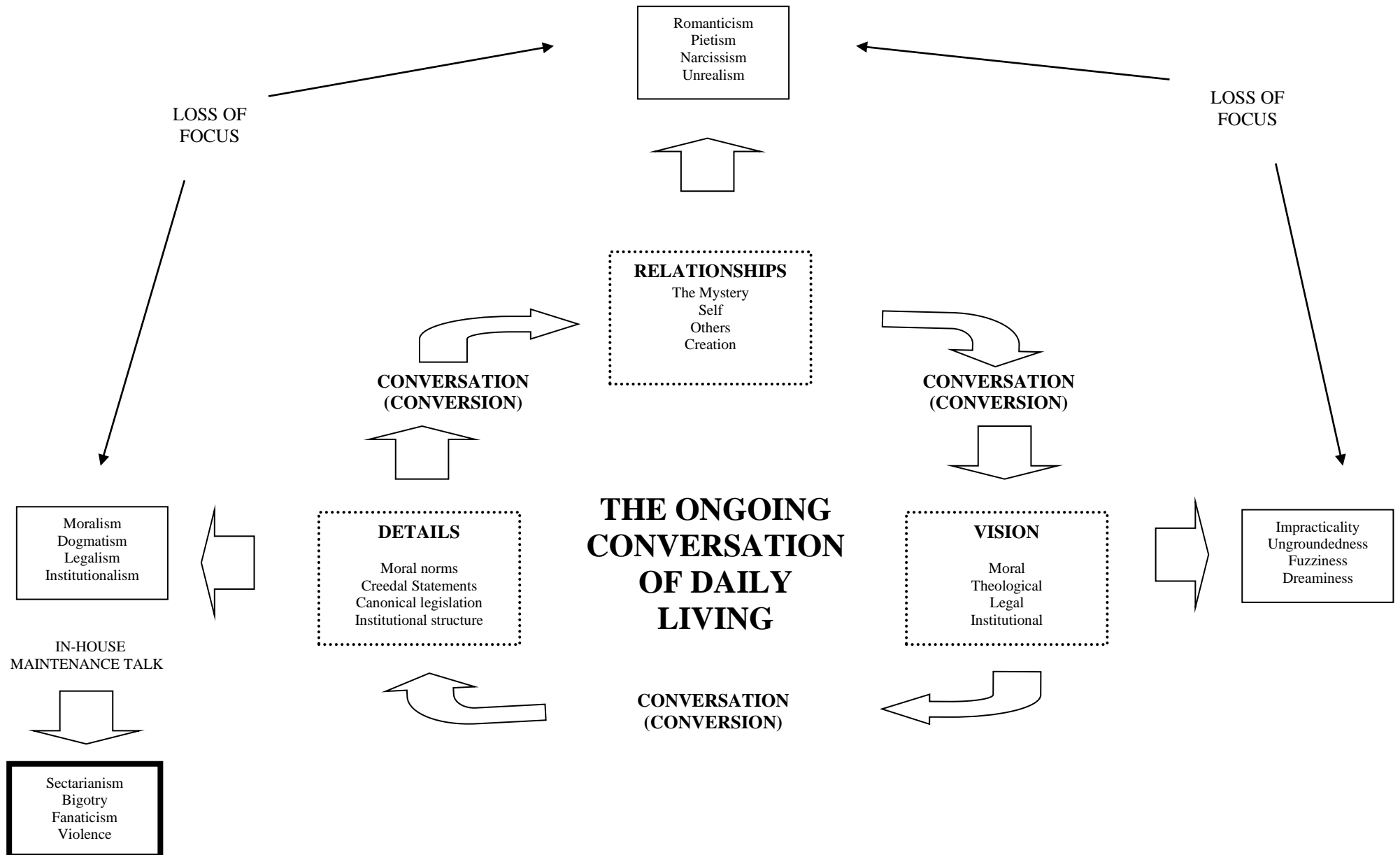


RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY: JOURNEY INTO LIFE



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(Notes by Michael Whelan SM to be used in conjunction with diagram)

I. Introductory comments:

- a.) The diagram is intended as a discussion starter, a catalyst for personal and group reflection about the nature of being human, more particularly highlighting religion and spirituality.
- b.) The diagram should be read from the center out, with each of the three categories – **RELATIONSHIPS**, **VISION** and **DETAILS** – **together** pointing to the essential core of the ongoing conversation of daily living; none of these categories can be omitted without seriously undermining the journey into life.
- c.) **CONVERSATION** keeps the journey happening.
- d.) The four categories out of the central circle represent what tends to happen when the conversation is more or less diminished or even ceases. Can you add to these or nuance them?
- e.) What is implied here of religion and spirituality could be said, with minor amendments, of human existence itself. Can you see any connections or insights with reference to one or more system in which you participate (eg family, work place, parish)?

II. The Primacy of Relationships:

- a.) We grow towards the fullness of our humanity in and through relationships – with **‘God’** (however we name that Being), with **ourselves**, with **other people** and with **creation**.
- b.) The relationship with ‘God’ gives **the context and ground** for the other three relationships.
- c.) The English word “religion” – from the Latin words “re” meaning “again” or “back” and “ligare”, meaning “to tie” – speaks of this natural condition; to be human is to be “religious”, inextricably connected to the “more than”, the “beyond”; that connection lays claims on us.
- d.) We could define **spirituality as living relationships** (with God, self, others and creation) and **religion as the incarnation of spirituality** (through symbol, ritual, creedal formulae, institutions, etc).
- e.) Religion without spirituality is **soulless**, spirituality without religion is **truncated**.
- f.) Spirituality and religion, therefore, are **necessarily social realities**; there is no such thing as utterly private spirituality or utterly private religion, though they will each tend to be more or less personal.
- g.) The journey into life begins and ends with **relationships**.

III. The Emergence of Vision:

- a.) If we accept that we grow towards the fullness of our humanity in and through relationships, we must begin to ask certain kinds of **questions**, which in turn demand certain kinds of **conversations**. Eg:
 - **Theological** questions arise: “Who is ‘God’ for me/us?” “Has ‘God’ intervened in the world?” “Does ‘God’ care about me/us?” etc, and these questions demand ongoing **theological conversations**;
 - **Moral** questions arise: “How should we treat each other?” “What is ‘good’ and what is ‘not good’?” “What are the best ways to behave so that relationships will flourish?” etc, and these questions demand ongoing **moral conversations**;
 - **Legal** questions arise: “What are the best laws to protect the common good?” “What are the best legal processes to hold people accountable for their behaviour?” “How shall we protect the rights of the individual?” etc, and these questions demand ongoing **legal conversations**;
 - **Institutional** questions arise: “How will we exercise authority?” “What structures best serve the people and relationships?” “What organizational processes shall we use?” etc, and these questions demand ongoing **institutional conversations**.
- b.) What other sorts of conversations do we need to go on having in service of relationships?
- c.) A system that is unwilling or unable to have these ongoing conversations will tend to find it more or less difficult to change and grow in creative sorts of ways. The quality of the relationships in that system will suffer; people will tend not to thrive there; eventually such a system will tend to nurture serious dysfunctional behaviours.
- d.) The ongoing multiple conversations, emerging from the **demands** of, and for the **good** of **relationships**, if engaged generously and intelligently, will give rise to a **vision**. Vision, born of generous and intelligent conversation, is an excellent antidote to routinism and its destructive tendencies.
- e.) The **vision** will tend to be life-giving **to the extent that the conversations continue**; the vision will tend to lose its life-giving power to the extent that the conversations are not engaged. Neither the conversations nor the vision must be allowed to become ends in themselves – they are there **in service of the four interdependent relationships**, with God, self, other people and creation.

IV. The Vision Demands Details:

- a.) The group having the conversations must concretize the vision in **details**; Eg:
- **Theological** details such as creedal statements, dogmas and various theological teachings;
 - **Moral** details such as principles, ideals, values, injunctions and statements about good and evil;
 - **Legal** details such as a particular code of law and processes for enacting those laws;
 - **Institutional** details such as office bearers, lines of responsibility and accountability.
- b.) What other sorts of concrete details can you think of?
- c.) The conversations **continue without end**, even though there may be great solidity and depth to the vision and the resulting details. Authentic living requires us to listen attentively and go on responding as best we can. Every commitment invites reflection and re-dedication. For example, the fact that I believe in the Resurrection does not prevent me from questioning and searching and engaging with fellow believers in an ongoing conversation about that central tenet of my faith.
- d.) The **vision and the details and the continuing conversations is for relationships**.

V. Practical Observations:

- a.) Good conversation requires at least a willingness, preferably a definite desire, on the part of the participants, **to be transformed**; note the shared etymology between “**conversation**” and “**conversion**”.
- b.) If groups are not ever-vigilant and persistently and honestly seeking good conversation, what may pass for conversation in that group may in fact better be called “in-house maintenance talk”; the very nature of conversation – inseparable as it is from conversion/transformation – **precludes it from ever being dedicated merely to maintaining the status quo**. Our commitment is, first and last, a **commitment to the fourfold relationships**, not to details or vision.
- c.) When the conversation is significantly diminished or ceases the group tends to drift out of the journey into life, and moves into one or other of the marginal states where there is a loss of focus:
- The more benign forms of this loss of focus occur when people get stuck on the need for relationships or vision and drift away into such things as romanticism, pietism, narcissism, unrealism, impracticalities, ungroundedness, fuzziness and dreaminess;
 - The much more malign form of this loss of focus – and typically the one where groups do commonly get stuck – is found in the **excessive focus on details**; when the details replace the relationships as primary, and when those details lose their groundedness in the always-developing vision, they tend to become deformed into **ideologies**; ideologies are invariably characterized by **dogmatism, moralism, legalism** and **institutionalism**; this deformed and deforming situation is then maintained with “in-house maintenance talk” and becomes very fertile ground for even more malign possibilities, such as **sectarianism, bigotry, fanaticism** and various forms of **violence**. History reminds us that when Christianity degenerates into an ideology it can be the source of as much violence and destruction as any other ideology.
- d.) In religious groups, **when authentic conversations cease**, preaching tends to degenerate into propaganda and/or banalities, spirituality degenerates into pietism and/or narcissism, authority degenerates into authoritarianism and/or impotence, fidelity degenerates into maintaining the system and/or empty conformism, service degenerates into power and/or manipulation.
- e.) Needless to say, **good conversation is very demanding**; it needs to be supported by times apart, times of prayer and reflection, times of silence and solitude, rest and relaxation.
- f.) Perhaps the seduction of the details is that they promise **control and order** – relationships can never be controlled, only **facilitated**. They need **details as servants**, not masters.
- g.) Perhaps we are most vulnerable to the seduction of the details and the pseudo-control they offer when we are not well-grounded in our relationships, with God, ourselves, other people and creation.
- g.) When the details become primary, the group tends to be **exclusive**; when the primacy of relationships is maintained, the group tends to be **inclusive**. (Can you think of any other contrasting characteristics that might emerge, depending on whether the group gives primacy to details or relationships?)
- h.) Perhaps we could name three signs that relationships are in fact being given the primacy: **freedom, grace** and **a strong sense of community manifest in practical care and concern for each other**.

VI. Some Practical Questions

- a.) What’s going on with me and my life at this time? (Think in terms of the four relationships.)
- b.) Is there any pain or grief in my life that I am not facing?
- c.) What do I really want in life?
- d.) What sorts of things enhance relationships with the people in my life?
- e.) What am I doing to enhance my relationship with God?
- f.) What is my relationship with the natural world?