

Looking for spirituality in the context of the pandemic in the province of Quebec

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When the international pandemic of Covid-19 struck in the Province of Quebec (Canada), two columnists raised a debate about the necessity of spirituality in such a context. The question is addressed from a short observation of the political and existential experience of a very secular society facing an unprecedented crisis. Spirituality then needs to be redefined and epistemologies must be reconsidered. While collectivities (or authorities) cannot impose spiritual meaning, individuals alone are insufficient to reach the spiritual. A “third term” needs to be considered transcending the opacity of reality through the ordinary of daily life.

The context of the first wave of the pandemic: a debate on spirituality

On March 13th 2020, the Quebec provincial government declared a public health emergency related to Covid-19. Ten days later, on March 24rd, a theologian and columnist, Jocelyn Girard, observed that while only essential services were available to the population, spirituality was not counted among those on the list. Here in Quebec, we belong to a deeply secular society (culturally) whose politics confine the religious and the spiritual to the private sphere; however, Girard still considered that the crisis caused by the pandemic should invite attention to the spiritual dimension of human experience. Existential questions would still need to be addressed collectively as well as individually.

Jocelyn Girard’s chronicle was followed by the opinion of another columnist, who surprisingly argued—referring to Maslow—that, in the end, spirituality should not be considered essential. It is only when one is fed and dressed, when one feels secure and loved, and when one has a certain sense of belonging that spirituality becomes a need. Several comments on this response accused said columnist of promoting an elitist spirituality; one that he considered more like a luxury.

The debate petered out on its own as the following days and weeks were filled with fear and tragedy: the stark lack of medical employees and resources, massive job losses in all fields of work, the painful deprivation of social contact with other human beings, the daily experience of confinement, and technological fatigue, to name a few. By the end of May, our health system had collapsed and thousands of people had died of Covid-19, ten times the usual numbers that would have been reported for regular flu. But what was most shocking was that 90 % of those who died of Covid-19 were frail elderly people who lived in long-term healthcare public facilities, who lacked proper care and were ultimately left alone due to a severe shortage of staff and conditions of isolation. The situation was unprecedented. Whisperings in the media spoke of a quiet genocide. We felt powerless, torn, hurt, and scandalized. The province—indeed, the whole world, which also knew such sufferings – was in shock.

Was spirituality essential then? Where was it experienced and lived out?

In this chapter, I will rely upon a variation of a revised hermeneutical method of practical theology that introduces a situation or issue, examines the circumstances of that situation by relying on non-theological sources, and puts these sources into





conversation with theological insights. The final section will open to what Browning calls the strategic practical theology move.

Reactions to the crisis

I understand spirituality from a secular perspective, as a mode of being and inhabiting our lives and our world. Spirituality has something to do with the quest for meaning and with relationality (that is, our relationship to self, others, the world, and what transcends the human—or God). However, my views on spirituality are also rooted in Christianity. The way I perceive and relate to the world, friends and neighbours is inspired and informed by Christian spirituality; or at least, this is my aim. As such, I try to contribute – spontaneously or with more conscious awareness – to the creation of narratives of meanings that are fostered – or put to test – by the resources of Christian tradition, which I correlate with the concrete situations which I encounter. I consider tradition as a dynamic and living reality, which can grow and develop and be reviewed or challenged with new insights that experience and reflection bring to the fore.

While paying close attention to what was being reported by the media during the crisis of Covid-19, I heard politicians trying to invest their decisions with meaning and drawing up arguments to justify them. They invited us to recognize that we were being confined “for the sake of others”. We were encouraged to follow the rules voluntarily, motivated by the fact that we could “save lives” by doing so. We were deprived of the physical presence of others, whom we missed deeply, for the very sake of those others, whom we might have contaminated and put at risk. The meaning of our actions profoundly and very concretely transformed our connectedness to one another.

Our connectedness to space and our environment both shrunk and enlarged. Our home was our refuge, a room (often the kitchen) became a designated place for working, resting, and Zooming ... We did not sleep much ... Taking a walk was allowed. Every day, we routinely took the same short paths, sometimes brightened up by rainbowed windows and painted rocks. We stopped travelling. And we gradually became aware that the seclusion we felt was shared across the globe: everyone who had a home had to stay confined there. And we realized that it was a grace to have a home. But we cursed that it had become our prison...

Time stopped; time slipped by. Some enjoyed the opportunity to make up for lost time and to rest; others buckled under the pressure to respond to the needs of so many. Still others could do neither.

In summary, our connectedness to self, others, the world, and what is beyond, and our relatedness to time, space and meaning required profound adaptations. And we did or did not have the leisure to consciously reflect upon the new ways by which we need to inhabit and invest our lives.

Questioning the Functional Epistemology of the Spiritual

Health care epistemologies often spontaneously consider the person and his or her functionality, his or her capability to operate as an individual and in society. Care is, thus, most easily addressed in terms of needs: what is needed so that functionality can be restored or sustained? Indeed, the medical practice continues to be rooted in the Hippocratic paradigm, oriented toward scientifically demonstrated improvements in patients’ physical condition. Within this paradigm, procedures and protocols are designed so the best medical results can be expected from a complex situation. Professionals commit to very specific tasks to respond promptly and efficiently to the identified medical needs of a patient.

However, the theologian and ethicist Guy Jobin has strongly argued that spirituality is historically rooted in a different epistemology than contemporary medicine (Jobin, 2013: 74ss). The well-known “holistic paradigm” includes other essential dimensions of human life within the context of caring for patients, namely the psychological, the social, and the spiritual. It puts the whole person’s experience at the center of the healthcare practice. This paradigm often comes to light in units like palliative care, for instance, but is also gaining a hold in other units and with practitioners. Healthcare professionals who wish to practice from a holistic perspective are called to include the spiritual needs of their patients.

Within Christian tradition, spirituality is often addressed in terms of desires instead of needs (Barnes 2020; Roy 2010; Garceau 1997). Spirituality seems to relate to a different dimension of our being, not because it is disconnected from our body – on the contrary – but because it is experienced in a more complex manner. One can truly thrive spiritually, and this thriving needs to be cared for, channeled and nourished (Barnes 2020). But, as the biblical texts remind us in their use of words such as “thirst” and “hunger” when referring to our endur-

ing quest for spiritual wholeness, we can never be truly “satiated” spiritually. Garceau is helpful here, when he distinguishes between needs, which can be fulfilled, and desires, which only deepen and constantly flow toward the infinite. On the one hand, an appropriate response to vital needs can be measured, granted and evaluated. After a meal, one is no longer hungry. In a medical setting, a question could be: “What does this body/person need so breathing is secured while general anesthesia is performed during a surgery?” Or, what does a patient need to alleviate his or her pain from a severe case of Covid-19. Scientific research will recommend specific protocols, techniques and dosages based on an efficiency that has been demonstrated in most patients, in similar conditions and situations.

On the other hand, healthy relational dynamics tend to deepen the “desire” to get to know a friend or a spouse, to enjoy their presence, to participate in the momentum of gift and counter-gift, bearer of a specific quality of life. Relational activities, far from being perfect, can be invested as if they belong to the realm of needs as well as desire. At times, human companionship or care is simply vital, for example to a newborn, but not only to those. It also happens that some people use or instrumentalize others to fulfill their needs, and in that case, are never being satiated. But genuine care and love rather correspond to dynamics of desire. Within this perspective, desire produces self-gift and freedom, not only “attracting” the “object” of desire but more readily participating in a life-giving (and at times suffering) space beyond self.

Hence, desire would better describe maturing spirituality. Spirituality is, indeed, both vital need and a luxury. As Maas puts it: “spirituality is really an essential necessity, or perhaps it’s precisely that luxury which is so indispensable for real vitality” (Maas 2011, 77). But spirituality, or faith, cannot be reduced to its functionalities. Maas continues:

One has to realize that one is using elements [from the spiritual traditions] which had and have a foundation and a *Sitz im Leben* in the relationship between the human person and the Infinite God. Whenever these elements are taken out of the context of the relationship with God, whenever they are removed from the perspective of gazing towards the Infinite and placed within the finite context of solving individual or social problems, apart from any religious perspective, then they have a much smaller space in which to function. (Maas 2011, 77)

Spirituality is not meant to solve problems. Its foundations lay in a non-utilitarian philosophy, in a

“gracious” order. Even when public institutions are rooted in secular contexts, the spiritual care they offer would need to be addressed in terms of its own epistemology, from a vision of relationality that goes beyond the human. Hence, “faith can fulfill an anthropological function only when it is understood apart from that function, only when it is grasped independently of that functionality. Or more positively formulated: faith is beneficial at the human level only as a side-effect of dedication to something else, namely, dedication to God” (Maas 2011, 78).

In a secular society that hopes to be inclusive of a large spectrum of spiritualities that ranges from atheist to deeply religious, the relationship with God would need to be “translated” (if such a thing is possible) into a relationship with that which is radically beyond the human, immanent or transcendent. The point is far from simple, but it cannot be overlooked. However, the argument allows for the emergence of a fresh perspective on so-called “secular spiritualities.”

Here, spirituality does not compensate for what might be missing from or malfunctioning in human lives. It has no formal use when considered from a utilitarian perspective. However, because of its relational dynamics, it allows the human being to conceive of a broader viewpoint regarding his or her immediate experience. It opens up a space where hope might be conceivable.

At the Heart of the Spiritual: The Individual?

When the Quebec government wants to relegate spirituality to the private sphere—in what we call in French a “*laïcité fermée*” or a “closed secularism”—its politics are coherent with an anthropology that puts the individuality of the subject of law front and center. According to Christelle Landheer-Cieslak, “one of the particularities of the subject of law described in Quebec’s civil code of 1994 is to be autonomous in all things, communal and institutional, especially religious” (Landheer-Cieslak 2020, 229). This means that the law insists that individual discernment must take precedence in decision-making processes, actions or personal involvement in collective causes, to name just a few. In this context, one could question whether governments are as neutral as they claim, since they can actively reinforce individualization and contribute to the instrumentalization of communities, if not to their dissolution. The individual is thus affirmed as such – paradoxically by a collective institution – and acts



as its own gravity center. Collectivities are ‘atomized’.

It seems that this vision somehow crystallized during the pandemic, and directly affected the spiritual and religious dimensions. Religious gatherings counted among the first to be proscribed and the last to be reinstated. Cultural and familiar ways to collectively celebrate anthropologically significant moments (births, unions of couples, deaths) became almost impossible. And spirituality, deeply connected to human relationality, was deprived of its natural source of nurturance.

Marcel Gauchet raises the modern question of the conjunction between what is individual and what is collective, viewed as a blind spot within contemporary consciousness (Gauchet 2003, 353). Reading Gauchet, the theologian Patrice Bergeron concludes that a reconfiguration occurred concerning what belongs to the private and public spheres (Bergeron 2010, 374). “If religions are rehabilitated in the public sphere, it is as a private source of meaning” (Bergeron 2010, 375). The search for meaning is displaced from its collective core, and becomes a burden that is laid upon the shoulders of individuals who struggle to make sense of life “for themselves”. Hence, religion becomes a private matter.

Multiple implications arise from this observation. Following Gauchet, Bergeron notes the transformation of the societal relationship to religion itself: this includes both a change in the influence of religion on individuals as well as a change in the way religion itself is shaped by people of faith. Questions of values, meanings and ends, although experienced collectively, must be addressed individually. In this context, the transmission of culture and history loses its collective power to support identity building, because of its perceived extrinsic dimension as opposed to inner experience. Therefore, religious (or Christian) transmission becomes highly difficult. These elements also impact contemporary understandings of humans, who are no longer viewed as being shaped by culture. Again, we are invited to reflect on a myriad of anthropological considerations here.

Bergeron’s reading of Gauchet prompts him to raise at least two points that are related to our topic here: the need to revisit and question the status of the *divine* as well as the status of the *world* “without God” – and their impact on present anthropologies. Modernity placed human destiny solely within human hands. The idea of God, while still meaningful, becomes unimaginable, “outside” of our world

(Bergeron 2010, 379). These two perspectives mutually reinforce each other. Our solitude leaves no space for an ultimate Other, while God’s perceived estrangement from our reality prompts us to take full responsibility for our actions and future. God’s works in our world become inconceivable. And we are led to believe that we are solely responsible for our own (personal) destinies.

The pandemic and the way it was managed may have helped us realize the price of – and the pain that comes with – such a unilateral vision.

The individual injured by politics?

Covid-19 forced populations and their governing bodies to recognize their potential power and to acknowledge the limits of their visions, orientations and actions. Yet the scope of influence allotted to spirituality, even when restricted to its individual expression, was not all that clear. It was put to question and debated, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: is spirituality essential, or a luxury? Religious representatives from diverse confessions repeatedly requested that their members be safely allowed to perform the rituals that would comfort their mourning or foster their resilience and hope, in face of adversity. Therefore, the question of our interest here might not strictly be limited to our individual or collective access to spirituality but rather might concern the contribution of a third term in the equation: the impact of political orientations and decisions on the available space wherein spirituality can be expressed and worked out.

Dominique Jacquemin observed, in a conference entitled “Spirituality ‘Masked’ By Health Standards” held in February 2021, that while communities and societies need common norms to rely on in order to “function”, what is accepted as a collective “norm” (sometimes) casts the human aside (Jacquemin 2021). Although it is normally meant to protect the population, the norm, when considered on its own and uniformly applied to all, divorces human experience from the global view of the situation. Quebec counted among a handful of geographical regions to decree the strictest sanitary measures. In the end, we believe that these efforts truly contributed to the saving of lives. But the stress and pressure that they caused stirred a rather strong response from the population, which even laid siege in exasperation after almost two years of this regime.

Imposing a normative space for religion or spirituality to restore their collective function might re-

spond to the first epistemological paradigm we exposed earlier. This politic would recognize a collective need to access realities beyond the material and to acknowledge a deeper dimension of our existence. But it also clearly risks denying individual experiences, hindering discernment processes, and restraining the life-giving (and chaotic) dimension of spirituality.

The unforeseen critical situation caused by the pandemic might have been inevitable. The whole healthcare system was heavily put to the test – and it collapsed in many ways. But Jacquemin's plea is that spirituality should be reintroduced as a *condition* of existence, integrating people's individuality, their history, and their relationality, none of which can be separated from their identity. In a context where sociability was strongly restricted, and where people were deprived of their relationality (being ordered to keep a distance from others), the capability to find significance in daily life becomes impeded, risking a disconnection from our genuine humanness. The increase in mental and emotional distress as well as the rising number of resignations in the healthcare milieu can attest to this secondary crisis, created by the politics adopted to control the unprecedented viral attack.

What we have seen, in many developed countries, has been the treatment of too many *anonymous* bodies, without any sense of individual stories or identity. Relationality was also deeply transformed as interpersonal contacts became threatening, carrying the risk of contagion. The pandemic might have exacerbated the limits of our contemporary anthropology. Human beings found themselves in peril; God was outside the world; spirituality seemed lost in the masked crowd. A way of "relating together" seemed to be missing. Individuals alone cannot sustain spirituality.

So where did spirituality stand?

Looking back at community and collectivity, where did spirituality stand in it all? Official bearers, as it were, of spirituality were also put to test. Churches and places of worship were closed and religious communities faced an authentic crisis – which sometimes bore fruit, but not always.

Meanwhile, I was surprised to see evidence of spirituality expressing itself in new or more visible ways in three rather unexpected areas of the public sphere: education, arts, and journalism.

During the first months of the confinement, even when facing technological challenges, the demand for online education, courses, seminars, and webinars, rose significantly. Courses or seminars related to spiritual or existential topics, or to ethical and societal issues, usually attended by a few selected participants, attracted hundreds of them. The imposed sudden halt impacted the societal impetus previously enmeshed in its 'business as usual'. When forced to stop in this way, many chose to take the time to reflect, or to learn new perspectives, question, gauge or develop, adapt and transform their ways of action. In a word, and referring to Jacquemin again, through a learning process, many took the road of "interiority". Learning becomes a way to connect and open oneself to the world beyond the self. Therefore, learning turns into a process or a journey, which cultivates a certain transcending of the self, which, in turn, lets spirituality – even if only partially – emerge.

Spirituality finds a spontaneous expression in the arts. Emotions, attitudes, intuitions towards self, others, the world, or what transcends us, find a language through arts, which are often attuned to interiority. The arts can express hope and despair, meaning and absurdity, destruction and creativity, often in conjunction with personal and collective inner dynamics. Although spirituality concerns both joy and suffering and can be both challenging or soothing, I consider its holistic dynamic to lead towards fuller and broader humanness and never its destruction. During the pandemic, while public art venues were cancelled (theaters, museums, and concert halls were all closed), a multitude of artists (many of whom had become unemployed) creatively attempted to bring beauty to the fore and their art served as reminders of care and compassion to our daily lives. It is fascinating to notice that solo concerts "reached out" to us in our homes, connecting us to music and beauty. Photographs and visual arts were shared on social media – perhaps more than usual – accompanied by meditative thoughts or spiritual sayings. These activities, already familiar to many, allowed one person to reach out to vast numbers, sharing their finds with others, and planting seeds of beauty (through images) and care (through shared messages) in many different places. New initiatives also emerged out of the new means of communication that videoconferences allowed for. These means brought new potential to virtual contacts, while also pressing their users to learn (or readopt) new rules of communication. How much I



was then impressed when I discovered collective music made of gathered solos coordinated and then synchronized by competent technicians: the works of many. “Mosaics” of musicians or actors succeeded in breaking the “walls” of isolation – in reality, as well as on screens – to share music or stories¹. Communities created a virtual simultaneity which allowed artists to pursue the creation of their art and to offer it to many, fostering our hope. Again, spirituality can be recognized here.

Even some journalists and columnists decided to write about much more than objective information: they voiced collective pains and sorrows, critique and opposition; they also revitalized shared values and hope. In doing so they endorsed a social role beyond the mere exhibition of facts or opinions. Rather, they sustained and nourished – through words and ideas – our human capacity to ponder and wonder, reminding us of a sense of community in which we are bound together (however imperfectly) in sorrow and in hope. I identify some of these journalists and columnists as true prophets as they boldly named what needed to be exposed and as they attempted to sustain our courage in the process. Spirituality was also in action here.

So where was spirituality in this time of pandemic in Québec? Religious institutions might have been silenced in many ways. Nevertheless, they remained active and pled politically for the right to collectively express and share spiritualities, hope and faith. At the same time, spontaneous collectivities or even secular organizations freely contributed to the relaying of sustaining means of spirituality to communities that hungered for such human depths. So in the end, where was spirituality? Reflecting on

this question, I am somehow relieved to confirm that spirituality was very much present, but certainly not where I was expecting it to be. Then again, is this not the way of God?

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¹ See for example: Symphonie confinée. La tendresse. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEjvRktXeis&ab_channel=ValentinVander ; On fait comme si. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csnxBimwfl8&ab_channel=FlorianMARTINET<NeuerAbsatz/>