

## CATALYST SUGGESTION SHEET #6

### AUTHENTIC RELIGION

#### REALTIONSHPIS - THE HEART OF TRUE RELIGION

Authentic religion is first and foremost a matter of relationships - with God (however we might name God), self, other people and the physical world. Authentic religion involves an ongoing, never ending struggle and search to know and foster those relationships. Growth emerges slowly through facilitation rather than mastery, it is gift rather than conquest, a grace of the Spirit rather than a triumph of the ego. And is this anything other than authentic humanity?

At the heart of this whole process is self-transcendence. We experience the truth that lies at the heart of the human story: we must die in order to live, that we find ourselves by losing ourselves, that the centre of our existence - our true selves, our identity in other words - is found in God. Relationships are stifled by egoisms of one kind or other - self-absorption, selfishness, meanness, greed, narcissism, pride and so on. On the other hand, relationships - at least life-giving relationships - are fostered by moving beyond our tiny ego worlds, by dying to ourselves in daily acts of self-transcendence - mindfulness of others, self-forgetfulness, generosity, compassion, listening, patience, magnanimity, humility and so on. The goal of authentic religion is participation or communion in a Great Mystery, not control of a little material world.

#### VISION - BORN OF RELATIONSHIPS AND NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS

A certain vision is born of this process of fostering relationships. We can also say that the process is born of the vision, for we would not pursue the relationships without some sort of vision, at least implicitly there. Relationships and vision are inseparable, each demanding the other. Without the focus of relationships, there would be no vision. Without the vision, the relationships would become deformed and deforming. Even as we generously give ourselves to fostering and living the relationships, we must constantly return to the vision that gives the purpose and meaning to that endeavour. The vision will have specific facets - mystical, moral, theological, legal and organisational.

#### DETAILS - THE NECESSARY ARTICULATION OF THE VISION IN SERVICE OF RELATIONSHIPS

All of us who desire to be committed to an authentic religious project, must do our best, according to our possibilities and limits, to articulate the details of the vision by which we live. It is, however, the special task of certain people to articulate in detail what this vision entails. We need good scholarship. Thus we have moral philosophers, ethicists and moral theologians, systematic theologians and scripture scholars, canonists and organisational experts. The work of these people must always be grounded in, foster and point back to relationships. Apart from that, their work has no value. One of the critical roles of the Church in every age is to keep the scholars faithful to this task.

#### CONSEQUENCES ARISING

In a healthy religious project there is constant and free flow of thought and attention between relationships, vision and detail. The less self-conscious this free flow of thought and attention is the better. Increasingly we become one with the One, with ourselves, others and our world.

Human beings being human, there is always the tendency to focus on the details as ends in themselves. Unlike relationships, they are more or less concrete, immediate, controllable, measurable, no where near as messy and so on. But when the details lose their relative position as servants of the vision and the relationships that give rise to the vision, they become, at best, more or less irrelevant ideologies. At worst those detached details become destructive systems that oppress people. Thus, religion may be reduced to moralism, dogmatism, legalism and institutionalism. Religion, in this sense, may stand between us and God. Representatives of this kind of religion tend to become ideologues rather than witnesses to liberating and life-giving relationships. Under such circumstances, preaching tends to be reduced to propaganda, scholarship to polemics, spirituality to pietisms, worship to ritualism and tradition to mere repetition. This is fertile ground for bigotry, sectarianism and prejudice in its many forms. The work of renewal is always primarily about the recovery of relationships - with God, self, others and creation. This work of renewal is about loving others into freedom as we have been loved into freedom. And the work of renewal never ends

FOR REFLECTION

1. "We must avoid like the plague that selective egotism that begins by censoring the world, goes on to miss out half the Bible, and finally, and predictably, takes flight and scandal when, in the end, it has to meet an uncensored God. It will certainly be best, if we are going to come into relationship with the God who is, not to think that we can know in advance what he will be like. There will be something very wrong both with the theology and the theologian, that does not approach the mystery of God through a deep reverence for the mystery of what he has made. It can never be too often said that one of the first traps set before the person who desires to pray or to study the theology of prayer is to set it in a world apart. The person of prayer cannot be a person of two minds. If our attitude towards the least of the creatures is wrong, so will our attitude to God be wrong. We might remember that, in the right hands, a little of the common earth, upon which people walk without reflection, can open the eyes of the blind." (Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, Paulist Press, 1976, 9)

3. "In the mystery of the human person God guards his own mystery. To this sense that God is utterly beyond our conceiving, the doctrine of the Fathers is faithful, as the word of scripture requires. Like Job, we may enter into relationship with God through his intervention in history, but then it is God the incomprehensible we meet, God the breaker of the heart's idols and the confounder of edifying talk. He is what he is." (Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, Paulist Press, 1976, 21)

4. "The biblical picture of the human person at creation is of a being whose basic call is to relationship, relationships first and foremost with God and with others, and then relationship to the universe at large through understanding and care. We are, as it were, born for openness, for that shared life which is the mark of those who are capable of knowledge and love. Only the orthodox doctrine of the Fall clearly asserts how intimately every other relationship, inner and outer, is bound up with the maintenance of the living relationship with God which, mysterious though it be, is an ineradicable need of our nature." (Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, Paulist Press, 1976, 37)

5. "While they were at dinner in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When he heard this he replied, 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. God and learn the meaning of the words: What I want is mercy, not sacrifice. And indeed I did not come to call the virtuous but sinners.'" (Mt 9:10-13; also Mk 2:15-17 and Lk 5:29-32)

6. "One of the scribes who had listened to them debating and observed how well Jesus had answered them, now came up and put a question to him, 'Which is the first of all the commandments?' Jesus replied, 'This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.' The scribe said to him, 'Well spoken, Master, what you have said is true: that there is one and there is no other. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength, and to

love your neighbour as yourself, this is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice.' Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken, said, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And after that no one dare to question him anymore." (Mk 12:28-34; also Mt 22:34-40 and Lk 10:25-28)

7. "He couldn't see her in the darkness, but there were plenty of faces he could remember from the old days which fitted the voice. When you visualized a man or woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity - that was a quality God's image carried with it. When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination." (Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, Penguin Books, 1971, 131)

8. "In the long run, is there any other way of handing on the Gospel than by transmitting to another person one's personal experience of faith?" (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), 46)

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

CATALYST SUGGESTION SHEETS are published by Catalyst for Renewal, PO Box 139, Gladesville, NSW 2111 - Tel/Fax: 02 9816 4262

#### RELATIONSHIPS

between  
God  
Self  
Others  
Creation

#### VISION

Mystical  
Moral  
Theological  
Legal  
Organisational

#### DETAILS

Spirituality  
Moral Philos/Theol  
Systematic Theology  
Canon Law  
Institutional Reality