

## **Much Ado About Something: A Vision of Christian Maturity**

**by Dr Larry Culliford**

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In this engaging and accessible book, Larry Culliford offers a rich review of the nature of personal spiritual growth, from a specific but not narrow viewpoint. In his previous work, the author has primarily considered spirituality in psychological, health and developmental contexts, but here he brings his insights firmly into the Christian milieu, exploring them from the standpoint of his own faith.

In a world where some Western theologians and policy-makers have a tendency to elide 'faith' and 'Christianity' to a point where propositions become impossible to follow; and others assume that the census figures indicate the death of Christianity and hence of all religious practice, Culliford's approach is refreshing. He acknowledges without regret or triumph the continuing hegemony of the Christian heritage in the common life of the nation, and recognizes the flourishing of other major faith traditions as equally important in formulating any arguments about individual spiritual development.

Culliford's view of spiritual growth starts with a review of the way in which the left and right sides of the brain function and interact, to produce respectively a 'persona' or constructed identity that can cope with the everyday demands of life, and a 'spiritual self', the true person. The two are placed in tension with one another as the former clings to 'attachments' and 'aversions' while the latter seeks to break these bonds. Culliford creates a model that he calls 'the arc of life', covering six stages of spiritual development after infancy: egocentric, conditioning, conformist, individual, integration and universal. The universal stage produces the 'enlightened self' or 'full spiritual maturity'. Underlying the arc is a baseline, the 'spiritual self' from which the arc moves away to its highest point, the time at which worldly ambition, attachments and aversions are at their strongest, and then may return fully or partially to its baseline depending on the stage of maturity reached.

Following the Wordsworthian idea of the child as 'pristine', Culliford sees this in Christian terms: the infant is born 'imbued with the Holy Spirit', with a need to return to this state, and a necessity of moving through the stages of the 'arc' in order to do so: these stages are described in the subsequent chapters of the book.

The 'arc of life' can present quite a difficult concept, in that authors such as James Woodward and Keith Albans, contemplating the spiritual life of older people, have seen spiritual development as an trajectory that continues upward when the health of mind and body have already peaked and are in a downward decline. Culliford's 'peak', in contrast, is the point of least spiritual awareness and the 'separation of flesh and spirit' (p.76), and the second half of his arc represents the return to 'enduring satisfaction'

(ibid). However, Culliford would, I think, be in agreement with these experts on ageing that people can get 'stuck' at various stages of maturity if they cannot move beyond conformity, or do not have the opportunity or capacity to explore the 'sense of purpose and meaning in life' (p.84).

One of the many fascinating insights the author offers, is that of the ambiguous role of the church in promoting spiritual maturity. He proposes that the church can in fact let down older people by encouraging the tasks associated with the first half of life, and not 'promot[ing] spiritual enquiry and development' (p.123) needed in the 'more holistic second half' (ibid). Worship and faith remain important, but 'we have somehow to relinquish ... even religious attachments and aversions' (p.203). Failure to do so leads to the mindset of Crusaders and Jihadis, stuck in 'conformity' and unable to exercise the tolerance that brings people closer to a loving God.

Culliford's book is centred on the personal journey to spiritual fulfilment, and in particular on achieving this through Christian belief, contemplation, catharsis and 'lysis' from bonds of attachment. He does not explore as fully as one may have hoped, the role of relationships in finding meaning and peace, in spite of 'love' being a major theme in the book. My own work in the field of spirituality and older people indicates that it is frequently relationships with family, friends, carers and the community that enable discussion, exploration, reconciliation and ultimately spiritual contentment. Culliford suggests that the move towards spiritual maturity is followed by improved relationships, but as relationships also play their part, perhaps this should rather be seen as an iterative process.

Similarly. Culliford's focus on 'turnaround', to which a chapter is devoted, gives possibly undue emphasis to his theory that 'something happens' to move people towards spiritual maturity; he also calls this an 'awakening' due to a 'shock' (p.148) that promotes lysis and catharsis. While this may well happen in some cases, and the author gives several examples, recorded conversations with older people suggest that it is also possible to move gently and gradually towards spiritual fulfilment, as life presents more time for reflection and losses become, if no less sad, accepted with greater resignation.

References to 'love', as already mentioned, provide a *leitmotif* throughout the book, although the author never quite defines the love that he posits as the most important part of humanity, Christianity and faith. The title of the book is a reference to the dissonance between, and eventual resolution through love for Beatrice and Benedick in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Culliford explores the importance of love throughout, quoting Teilhard de Chardin: 'Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfil them' (p.70). He contrasts 'true, selfless love' with the emotions that can distort it such as 'sexual attraction, dependency and possessiveness' (p.80) (although the first of these was surely a factor for Beatrice and Benedick?). Later, he talks of the maternal bond as 'one of the purest examples of love' (p.90), and the 'true nature of God' as 'love' (p. 99).

Perhaps it does not matter too much that Culliford does not discern or distinguish among these different expressions of love, but one is left with the feeling that he has somehow judged between them, though less certain of his verdict.

For myself, as an inter-faith practitioner, some of the most interesting and valuable insights offered by Culliford are those pertaining to the relationships between faiths and spirituality, from a Christian perspective. It is, again, the theme and prism of love that leads to these insights. Because 'the nature of God is love', and 'love breeds ... acceptance ... rather than conflict', it so follows that 'partisan theologies and ideologies are ... a mark of spiritual immaturity' (p. 99). This observation refers back to the nature of the divided brain: the left side concerned with dualities such as 'black/white, right/wrong, either/or'; while the right side sees the 116 BOOK REVIEWS 'both/and', the unitary, holistic and spiritually mature picture. Culliford quotes from Romans 10.12: 'the same Lord is the Lord of all, and is generous to all who call on Him'. So, while the book is avowedly Christian-centric, Culliford nevertheless recognizes the dangers of exclusive thinking. When Christianity (and by implication any faith) 'becomes rigid and inflexible, and claims of superiority are made, the preconditions of division and conflict are met' (p. 123); 'the time has passed for any group to claim privileged knowledge' (p. 124).

This rejection of religious exclusivity forms an important part of the author's argument for spiritual maturity, as without it we will be unable to benefit from the transformational insights offered by all the great faith traditions, in particular the 'enrichment' of the Eastern faiths, which are more holistic in nature. In making this assertion, and throughout the book, Culliford acknowledges the profound influence of Thomas Merton, who described his own struggle to move on from 'individuality' and who also experienced and wrote of different religious and spiritual practices, and how they amplified his Christianity.

The problem with a book rich in ideas is that the author may choose not to explore them all, and the lack I felt most — although it had not in fairness been promised — was any exploration of shared spiritual life. There are references to Jung's theory of the 'collective unconscious', and also to the collective spirituality of tribes, but the latter are seen to have reached the 'conformity' stage with no need to move beyond this as they are 'as spiritually mature as their society require[s]' (p. 117).

Culliford does, temptingly, allude to the interplay between spiritual inhibition at an early stage of the 'arc' and world problems. For example, totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes and all their concomitant horrors, are explained in terms of the 'egocentric stage' leader and the 'conformist stage' followers (p. 111). However, Culliford primarily equates spiritual maturity with the drive to benefit others and 'contribute to mankind's spiritual evolution' (p. 171) on an individual basis, for example as a doctor, social worker or pastor. In fact, the author says of this final stage of the arc, 'A desire for things (and for things to be different) fades, contentment with what is (and the way things are) remains' (p. 170).

Where does this leave us as citizens of the world? Should we not be making pilgrimages to protest against climate change, or encouraging our governments to be more compassionate? Culliford says, 'As individuals we can do little to prevent catastrophe, to make spiritual development happen at the wider cultural level ... except by taking care of

our own personal development' (p. 202). I would so like to see him produce further work that explores the interplay between the personal and the public in spiritual terms.

In summary, *Much Ado About Something* is informative, enlightening and a pleasure to read; the fact that it raises more questions than it pursues could be seen either as a merit or a fault — depending on Culliford's future plans.

The clarity of approach in this book and the implications of the author's ideas for personal and social well-being should attract a readership that includes those seeking insights into their own spiritual life; those with an interest in mental health, spirituality and the human brain; and those with pastoral roles, especially with older people.

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