. This manifested itself most of all in religious dogma. It is not surprising then, in our present state of uncertainty and insecurity, to find people resorting to religious fundamentalism: Christian fundamentalism, Muslim fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, and Jewish fundamentalism. Each of these is different and often in open conflict with at least some of the others. What all have in common is a reliance upon an authority that provides absolute truths—truths that cannot be questioned or doubted. This is the kind of security they offer to a very insecure world.

Fundamentalism often takes on a political form. More accurately, militant governments and militant resistance groups

often make use of religious fundamentalism: some American politicians make use of Christian fundamentalism; militant resistance in the Middle East sometimes makes use of Muslim fundamentalism; at one stage, the governing party in India made use of Hindu fundamentalism; and Israel utilizes a kind of Jewish fundamentalism. This use of fundamentalism often leads to violence: institutional state violence or revolutionary and even terrorist violence.

Neo-conservatism is another response to the frightening insecurities of our times. It is also a return to the past, a return to the principles, practices, customs, beliefs, and sense of identity that made some of us feel so safe and secure in the past. A good example of this is the neo-conservative backlash in the Catholic Church following on the liberating reforms of the Second Vatican Council after 1965.

Despite the failures of modernity, a very large number of people are still stuck in it and still believe in its promises of progress. Leaders in the so-called developing nations are busy “industrializing” and “modernizing” their countries—in other words, becoming Western.

There is yet another response to postmodernism, a response that is gaining momentum every day. It is the search for an appropriate spirituality.

Spirituality

In our present circumstances of uncertainty and insecurity, spirituality could be seen as yet another form of escape. While this may be true in some cases, it seems to me that by and large the new search for spirituality, the deep hunger for spirituality, is genuine and sincere. It is one of the signs of our times.

The sign, however, is not the number of people who have found a satisfactory form of spirituality to live by. Some have done so, but the sign is rather the widespread *hunger* for spirituality, the

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search for spirituality, the felt need for spirituality. One could argue that all human beings need, and have always needed, spirituality. What is happening today is that many more people are becoming acutely *aware* of their need for spirituality.

This need or hunger is experienced in a variety of ways. Some experience it as the need for something that will give them the inner strength to cope with life, or peace of mind and freedom from feelings of fear and anxiety. Others experience it in seeing themselves falling apart and in need of something bigger than themselves to hold them together. There is also a sense of being wounded, hurt, broken, and in need of healing. Many, it seems, feel cut off and isolated from other people and from nature. They long for connection and harmony. An increasing number of people, especially young people, feel the need to be in contact with the *mystery* beyond what we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think, beyond the constraints of mechanistic materialism.⁶ Some experience the hunger for spirituality quite simply as a longing for God.

To explore further the complexities of this hunger, we can look at some of the spiritualities that have risen or have been revived in recent times. This has sometimes happened within a particular religious tradition, and sometimes outside of any specific religious institution.

From within Religious Traditions

During the second half of the twentieth century, in the midst of our growing uncertainty and insecurity, the person who was responsible, more than anyone else, for reviving and popularizing the Catholic tradition of contemplative spirituality was the American writer and monk, Thomas Merton. He enabled millions of Catholics, and others, to grow up spiritually as he himself had done—step by step.

As a young man, Merton embodied the spirit of his time with its confusion and anxieties. What followed was his famous conversion, his rejection of the world and his escape into a strict, old-fashioned monastery. But then as his spiritual journey matured he turned again to embrace in a new way the world he had rejected. From his monastic enclosure he got involved in the American civil rights movement and anti-war campaigns, and he grew in appreciation of the mysticism of Eastern religions.

Thomas Merton died in 1968, but his many writings have continued to feed the spiritual hunger of new generations of seekers worldwide.

During the same period, the second half of the twentieth century, the spiritual hunger of the West was also being fed by Eastern religions, especially in the form of yoga and meditation. Meditation of one kind or another has become very popular, although it is only recently that the ancient Christian tradition of meditation has been rediscovered and popularized. It is known to a growing number of people today as “centering prayer.”

But the really powerful development of spirituality within Christianity, and more generally in the Western world and elsewhere, has been the discovery of the relevance and importance of *mysticism*.

Mysticism

There was a time when the mystics were regarded as rather odd people whose writings were singularly irrelevant to the concerns and needs of our world. Today that view has been reversed. An increasing number of people are now reading the mystics, both Western and Eastern, studying them in their historical contexts, publishing critical editions of their writings,

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and finding in them a deep resonance with our postmodern insecurities and uncertainties.⁷ The works of medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the famous Spanish mystics like Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Ignatius of Loyola, to name but a few, are to be found on the shelves of our bookshops alongside the works of our modern mystics such as Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh.

Mystics are not extraordinary people who perform superhuman feats and get carried away by weird, miraculous experiences. Mystics are appreciated today as people who take God seriously. They do not merely believe in the existence of God or the divine, they claim to have *experienced* the presence of God in their lives and in the world. The aim and purpose of mysticism is union with God, a oneness with the divine that is complete and total. For mystics, everything else follows from this. When the mysterious presence of God fills their consciousness in ways that are impossible to describe, their lives are transformed. They become happy, joyful, confident, humble, loving, free, and secure. The hunger for spirituality is a hunger for precisely that.

One of the features of the mystical experience of union with God is that it always includes an experience of oneness with all human beings and with the whole universe. Francis of Assisi, for example, felt completely at one with all his human brothers and sisters, as well as with Brother Sun and Sister Moon. People today are fascinated and deeply moved by the mystical experience of oneness. But what attracts attention more than anything else is the claim that mystical union is a religious *experience* rather than a religious *dogma*.

The move from ideas and thoughts to experience, from intellectual knowledge to felt knowledge has long been part of human history.⁸ In postmodernism it has reached an unprecedented high point. The demand is for experience, not grand

ideas. And the mystics have always been *the* great proponents of deep religious experience.

In its origins, Pentecostalism was also an expression of the hunger for an experience of God. Here and in the broad charismatic movement that has swept through Christianity since the second half of the twentieth century, spirituality is experienced as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. What matters is the concrete experience of the gifts of the Spirit—from joy to speaking in tongues. Whatever one may think of this, it must be seen as part of the overall hunger for spiritual experience.

The Hunger for Healing

Another very significant way in which the hunger for spirituality finds expression in the world today is in the desperate need felt by so many people for *healing*. This is particularly true in Africa. In 2004, an estimated two million people gathered on the beaches near Lagos in Nigeria hoping to receive healing of one kind or another from a well-known Nigerian healer. In Nairobi I once witnessed a gathering of about a million people covering the campus and the sports fields of the university, watching, on closed circuit television screens, a visiting American faith healer. In Africa, churches that offer healing are growing exponentially. This is not because of their success rate as far as actual healing is concerned. It is because they speak to the desperate hunger for healing.

Nor is this phenomenon confined to Africa. Faith-healers can be found everywhere. The Catholic Church tends to have shrines for healing rather than faith healers in such places as Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje. In India and Sri Lanka there are holy places and holy rivers where people can go for healing.

Most of the time what we are looking at here is the need for healing from “physical” ailments or injuries. There is nothing new about that. What is significant is that today, while more and

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more people are making use of Western medicine, they feel the need for something more, something transcendent, something that will heal body, soul, and society—holistic healing.

For some time now Westerners have been going to their therapists for psychological healing. The practice has been that if you have a physical illness you go to your medical doctor, but when you experience the need for inner peace, inner strength, and wholeness you go to your therapist. Now, Westerners are beginning to feel the need for something more than psychotherapy.

Secular Spirituality

One of the most significant developments of our time is the separation of spirituality from religion. Diarmuid O’Murchu, among others, argues that while spirituality has been with us from the beginning, religion was introduced only five thousand years ago, and it will gradually disappear because spirituality is now flourishing outside of the great world religions.⁹

While something very significant is happening here, I do not think that setting up a dichotomy between the words “spirituality” and “religion” is particularly valuable in our search for the signs of our times. Researchers like Mircea Eliade refer to what has been happening from the beginning as religion, and postmodern philosophers like Jacques Derrida write about what is happening today outside of any church or institution as religion or as religious experience. What we are all beginning to recognize is that religious institutions tend to become fossilized, legalistic, dogmatic, and authoritarian.¹⁰ But, whatever we choose to call it, there is a very powerful hunger for spirituality today that cannot find the nourishment it seeks in our churches, mosques, synagogues, or temples.

One of the places where the hunger for spirituality is felt most acutely is among those who have discovered the new uni-

verse story, which we will look at in chapter 4. The grandeur and glory of God or of the sacred is powerfully manifested in the unfolding mystery of the universe. The search here is for a practical spirituality that will enable us to live this out in daily life and, for those who are Christians, in the church.

Many church-going Christians write off the secular search for spirituality as New Age. In fact, there is no one coherent spirituality or movement that can be labeled “New Age.” What we have is a growing number of spiritual searchers who are willing to try anything, whether it is called paganism, or magic, or superstition, or animism, or pantheism, or whatever else. The variety is enormous. Some of the rites and practices are indeed childish.¹¹ At the same time, those who do resort to “spiritual technologies” are often exploited by entrepreneurs who find ways of making money out of the insatiable religious curiosity of some seekers.¹²

On the other hand, there are some powerfully simple spiritual insights, like those contained in William Bloom’s holistic approach to understanding the new spirituality emerging in our world,¹³ that can also be classified as New Age. Should we not see the whole phenomenon as yet another manifestation of the hunger for spirituality?

David Tacey’s research into the spirituality of Australian youth today can help us to understand what is happening among young people throughout the world. Today’s secularized youth are reaching out beyond a scientific and mechanistic worldview in search of the great mystery that underpins it all.¹⁴ This is something they do not experience in their traditional churches, they say. All they find there are authoritarian teachings, empty rituals, and dualism. The body-soul dualism is meaningless to postmodern youth. They want a spirituality that includes the body and its sexuality.¹⁵

My own experience of youth, black and white, at school and university, over more than thirty years, is that none of them, except the fundamentalists and religious neo-conservatives, are

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any longer interested in doctrines and dogmas. The phenomenal success of Taizé, the ecumenical monastery and retreat center in France where, throughout the year, thousands of young people gather for a week at a time, is due to the freedom it provides. No doctrines or dogmas are imposed. There are no sermons at all in any of the long liturgies. The young people gather in groups to discuss spirituality or the Bible or whatever they want. There are long periods of silence, and the prayers, the songs, and the worship services are simple and quietly repetitive.

Whatever we may feel about all this, it must be recognized as one of the signs of our times.