

## **Christian but not Spiritual? Christian Discipleship in an Age of Spirituality**

Thank you Neil for the welcome and for the invitation to give this lecture.

It is an honour to do so. When looking at the very impressive list of previous lectures and lecturers. I only wish I'd known about this series beforehand. I would have come along.

What I've read about Peter Bercham is also very impressive. Such people with their curiosity, expertise, and faithfulness to the church and community are indeed wonderful gifts which God gives us.

I hope that my own contribution tonight honours Peter's memory and makes a contribution to this congregation's own engagement with contemporary issues.

With Neil I acknowledge that I am making this presentation on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respect to elders past and present and for their custodianship of the land for millennia.

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In 2016, the Australian social researcher and commentator, Hugh Mackay, published a book with the title, *Beyond Belief: How we find meaning, with or without religion*.

The fourth chapter is entitled, SBNR: an acronym for "spiritual but not religious."

Tonight I want to insert a third term between spiritual and religious, namely "Christian" and play around a bit with the relationship between Christianity and spirituality. As the question of my title suggests, perhaps counter-intuitively for most Christians, that maybe there's a difference between being Christian and being spiritual!

Counter-intuitive because, after all, Jesus himself taught that God is Spirit, Jesus promised the Spirit, Christians speak of Christian unity as unity of the Spirit, Christians see to cultivate the fruits of the spirit in their way of life.

But it all depends the definitions of “Christian,” “religion” and “spiritual / spirituality” which are at play in this conversation. And each of those terms has many definitions.

So to explore this topic, the lecture will be divided into 4 sections.

**SBNR – what’s it all about?** [I’ll drill down a bit more in to Hugh Mackay’s SBNR chapter]

**Which spirituality?** [Spirituality has accumulated a vast range of meanings. I will clarify which precise meaning of spirituality that’s at stake in this discussion.]

**Which Christianity** [To answer that question I won’t be offering a conventional theological treatise, but I’ll be exploring the Christianity of Nick Cave and Stan Grant]

**Christianity and Spirituality: what relationship?**

But there is one preliminary task I need to attend to before I get to the lecture proper. How accurate is the sub-title? Do we really live in an age of spirituality?

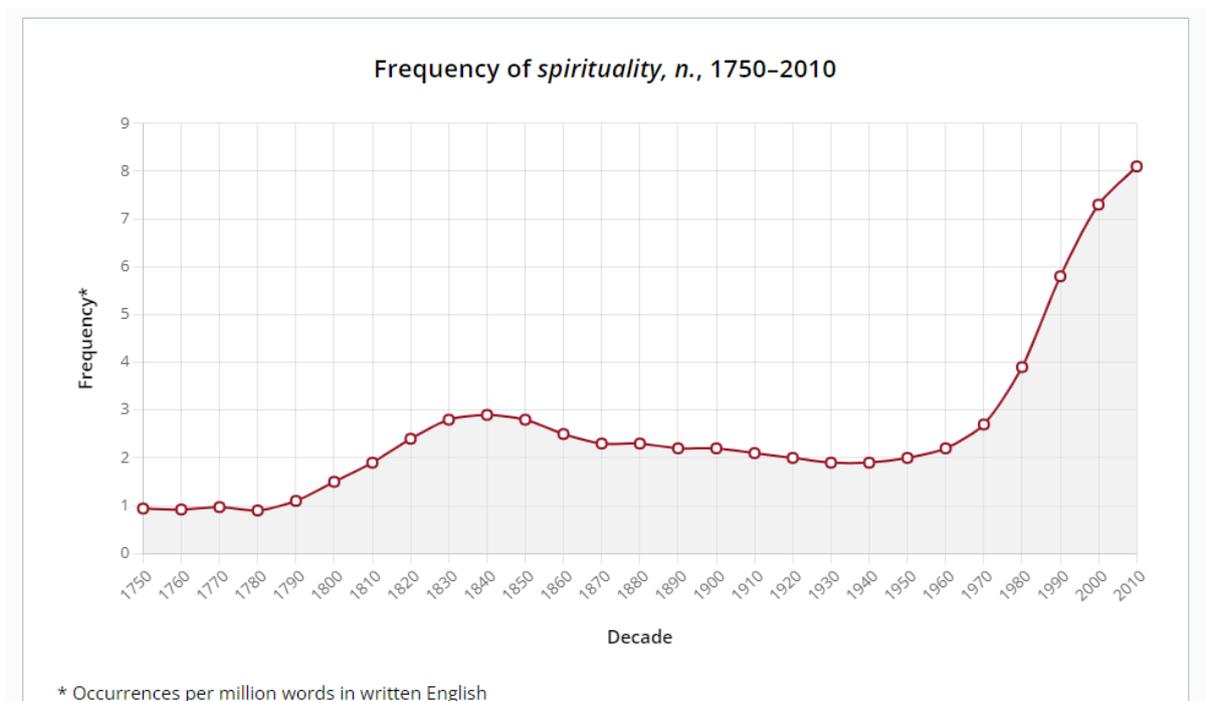
The most recent Australian census has confirmed not only that Christians are now formally a minority in this country but also that the fastest growing category of religion was “no religion”. It grew from 30.1% of the population to 38.9% in just the five years from 2016 to 2021. According to the Bureau of Statistics:

This increase indicates a shift away from religious and spiritual viewpoints, by either expressing their beliefs outside of traditional religious institutional settings or not holding a religious or spiritual viewpoint to express.

Perhaps calling this an “age of spirituality” is an overreach.

But it does seem to me that spirituality is the category that people quickly default to in any contemporary and public conversations about such matters as God, the Spirit, salvation, soul, creation etc.

The online Oxford English Dictionary includes this graph of the frequency of the use of the word ‘spirituality’ in English writing between 1750 and 2010. As you can see, there is sharp rise in the how often people write about spirituality in English from 1970 onwards.



Sure, this high-level data which warrants closer investigation. But it does suggest that if we are not quite living in an “age” of spirituality, we are talking about it more than we were. It’s a change that’s happened in the lifetime of most of us in this room tonight.

So with that brief justification of the subtitle, let’s go to the first of the four sections of the lecture.

## **SBNR – what’s it all about?**

Back to Hugh Mackay’s book. After recounting some of the conversations in which he has engaged people who describe themselves as SBNR, he writes this about what it means:

The label might be new; the concept is not. SBNRs are located in a rich tradition of thinkers, mystics, doubters, agnostics and passionate theists who have resisted formal connections with institutional religion while never losing interest in the spiritual. (97)

A few pages later, he explains what this appeal to the spiritual or spirituality is about.

Though institutional religion has become unattractive and even repugnant to many people, spirituality remains an appealing concept, based on the assumption that whatever a spiritual life might offer, would be beneficial. ... [It] points to some power beyond ourselves or some interpretation of life’s meaning that offers more than biology.” (104)

He shows how the use of the term spirituality points to “having a place in the universe” and to the “broadest and deepest form of connectedness.” The term is often used to speak of “feeling of great calm, peace or tranquility.” And, very importantly, it is used “almost always in response to positive experience.”

You get the picture: spirituality is good, appealing, connecting, relational.

In contrast, religion is unattractive and repugnant.

Those of us in the church cannot sidestep the force of that second adjective – *repugnant*. It speaks of something beyond being boring or irrelevant or unattractive. It speaks of the visceral nature of some people’s response to the realities of the Christian church.

We can’t gloss over the underbelly of the churches that has been exposed in recent times: financial scandals, complicity in colonialism, hypocrisy, and the decades of turning a blind eye to child sexual abuse. The SBNRs have their reasons not to be religious.

The argument of this lecture, however, was sparked by something Hugh Mackay observed at the beginning of the chapter but which he passes over and never develops.

For me, it’s the most intriguing observation in the chapter.

Many people who identify as Christian would not choose to call themselves religious. Indeed, the Australian [Anglican] theologian Bruce Kaye declares that he is really CBNR – “christian but not religious.”

I don’t think Kaye is alone in this.

Once again, much depends on precisely how “religion” is defined.

If, ‘religion’ stands for institutionalism, dogma and dogmatism, authority, clericalism, patriarchy, ritualism and cultural inertia, then of course Christians, as followers of Jesus will be inclined to push back against it.

But over and above the negative connotations of the word, even the use of the category of religion puts Christianity in a box. If you try to squeeze this complicated, complex, ancient, loose at the edges, messy phenomenon, we call Christianity into the narrow box of religion (however it is defined) you will find it doesn't fit.

There is something about Christianity that defies all the categories that we try to squeeze it into. And I've read enough to know that Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists will say something similar. They too can be uncomfortable with the category of religion being applied to them.

There is no reason to think that spirituality won't function as a similar kind of confining box – too tight for the historically, culturally, intellectually complex phenomenon that Christianity is.

But more than that, I want to explore the **particular** use of the concept, common amongst SBNR, that understand 'spirituality' something going on **outside** the church which is actually better at doing what the church **itself** is supposed to be doing.

Where does this understanding and use of the word spirituality come from and where does it fit amongst other uses?

### **Which spirituality?**

Even a quick skim of the literature about spirituality indicates that the term is used in a multitude of ways and that it yields no straightforward definition.

In fact that could be a comment made about several of the terms I've already used tonight. "Religion." "Spirituality." "Spirit." "Christianity." "Faith." "Connectedness." "God." "Sacred."

My sense is that in contemporary discussions about such matters these words often slide into or merge into each other.

Of course, this is by no means uncommon in public discussions of any topic. Words get used ambiguously, unreflectively, spontaneously. Sometimes people understand each others' words. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes we are prompted to stop the conversation and ask: "Hang on, what do you actually mean by that?"

I'll give a sporting example – as Australians usually do. Think about the different meaning of the word 'football' in different Australian states, not to mention other countries.

So it is with the various key words I've used tonight, including spirituality.

It can now be found in just about every domain of contemporary society.

There can be business spirituality, health-care spirituality, spirituality in sport. There is even a famous book called *Atheist Spirituality*. The list could go on. Just take a look at the spirituality section in the next book store you visit.

In the light of this variety and, in an attempt to get some leverage on it, one writer has proposed four categories of its use: the ascetical, the mystical, the practical and the prophetic.

The '**ascetical**' is characterised by a rejection of human fulfilment "through material success or consumption"<sup>1</sup> and a certain level of self-denial.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 14

The '**mystical**' is oriented to "intense religious experiences or experiences of self-transcendence."<sup>2</sup>

The '**practical**' looks to everyday life as the context of spiritual meaning. It pursues the spiritual path in "family life, work or other social contexts" and by valuing "everyday virtues of forgiveness, compassion, tolerance, charity and social responsibility."<sup>3</sup>

The '**prophetic**' overlaps with the 'practical' by also being focused on everyday experience, but extends to "social critique and commitment to justice as a spiritual task."<sup>4</sup>

We also need to add another category not included on this list but essential in any discussion of spirituality in Australia: Indigenous spirituality. It too eludes easy definition, but involves the interweaving of law, custom and ceremony and is deeply related to land.

I can imagine that we have all used the word, or heard other people use it, with one or more of these meanings. The details of these definitions don't matter. I highlight them simply to demonstrate just some of the many meanings of this word. And to stress that I'm not talking about all them.

That is: The use of 'spirituality' to refer to something going on **outside** the church which is doing a better job at what the church **itself** is supposed to be doing.

Where does this idea of spirituality as a contrast, alternative or corrective to church come from?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word first appears in English in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. At that point it doesn't have any of the variety of meanings it

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<sup>2</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 16

<sup>4</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 16

has today, and it's certainly didn't have the meaning of something outside of the church.

Then, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the word 'spirituality' was a kind of overarching category to describe what Christianity is. Clergy were said to be guardians of spirituality. Spiritual matters were contrasted with temporal matters.

Spirituality was almost synonymous with church.

Now - six centuries later – as we have seen, at least one meaning of the word spirituality has migrated out of the church.

We can note three forces that have prompted this particular migration and change of meaning.

Firstly, it stands for a reaction to the emphasis on reason and science – or more precisely, scientific materialism – as the foundations of our understanding of reality that took hold in Western culture from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It makes the claim that this form of Western rationalism has suppressed other dimensions of reality – its mystery – and our experience of it. It addresses what the German sociologist, Max Weber, termed the “disenchantment” of modern life.

A second force at work is closely related. That is the way spirituality emerges as a way of healing the disconnectedness of modern society, a disconnectedness itself related to the individualism and fragmentation of community which also has some of its roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century European understandings of freedom. Spirituality seeks to affirm and live into the connectedness between people, communities, the earth.

A third driving force is the idea that the churches in the West bought into both the rationalism and individualism of the West. They focused, so the argument goes, on belief at the expense of experience and mystery. They focused on individual salvation. As such, they merely mirrored the rationalism and

individualism of the secular world. As a consequence, so the argument goes, spirituality a quest for mystery, community and relationships met a dead end in the churches. So that quest migrated out of the church to be an alternative to the church.

One Australian academic writer, David Tacey, draws some of these themes together. “Spirituality,” he writes, “is a desire for connectedness, which often expresses itself as an emotional relationship with an invisible sacred force.”<sup>5</sup>

As for the relationship to religion he asserts some compatibility but also some sharp contrasts:

Spirituality is by no means incompatible with religion, but it is existential rather than creedal. It grows out of the individual person from an inward source, is intensely intimate and transformative, and is not imposed upon the person from an outside authority or force.<sup>6</sup>

So much for the very broad-brush analysis of how we got here, of how we got to this contrast between spirituality and religion. We observed a shift from an understanding of “spirituality” as category that capturing all that Christianity stands for to a way of seeing it as an alternative to Christianity.

Let me pull these ideas together by reading to you from someone who is sympathetic to Christianity but who looks outside the church for what she thinks the church should offer. She doesn’t use the term spirituality in this quotation, but the rhetoric is a mirror reflection of everything I just been talking about. The author is Julia Baird, writer, social commentator, and erstwhile host of the ABC’s *The Drum*. It is a long quote and its covers three

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<sup>5</sup> David Tacey, *Re-enchantment*, 17

<sup>6</sup> David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2003), 8.

themes: her own frustration with the church; her understanding of the core of Christianity; and the quest for mystery in nature.

This is only place of faith I am really comfortable in now, with those who wish to be a quiet witness of love. The egregious sins and stag fights of an institutional church have sullied its public face and caused harm to countless numbers of people; we can too easily forget that the true church is based on love, and lived out in thousands of little parishes, where people care for each other.

...At the heart of Christmas story is a baby – God as naked, poor, newborn refugee; God as utter absence of power. Not a bearded patriarch obsessed with doctrine and church law, but a kid who grew up to teach in parables, then a young revolutionary who was killed for sedition. Who told people to love, to train their hearts to be kind, to let their life be their witness.

Many who don't attend church or adhere to any particular religion congregate on beaches, in forests and on mountaintops – to experience awe and wonder, ... and seek ways to bring living light into their lives. Such sites are nature's cathedrals of awe, places where we can sit alongside strangers in silence and understand what we share; where we exclaim at the firefly or the sea sparkles or the cephalopods because they are signs of the miraculous and they usher in a kind of quiet respect for the fantastic, the improbable and the marvelous, ...

What this passage crystallises is that particular understanding of spirituality that I have singled out in this lecture: the idea that there is something going on outside the church which is better at doing what the church itself is supposed to be doing.

I have no reason to say that the experience of those who congregate in nature's cathedrals rather than Christian cathedrals is invalid, misled or deluded. It is real. It produces the effects that Julia Baird describes.

But let me ask this question: is the fundamental purpose of the church to foster experiences of awe and wonder? Are the cathedrals of nature really in competition with the cathedrals of Christianity?

You see, I think Christianity is more complicated and actually more interesting than Julia Baird's somewhat benign image of "the true church consisting of thousands of parishes where people care for each other."

If as she rightly says, Christianity is based on God as naked and poor, who lives a revolutionary and seditious life, might not Christianity be something more unsettling, harder to categorise, and basically a lot more interesting than most of our churches suggest it is.

This brings me to the second section of the lecture: Which Christianity?

### **Which Christianity**

I could address this question by exploring passages of the New Testament or ancient or contemporary theologians.

Instead, I'm going to unpack it by engaging the recent writings of two Australians: rock musician Nick Cave and Indigenous leader Stan Grant.

Both are people whose life circumstances give them every reason to reject Christianity. But against all odds, both of them are drawn to it.

What is also interesting for this lecture is that that they explicitly find religion – by which each of them *mostly* mean Christianity – more compelling than spirituality. Neither of these men neatly fit the spiritual but not religious category.

Spirituality, Nick Cave writes, is “little amorphous for my taste. It can mean almost anything.” “Religion,” in contrast, is “spirituality with vigour; it makes demands on us.”

“Some people,” writes Stan Grant, may reach for the spiritual but not religion” Spirituality is too opaque [for me]...Religion...asks something of me.”

It may seem that in drawing on these two men with these sentiments that I’m engaging a bit of confirmation bias in order to make my case. But to read them is to get glimpses some of the essentials of Christianity.

Yes, we will hear of those essentials in a different register than those of us who are more mainstream Christian might be used to, and in ways that theologians like me instinctively want to tidy up. But their fragments of insight – and that’s what they are, fragments – might prompt the churches to ask which Christianity are we proclaiming.

If proponents of spirituality – the SBNR – walk away from Christianity, Cave and Grant walk into it in order to challenge it from the inside. Let’s hear a bit more about each of these men and their thoughts.

### *[Firstly] Nick Cave*

Cave’s recent musings on Christianity emerge from the collection of interviews he conducted with Sean O’Hagan and published as *Faith, Hope and Carnage* in 2022, with an updated edition published in 2023.

The book and Cave’s reflections in it are framed to a large degree by his many experiences of profound and tragic loss. Most especially, the death of his 15-year old son, Arthur, in a climbing accident in 2015 and then that of his 31 year old son, Jethro, in 2022 from undisclosed causes.

But his interest in God and matters of faith pre-dates these tragedies, although it become more explicit because of them.

Cave is not a conventional Christian, although he does go to church. He is intrigued by Christianity's core ideas.

Like the SBNR, he is impatient with Western culture's rationalism and the scepticism it fosters. It is

simply standing in the way of a better-lived life...I think I would be happier if I stopped window-shopping and just stepped through the door. (23).

But unlike the SBNR, it is the door of the church that he steps through.

He speaks of a yearning for something beyond himself (22). But it is not spirituality, which, as I've already shown, he thinks is amorphous. "Religion," in contrast, is "spirituality with vigour; it makes demands on us."

He goes to explain this a little more. The "religious impulse," he says, is "*not* to bring happiness or comfort, necessarily, but to bring about an expansion of the self - the possibility to expand as a human being rather than contract." (107)

When he speaks about the elements of Christianity that have claimed him, he names the crucifixion and Christ's raw humanness. He is drawn to the way Christianity makes way for faith and doubt without treating them as opposites.

Going to church, engaging in worship and devotion is, he writes, a

"practical activity that involves taking my belief – and my unbelief – into a sacred space and dealing with it there rather than it being something that just lives inside my head. What I like about church is that it stands defiantly against the gods of reason and rationality. It's a deeply a

strange place, and Christianity is a deeply strange religion, all based on a deeply strange set of ideas.” (286)

He doesn't mean a strangeness as “weird” or a “strangeness” that repels or offends him. He means “strange” in the sense of being interesting, curious and intriguing.

*Stan Grant*

Grant's ideas about Christianity are developed in various places, but for now I'm drawing on some sections of his 2023 book *The Queen is Dead: The time has come for a Reckoning*.

As the title and subtitle already suggest, his reflections about Christianity are enfolded in larger issues of colonialism, racism, justice, reconciliation.

The connection between Christianity and colonialism comes in for harsh critique. He asks: how did Jesus who “stood against tyranny and empire, who spoke only of love (273) become allied to the service of conquest?” His answer: through the White Jesus of Christendom: the Jesus whose image was placed at the head of European armies and European empires. Grant declares: “I am a Christian and I find no home in White Christendom.”

Still he says he can find faith in all sorts of places and amongst different religions. As well as all those places, he adds: “I find it in churches. Yes especially in church.” (275)

He speaks of the little wooden church in Wiradjuri country in which his own faith was nurtured: it was the church on the Three-Way Aboriginal reserve, near the town of Griffith. He says that he knew nothing but love in that church.

But it was love as experienced by the afflicted and the forsaken (210). His pastor-uncle taught him quite specifically to be a Wiradjari Christian, not a European Christian. The Christ who he learnt to follow was the “crucified Christ” the one who was himself afflicted and forsaken.(276).

He spells this out by describing his faith as an Easter Saturday faith, a faith that doesn't rush to a triumphant resurrection, that finds God in loss and abandonment, but still waits for the resurrection as a gentle manifestation of divine love.

My people are of the dark Saturday; the day after the crucifixion. On that day God is dead to the world. This the darkness of our suffering and in that darkness God is with us as he was with Jesus in the moment of abandonment. And in the risen Christ, is the God of love, not a God above or beyond us, not a God of which we are unworthy, but a God within us.

As with Nick Cave, Grant does not systemise his thoughts about Christianity. But in the same manner as Cave, he goes to the heart of Christianity – this odd Easter story that mixes death with life, faith with doubt, abandonment with presence.

The same acceptance of paradox around Easter is manifest in Grant's comments about the Bible, which he describes as “perplexing, confusing, confounding, enraging, enlightening and enlarging.”

You could use those same adjectives to describe Christianity more generally: perplexing, confusing, confounding, enraging, enlightening and enlarging.

Let me put those comments from Grant alongside one of the earlier quotations from Cave.

Recall that Cave said that the “religious impulse is not to bring you happiness or comfort necessarily but to bring about an expansion of the self –the possibility to expand as a human being rather than contract.”

For Grant, Christianity is enlarging. For Cave it is for the expansion of the self.

Neither Nick Cave or Stan Grant are looking to Christianity primarily to make them happy or to bring them comfort. They are not seeking a less perplexing or confusing faith. They are seeking something *real*, something that confounds all the boxes into which we try to put it. Something that expands and enlarges their experience of being human.

I think they are tapping into something long neglected by the churches. Too often we have presented the faith as a package of happiness and comfort.

Recall the comment from Hugh Mackay much earlier in the lecture. When surveying what the SBNR meant by “spirituality” he found that it “almost always” referred to something positive.

Nick Cave and Stan Grant reminds us that Christianity is simply not designed to be always positive. That’s not to say that it is designed to be negative.

Rather it is meant to be true to life.

That is because at its heart is a one particular human life and how God was revealed in the paradoxical words, the confronting actions, violent execution and the mysterious raising of that one life.

The first Christians did not simply preach God is love or commit to caring for each other. They introduced a new reference point for both God and love.

They did not simply declare God is love, they the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Paul's preaching once elicited this response from his audience in Athens:  
"What you say is strange to us, we want to know more."

Many veils have been pulled to expose Christianity in recent decades. With those veils removed we have seen the underbelly of the churches.

It seems to me that Cave and Grant, both fully aware of this underbelly, have pulled back another veil, the veil that often hides the actual core of Christianity – the complex figure of Jesus and the strange story about him.

Perhaps this is the Christianity that needs to be rediscovered by the churches if we are to have anything to say to the world of the SBNR.

### **Christianity and Spirituality: what relationship?**

Christian but not spiritual?

You might think that by invoking Nick Cave and Stan Grant that I have smugly proved my case that you can be Christian but not spiritual. They seem to find "spirituality" lacking in the same way that the SBNR find Christianity lacking. But they also are clear about what's lacking in Christianity in many of its present forms. Their writings should in no way be read as a balm suggesting that all is well in the churches.

The tension built into the title of the lecture arises from the spirituality that sees itself as doing a better job of what the church itself should be doing. Often this leads the church to think it needs to catch up with that form of spirituality, as if that is really what its core business is.

I think Nick Cave and Stan Grant at least give us pause think that that this might not be the case.

I hope in the previous two sections of the paper I've sketched a vision of both Christianity and spirituality which suggest that they are just different. They do not relate as better and worse forms of the one thing. They are just different.

Let me unpack this by sparking off Julia Baird's attraction to the cathedrals of nature where people gather and are drawn into experiences of awe and wonder, mystery and community. From a Christian point of view, these may or may not be experiences of God.

The cathedrals of nature do indeed produce awe and wonder upon atheists, agnostics and believers, all of whom interpret the experience differently. And those experiences can indeed bind people together, increase respect for creation, and foster gratitude and humility. All these are to be welcomed, not least by Christians.

But the church has no need to think that its task is to outdo or catch up with the cathedrals of nature in their work.

Christianity also has its cathedrals – literal and metaphorical. Those cathedrals also have spires (or some parallel architectural structure) that point upwards, often evoking awe and wonder.

But somewhere beneath every spire in Christianity's cathedrals is a table.

A table where people do encounter mystery – but they do so through eating, drinking, remembering, praying and hoping together. At this table, the mystery is not the mystery of unknowing, or the mystery of the grandeur of creation,

but the mystery of what has been made known in one fragile, vulnerable, disruptive Jewish life, and in what happened in and to that life, namely the intriguing and perplexing drama of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Definitely, there is a "looking up" that belongs to Christian faith.

But it is a looking up that that is inseparable from fixing our gaze on cups of wine and broken pieces of bread, inseparable from attuning our ears to the story of one particular life, and inseparable from orienting bodies and souls to the expanding, enlarging way of Christian discipleship.

Christian mystery is set in the midst of people and place, conflict and controversy, acceptance and antipathy, love and loss.

It is a mystery which is not better known by *withdrawing* from people and place, conflict and controversy, love and loss, but is best known by stepping into them. And it is those steps *into* the world of people and place, conflict and controversy, love and loss which is the way of Christian discipleship.

That, after all, is how Jesus made God known – through his interactions with people and place, conflict and controversy, love and loss. The mystery of faith is a mystery that is true to life in all its complexity.

Christian but not spiritual?

Again, it all depends.

But how we each navigate the relationship will depend to some extent on how curious Christians are willing to be about the Christian faith, how open we are to living with its strangeness.

And something of that sense of curiosity is something that I think that Christians can well and truly learn from the curiosity of those who name themselves spiritual but not religious.

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