

Seeking Christian Interiority: An Interview with Louis Dupré

by Louis Dupre

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You have said that it's difficult to be Christian in our age. But hasn't it always been difficult to be a Christian? Why specifically is being a Christian difficult in our time?

Culture as a whole has become secular in a way that it has never been before. One may plausibly argue that the 18th century was the first non-Christian century. Most leading thinkers and artists, even if they were not opposed to Christianity, ceased to take their inspiration from it; secularization became dominant. Still, even at that time Western culture was so penetrated by Christian values and ideas that one might mistake entire passages of Voltaire or Diderot as having been written by believing Christians. Eighteenth-century culture was still steeped in a tradition that had been Christian since its beginning, and it was extremely difficult for these thinkers to free themselves from a language saturated with religion. The 19th century was different. It was an epoch marked by a virulent antitheistic campaign to clean the cultural slate of all Christian traces. Yet these attacks were the work of an elite; culture at large retained distinct remnants of its Christian roots.

Even today ties still exist between Christianity and culture in Europe and more so in the U.S. But on a more fundamental level the West appears to have said its definitive farewell to a Christian culture. Little of the old hostility remains. Our secular colleagues are happy to recognize the debt our civilization owes to the Christian faith to the extent that the faith, having been absorbed by culture itself, has become simply another cultural artifact. Christianity has become an historical factor subservient to a secular culture rather than functioning as the creative power it once was.

The new attitude of benign atheism was, I think, prepared in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries by the three most prominent secularizers of the time, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche.

Why single them out? How did they differ from the earlier atheists you mention?

For Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, the idea of forcibly eradicating religion had become unnecessary. Religion for them was a passing symptom that was rapidly vanishing by itself. Already Marx had moved beyond the idea of atheism as a mere assertion of the unreality of God. For Marx, concentrating on atheism distracts us from the positive task of liberating humanity from social oppression. Lenin's active atheism, in which he used the state to try to destroy religion, is actually a fallback to earlier attitudes about religion. Freud admitted that no one can be forced not to believe. But as rational thought shows nothing in favor of religion and everything against it, to persist in a faith because no argument can decisively refute it is for Freud the sign of a lazy mind. Nietzsche preached a spiritual gospel, a new religion without God, beyond Christianity and atheism, that could still learn much from the old faiths.

Moving further in that direction, contemporary secular culture, especially in its communications media, shows a surprising openness toward religion. But little suggests that this interest surpasses the purely horizontal cultural level. Culture itself has become the real religion of our time, and it has absorbed all other religion as a subordinate part of itself. It even offers some of the emotional benefits of religion, without exacting the high price faith demands. We have all become atheists, not in the hostile, antireligious sense of an earlier age, but in the sense that God no longer matters *absolutely* in our closed world, if God matters at all.

Why should the secularism of our time pose a more serious challenge to Christianity than the determined antitheism of the past?

Because religion in the 20th century has ceased to integrate public life altogether. By its very nature faith must integrate all other elements of life if it is to survive. Faith cannot simply remain one discrete part of life. My own writing about religion grew out of the fundamental question raised by the new situation: Is religion something that may or may not be very important to humans, or must it in some way integrate all other aspects of existence? I came to the conclusion that if it isn't somehow everything, it's nothing.

All societies, even the religious ones of the high Middle Ages or of Calvin's Geneva or of the Puritan pilgrims, distinguish between sacred and profane. But religion must in some way integrate the profane with the sacred. Obviously, Christianity no longer plays an integrating role in the life of modern societies. Certainly for most people in the West, especially in Western Europe, it has lost its creative, formative power. Christianity has become simply one element of civilization among many others, and by

no means the most important. So here lies Christianity's present predicament. In the past religious integration was handed down by a tradition. But that tradition itself has lost its authority in the eyes of our contemporaries, including most believers. What then ought the Christian to do to survive as a genuine religious believer? I see no alternative but that he or she must now personally integrate what tradition did in the past. Nothing in culture today compels our contemporaries to embrace a religious faith. If they do, they alone are responsible for allowing their faith to incorporate all aspects of their existence. Hence the vital importance of a spiritual life.

The word *spiritual* is used liberally these days. What do you mean by spiritual life?

A religious life built upon an attitude of personal response to the call of the divine. Such an attitude originates *within the self*; it is not derived from the force of inherited habits nor from people's tendency to yield to social pressure. To attain the religious life the believer must be alert to the inner voice. How essential such an attitude has become is evident in light of the massive apostasies that occurred in the 1970s and '80s (and continue in Western Europe) when the social pressure in support of religion suddenly seemed to have lifted. Because it lacks roots either in society or the self, people have simply abandoned the faith.

Of course, the term "spiritual" is not exclusively religious. We speak of the spiritual in art and literature. In 1911 the painter Kandinsky wrote an influential work, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. We tend to think of El Greco and Rothko as "spiritual painters," without necessarily considering them religious. But in all these meanings the term refers to a more intense inner awareness of what surpasses ordinary life. The alertness is what counts.

In the frequently quoted conclusion of his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre claims we must choose between Nietzsche and St. Benedict —between the world of the autonomous individual and the world of the individual in voluntary submission to a community of religious practice. You seem to be describing a third alternative.

Only in this respect: before Benedict came Augustine, the master of interior life. Without one who taught how to reintegrate the fragments of a broken civilization from within, the retreat to the monastery might easily have turned into mere flight. But in part because of Augustine the Benedictine monastery became the heart of medieval culture, the spiritual force that motivated the building of a new civilization.

So in the first place—prior in some sense to submission to a community of religious practice—the new integration you look for requires an inner life?

Exactly. I am reminded of Karl Rahner's remark that Christianity in the future will be mystical or it will not be at all. That expression may seem

too strong—but only if we think the mystical is the exceptional rather than a spiritual experience that belongs to the essence of religion and remains accessible to all believers.

In your opinion, then, the religious problem of our time involves changing individual hearts so that individuals are able to hear and to see religiously.

Yes, and that is not easy, because it implies confronting each person with his or her unique responsibility to *decide* on a personal attitude toward existence instead of having it conveyed by society or inherited from ancestors. Each person must find his or her own way in the world. This becoming a Christian "from within" is a daunting task. But I can think of no other that would contribute more to the integration of our culture at the present period. We experience our culture as fragmented; we live on bits of meaning and lack the overall vision that holds them together in a whole.

Some postmodern writers pride themselves on the liberating absence of a defining unity. But most of us feel lost in a disconnected universe. We may feel attracted to noncommittal open-endedness. But to survive as human beings we need some coherent meaning in our lives. This may be one of the reasons why the integrated Christian culture of the past has suddenly become so attractive to many of our contemporaries. They feel that the fragments of meaning present to us must somehow be united in a manner that modern culture fails to accomplish. Hence they turn to models from the past. Some join ultraconservative religious or political movements, or they lose themselves in mystics of earlier times as if no cultural distance separated us from the past. Such complete reversals that attempt to abolish modern life are, I think, inauthentic ways for trying to achieve the integration our time needs.

Many Christians (I am one of them) may feel nostalgic for a culture that is more God-oriented than ours, but this religious nostalgia must not be allowed to fly us on a magic carpet to a mystical *fata morgana*. Nor must the need for integration seduce us to reinvent a Christian "tradition" (mostly intended for "the masses") for social or political purposes, as some social theorists do today in America. They consider religion essential to cultural integration, but their primary concern is not with the *truth* of faith but with the *order* of society.

To return to Augustine, what can we learn from him? In contrast with us Augustine lived in a world rich with religious meaning.

Augustine's world was more religious than ours, certainly. But he shared our predicament of living in a world in which traditional values have collapsed. It's hard for us to imagine what the end of the Roman Empire must have meant for its citizens. The central questions Augustine addressed in *The City of God*, questions of absolute moment to him and to his contemporaries, were: What or who is responsible for the end of civilization? What can we do about it? In response to these questions Augustine developed a remarkable form of what I would cautiously call a

Christian humanism.

Over the course of his writing life, Augustine combined a number of elements from his fragmented culture—Neoplatonic philosophy, Roman civic morality, the heritage of the great Roman poets, Manichaeism—with his dominant but open-ended Christian faith, into a new synthesis. At first these various components merely formed his own interior life; later they became the seeds of a new culture. But his first concern was to respond to an extremely personal demand. The story of his life in *The Confessions* is not one of self-actualization—it's not the record of what we now would call a "life project." It presents his extremely active life as a constant response to what he sensed to be a divine initiative. *The Confessions* record a dialogue with transcendence in which the first word comes always from the other side. There may be a lesson in this for our own reform plans which all too often—also in religion!—assume the form of a "project."

But Christianity was a new religious force in Augustine's day. Today, as you say, its power to integrate culture has all but disappeared. Does Christianity still have the capacity to renew?

On a personal level, yes, and through a personal renewal it may spread to small communities which in turn could affect the entire culture. But the time of the *res publica christiana*—of what some would call Christendom—is past. Both the secularization of the West and the revolution in communications have converted our society into an intrinsically pluralist one. I expect it to remain so for any foreseeable time. But Christianity has always started with a *personal* conversion of the heart. The case of Augustine reminds us of this primary fact. At a time when culture has become shattered, we, like Augustine, are forced to rebuild it from within. In an odd sort of way, our culture may even be said to foster a move toward such personal renewal by its overwhelming sense of emptiness and its desperate search for a soul. This emptiness itself favors a new openness to transcendence. Our contemporaries experience an intense need for self-integration. (Hence the enormous success of psychoanalysis and methods of self-actualization for other than purely therapeutic purposes.) Whether this need will eventually result in a reintegration on a cultural level I do not know, and I am not overly optimistic about that possibility. But in the end, that is not the Christian's primary concern.

I do not want this last point to be misunderstood. I am not advocating an interiority that isolates the individual or the Christian community from contemporary culture. I am defending an integral and all-integrating Christian humanism, but one that derives its inspiration from within. Christianity has no right to seclude itself from society. Even the contemplative is responsible for the civilization in which he or she lives. By its very nature spiritual life is transformative of all life. The spiritual Christian belongs to a community. That community is, quite naturally, in the first place one of like-minded and of potentially like-minded persons. It includes one's church but also that hidden yet intimate communion of spiritual men and women of other faiths. Christians living in an inevitably pluralist society have an obligation to acquaint themselves seriously,

without giving in to syncretist tendencies—another symptom of the fragmentation of our time—with the presence of the Spirit in other faiths. They must move to a union beyond tolerance and even, as one spiritual thinker has put it, "beyond dialogue."

In addition, Christians are also responsible for the culture in which they live, however unlike-minded it may be. A genuine Christian interiority must provide the inspiration for a humanism capable of living a vigorous, free and open life within one's culture, whatever its condition may be. I see no conflict between an interior life and an integral humanism that embraces, from whatever source it may come, "all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and gracious," as Philippians says. The spiritual Christian is not involved in constant polemics with the surrounding secular world. Since that person's force and strength come from within, he or she can grant society and culture their full autonomy.

It may strike some as odd to hear you speak of the creative possibilities of emptiness and need. Those who admit to a fundamental emptiness in life are usually speaking out of despair, not hope. How is emptiness both absence and religious opening?

Indeed, many people never experience any emptiness at all: they keep themselves too busy to experience much absence of any kind. Yet occasionally some unexpected event may strike them with a numbing sense of the meaninglessness of existence. Suddenly they experience the anguish of sinking away into a life devoid of a solid bottom. The author of Psalm 18 expresses this experience when he writes, "The sorrows of death compassed me ... The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me." At such moments some may experience a mere absence, with no possible alternative. Others may perceive it as a repeal from the abyss, a call for meaning in the midst of despair. It is worth noting that some contemporary literature has made more of this human experience than theology has. Until recently theology often tended to be a self-supporting system that instead of responding to this existential anguish screened it off by its presumed theoretical sufficiency.

On the other side, it is precisely this sense of emptiness that accounts for the strange attraction mystical literature holds for our contemporaries. The mystics also convey a sense of emptiness not entirely unlike the one we experience about existence. For them the absence of God or what John of the Cross called "the night of the spirit" were experiences as acute and painful as what the a-theism of modern culture evokes in us.

But for John of the Cross the dark night of the spirit arrives at the end of a period of absolute self-abnegation. Writers such as John consider it an advanced status in one's personal relationship with God. Are you saying that, culturally, we are offered a shortcut?

No, there is no more than a remote analogy between the modern experience of emptiness and the intense longing for the God whom the mystic knows

to be present though totally absent from experience. The tendency to compare our poverty to mystical riches has been one of the illusions of a time that reduces all differences to our own measure.

I wonder whether the situation that you describe is unique to our time. Do we find parallels in the Bible, for example?

Not exact ones, of course. But biblical writers have been so outspoken in expressing their despair, their abandonment by God, their emptiness, that their words have lent a voice to distressed Jews and Christians of all times. They continue to do so in our own time, however unprecedented our condition may seem.

In fact, the Bible has assumed a unique significance for men and women living in an age of change and confusion. Ideas that previous generations held to be unshakable have turned out to be very shakable indeed, and those still committed to Christian faith are often at a loss as to what precisely it is they ought to believe. In their perplexity they still may turn to the Word. Even when we have no more religious words of our own, the ones on which our faith rests remain with us. No advanced biblical criticism is needed to let these words speak and to give voice to our own feelings of joy or sadness and even of despair. They translate for us what otherwise might remain unexpressed or constricted within the all too narrow limits of private needs and feelings.

The late Henri Nouwen always had the Psalms nearby to bring "before God" the passing moods and attitudes of the day. Another friend, when reading of the horrors occurring in Bosnia-Herzegovina, could only vent his emotion by turning to the Book of Lamentations. Who has not felt at some time the hopelessness voiced in Psalm 3: "How are they increased that trouble me. Many are they that rise up against me. Many there be which say of my soul, there is no help for him in God"? Or when coming out of despair who cannot identify with the words of Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?... Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear... "?

Spiritual life, as Bishop Joseph Butler knew, rests entirely on analogies. The Bible provides the analogies that enable the believer to convey meaning to private experience. But the Word will extend religious comfort only if we allow it to speak in its own name. The first lesson to learn in a time of need is that of listening. Only when we attentively heed the Word can it lift us beyond ourselves and convey divine meaning to private sorrows.

You speak about a kind of listening to the Word that does not require advanced biblical criticism. But many Christians experience serious difficulties with such an immediate encounter with stories and claims—the specific words—of a faith that originated in a remote past in a cultural context that appears so removed from today's reality. In many ways it seems easier to be religious in a general sort of way rather than believing according to the specifics of a particular

historical faith.

That has indeed become a major problem for our contemporaries. I would attribute it in large part to an exclusive and mistaken literalism in our encounter with the sources of revelation. One of the more ominous signs of the spiritual impoverishment of our time is that believers have lost much of the sensitivity needed to perceive the symbolic within the literal. They tend to oppose one to the other: events and words are either symbolic or they are literal. But such a disjunction is fatal. The purely literal reading deprives the paradigmatic events of our faith of their enduring redemptive significance today and reduces an historical religion, such as ours is, to a mere memory. A purely symbolic reading weakens historical events and words to the point where they become simply occasions for creating new symbols for our own age. Many contemporaries caught between the horns of this false dilemma flee their historical faith to take refuge in some kind of abstract deism. But the historical need not be exclusive of the symbolic, and precisely thereby it attains contemporaneity for all times.

An older conception of religious symbols understood them as both concrete, historical realities in their own right and signs referring to an invisible reality. That conception still survives in the Christian theology of the sacraments, according to which ordinary actions become extraordinary in signifying a new conveyance of divine grace. Unfortunately, in their encounter with the equally sacramental words of scripture Christians appear to have largely lost the symbolic meaning. Yet if the words and events of the Gospel narratives are to have more than a historical meaning, subject to the rules of historical criticism, they also must be read as sanctifying symbols that religiously address today's believer.

The concept of a nonspecific general "religiosity" has proven to be untenable. Religion cannot survive on mere feelings or moral intentions. It needs symbols of transcendence, and symbols are by their very nature specific.

We've been speaking about the biblical resources of Christian interiority. But a moment ago you alluded to a likeness in the pursuit of the spiritual life between Christians and members of other faiths. Your view of the spiritual life seems to encourage interfaith encounter.

In our age we have come to understand our faith within the context of the aspirations, desires and needs expressed in so many forms since the beginning of the human race. We have learned to respect these many ways of humankind's longing for God in the light of our own faith. Some Christians have been inspired to integrate pious attitudes and meditative practices derived from other faiths within their own, without betraying Christianity's unique identity. In doing so they are following ancient examples. Christians have received so much from the Hebrew mother faith of which they are no longer aware. Also, from the fourth century on, Greek fathers generously borrowed from Neoplatonic speculation to an extent that, via Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius and Maximus Confessor, late Greek piety has shaped the very nature of Christian mysticism. Why should we

then not be allowed, as even the desert fathers were, to borrow meditative exercises that centuries of pre-Christian practice have left us?

In fact, here also the analogy of faith urges us to see the existence of other religions in the light of God's providence. Buddhist silence may help the Christian in deepening insight into the mystery of the Trinity where the Father is the silent source of the eternal Word. And how could God's omnipresence in Vedantic Hinduism not remind the Christian of the Spirit, *qui replevit orbem terrarum*—who fills the entire world? Such analogies cannot be fortuitous to the Christian mind, and we do well to heed them as signs of a divine Providence that, with loving care, rules not only Christians but all humans,

It would be wrong, however, to regard these analogies as justifying a syncretistic relativism that entitles each person to compose his or her own religious collage. This attitude, all too common today, shows a lack of respect not only for one's own faith but also for those faiths one so casually dismantles for spare parts. It is yet another manifestation of that radical anthropocentrism, the main enemy of sincere religion, that tempts believers to bring the language of transcendence down to the level of purely human wants and choice. Without detracting from the providential nature of other faiths, Christians cannot ignore the fact that this same Providence has led them to a faith that is not a "choice" but, for those chosen to it, an absolute summons. To relativize faith is, I think, to subvert its fundamentally divine character.

You were among the earlier writers who regarded the mystical tradition as a source of religious renewal. Perhaps we should take the opportunity to clarify a basic point. What do you understand by the term *mystical*?

The word has radically changed its meaning, and the change is related to the modern turn to the self as source of meaning and value. This turn, in many respects, has restricted the scope of religious life. Thus, *mystical* now tends to refer to the intensely private, mostly exceptional, experience of God's presence. The original meaning was less restrictive and far less subjective. For Christians of the first three or four centuries it referred to the spiritual meaning "hidden" under the letter of the Bible and, by extension, to the spiritual reality concealed in Christian sacramental symbols. The meaning remained hidden only until the person had been initiated into its deeper sense. Nor was that meaning in any way private. Gradually experience itself (still communal, and not exceptional) assumed greater importance than textual or sacramental meaning. When the individual self came to the fore in the modern age, religious life increasingly came to be interpreted as a private matter. Today we have to live with that somewhat individualist connotation, but there is no need at all for accepting the supposedly exceptional character of the mystical experience; that notion was an 18th-century addition.

I would prefer to consider as *mystical* all that refers to faith as it directly affects human experience. That includes the common Christian intimation

of a divine presence in scripture, religious doctrine, liturgy and nature. To accept this broader meaning would also remove the obstacle that still gives some Protestants—anxious to explore the experience of God—a bad conscience in using a term so connected with a too exclusive spiritual theology. In its more general sense, then, *mysticism* refers to that disclosure and experience of a higher, purer reality which one gratefully accepts without exercising control over it. All great Christian writers assign considerable significance to such experience, Luther and Calvin as well as Teresa or John of the Cross, and for good reason, for without some experience, however humble, few people would be religious, particularly today now that the social pressure for actively belonging to a religious body has become so much weaker. Even Christians disaffected with church services, confused by doctrine, and unconvinced by some principles of moral guidance often appear somehow to remain acquainted with those delicate disclosures of an invisible, inaudible, mysterious presence.

Such a strong emphasis on personal experience alarms some religious thinkers, but for you such experience seems to mean more to the person of our time than it ever did before.

Yes. Precisely because believers are no longer supported in their faith by the community at large, they tend to fall back upon personal experience. Paradoxically, this new prominence of religious experience occurs at a time when that very experience has become both weak and ambiguous in our secular culture—indeed, so ambiguous that many no longer discern it as specifically religious. But religious experience has also become weak. The voice of God is being drowned out by the increasing noise of the ever humming, faxing, ringing world of ubiquitous communications that surrounds us. Even before this century John Henry Newman said in one of his sermons: "He is still here; He still whispers to us, He still makes signs to us. But His voice is too low, and the world's din is so loud, and His signs are so covert, and the world is so restless, that it is difficult to determine when He addresses us, and what He says." Nonetheless the small, thin voice persists, gently urging many toward a specific faith that, they hope, will yield more abundant and more particular disclosures. The experience that leads to faith and that constantly feeds it is no mere intellectual insight, but neither is it a purely emotional occurrence. Taken in isolation, religious experience would not be faith at all, for faith, certainly the Christian one, implies so much more than experience. Faith can never be satisfied with profound insights and wholesome feelings. It requires an active response, a commitment of the whole person. Nevertheless, experience belongs to the essence of religion, even though it never coincides with it.

How should pastors speak about the Christian faith to their congregations? Where does the mystical path intersect with their responsibilities as ministers of the Word?

To speak *of* the religious experience may lead them into the most dangerous corner of all. The communication of personal feelings or the appeal to the feelings of the congregation subjects the divine message to

the constantly changing tides of the human heart. The pastor's task is an objective one: to preach the Word. But *what* the minister preaches is not an objective fact, a moral exhortation or an intellectual doctrine. It possesses an inner, radiating beauty that illuminates the objective message and warms the heart of the believer. To bring out this aesthetic quality of the Word requires more than eloquence or a solid acquaintance with theology. It summons the pastor to be a spiritual person, penetrated by the encompassing presence of the Word, by its mysterious force and by its sublime symbols.

The pastor ought to be a person acquainted with that inner silence in which alone the Word can resonate. Pastors should also be capable of detecting the symbolism both of words and of earthly events—the analogies of faith—through which the deeper meaning of the divine mystery discloses itself. This, I suspect, may be far more important than being timely or relevant. Those who attend services come to hear what is *different* from ordinary life: what is the same they may learn far better from journals at home.

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