

“Jesus Today: a Spirituality of Radical Freedom” by Albert Nolan

When I heard the author introducing his book he began by answering the question, why another book on spirituality? He answered by saying that some of the books on this subject totally ignore Jesus, and most of them treat Jesus as the **object** of spirituality. But Jesus had his own spirituality and it is from this that we should be seeking to learn. Most Christians, with a few exceptions, do not take Jesus seriously. We do not love our enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive seventy times seven, bless those who curse us, share what we have with the poor and put all our trust and hope in God. However, the crisis humankind is now facing needs the kind of spirituality that Jesus offers us, one which deals with the rampant individualism and self-centredness which have brought us to the edge of disaster. He sees this spirituality as having relevance beyond the Church which is why he has tried to write this book, not only for Christians but also for those who no longer go to church and those who no longer call themselves Christians.

If we are to follow Jesus we will have to take seriously what is happening in the world around us. Jesus’ spirituality was thoroughly contextual. He not only read the signs of the times himself but taught his followers to do the same (Mt.16: 3-4).

Part I of the book, therefore, has four chapters on what the author considers to be some of the major signs of our **own** times.

1. A Hunger for Spirituality.

He opens this chapter by discussing, “The Da Vinci Code” which he describes as a novel abounding in historical errors and considerable ignorance. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore its significance because the book is a very clear barometer as to where many people are today. They have no confidence in what we regarded as the certainties of the past, whether they be scientific, religious, cultural or historical. Everything is being questioned and nothing is taken for granted, no matter what authority it is supposed to have. We live in an age of unprecedented skepticism. Academics call this attitude of mind ‘**Postmodernism**’ and Nolan goes on to discuss it.

Modernity and Postmodernism

Modernity was the age of reason which began with the Enlightenment. It coincided with the scientific age shaped by Newton’s mechanistic worldview. It was characterized by the certainty of progress in which science, technology and reason were expected to overcome all problems, whilst things like religion, morality and art were relegated to the realms of private belief and concern. The two world wars of the 20th century, and the many conflicts since, have undermined this confidence. At the same time communism, which had its own vision of human progress, was seen to be oppressive and totalitarian and its failure became evident with the collapse of one regime after another. Religion fared no better as scandals have rocked the churches and ecclesiastical authority was undermined in one way after another. People used to find security in their respective cultures but, today, many of these cultures are also perceived to be slowly disintegrating and there is less and less for people to hang on to. In short, our age is one of deep insecurity and this is heightened by the bad news we are always hearing of wars, murders, violence, terrorism and natural disasters.

One reaction to all of this is the attempt to return to the past as seen in the different forms of fundamentalism which prevail in our day, Christian, Islamic, Jewish and Hindu. All of these can be seen as attempts to grasp at the illusion of certainty. Another response is the one which is gaining momentum every day: the search for an appropriate spirituality. Obviously, this too can be a way of escape, and sometimes is, but Nolan sees it as an authentic response. Not that people have found what they are looking for but the **hunger** is all around us and it takes many forms. He underlines the role that Thomas Merton has played in helping to address this need and goes on to stress how mysticism has come to the fore in our day. Mystics used to be seen as rather odd and eccentric but today, their emphasis on **experiencing** God and the vision they offer of unity with God and all things, are seen to have widespread relevance. Ironically, spirituality is being seen as something separate from

religion and Nolan says that there is a very powerful hunger for spirituality today that cannot find the nourishment it seeks in churches, mosques, synagogues, or temples.

Many church-going Christians have written off this secular search for spirituality as “New Age” but, as Nolan points out, there is no one coherent spirituality or movement that can carry this label. What is clear is that many young people are attracted to spiritual things whilst no longer being interested in doctrines and dogmas, and the outreach from Taizé, amongst young people, illustrates this.

The Crisis of Individualism

The Western industrialized world idealises the self-made, self-sufficient, autonomous individual who stands by himself or herself, not needing any one else. Freedom and happiness are equated with independence and self-sufficiency. Individualism is not new. What is new is the growing awareness of its destructiveness from almost every point of view. The search for spirituality can also be self-centred, which is why the mystics have always said that we must undertake the difficult and painful task of moving beyond our self-centredness, individualism and ego. What is now being seen is that the struggle for justice itself, essential as it is, can also founder unless it is balanced with **personal liberation** because self-centredness invariably leads to a new kind of oppression as the next generation of leaders succumb to the temptations of power, prestige and wealth.

The tragic irony of Western individualism is that it threatens the very freedom it hoped to achieve. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the destruction of our environment. Ecologically, it has brought us to the edge of chaos. Many commentators have said that we know what needs to be done regarding global warming and the destruction of the planet. What we lack is the will to do it and our short-sighted, selfish interests are the main contributors to this.

Nolan, concludes this chapter by noting that Freud, Jung and other psychologists use the word ‘ego’ in different ways but that the most common use today is in reference to the self-centred self, the “I”. He ends by giving some of its key manifestations.

3. Globalisation from Below

History books tell of military victories and conquests, of great civilizations and amazing discoveries and inventions. What they hide is the enormity of human suffering that accompanied these events. Millions died or were maimed in the two world wars of the last century but the horrors of slavery and the miseries in factories and mines during the industrial revolution can be cited as but two of very many examples. Often these sufferings were made worse by a deep sense of powerlessness. There seemed to be no way out. Religion offered some consolation but it also added to the suffering by preaching hellfire and suggesting that sufferings of this kind were sent by God as his way of bringing about holiness. The theology of predestination was an added burden.

In more recent times, we have seen people challenge these different forms of inhumanity, and various revolutions have shown that “the people” do not have to be powerless. There have been significant gains from these movements: the abolition of slavery, the reversal of colonization, and the ending of certain kinds of racism in places like Nazi Germany and South Africa. One result of all of this is that new voices are being heard on behalf of the previously voiceless.

The truth about history is that we seem to replace one form of suffering with another. In our own day we are witnessing world suffering and one of the causes, apart from the scourge of HIV/AIDS is the huge divide between rich nations and poor. Millions of people are being marginalized and excluded because there is no place for them in the new economics and, what we call ‘globalization’, is often a new form of colonization and imperialism which carries with it a thoroughly materialistic world-view. Money rules the day but no nation can dominate the world with money unless it has the backing of a powerful military machine. What we are witnessing is the dominance of what Nolan calls ‘the American Empire’ which like all empires will eventually fall. What is significant is the ground swell of voices, from below, which have

begun to protest against the arrogance, the values and the methodology of American influence in our global environment.

4. Science after Einstein

For me, this chapter dealing with science since Einstein was the most fascinating of these early chapters. Nolan gives one example after another to illustrate the shift that has taken place in the scientific worldview and, if I read him aright, he has, without intending to do so, given us the basis for answering Richard Dawkins' aggressive arguments in favour of atheism. Nolan's conclusion is, "Suddenly, from being an obstacle, science has become an aid, a kind of springboard into spirituality and mysticism. This is not because science can prove anything about God or faith. Rather, science has now recognized its own limitations. Today it is the scientists who are saying, 'we don't know, and for the most part we can never know. It is a mystery'" (page 45).

The author ends **Part 1** with a telling metaphor which illustrate the dangers and opportunities inherent in the situation humankind is now facing and in this context we are invited to consider anew the spiritual wisdom of Jesus of Nazareth. **Part 2** has three chapters dealing with Jesus' Spirituality.

i) A Revolution

Jesus was not a reformer, patching up an old garment, but a revolutionary, turning things upside down. He was subversive of almost everything his contemporaries took for granted. He spoke of turning the other cheek instead of taking revenge; of loving enemies instead of hating them; of doing good to those who hate you and blessing those who curse you; and he taught that we are to forgive endlessly (seventy times seven). Even more revolutionary, was what he had to say about rich and poor. The assumption at that time was that God had blessed the rich but Jesus said that people could regard themselves as specially fortunate if they were not one of them because the rich will find it very difficult to get into the Kingdom of God. Jesus was also uncompromising in his belief that all human beings were equal in dignity and worth. Hence he treated the blind, the beggars, the outcasts and the marginalized with the same respect as was given to those of high rank and status and he was totally unconcerned about what this did to his own reputation. Luke shows us how Jesus gave special dignity to women.

John Dominic Crossan described a parable as a story that undermines the status quo and reveals its contradictions. Hence at a time when the Pharisees were held in very high regard, Jesus could upset the assumptions of virtually everyone by telling stories, and making statements, that showed how tax collectors and prostitutes could enter the Kingdom ahead of them. "The first shall be last and the last first". Nolan uses the examples of the Good Samaritan, the Labourers in the Vineyard and the Prodigal Son to demonstrate how these stories subverted the current norms and attitudes.

Jesus' spirituality was based on the Torah yet he turned this on its head as well, not by rejecting it but by relativizing it. Nolan says, "Jesus felt perfectly free to break the law whenever observance of it would do harm to people" (page 55). He adds that, in the religious culture of the day, the law was not the Ten Commandments only but also the comprehensive system of ritual purity and cleansing associated with the Holiness Code. Jesus saw **these** laws as being linked to human traditions which distorted God's original intentions.

Jesus connected the Kingdom of God with a new family. He sees his own mother as blessed, not because she is his biological mother but because she "hears the Word of God and keeps it". Our Lord did, in effect, create a new community, a family of those who love one another, and it is this which accounts for the early Christians addressing one another as brother and sister.

Our Lord was aware of the wide variety of expectations amongst his contemporaries relating to the forthcoming "reign of God" and the Messiah. He turned these upside down as well. Only with reluctance did he allow himself to be spoken of as the Messiah and, even when he was, he was at pains to show that this Messiah would be a servant, and a suffering one at that. Hence, when he eventually died on the cross, he did so as an apparent failure. Nothing

could contradict the conventional attitudes as to what constituted a life of blessing more than this. "The one who saves his life is the one who will lose it but the one who loses his life for my sake and the Gospel will find it. Even today, this is a complete reversal of what people regard as success over against failure; of life over against death. What Jesus did was to show what life could be like without all the distortions and illusions of self-centredness as seen in such things as pride, envy, jealousy, self-importance and isolation from others. So, ultimately, our Lord's revolution was one which puts things right side up.

ii) Jesus as Prophet and Mystic

Whatever else our Lord's contemporaries said about Jesus, they agreed he was a prophet. The writer then goes on to outline some of the key characteristics of the prophetic vocation:-

- Prophets are people who speak when others remain silent and they will be particularly concerned to address to their **own** society, country or religious institution. They were not usually part of the authority-structure of their society and religious institution and were often seen as a threat to the establishment.
- Prophets are typically people who can foretell the future, not as fortune tellers, but as people who have learnt to read the signs of the times.
- Jesus spoke, as most prophets do, for and on behalf of God but, in his case, there was a change of tone and emphasis. Instead of the usual, "Thus says the Lord" Jesus often said "But I say to you".
- Prophets experience a special calling from God and a special closeness to God. Behind our Lord's intense activity there was a life of constant prayer and profound contemplation.

Nolan goes on to emphasise that Jesus was also a mystic, and notes that all mystics speak about an experience of union and oneness with God. They also tell us that no words or images are adequate to describe this union. We do need to use words and metaphors, inadequate as they are, and Jesus does so by speaking of God as his Abba. Nolan says that it would be too trivial to translate this as 'Daddy' but on our Lord's lips it is a term of deep intimacy and closeness. It was this Abba relationship which was the source of Jesus' wisdom, confidence and radical freedom.

Not long ago, there was a tendency to separate the spiritual from the political; mysticism from prophetic action. These are false dichotomies because in the Judeo-Christian tradition prophets were mystics and mystics were prophets. Many of the great contemplatives and mystics in the Church's history have been deeply involved in the affairs of their day and have often spoke out boldly against the injustices in both Church and State. Nolan believes that anyone wishing to take Jesus seriously will have to be prepared to become a prophet and a mystic and he quotes Karl Rahner, "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all". However, this kind of discipleship will also involve entering into the kind of Abba-like relationship with God that Jesus spoke about and the New Testament suggests as much. Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, "I go to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God (John 20: 17, Cf Rom. 8:15).

iii) A Spirituality of Healing

Jesus was clearly a healer but his ministry of healing was holistic. Although our distinctions between physical, psychological and spiritual healing were unknown in the Bible our Lord's healing activity, as reflected in Scripture, clearly went beyond miraculous cures. His practice of treating people as unconditionally forgiven and as no longer guilty or sinful had a powerful effect upon those who had been told again and again that they were guilty. It is easy to imagine how people could be moved to tears by this revelation (Luke 7: 38, 50). There is a powerful illustration of the effects of forgiveness in the story of the paralytic (Mk 2: 2-12)

Our Lord's ministry of preaching and teaching also brought healing. Nolan invites us to imagine the impact the Good News must have had on the peasant people of Galilee as they learnt how they were loved and accepted before God. Our Lord's dinner parties, for those regarded as 'sinners', conveyed a deep sense of acceptance after years of hurt and rejection.

Jesus had a spirituality of healing arising again from his relationship with God as Abba. God is a loving father who loves and forgives all people - men, women and children -

unconditionally. Whilst Jesus was extremely critical of his society he was never judgemental, nor do we find him moralizing, scapegoating or imputing guilt. As Jesus saw it, people needed healing not blame and the people the Pharisees called 'sinners', Jesus regarded as sick and in need of a doctor (Mark 2:17)" (pages 79 & 80).

The other metaphor that Jesus used to describe people's need was that of being '**lost**' (Luke 15). Nolan shows the relevance of such an image for the peasants that Jesus knew in Galilee. But, of course, it was not just for the poor who were lost. Jesus saw the scribes, the Pharisees and the rich in the same condition, though they were reluctant to admit it.

Jesus taught his followers not to judge but Nolan, helpfully, draws the distinction between imputing guilt and condemning people, on the one hand, and using our judgement in various situations to discern right from wrong.

The chapter ends with a discussion on the power of faith.

In **Part 3**, the focus shifts to exploring a practical spirituality for today based on that which we see in Jesus. Personal transformation is, however, a long term process. Conversion may happen suddenly but the Christian life itself is a journey, which is why the earliest followers of Jesus were called 'people of the way'.

Silence and Solitude

The first hurdle we have to overcome, if we wish to take the way of Jesus seriously, is our own **busyness** because it distracts us from self-awareness, awareness of the **real** world and, above all distracts us from God. Jesus himself, in his ministry, was a very busy person yet he made it his practice to withdraw regularly to the 'desert', the lonely quiet place. On the basis of his example, we will also need to discover our own equivalent of the desert. Two words sum up the desert experience: **solitude** and **silence** but, in the case of the latter, it is inner silence that we must strive for.

Meditation, for most of us, began with thinking and reflecting on scripture and the things of God. Today, however, the word is sometimes being used differently. Instead of describing a certain kind of **mental** activity it is often applied to exercises which are aimed at calming the mind and heart with a view to arriving at inner silence. Nolan gives examples of some of the exercises which are being used.

Another ingredient of such prayer is **relaxation** which is intended to counter the effects of modern-day stress. Most good books on prayer emphasize the importance of taking the body seriously if we are to pray meaningfully.

Most of us live in the past or in the future rather than the present. We dwell on what happened yesterday and we think or worry about what lies ahead. Jesus emphasized 'Today' (Mt.6:25-34; Lk.12:22-31) and as we learn to live in the present moment we become more **aware** of God, of ourselves and of the real world around us.

Getting to Know Oneself

In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus says, "One who knows everything else but does not know him/herself knows nothing". All mystical writers agree. Teresa of Avila claims that, "one day of humble self-knowledge is better than a thousand days of prayer" and Meister Eckhart adds, "no one can know God who does not first know him/herself". Our Lord's picturesque way of underlining the need for self-knowledge was to use the ludicrous and amusing illustration of trying to get a speck out of a brother's eye while still having a huge log in your own! Nolan links the log with the selfish self, the ego, and he underlines the urgency of learning to recognize those things which make hypocrites of us, consciously or unconsciously. The hypocrite is one who pretends to be what he/she is not by presenting a false image to the world. One way to get to know ourselves is to observe our egos at work; how it tempts us to indulge in feelings of pride, superiority, self-righteousness and self-pity. The author stresses once again that the ego is not our real self. The ego, however, cannot be conquered or annihilated, as many ascetics have tried to do in the past. It can only be sidelined or transcended.

Nolan suggests some signs that will help us recognize our **true** selves:-

- 1) A strong desire to know the truth about ourselves no matter how humiliating.
- 2) The ability to laugh at the antics of our egos. (And here I am reminded of a talk I heard recently by a RC Sister who suggested as an extra beatitude, "Blessed are they who can laugh at themselves: they will always be entertained"!))
- 3) Being genuinely moved with compassion for others in need.
- 4) Being truly grateful for the many gifts life offers to us
- 5) Having genuine feelings of sorrow and regret as we own responsibility for the harm that we have done in the past.

With a Grateful Heart

Nolan stresses that the virtues of thankfulness and gratitude are essential ingredients in the spirituality he is commending and to make his point he gives us several quotations. "To be a saint is to be fuelled by gratitude, nothing more and nothing less" writes Ronald Rolheiser and, according to the liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, only one kind of person transforms the world spiritually, and that is someone with a grateful heart. "If the only prayer I ever say is Thank You...that is enough" (Meister Eckhart). However, I found Nolan's attempts to link these virtues with Jesus less convincing. Whilst it is hard to imagine that Jesus was not a person who overflowed with thankfulness, the evidence to prove that this was so seems to me to be somewhat limited.

The daily practice of praying prayers of thanksgiving is very strongly urged and Nolan quotes St Paul's, "Pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances" (1Thess. 5:17-18). He suggests that thanksgiving prayers should be very specific and lists a number of examples of what he has in mind. However, because the ego is always at work, we must move beyond thanking God for all the blessings 'I' have received and also rejoice in **everything** that is good, in my own life and in that of others. True thankfulness for the gifts and blessings that others have, even though they have been denied to me, is the true test of real gratitude and a great counter to envy and jealousy.

Nolan argues that prayers of thanksgiving can change our whole perspective on life. Instead of being full of complaints, pessimistic and impossible to please, we can become happy, contented and grateful for what we have. Instead of being cynical and seeing only the negative in others, we learn to appreciate the goodness that is in them.

The challenge is to maintain a grateful heart in the midst of intolerable suffering without either playing down the suffering or ignoring it. The ability to be compassionate in the face of suffering, whilst still maintaining a spirit of joy and thankfulness, stems from complete trust and hope in the God who is always at work, even in the midst of so many horrors.

Childlikeness

Of all the perceptions Jesus turned upside down, none was more surprising than his use of the child, instead of an adult, as a model for us to imitate. In his society a child was a 'nobody'.

Jesus used the child first to commend humility (Mt.18:3-4). We for our part cannot become humble by trying. What we can do is become aware of our pride – of our ego. Humility is a matter of recognizing the truth about ourselves and if we think we are either superior or inferior to others, we have a false image of who we are.

Jesus' love for children is well attested and he used to say, "To them are belongs the kingdom" (Mk. 10:14-16). No doubt he had in mind, among other things, the child's capacity for trust and certainly our Lord's own relationship with God was extremely childlike. One way in which this was shown was in his amazing fearlessness. It is not that Jesus was never afraid – the Garden of Gethsemane shows otherwise – but he was not paralysed by fear and he did not allow it to stop him doing God's will. Nolan points out that fear, in situations of danger, is natural and indispensable but what we do about is the significant factor.

Another aspect of childlikeness is a sense of wonder. The child can be spellbound before something that we have long since taken for granted and it is suggested that we have to recapture something of this. Einstein once said, "The most beautiful experience we can have is of the mysterious. The person to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead." Wonder is a profound experience but it cannot be turned on and off at will. Its value lies in the fact that it wells up from our true self and not from our ego and so in the work of personal transformation we should allow ourselves to be carried away by wonder as often as possible. The new science offers many possibilities.

Children know how to play and have fun, and they often do so by pretending. The difference between the child of the hypocrite is that, whilst the latter is very serious in his attempt to act the lie, the child knows the truth and is only playing the part for fun. Few people associate spirituality and mysticism with humour and even Jesus is often depicted as being humourless. Our Lord's ability to love and enjoy children belies such an image.

We all know that there is a great difference between childlikeness and childishness. Nolan shows, from a number of examples, how easy it is for people of faith to become childish in their relationship with God.

Letting Go

Chapter 12 is about the essential virtue of detachment, a word that does not mean aloofness and indifference, in the spiritual context, but rather **freedom**. For Meister Eckhart detachment is more fundamental than love because without freedom from our attachments we cannot love fully and unconditionally. The example of the rich young man comes to mind because he was so attached to his wealth that he could not leave it in order to follow Jesus. Jesus asked some people to leave their jobs, their homes and even their families to follow him and, when they did so, he taught them to live light (Mk.1:17-20; 10:28-30; 6:7-10).

Nolan gives an interesting list of the attachments which can enslave us, of which, money and possessions are the most obvious. To these he adds, likes and dislikes, attachment to people, time, our reputations, certain devotions and practices, our ministry or profession and our attachment to ideas. He comments on how upsetting it is for some people to have their 'certainties' undermined. The willingness to die is seen as the ultimate form of detachment. Evidently, therefore, detachment is a virtue which is dependent upon a deep trust in God.

Part 4 of Nolan's book is about the experience of oneness, oneness with God, with ourselves, with others and with the universe, and he devotes a chapter to each. In this part of the book we see Albert Nolan at his best, simple and yet deeply profound. His choice of the word 'oneness', instead of unity, union, reconciliation, harmony, peace or love, is itself significant. All these other words suggests a bringing together of what is separated or divided. Oneness, on the other hand, speaks of that which already is and always has been at one.

One with God

We talk glibly about God. Yet in our day many no longer believe in God, and many of those who profess belief allow God to play no significant role in their lives. The word itself has often been misused so that, in the name of God, millions have been tortured, exploited and crushed. The many images of God that we have inherited are themselves hopelessly misleading – a punishing judge, the supreme male patriarch, the great egoist who imposes 'his' will, the all-powerful manipulator that sends earthquakes, floods and disasters, and the God who is far away. No wonder some writers have suggested that we abandon the word 'God' altogether.

The first question we need to face is whether we can know anything about God. Mystics speak of God as unknowable and Thomas Aquinas says that we do not know what God is: we can only know what God is not. This kind of negative theology is deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition.

Pseudo-Dionysius spoke of mysticism as an experience of God that takes place without words, names, ideas, or any knowledge at all, and this has been taken up by almost all

Christian mystics. This kind of experience entails abandoning all our images of God. This does not mean that they are false or useless; only that we must go beyond and transcend them.

All Christian theologians and mystics teach that God is not an object. Nolan speaks of God as "Mystery" which, by definition, is unknown and unknowable. But that does not mean that a mystery is not real. What matters is not how much we know about God but rather whether God is real to us or not. Experienced as mystery, God can be more real and more present than anything we can see, touch or handle. God is not 'a' mystery: God is 'the' mystery and you and I are part of that mystery. But 'part' is also a very limited word, so Nolan makes the same point negatively. I am not outside the mystery of all things, looking at it like some observer; I must include myself in the mystery we call God. "In God we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The true self is a mystery too because we cannot experience it with any of our senses and yet we know it by its fruits, its manifestations. The appropriate response to mystery of any kind, is wonder.

At the heart of Jesus' spirituality is the awareness of God as very near. The mystics teach that God is near to everyone, irrespective of who they are, and Nolan quotes Augustine, Meister Eckhart and even Muslim mystics to make this point. The challenge then is to grow in our own awareness of God's presence and closeness, and this begins with an experience of wonder and awe. 'Closeness' is another inadequate term. God is one with us and consciousness of this oneness is at the centre of every mystical experience, though it is described in many different ways. Eventually we come to descriptions like deification, divinization and 'becoming God', which is why mystics have often been accused of heresy. The point is that words fail to describe the experience itself, yet the oneness they are talking about was supremely seen in Jesus. Our concern is not to explain Jesus but to imitate him, and to develop our own awareness of oneness with God. Included in this awareness will be the profound sense of being safe, having nothing to fear and being loved. God loves me as God's self and we are in some mysterious sense one self.

As we talk of love and of the mystery of God it becomes harder to talk in anything but personal terms. But treating God as a person, or even as personal, is not the same as treating God as an object. A person is a subject not an object. But then again, God is not a self alongside other selves. As more and more people are saying today, God is the universal SELF.

Nolan ends the chapter with the logical question, why then evil? Why the cruelty, injustice, earthquakes and tsunamis and so forth? He says again that we are dealing with mystery. All we can say is that we do not understand. When we expect God to act as **we** would act, if **we** were God, we forget our own very limited understanding of the vastness of the mystery of God. Nolan quotes the theologian Kaufman, "The knowledge of good and evil belongs to God and not to us". What we can understand is what human being should be doing about suffering and Jesus gives us a lead in this too.

One with Ourselves

If we are to love our neighbours as ourselves then we must first love ourselves. Self-love is not the same as selfishness or self-centredness. Selfishness means preferring oneself to everyone else but love does not prefer one person to another. Genuine love is one and undivided: we love everyone, including ourselves.

The truth is, however, that many people hate themselves, who they are and what they are. They hate their weaknesses and limitations. They cannot live with their past and, whilst feeling guilty and ashamed, are still unable to forgive themselves. Many have a real problem loving their bodies, especially as they age and, particularly, when they do not conform to the latest standards of beauty and attractiveness. We can even be afraid of our bodies because of their seemingly uncontrollable appetites and desires, and some fear most their sexual desires.

To love ourselves is to accept ourselves, and this includes our bodies. The body-soul dichotomy, which has plagued many Christians down the years, and the asceticism which

punished and oppress the body, are now seen to be serious deviations from the spirituality of Jesus. Jesus was at peace with himself and we can find the same peace by undermining our egos and learning to love ourselves as we are, unconditionally.

This kind of love will also recognize our own uniqueness. We are not superior to others or inferior but we **are** different. We also have a unique role to play in the mysterious unfolding of the universe and it does not matter whether that role is small or great. Jesus treated others as unique because he did not see a person as 'just another' beggar, Pharisee or Roman soldier. Indeed, one of the things which the study of evolution has shown is that God loves diversity and we are all uniquely part of this immense and diverse universe. Selfish individualism is a distorted way of understanding our uniqueness. It sees itself as separate and independent, and with a uniqueness that puts itself at the centre of the universe. This kind of uniqueness operates by trying to be better and superior to others.

The final act of self-love is to accept our own death. Nothing cuts our egos down to size more than the recognition that one day we will die. We could treat death as a friend as it points us to our ultimate limitation, or as an enemy that cuts short our self-important contribution to the human race by spoiling our plans! Death is **the** death of the ego because it reminds us that we are not indispensable.

One with Other Human Beings

Loving God and one's neighbour is obviously central to Jesus' spirituality. What is strange, says Nolan, is that we refer to this as the great commandment. How, he asks, can we be commanded to love? He goes on to make a statement, which I find hard to agree with, when he adds, "Love is an emotion that wells up inside us in certain circumstances. It is not a matter of obedience or duty". He even suggests that Jesus did not command the love of God and neighbour, pointing to the fact that in Luke, it is the lawyer, not Jesus, who quotes the great commandment. This is, I think, questionable exegesis, bearing in mind that Luke used Mark, and in the latter it was Jesus who made the statement.

This apart, the rest of the chapter offers some profound insights. Nolan asks how, if love is spontaneous, can we hope to love all our fellow human beings, and especially our enemies? Our problem, he says, is that our egos treat everyone, even those closest to us, as **objects** to be used, possessed, cultivated, rejected or hated. The way ahead, therefore, is to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. What does the world feel like from that perspective? This, says Nolan, is the beginning of intimacy. It is what we see Jesus doing, namely, **identifying himself** with other people.

Matthew's parable of the sheep and goats makes the same point but Nolan says that, whilst the basic teaching is that of Jesus, the court room drama of a final judgement is from Matthew. The criterion of judgement, in the parable, is how those in front of the judge had been treated by their fellow human beings. Did they feed the hungry, visit the sick etc etc? The second feature of the parable is that love of neighbour is seen to be, in practice, the same as loving God; "whatever you did to the least of my brothers and sisters you did to me". However, because the judge is also described as the Son of Man, then whatever is done to others, Jesus experiences as being done to himself. God is one with all human beings and we are one with one another, whether we realize it or not.

On the same lines, Nolan comments on the solidarity of kinship. A mother identifies completely with her child and, in some tribes and clans, the blood ties are so strong, that to insult one is an insult all. What Jesus did was to extend the solidarity of kinship to the whole human race. The truth is that we are all one family and the author refers to how he came from his mother's womb, and she from her mother, and so on and so on. Ultimately, therefore, we can all be seen as one flesh. It is an illusion to see ourselves as separate from others and the barriers of family, race, language, and nationality are all seen to be false. We are one.

When we recognize that our neighbour is one flesh, one blood, with us it becomes possible to love him or her spontaneously. Our true selves are shown by being human with all other human beings. The word Nolan chooses to describe this is 'Empathy' which he says is a

better word than compassion. We have compassion for those who suffer but we have empathy with those who suffer and those who do not – ‘we rejoice with those who rejoice and we weep with those who weep’. Empathy enables us to share the feelings of others no matter what their circumstances. At this point, he goes on to discuss ‘the option for the poor’, a subject that used to be ‘a hot potato’ in our society not so long ago.

Until we transcend our egos and discover oneness with all human beings we will continue to compare and compete, to kill and to fight. Our species will only survive when we recognize ourselves to be of one flesh and one family. Awareness of this solidarity can lead to **sharing** and our concern here should be for what we call, ‘the common good’. This means that what is best for everyone is ultimately best for us too. Jesus promoted sharing among his own band of followers and we can see the effects of this in the Acts of the Apostles (4:32-35). St Paul extended the same idea of sharing when he initiated, among the Gentile churches, the collection for the Saints in Jerusalem.. The same idea has been kept alive in monasteries, convents and religious communities, but today, more than ever, we need to find new ways of reviving our Lord’s spirit of sharing.

What Jesus had in mind was more than mere almsgiving and “charity”. Any attempt to live Jesus’ spirituality in splendid isolation, with nothing more generous than a handout, will not work. We need one another and Nolan sees small groups and families as the place where we could learn to be treated as persons and treat others in the same way.

One with the Universe

Jesus experienced nature as God’s creation, with human beings as an integral part of it. He saw that God cares for us as he does for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. The mystical experience of oneness with God seems to have always included an experience of oneness with creation, and Francis of Assisi and Martin de Pores are given as some of the prime examples. Teilhard de Chardin loved matter in all its forms and taught us to see ourselves as part of the evolving universe.

This identification with nature and the universe is not an optional extra; it is essential. There is no way that we can discover our true selves, without making contact with nature in one form or another. But this needs, says Nolan, to become **an experience**. The new paradigm is of a continuously evolving universe and we do not live **in** it; we are part of the process. He suggests three principles that govern the dynamics of our emerging universe: unity, diversity and subjectivity.

Unity

Nothing has demonstrated the wonders of the universe more stunningly than the discovery that all things originated in one and the same unimaginably small “singularity” out of which burst forth a mighty explosion of energy which we call ‘The Big Bang’. Teilhard de Chardin has pointed out that spirit and consciousness must have been present from the beginning because there is no matter without spirit of some kind. What this means is that we are one with the stars and everything else. Furthermore, scientists are now convinced that every event in the long history of creation is connected to every other event. There are no such things as isolated or separated events: all are connected in an unimaginably mysterious web of interdependence.

Diversity

As the universe unfolds and expands it does so by a process of endless diversification. There have been and still are countless millions of plant, insect, bird and animal species and the unfolding process favours an increase in diversity, ever greater complexity and new depths of consciousness. Darwin’s idea that species evolve by the simple mechanism of natural selection has been superseded by discoveries in microbiology and genetics that point to a far more complex process of cooperation as well as competition. The universe is not the step-by-step slavish implementation of a preconceived blueprint. Creation is not like a human manufacturer mass-producing a product. God is more like an artist with everyone and everything unique. Not even two snowflakes are alike.

Subjectivity

Scientists talk about objects, but their study of the evolving universe has led them to the conclusion that they are not dealing with collections of objects but self-organising systems. There are systems within systems, each with an organizing principle or a self of some kind. It is a universe of subjects and not merely of objects. This leads to the mystery of human consciousness which, like our subjectivity cannot be explained. (Time magazine) The mystery deepens.

Oneness with God, with ourselves, with others and with the universe is a seamless whole. Nothing can be excluded. We cannot be one with God without being one with each of these other dimensions. The call is to move from separation to oneness, from selfishness to love, from ego to God. The mystical writer of the fourth Gospel saw Jesus ultimately as the revelation of this oneness (John 17:21-23) and St Paul gave the oneness cosmic dimensions (Col.1:20; 1Cor.15:28).

God and the Universe

Most theologians speak of God as transcendent and immanent. Transcendence, however is often misunderstood to mean that, in some mysterious way, God lives in another world **outside** the universe. God's immanence is pictured as God being present **inside** the universe. But inside and outside are spacial metaphors that are inappropriate and often misleading. There is nothing outside the universe and because there is no outside it makes little sense to speak of inside. The truth is that many believers imagine God belongs in a heavenly world removed from this one. But for Jesus, as we have seen, God is very near and he, like the prophets and mystics, did not assign God to another heavenly world. In fact, many mystics speak so emphatically of God's oneness with the universe that they are often accused of pantheism – the belief that God **is** all things.

Nolan says that his concern would be to keep in mind that God is an unfathomable mystery and should not, as we have said already, be thought of as an object of any kind. God can therefore be referred to, or experienced, only as a kind of **subject**. In this sense, God is the subject of the universe. God is not an object in the universe or the sum total of all the objects that make up the universe. That would be pantheism. God can be thought of only as **the** subject, the universal subject, the universal Self.

God is not the diversity, creativity, or energy of the universe. God is the self who diversifies, creates, and energizes. God is not part of creation but the subject that creates. We can see the creativity, but we cannot see the Creator, in much the same way as we can see objects but we cannot see the acting subject in itself.

In this way we can appreciate God as both immanent and transcendent. God is immanently one with the universe, but at the same time, by being the subject, the Self, the Creator of the universe, God transcends all the objects that can be thought of as making up the universe. Words fail us here. God is the transcendent mystery that can never be described or named but, like all subjectivity and consciousness, can only be indicated or pointed to. In awe and wonder we contemplate the mystery of it all.

The final chapter of the book is called, "Radically Free". It represents the sum total of what the book is about and therefore picks up many of the issues in the earlier chapters. Because much that is said here has already been discussed in some detail, it will be necessary only to sum up some of these key points.

Jesus' Freedom

Nolan reminds us first of our Lord's own freedom: courage to speak out; freedom to challenge the norms of the society; freedom to do God's will regardless of what others thought; freedom to love the outcast despite the threat to his own reputation; and freedom from bondage to fear.

Our Freedom

Attempts to live the spirituality of Jesus will mean: --

- Gradual freedom from attachments; from fears, worries, obsessions and guilt.

- The discovery of the truth about ourselves and the tyranny of our egos.
- Learning to trust God.
- Learning to love and accept ourselves together with all human beings, even our enemies.
- Discovering the attributes of childlikeness.
- Finding our own courage to speak out against injustice and oppression.

False Freedoms

- Post-modernism is a search for freedom but we will need to be alert to the false freedoms **of the ego** rather than the real freedom **from the ego**.
- We will recognize that the hunger for spirituality can also become self-centred.
- The self-sufficiency, independence and separation which mark Western individualism will be seen for what it is.
- When the Empire's rulers promise freedom to the world, we will ask what kind of freedom they have in mind: the so-called freedom of self-indulgence, the "freedom" of the rich and powerful to oppress the weak, and thereby hinder their freedom?
- We will recognize that social liberation founders unless accompanied by personal liberation.

Fear of Freedom

Nolan recognizes that many people fear freedom:

- Some cannot face the responsibility of deciding for themselves.
- Some fear giving freedom to others less they make mistakes etc.
- Fear of freedom turns some people into fundamentalists because they 'need' certainty and security.

Nolan recognizes that there are people who never outgrow the need to be dependent, and some of them can even get into positions of leadership or parenthood without ever becoming mature adults themselves. We should not blame anyone for this, he says. However a real problem arises when such people insist on treating others, who are mature, as though they are still children.

God's Will

Ultimately, we are not called to be perfectly free; we are called to do God's will. However, we can only do this effectively if we become as free as possible. Freedom, then, is a means, not an end. Jesus lived to do God's will and we are called to do the same.

Nolan suggests that what is meant by God's will can be translated as "**the common good**", that is, whatever is best for the human family. This does not contradict my personal good for what is best for everyone is also best for me. What I might have to sacrifice, is not my good but my egotistical self-centredness, which is not good for me anyway.

Free to do God's Work

When we are radically free, or on the way to that kind of freedom, divine energy can flow through us *unhindered*. This we see clearly manifest in Jesus, but also in the saints. We can give up our own thing and begin to participate in the only work that is effective and real - God's Work. It may include many of the things we are already doing, but being able to do them in a new way and with new motivation. God's Work, like God's Wisdom is revolutionary. It turns the world right side up.

Nolan ends with an urgent appeal. As a species we have only just begun to evolve. We still have a long way to go but this should not tempt us to give up a sense of urgency. With half the world starving, the hungry need to be fed now. Poverty and disease need to be eliminated without delay. Greenhouse gas emissions should be stopped as soon as possible. The struggle against selfishness is a matter of urgency. It is all God's Work, but our participation in it cannot be postponed. There is hope for the universe and for each of us as individuals. When we die, our egos, our false selves will be destroyed, once and for all, but our true selves will continue for ever in God, the Self of the universe.