

# 'Spirituality in a Challenging World': Welcome and Reflections

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This is a report on the Third International Conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality, *Spirituality in a Challenging World*, held at Ashridge House, Berkhamsted, UK from 15-17 May 2014. The report begins with the opening remarks and welcome to delegates from the Conference Chair at the start of the conference. It concludes with the Chair's personal observations following the conference.

KEYWORDS BASS, spirituality, challenging

## Opening Remarks

It is a real pleasure for me to welcome you on behalf of the Conference Committee to this Third International Conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality. I am very conscious of the huge problems many of you have had in attracting funding and/or negotiating time to be here when institutional budgets are being cut to the bone. It is the more encouraging therefore that our overall numbers show an increase on the number of delegates at the 2012 conference. I am particularly pleased to welcome those delegates who have come from outside the UK.

The theme of this conference, with the title *Spirituality in a Challenging World*, builds on our very successful first two conferences. It is one of the core tenets of BASS that spirituality is a vehicle for cohesion, unity and peace - which are clearly not easy to implement in today's world. I will say more of the 'challenges' in a moment.

First, let me set the scene for our conference. It is always worth remembering that spirituality has been with us for tens of thousands of years and existed long before any of the major world religions. In *Retro Fire* we read:

The most significant difference between cavemen and modern man [sic] would be their level of spirituality. It amounted to actually interacting with nature in a spiritual way. The caveman's senses were keen to this; he could hear the spirit world and could communicate spiritually on a regular basis  
(retrofire.livejournal.com).

The question persists about the place of spirituality today. That there is a thirst for spirituality is not in doubt. In the introduction to *A New Monastic Handbook* there are these words:

There is much poverty and impoverishment in contemporary culture that has created a hunger and yearning for mysticism and spirituality which is practical and accessible to ordinary people.... Spiritual not religious is the fastest growing religious identification.  
(Mobsby and Berry 2014: 2-3).

It is equally encouraging that the philosopher, Roger Scruton, wrote in *The Spectator* recently that:

... we will always hunger for the sacred. Sacred things seem to include all those events that really matter to our genes - falling in love, marriage, childbirth, death. The sacred place is the place where the life of the tribe is endowed with an eternal significance. Humans with the benefit of this resource must surely withstand the storms of misfortune rather better than the plain thinking individualists who compete with them.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly our very first keynote speaker, Professor Michael King, has conducted research which he concludes contradicts the view that spirituality helps people to cope better.

In many faith buildings there is a space called the Narthex. It is usually where people gather, and lies between the outside world and the inside worship area. It is an ante-chamber situated 'in between'. Remember it was Martin Buber who said that real meeting takes place in the in-between. This is where spirituality is located and where it enables and fosters real meeting. A person's spirituality is to be found in the in-between, in the way people meet and relate to each other, and how this dynamic fosters change.

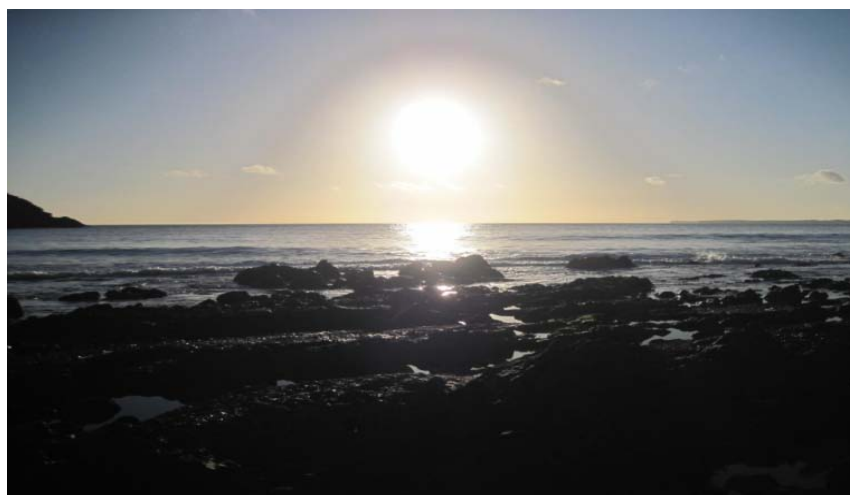
It is here that spirituality meets the challenges of the world. Let me identify just three of these challenges as I see them.

- The first relates to the two pictures on both the conference poster and the brochure:

a desert



and an ocean



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<sup>1</sup> STYLE (*Sunday Times*), 15 June 2014, p.52. Roger Scruton's new book is *The Soul of the World* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

Both are paradoxical elements of nature:

In the desert are scarcity and aridity and, at the same time, growth, colour, stillness, and silence.

Oceans provide food, a means of travelling, and water for irrigation. At the same time oceans are places where floods and tsunamis originate.

One task for Spirituality is to help understand and reconcile such paradoxes.

- In the West, particularly, we live with the challenge of individualism which undermines community and family cohesion and living. Traditionally, communities and families have provided places for nurture and human interaction, both of which resonate with spirituality.
- The curse of every age is fundamentalism, whether political, religious or social. There is no place within fundamentalism for spirituality with its interest in and emphasis on creativity, reconciliation and values. In the U.K., in Birmingham, there is currently a debate about faith schools and some are saying that religious fundamentalism is leading to extremism.

In his 'alternative history' book, *Dominion*, C.J.Sansom speaks of political fundamentalism and writes:

After the Second World War nationalism did not die in Europe. I find it heartbreaking - literally heartbreaking – that Britain is increasingly falling victim to the ideologies of nationalist parties.

(Sansom 2013: 590)

Whatever one thinks of his views, he then cites the Scottish National Party (SNP) as an example. The SNP is referred to by its members as the 'National Movement' and, says Sansom:

... this should send a chill down the spine of anyone who remembers what those words have so often meant in Europe. (op.cit.: 593)

Throughout the conference, I am certain you will find and explore many more examples of where and how spirituality meets the challenges of the world.

## Post-conference reflections

Looking back over the conference, I am very grateful to our five keynote speakers for leading and stimulating our discussions. In addition to the keynote lectures, there were forty parallel sessions running throughout the conference and I do thank everyone who made presentations. I was particularly interested to see the themes I identified at the start of the conference being unpacked, as well as many new threads being introduced.

Ashridge House was once a monastery before the dissolution of the monasteries (c.1540) by Henry VIII. Perhaps as a consequence, it seemed to offer an oasis of stillness to delegates arriving from all over the world for the exchange of ideas, insights and reflections in the house itself and its 190 acres of beautifully maintained gardens. For me, this was all greatly enhanced by the meditations which began each day in the chapel for those delegates who wished to attend.

There was a very good mix of delegates which was evidenced by the stimulating conversations taking place everywhere. Meal times were a favourite time for sharing ideas and catching up with friends and colleagues. There are many people to thank for making the Third BASS conference happen, not least the members of the conference committee and our administrator, Georgina Long.

Someone who was very much in mind for many of us throughout the conference was Peter Gilbert, a former member of the BASS Executive and a prominent figure at all our previous conferences. At the end of 2013 we received the very sad news of his death. Professor Peter Gilbert was both an international and national figure in the world of spirituality. Many tributes have been paid to him, including a book entitled *Crossing the River : The contribution of spirituality to humanity and its future*<sup>2</sup> which I have edited with Ben Bano to celebrate Peter's work and writings. It was published in April and we were pleased to have it available at the conference.

Plans are already being made for the next conference, to be held in May 2016. I hope I will have the opportunity to meet new people then, as well as friends who have been to one or more of the conferences held in 2010, 2012 and 2014. You will all be most welcome. Do please book early!

## References

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## Notes on contributor

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<sup>2</sup> For further information see: <http://www.pavpub.com/crossing-the-river/>