

Bonebound Spirituality

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The hall-mark of a genuine spirituality must lie in the honest recognition of our rootedness in the world of matter. It is the theme of poets as various as John Donne and Dylan Thomas. Perhaps in Donne we find its chief expression in the *Devotions on Emergent Occasions and Severall Steps in my Sickness* of 1624, but it is present as the background of many of his poems:

To our bodies turne we then, that so
Weake men on love reveal'd may look;
Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
But yet the body is his booke.¹

Dylan Thomas refers to Donne with approval and comments in a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson in similar vein:

Through my small bonebound island I have learnt all that I know, experienced all and sensed all. All I write is inseparable from the island. As much as possible, therefore, I employ the scenery of the island to describe the scenery of my thoughts, the earthquakes of the body to describe the earthquakes of the heart.²

This rootedness is our greatest glory. It must drive us towards engagement with the stuff of creation, in contrast to a spirituality which offers us ways of putting up with things as they are.

This suggests a spirituality which must face up to the concrete particularity of our daily life. As Jon Sobrino has remarked recently:

The 'being human-with-spirit' that will measure up to reality's cargo of crisis and promise, that will unify the various elements of reality in such wise that reality be, in the event, more promise than crisis, is what I call spirituality.³

This is a way of regarding the human situation which refuses to set soul against body, men over against women, structures over against communion and humankind over against creation. A spirituality which regards creation as merely the stage and back-drop for the drama of our encounter with God is inadequate. Humankind is embodied, part of the stuff of the universe. As Paul Tillich made clear, the relationship between the human being and the rest of creation is subtly nuanced:

Biological, psychological and sociological powers are effective in every individual decision. The universe works through us as part of the universe.⁴

Tillich points to a considerable overlapping between animal bondage and human freedom: we are influenced by tiredness, sickness and the like. To be insensitive to our physical limitations, to claim the power of mind over matter, to feel that we can drive ourselves, is always a spiritually destructive and dangerous process. We reach into nature as nature reaches into us.

In the same way, therefore, being responsive to the demands of our environment cannot be peripheral to the path to holiness. How much driving we do, whether we use lead-free petrol, the use of ozone-friendly aerosols, are spiritual issues. We can recall Hopkins' indictment of an earlier stage of industrial materialism:

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.⁵

This is not to glory in some abstract, natural world which can be treated as an end in itself independently from the human family. As we collaborate in the corrosion of the environment it is we who are diminished. In the needless death of the African elephant or the whale it is human selfishness that is revealed.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, we must accept that we live in, and each contribute to, a society which remains of its nature unjust. We are caught up in a web which sets limits to our own freedom and forces us to curtail the freedom of others. We have been seduced by, and are quite prepared to collude in, the heartless world of consumption which is bolstered up by all the sentimental glitter of the machinery of advertising. A consumer society responds not to need but plays on envy. We have become affective about things, effective about people⁶. Carlos Christo, writing in his prison cell in Brazil in 1970, underlines this:

The essential goals of the culture that is our matrix are embodied in profit, power and prestige. There is an explicit denial of God, although religion is accepted to the extent that it forms part of a system for neutralising frustrations generated by the fact that, for most of us, work is self-sacrifice rather than self-fulfilment. This materialism which shrewdly manipulates religion is far more harmful than ideological materialism that denies God, because it tends to create a situation in which Christians actively or passively acquiesce in glaring social evil.⁷

The clearest example of this is the strong tradition of individualism which is a feature of religious life in Europe. Many have found it hard to accept that religion is essentially a political activity. It is about growth and change, and this can never be an individual pilgrimage. It is a matter of the politics of prophecy. Luther's doctrine of the two swords, the careful isolation of private morality from public polity, has been restated in many contexts and many different versions. Whilst not wishing to credit more weight than it deserves to a rather superficial example of this sort of thinking, one may point to Mrs Thatcher's speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May 1988. There is a strong dash of

Pelagianism here—as ever a singularly British heresy—betraying an oversimplistic understanding of the nature of our ability to choose. The theme running right through this speech is a shallow individualism which demands a vigorous theological riposte. This possessive individualism, which is the product of late twentieth century post-industrial society, breeds a disorientation and disintegration which corrodes both individual and society.

We are caught in a series of vicious and interlocking circles which work together as linked systems to bring human life to a state of dehumanisation and death. Jürgen Moltmann describes these circles in his significant work, *The Crucified God*⁸. In the economic dimension there is poverty, which invariably polarises society and provokes a political reaction involving force, a defence of property. There is racial, cultural and technological alienation and the inevitability of environmental pollution. These in turn lead to crushing feelings of helplessness in a world which ceases to have meaning. We feel that we are no longer subjects of our own history and have to seek escape in transient pastimes which merely reinforce this sense of disillusion. It is a world which is God-forsaken. The classic result of this state of affairs is the philosophy of national security.

South Africa, as an extreme example of a society manipulated to serve the ends of industrial capitalism, offers a disturbing illustration. Albert Nolan lists the symptoms of alienation in a society which he suggests has already fallen apart⁹. It is marked by violence, frequent breakdown of mental and physical health, death and suicide. Reporters have commented on the growing incidence of family suicide amongst white South Africans. The picture is unfortunately not an unfamiliar one. We can recognise at least some of the symptoms in our own cities. It was a picture already sketched at the beginning of this century by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim as he analysed the anarchy and exploitation that follows in the wake of industrial capitalism. In his critical study of Durkheim, Steven Lukes shows how his criticism of the notions of 'egoism' and 'anomie' were 'rooted in a broad and all-pervasive tradition of discussion concerning the causes of imminent social destruction. ... All agreed in condemning *l'odieux individualisme*'¹⁰. While we might well be uneasy with Durkheim's analysis of the role of religion in society he is surely correct in seeking the essence of religious thought in an attempt to fight against this destruction of the bonds of human society.

One of the greatest dangers threatening the Christian community is for it to respond to this situation by fleeing the market place and by establishing its own symbols of security and salvation. There are strands in our own traditions of moral understanding which reinforce this position and lead to a similar cul-de-sac. A personal spirituality, which starts from an attempt to win victory over individual sins and to free ourselves from the ambiguities and messy compromises of human living by a seeking to achieve a moral perch above it all is a clear reflection of a similar mentality. It is significant that Carol Gilligan, working on the stages of moral growth established by

Kohlberg, is able to identify elements of a male-bias in the model¹¹. Such an exaltation of an absolute morality represents, she suggests, an adolescent quest for self-justification which is in itself illegitimate. It causes us to attempt a flight from the responsibilities inherent in living out our lives in the concrete particular. Perfectionism is a wolf in sheep's clothing: the most insidious temptation is a temptation to goodness, as Thomas Becket realised when he was confronted by the unexpected arrival of the Fourth Tempter:

Servant of God has chance of greater sin
And sorrow, than the man who serves a king.
For those who serve the greater cause may
make the cause serve them
Still doing right.¹²

Engagement demands the acceptance of ambiguity and of being prepared to live with things that are not clear-cut. It means seeking justification from God rather than from ourselves. At the same time it means treating ourselves with a little more humour. A spirituality which drives towards guilt rather than joy and celebration and light-heartedness cannot be genuine.

Attempts to offer an alternative culture, or a message which proclaims itself to be apolitical, should be viewed with extreme suspicion. Invariably such programmes of neo-conservative restoration shroud a vigorous political programme which supports capital, vested interest and privilege¹³. We need to learn the words of a language which states the traditional metaphors of salvation in a way which awakens new hope and fires people to a new vision of transformation. This can only be worked out in the concrete particularity of the lives of individual communities. The Church's task is to plunge into the heart of society and to speak out from that wounded heart. So often we are content with theological abstractions, but the Word of God spoken independently from a specific situation remains ambiguous. God wants us to live: He does not will oppression. This proclamation is heard as a word of comfort for the poor and a word of judgment for the rich. For both, however, this can be an experience of liberation, a discovery that life is gracious rather than indifferent. There can never be a clear-cut plan of action: it is much more a matter of accompanying people in their unique struggle for salvation. So often we talk of faith as a matter of concluding, the end of a logical process, but God's will is discovered in the pattern of a life lived out. The most appropriate model is that of falling in love.

At the present time we see groups beginning to crystallise around new symbols of faith. There is a new ecumenism discovered in the service of the oppressed. Many of the old questions seem to have lost their import. Perhaps the most appropriate series of contemporary metaphors that allow us to rediscover the meaning of God's saving presence in our midst are those provided by the central paradigm of the struggle for justice. Salvation is a liberation from what oppresses. It is a liberation from what oppresses particular people in particular places. In the face of alienation people begin to discover that they can again become subjects of their own history. It is in

proclaiming justice that we can proclaim again the gospel in our own age. But we must beware of Anglo-Saxon attitudes which so easily confuse justice with fairness, with questions of balance and the mechanism of the Courts. We must accept what Hugo Assman calls the 'epistemological privilege of the poor', the fact that, in viewing the world as the poor see it, we are closer to the world's reality than if we use the perspective of the rich¹⁴. But even these words remain abstract unless we give them roots in a particular place and unless we discern the needs of a particular people.

The achievement of our full stature as human beings can only take place in communion with others. It is not a matter of attaining individuality, still less autonomy—as the tradition of morality dominated by Kant would have it. We need to seek what Nicholas Lash calls 'a new grammar of dependence'¹⁵. We experience the mystery that is God not in some abstract, separate realm but only if we are prepared to take on the demands of living in communion. The easiest way to deal with those we find difficult is to make them anonymous, faceless, to deprive them of their own biography and social context. In depriving someone of their own story we are making them less than human. Stereotypes are more easily lived with. At times we go further than this. We project our own fears and anxieties onto others. It is the central feature of the brutalising words of the aggressor, or the manipulation of the media. We do well to remember that even in Britain history is written by the victors, those who are in power.

The prow of a Viking ship descending through the coastal mists was as adequate a symbol of the destruction of a whole world as is the reared head of a modern-day Trident or Cruise missile. As in our time, the Jews, too, lived under a great threat—the Roman occupation threatened to destroy their society as the nuclear threat, or environmental threat, does ours. Many reacted violently against this external threat. The Zealots felt that everything would be solved once that was solved. One of the most noteworthy things about the gospels is that this is nowhere mentioned in Jesus' teaching: there is not a comment, not a hint, in the gospels. For Jesus the great enemy is the enemy within—our self-centredness, that temptation to live out our lives in a state of chronic comparison, bolstering ourselves up by projecting our fears and inadequacies on to those who share our lives. That was Ghandi's discovery, too: the chief threat was not out there—the British occupation—but the disintegration that was eating at the heart of the Indian community itself. Jesus does not offer a new criterion of judging, a new set of rules for weighing up the situation, but he demands an altogether new way: that of solidarity with all people.

It takes Jesus to break through our distorted vision. He approaches everyone as an individual with a unique story. We think of Zacchaeus, an outcast because of his brutal profession, or of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well. In a situation where Jews refused to speak to Samaritans Jesus met merely a woman enmeshed in her own tragedy: a person with her own life history, her own griefs to share, her own need of affirmation and healing. Raimundo Panikkar rightly rejects the popular

misapprehension in describing society as a global village when the underlying metaphor is the urban sprawl of the modern megalopolis in which everything is the same¹⁶. For Panikkar the notion of village life allows a cherishing of individual styles and a fostering of diverse cultures. It allows an appreciation of difference. The Church, like the human family itself, is best expressed as a communion of communions rather than as a global uniformity.

It is of the nature of Christian discipleship to be in the world as one who listens. We can never approach others from an impregnable position of absolute certainty. This is a feature of an ideological or fundamentalist stance. The fundamentalist lives in a closed world in which the basic questions have already been satisfactorily answered. Here there can be no grounds for discriminating between different interpretations of the world. For Newman religious truth must be approached in a spirit of homage. Even though adherents of a religious faith have the certitude (to use Newman's word) that they live in the truth, this must remain open to a constant and complex process of testing and re-interpretation. It is subject to the experience of living. As Edward Hulmes insists so rightly, this inevitably includes the idea of 'vulnerability'¹⁷. In the end, as Christians all we have to offer is our vulnerability, our openness to one another, our refusal to pass on violence. It is the state of Jesus on the cross.

Perhaps, then, the greatest gift that we can give to anyone is simply an acknowledgement of our own insecurity and weakness, the courage to allow others to give to us. This entails accepting a condition of complete dependence, to accept that we have nothing to offer, simply things to receive. In fact it is precisely this state that should characterise the relationship between the so-called developed world and the underdeveloped world. All too often the ability to give things can bring with it a hidden agenda of manipulation and control.

We must never forget that as followers of Christ we are called to proclaim the kingdom but that that proclamation is made by God not in spite of ourselves but through ourselves, through all our daily dealings, the little gestures of help and friendship, of support and encouragement: those delicate rituals of everyday life which the poet Yeats calls 'the ceremony of innocence'¹⁸. The kingdom of God is a gift given into our hands. Because we are bound into the wrong perspective of the world we tend to think that the important things are the things that go on in the corridors of power. It is simply not true. We have had a lesson of that fairly recently in eastern Europe.

The words of Jesus are never primarily imparting information, giving new facts about the world, but rather initiating us into a new vision. It is a question of wrestling with our experience in the light of the word, a wrestling with the word in the dark and confusion of our experience. Like Jacob we shall, with the day-break, learn the letters of a new name. 'And God will bless us there' (Gen 32: 23—29).

For the Welsh poet and visionary, David Jones, as well as for Thomas

Aquinas, the human being is a borderer, 'the sole inhabitant of a tract of country where matter marches with spirit'. We dwell at that point in the cycle of life where freedom becomes a possibility and where love becomes a possibility. This inevitably imposes its own dynamic: being free means being free to refuse the response of love. To live at the heart of things brings its own pain and loneliness. We should not seek to escape it. It is the lot of being human. The heart is a wounded heart. Yet here, in the human heart, the created matter of the universe becomes self-conscious and self-reflective. In the human, finitude can consciously articulate the praise of creation.

- 1 John Donne, 'The Extasie'.
- 2 A letter of October 1933, cited in *Poet in the Making, The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas*, ed. Ralph Maud, Dent 1968, p. 27.
- 3 Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, Orbis 1988, p. 46.
- 4 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 2, SCM, p. 42.
- 5 Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', *Poems*, Oxford, 1967.
- 6 Louis Marteau, *Words of Counsel*, T. Shand, 1978, p. 37.
- 7 Carlos Christo, *Against Principalities and Powers*, Orbis 1977, p. 102.
- 8 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, SCM, 1974, p. 329ff.
- 9 Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa*, CIIR, 1988, p. 81–84.
- 10 Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim*, Penguin, 1975, pp. 196–8.
- 11 See Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, 1982.
- 12 T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Faber, 1935.
- 13 See Elda Morran & Laurence Schlemmer, *Faith for the Fearful*, Durban, 1984.
- 14 See Frank Chikane, *No Life of My Own*, CIIR, 1988, p. 114.
- 15 Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, SCM, 1986, p. 154.
- 16 Raimundo Panikkar, *The Tablet*, 9 July 1983, pp. 649–650.
- 17 Edward Hulmes, *Commitment and Neutrality in Religious Education*, Chapman, 1979, p 73.
- 18 W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', *Collected Poems*, Macmillan, 1982.

New Blackfriars

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