

episcopal residence that he then proposed was eventually built at Broughty Ferry, among the jute barons' mansions, after his death, paid for out of the large sum of money quickly raised to provide a memorial. Forbes certainly left an indelible mark on the history of the Scottish Episcopal Church. As Richard Church noted in his obituary, recalling seeing him as an undergraduate in Newman's company some thirty five years earlier, Forbes was 'one of those who received and maintained in their purest form the best influences of the great movement with which Dr Newman's name was associated'. As another obituary wryly observed, he was 'more popular as a rule with the extremes of society at each end of the social scale than with those of the intermediate class'. And as Rowan Strong concludes, at the end of his deeply satisfying biography, for all his theological and ecumenical involvement in his own day, 'it is the example of Forbes's sacrificial and unstinting work among the poor of Dundee's streets and tenements which most endures to this'.

- 1 ALEXANDER FORBES OF BRECHIN: THE FIRST TRACTARIAN BISHOP by Rowan Strong, *Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995*, pp. 281; £35.

Post Critical Contemplation and Do It Yourself Religion

Edward P. Echlin

No description quite captures the fragmentation through which our culture is passing. Post modern, new age, deconstruction, immanentism, emotivism, all are usefully employed — none quite turns the key. In general we may say not that there are no narratives, but that *the* received narrative, the foundational cosmology, the consensus about ultimate reality upon which our societies formerly concurred have receded. Moreover, at least in affluent cultures, the mourning about dwindling consensus is past. Rather than writhe in anxiety before religious fragmentation, people simply accept as the one "luminously self evident reality" that they are alone in the universe making their own meaning. Confusion exists as to what theology is, and what real theologians are. Walter Kasper writes, "It is unfortunately not a redundancy to say that, especially today, a theological theology is the need of the hour."¹

Do It Yourself Culture

Perhaps our present phase can be fairly described as a *spiritual do it yourself culture* in which God, faith, morality and the future are for each and every person what each decides they are. Appreciation of expertise, theological training, the religious wisdom of the centuries, is suspended. Religion, says Cambridge's Don Cupitt, is "wholly of the world, wholly human, wholly our own responsibility". Eclecticism, picking and choosing from traditional religions and from new constructs, is increasingly common. The "spiritual" remains important. But the wholly transcendent is questioned. Far from being without spiritual narratives, ours is an age in which there are almost as many stories as there are tellers.

To keep this new context in perspective, however, we may remind ourselves that previous epochs too have known spiritual asymmetry. John's gospel, compiled near the end of the first century, asks, "How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" (Jn. 5:44) For any Christian, then and now, not to understand the stories of one's contemporaries, and, even more, not to *be* understood nor even listened to by "the other" is always disturbing. Discordant worldviews trouble Christians who, from their origins, have been *sent* to herald good news about God and humanity and the saving union of both and of all creation in Jesus.²

A Challenge

Nevertheless, I would argue that our context of fragmentation and "do it yourself" religion should be regarded less as a threat than a bracing challenge. The challenge to Christians today takes different forms in different bioregions. North of the Sahara African Christians living amid a sometimes militant Islam find evangelization itself almost prohibited. In Europe Christians face the still sharper challenge of metrocentre cultures which permit evangelization, especially if it legitimates consumer industrialism, while ignoring its deeper demands. Nor is marginalization itself a cause for anxiety. In an increasingly crowded global village Christians can expect, certainly in the near term, to become more marginalized — but the imperative to evangelize, especially as a leaven of reconciliation, remains. Here I differ from those who suggest we should *only* listen; or dialog with our myriad partners as if we had little compelling in the depths of our living tradition to offer. Just as Mary hurried over the hills to share the word received at Nazareth, so we ascend the hills with conviction because we have good news to share. In our cultural phase of monologic story telling we need both to listen to other stories and to strive to understand and to communicate the love of God for

this world in Jesus. Fidelity to a living tradition includes sharing that tradition at least in our faithful practice. Michael Barnes observes, “If Christians are to avoid both the patronising tolerance of the pluralist and the sublime indifference of the post-modern, they have to find some way of matching the value of openness to the other with the demands of remaining faithful to an ancient tradition.”³

Faithful Presence

As rarely before our witness, whether in north Sahara situations or in the metrocentre, needs to become a *palpably caring presence*. Oral preaching from pulpits — or even from hilltops — is not the only way to profess faith in Jesus crucified and risen. A willingness to live sustainably — by which I mean not chronic “development” but in sufficiency — and to share also with those who will walk this planet after us because in Jesus Risen *the future does matter*, may well be the paramount Christian contribution to global inter-religious dialogue.⁴ Religion in an economocentric world, in “manmade” habitats, is barely possible. “Spiritual and social needs of people”, for example, cannot be served without care for the wholeness of creation. There can be no “justice” or “peace” or “development” without attunement to the interdependence of people, no matter how high their technology, within fragile habitats. We cannot nurture overseas relations without nurturing what is local. These connections are not always made, nor convincing witness to them given, by Christians who profess interest in justice and peace.

If we are to witness convincingly to our hope in God’s kingdom we need ever deeper understanding “*fides quaerens intellectum*”, of where we stand *as Christians*, we need at least fundamental agreement among ourselves, within healthy pluralisms, about the triune God, Christ, the church, apostolicity, the historic episcopate, and the inclusive future kingdom. I suggest that we can deepen our understanding of who and what we are, as Christians, and whither we are tending, by what may be described as *post critical contemplation* of the bible within the living tradition of the church. By meditation on the bible, alone or in groups, and always with a reliable commentary, we will discover surprising tributaries to nurture our own context. We will also make discoveries *for* that context if we meditate *on* our context itself and on our connectedness, under God, within the wider created soil community.

Our Context

The circumstance in which we now live and seek God’s will is pervaded by unitization, the inability to make and live connections. Science and economics generally deal with isolated units. Ours is a scientifically and economically minded age, indeed if there is anything even approaching a

consensual worldview among many of our contemporaries today it is that ours is an economocentric world. In the debris of late industrialism and, more sadly, of the natural world, there still lingers, in economocentric cultures, the idea that any behaviour, no matter how unsustainable, is acceptable if it is “economic”, especially if it “creates jobs” or enhances “wealth creation”. In economocentric societies the future barely matters.⁵ Even professed theologians jet travel as if there were no tomorrow, no limit to fossil fuel, no imperative for bioregional theology. Addicted to techno-consumerism our societies find difficulty relating to other beings as subjects with needs of their own, fellow travelling companions within a global soil community which shares our future.

Post Critical Contemplation

By post critical contemplation I am not suggesting the desirability — or even possibility — of excluding historical critical scholarship. Rather the reverse. I am proposing that we *combine* historical criticism with contemplation and imagination. We need all the gifts of responsible exegetes to uncover the “literal sense” of the biblical texts which we contemplate — what the bible authors intended and conveyed to their readers.⁶ I am urging that alone and in small groups we meditate upon bible texts within the church community — so that we can respond in continuity with the depths of our tradition to the deconstruction which paradoxically excludes both the Transcendent and the needs of the earth. When God is eliminated God’s earth and people themselves are diminished.

We need *imagination* as well as historical critical exegesis. Indeed some recent biblical scholarship may have been almost *uncritical* in its emulation of the methods of modern laboratory science in selection and isolation of biblical texts in pursuit of what is deemed scientific truth.⁷ Believers today need the assistance of responsible exegetes and theologians — but we also drink, with them, from other fountains. There are fresh springs deep between the lines of the bible itself, and within the liturgy, life, and practice of the church. Even biblical scholars need to learn from the almost hidden wellsprings of the bible. In the mordant words of Yves Congar, “I respect and I refer unceasingly to the knowledge of the exegetes. But I refuse their magisterium”.⁸

The Spiritual Sense

When we contemplate the bible we are reminded that the real Jesus who lived in Palestine left no writings, not even his signature. All that was written *about* him when he lived and which remain were those trilingual words upon his cross. The New Testament does not and cannot provide a biography of Jesus. The authors proclaim his remembered — and

interpreted — words and deeds not as history or modern biography but as good news. “The gospels”, says Raymond Brown, “are primarily evangelistic; to make them dominantly reportorial is a distortion.” When we meditate on the gospels, with openness, we make discoveries especially in the gaps, the small print, in what is between the lines, in the silence. “Jesus was silent”, wrote Matthew (Mt. 26:63), in a crisp sentence which Origen, the first great biblical scholar, flung at the hostile pagan Celsus. “He who has made the words of Jesus really his own is able also to hear His silence,” says Ignatius of Antioch (Eph. 15.2). In that silence, in the tacit depths of his life and death and resurrection we will discover in the New Testament insights and subsidiarily known connotations about Jesus. There is more within the tacit depths of the bible than the first Christian communities realized. There is a “distanciation” between the early Christian communities and the texts which they transmitted. There is an implicit *plus* within the proclamation about Jesus which speaks to us in our context today.

The bible’s authors reflected upon the Old Testament in the light of Jesus crucified and risen and, in their very different geographical and cultural context, interpreted the Jewish scriptures and the Jesus Event for their contemporaries — and for ourselves. That interpretation continues. There is no exempt generation that does not have to reinterpret the bible *in apostolic continuity* with the contemplation and theology of the first Christians. Post critical contemplation is not a closet “do it yourself” way of proceeding. What we discover in the bible (and within the living tradition), especially any “plus”, must be consonant with the sense intended and conveyed by the canonical authors, and with our creeds and liturgies and teaching office, if we are to continue within the apostolic succession. Post modern deconstruction is not and cannot be in apostolic continuity. There are as many projections as there are projectors. The projection is the message. The need for *continuity* today cannot be overstated. John Calvin writes,

Without some linkage in these matters between the Jesus of history and the later Church, it would appear impossible to assert continuity between Jesus and the Church or to provide any standard by which to assess the compatibility of subsequent historical developments in the Church with their normative origin.¹⁰

The early traditions about Jesus conveyed in different ways in the New Testament *are meant for us*, in this age of the Spirit, today. For us too the bible was written. We too are in communion with the early Christian communities. In one of the earliest Christian texts, St Paul addresses us down the intervening centuries. “When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of

men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” (1 Th. 2:13)

The Stones Shout

A popular gospel through the Christian centuries has been that of Matthew. Matthew’s gospel begins with echoes of the gentile Balaam who foresaw a celestial light and a future Jewish king.

I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not nigh:
a star shall come forth out of Jacob,
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.
(Nm. 24:17)

Christians remember Balaam with warmth for his relationship with his donkey; and for God’s stern reminder about the imperative to respect other sensate creatures.

Why have you struck your ass these three times? Behold, I have come forth to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me. And the ass saw me, and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have slain you and let her live. (Nm. 22:32–33)

If we contemplate the gospels imaginatively Matthew’s infancy story recalls Balaam and his donkey. The Magi follow Balaam’s star and find the king. Gentiles from the East are included at the very origin of Jesus’ life on earth. So are animals. In Christian art, as in the medieval frescoes in the little church at Kempley in Gloucestershire, the gentile Balaam is forever associated with his donkey; and the Magi with pack animals and with camels.

At the end of Jesus’s earthly life Matthew again includes gentiles — Pilate and his wife, and the centurion and “those who were with him” (Mt. 27:54). Again it is a gentile, the centurion, who discovers the king. “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Mt. 27:54). Just as Jesus’s life began with the inclusion of other creatures, and as his public ministry began with a cosmic opening — of the heavens at his baptism (Mt. 3:16) — so also as he expires in the early darkness at the ninth hour on a hill the earth itself quakes in its very depths and the rocks break open (Mt. 27:51). All creation — from a humble donkey to the trembling cosmos — are included in the Incarnation and Redemption.

The living tradition, including Christian art, generally interprets the earthquake as judgment. Certainly of the six apocalyptic signs Matthew employs at the death of Jesus it is the cosmic quake which especially moves the centurion (Mt. 27:54). Yet if we consider this extraordinary

scene heuristically, with imagination and with wonder, may we possibly discover more than judgment here? Is there an implicit “*plus*” in the darkness and the rendering of the rocks? We cannot demonstrate, at least with our present knowledge, but imaginatively we may wonder if Matthew and his community do not leave hints, echoes, inchoate pointers to cosmic inclusion, even sympathy, at the death of creation’s King. Significantly, at Sardis in 170 Bishop Melito in a paschal homily imagined the earth and heaven as moved by what approaches compassion at the death of the Saviour.

The earth was trembling ...
The heavens feared ...
The angel rent his clothes ...
The Lord thundered from heaven,
and the Most High gave a cry.

Two centuries later another Syrian Christian, Deacon Ephrem, was more explicit than Matthew and Melito. For Ephrem the rocks cried out with cosmic protest at the condemnation of Innocence. “Because the mouth of human beings had condemned Him, the voice of Creation cried out to proclaim Him innocent. Men were silent, so the stones cried out.”¹¹ In Augustine’s famous dictum, “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, the Old is made explicit in the New.” Syrian Christians reflecting on the Old Testament in the light of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, discovered insights about cosmic inclusion in the Incarnation and Redemption.

Cosmic inclusion was affirmed not only in eastern Mediterranean lands but far to the north in Northumbria. An unknown poet, contemplating Matthew’s gospel, in the 8th century—in “The Dream of the Cross” —attributed to all creation sympathy at the death of the Creator.

Clouds of darkness gathered over the corpse
of the Ruler; and shadows, black shapes
under the clouds, swept across
his shining splendour. All creation wept,
wailed at the King’s death. Christ was on the cross.¹²

Redemption includes the cosmos — and green gardens. The outstretched arms of Jesus embrace *ta panta*, all things, cosmic and very small. The last gospel, that attributed to the beloved disciple, includes in the passion account the open depths of the earth and an olive garden. “In the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there” (Jn 19:41-42). By contemplating the bible, with the help of artists and poets, and with exegetes and experienced theologians, Christians can in our

confused post modern world recover and retain our identity as we meditate on the interconnection of creation and redemption in Jesus.

Conclusion

Had Jesus after his death and burial survived but not risen from the dead, Christianity would be a different, less ecologically inclusive religion. But he did arise and was experienced risen by many of the first Christians. He is experienced again by ourselves in the canonical bible and in “the liturgy, life and worship of the church”. For Christians in this post modern age Jesus risen is the first fruits of the transformation of the universe. We profess faith in Jesus Christ, crucified under Pontius Pilate and risen, transformed, from the depths of death. We therefore profess hope for the future of our planet which shares our destiny. The resurrection, says Pope John Paul II, “is the beginning of a new creation, the rediscovery of all creation in God, of the final destiny of all creatures.”¹³ Our opportunity in this age of do it yourself religion is to deepen our Christian identity in communion with the liturgy, life, worship, and teaching office of the church, and from the margins to fill all the gardens and the cosmos with Jesus who “ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things” (Eph. 4:10).

- 1 Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, SCM, 1984, p. 15.
- 2 Michael Barnes SJ, “Theology of Religion in a Post-Modern World”, *The Month*, July 1994, pp. 260–273.
- 3 Michael Barnes SJ, “Theology of Religions in a Post-Modern World”, *The Month*, August 1994, p. 326.
- 4 Edward P. Echlin, “Theology and ‘Sustainable Development’ After Rio”, *The Newman*, September 1993, pp. 2-7.
- 5 Simon Robinson, “Prophecy and Business Ethics”, *The Month*, August 1994, pp. 307-310 criticizes the ecological—and other—inadequacies of consumerist business ethics.
- 6 Raymond A. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 vols., Geoffrey Chapman, London 1994, Vol. I, pp. 6-9.
- 7 Andrew Louth, *Discerning The Mystery*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, pp. 17-44.
- 8 Quoted in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus An Experiment in Christology*, O.U.P., 1974, p. 40.
- 9 Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Vol. I, p. 24.
- 10 John P. Galvin, “From the Humanity of Christ to the Jesus of History: A Paradigm Shift in Catholic Christology”, *Theological Studies*, June 1994, Vol. 55, No. 2, p. 270.
- 11 On the Diatessaron, in Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, 1992, p. 166.
- 12 Robert Murray SJ, “Tradition and Originality in ‘The Dream of the Cross’”, *The Month*, May 1994, p. 183.
- 13 His Holiness Pope John Paul II, *Crossing The Threshold of Hope*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1994, p. 44.