

Change:

WHAT WE DO. HOW WE DO IT. WHERE WE DO IT. WHY WE DO IT!

'Is it possible that as such, over epochs of time the tendency toward an emphasis on place, on locations, have taken the essence of discipleship as well as worship to where we gather rather than how or even why?'

Our world-wide pandemic is changing humanity; what we do, how we do it, where we do it and why we do it! The human experience always evolves, and that at an accelerating pace. But COVID19 has changed things unexpectedly.

As a Mission Centre leader I work with dedicated congregational officers who have loyally ensured our buildings for stewardship and insurance purposes have been secure. Our empty buildings, in not being able to gather together has caused me to reflect on the history of Christianity and its focus on buildings.

Places of worship – like many tourists, temples, cathedrals, and sacred sites across our planet have been attractive to me. I'm challenged to ask, aside from architecture and landscape, why am I captivated by such places. Of course, this causes reflection on the less elaborate but serviceable church buildings we have, realising such places also captive members. So why this allure or fascination with buildings by disciples. Aside from demonstrating success by property ownership, what prompts many church folk to fervently and emotionally possess their congregational building. Why is it, that when property is sold, the tendency is toward anger and grief rather than celebration of what occurred and was achieved.

When at theological college, I briefly studied the concept of the Holy and / or Sacred. These are words within our church's lexicon but do we understand or reflect on them?

For some self labelled rationalists the idea of the holy is non-rational. How or do, we in religious circles, explain the holy or sacred? Is there a difference between the two? If a place or building has been consecrated, is it now sacred or holy? What makes a small cave beside a gentle flowing beck a sacred site? Is it generations of veneration that makes it so? Is the World Church temple more sacred than the adjacent Auditorium?

May I introduce and develop a notion proposed by a theologian named Rudolph Otto, which is the idea of the numinous. Even that word is problematic, as dictionaries define that word simply as supernatural or magical. This was not what Otto was expressing; he characterises numinous as 'the holy'; the divine mystical minus any morality or rational aspect. The numinous, not doctrine or ritual is the indefinable core of religion: the spiritual experience of it cannot be described in terms of other experiences.

Is it that we, who have our sacred / holy / spiritual places have them because we have experienced there, the numinous? We have experienced a sense of dependency on something external to ourselves that is greater than ourselves and the recall is somewhat multi-sensual rather than a mental memory, and that comes to us only in that place?

Is it that we humans are programmed in our deepest essence to fix a location or imbed physical symbolism to any strong, sudden, intense numinous experience. While we sense the spirit within acts of personal piety,

or perhaps through the fixed and ordered solemnities of rites and liturgies, including music and prayer, is it that we [quite literally] ground that experience with place. Thus the atmosphere that clings to our familiar building as well as to old religious monuments and buildings, to temples and to churches is a reminder of that grounding?

Within our (un)consciousness, maybe some peaceful memory comes sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood, or perhaps a faster moving or even thrillingly vibrance. However, all spiritual experiences fade away and the soul resumes its profane, non-numinous / religious mood of the everyday.

An exploration of this idea might suggest five components interact to generate the numinous. They are: it is wholly other [that is it is something truly amazing, as being totally outside our normal experience]; awfulness (that is it inspires awe or is inspirational, including a sort of unease), overpowering-ness (that which, among other things, it inspires a feeling of humility); fascination [that which causes one to be caught up in it, to be captivated]; and a profound but inexplicable energy is felt.

Within this article, I acknowledged Rudolph Otto. He starts his treatment of the numinous by placing the whole matter in an evolutionary context. He expresses himself somewhat obscurely, but basically suggests humanity has a predisposition to the religious but commitment is contingent on personal events of history (interactions between nature and nurture, heredity and environment). He argues for the emergence of particular people, far more sensitive to the numinous than their fellows, who have sensitised and influenced those around them. Thus some special individuals placed emphasis on what were religious norms and what religion demanded of its followers.

Is it possible that as such, over epochs of time the tendency toward an emphasis on place, on locations, have taken the essence of discipleship as well as worship to where we gather rather than how or even why? Will future generations of the church look back at weekly, geographically inconvenient building based worship with a wry smile and wonder why was that the emphasis of that time.

Within this pandemic is the Spirit disrupting us from our comfort and calling us over the horizon into a rather different future that is not physical building ownership based, but more community generating relationship based?

**MALCOLM
STEPHENSON
NSW**