

How to release the gospel and its intrinsic dynamic from this hard Euro-American shell, this hard Latin shell, this capsule? Boulaga concludes his book by giving four 'rules for conversion'; they are labelled *personalization, historicization, aesthetics and universalization*. In other words, Christian truths must be personalized in order to become believable, faith must be a process of historicization, Christianity must become a redemptive aesthetics, and universality must be recognized as made, not given. The last point we have already touched on; the first three I do not fully understand. But what is clear is that the work of release, or of applying the Christic model, can only be performed in local Christian communities. It cannot be directed, or controlled, or laid down from the centre, from Rome. Rome, the Holy See, can encourage or discourage it, but cannot possibly, in the nature of the case, do it. What the Roman Church (that local Church in Italy) and its bishop should do is apply the Christic model in Rome to the Roman situation, and, as far as the rest of the world is concerned, 'preside over the process in charity'.

- 1 *Christianisme sans fétiche*, Editions Présence Africaine, 1981; ET *Christianity without Fetishes*, translated by Robert R. Barr, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1984, US £11.95.
- 2 *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q. 3, prol.
- 3 q. 17; published by CTS.

Prayer as Bleeding

Melvyn Matthews

Prayer is a form of bleeding, a wound which we may not staunch. Its source is in the incompleteness of the human person and its continuance depends upon that incompleteness, that wounding being maintained. To be a prayerful and spiritual person requires an affirmation and an acceptance of one's incompleteness. It requires a realisation that the important thing about human beings is their incompleteness. Human beings are characterised by the unstaunched wounds within their nature. They reveal these wounds by being those who continually and consistently look towards the future, always seeking a new heaven and a new earth, always hoping, always moving forwards. Doing this is what makes us human. To settle into a final completeness of understanding is to accept an ideology. To believe that you have found a complete explanation, a way of seeing things that explains and welds into a complete pattern all of the inconsistencies of life, this is to lock oneself into a diminishment of the human person. To believe that you have

finally uncovered and understood the means of human fulfillment is to embrace the roots of fascism. We are all radically incomplete, wounded at the centre. The Christian gospel is that which asks us to accept that incompleteness and to accept it as being, in itself, good news. Prayer then becomes the outpouring of the self which radically maintains and affirms our incompleteness, springing, as it does, out of our longing and desire. Prayer keeps us incomplete and to remain incomplete is the fulfilment of mankind.

All of this is, of course, in direct contrast to an understanding of prayer which sees its source as residing in the human will. Prayer seen as deriving from an act of the will must be the most discouraging way of understanding the whole process; discouraging because prayer will only then occur when something is wanted, and we know there are many things we want which we cannot or even should not have. It is also a limitation in the sense that the objects of prayer will then be limited to those things which we can envisage as being 'good' for ourselves or for others. Furthermore, such an understanding of prayer actually limits God to being a 'willing' deity, a god whose primary reason for existence is to choose to grant or refuse the petitions of his subjects. All of this diminishes both God and us. Above all, such an understanding of prayer—placing its origins within the willing, rational life of human beings—only reveals exactly how far the contemporary process of dislocation has gone. It has reached right into the very bones and sinews of religious practice and persuaded us that even prayer must be regarded as a partial activity, something that we can do and which will, if we do it properly, produce results, and above all results which we can see. So prayer is reduced to being a product, something which we can make or do, another thing we can have if we are to be the properly fulfilled people we think we should be.

Prayer as property is no joke. Two recent articles in a popular magazine illustrate this. The first was a pull-out supplement entitled 'How to Improve your Health'. This contained check lists on diet and exercise and then one on 'spiritual health'. The necessity of regular prayer was added to the list of exercises, yoghurt and a regular consumption of dietary fibre. Not that either prayer or dietary fibre are bad in themselves. They simply do not belong to the same class of things. The same magazine carried an article about a 'spiritual marriage'. This described a couple who, after some years of matrimony, had decided to abandon sex and live on muesli and yogic exercises. They clearly felt that they had everything they wanted except some form of spiritual fulfilment and had now decided to obtain that as well. Their mistake was to assume that spiritual fulfilment was something which could be 'obtained' by behaving in particular ways. Prayer and the spiritual life have become items on the consumerist shopping list; they have become totally

absorbed into an individualistic consumerist materialism, reduced to another acquisition of the 'fulfilled' person. To associate prayer or spirituality with fulfilment is to make a category mistake of the first order. Prayer is not fulfilling in that sense; if it is it is not prayer.

Prayer is a dark struggle, a struggle with the angel who then leaves us with a persistent limp, a dislocated joint. Prayer is a radical refusal to accept that I can be completed by the conditions prevailing in western society. Prayer is a radically subversive act of protest against all self-contained and totalitarian understandings of mankind of whatever kind, including theological ones. All prayer is a protest against the inevitability of determinisms, a protest against the idea that there is no alternative.

Prayer and the hidden life

Prayer, moreover, is an affirmation and acceptance of the unknowability of God. God cannot be seen. This is the fundamental truth of religion. It is a truth usually ignored by contemporary evangelical religious movements, which, while they would deny having seen God immediately, give the lie to this statement by replacing the darkness of trust with the certainty of assured 'knowledge'. The statement 'God cannot be seen' does not just say something about sight, it also says something about incomprehensibility and about the basic necessity of trust. The statement 'God cannot be seen' is not a truth of a somewhat unpalatable nature, to be accepted with regret as if it should not be so; rather it must be embraced as life-giving, or at least understood as life-giving once embraced. God cannot be seen, he can only be trusted. Gregory of Nyssa spoke of this when he said that on Mount Sinai Moses only saw the 'back-parts' of God. And the theme has been taken up in our own day by the Welsh priest-poet R.S. Thomas. In the poem 'Pilgrimages' he writes:

...He is such a fast
God, always before us and
leaving as we arrive.¹

Prayer as an affirmation and an acceptance of God's unknowability is beautifully expressed in his poem 'The Presence'.

...I pray and incur
silence. Some take that silence
for refusal.
I feel the power
that, invisible, catches me
by the sleeve, nudging...²

Prayer then is—or should be—an act which is content to rest in the silence of God and to accept that this is, although painful, ultimately good. This prayer is a radical protest against final descriptions of God, against 'knowing' in a debased sense. It is, therefore, a radically subversive act of protest against theology as description, against doctrine

simply as a series of true and rational propositions, against those who imply that they have 'seen' God or the inner metaphysics of Jesus Christ. It is interesting that Gregory of Nyssa also makes this point when he suggests that to be content with the 'face' of God is to be content with less than what God is. If you have seen God you will not pray.

Furthermore we will not understand prayer until we see religion as lying at the root of all human affairs. Prayer then involves all things, and is an attempt to bring all things into focus, to see all things as they really are, as seen by God. It is not a religious act which will somehow alter the way things are, it is rather an expression of faith in the godwardness of all things and an attempt to align oneself with that godwardness. A religious view of life is not strange, it is life seen as it really is.

It might help our understanding of matters at this point if we were to look a little more closely at our use of the word 'spiritual'. The word 'spiritual' should imply two things in particular—that there is a single reality and that human beings must not live on the surface of this reality. Perhaps, for the time being at least, we should lay aside the word 'spiritual' itself. Its dualist connotations obscure the affirmation of the unitary nature of reality which it contains. Perhaps we should replace it with the word 'hidden'. Spiritual realities are in fact hidden realities, things which, for various reasons, we cannot see at the moment. To be a spiritual person is to be someone who sees things as they really are, who sees things from the inside, whose vision is not clouded by fantasy or illusion. To be spiritual is not to be ethereal but to be perceptive of hidden truth, obscured or forgotten agendas. It is to be aware of deceit and 'covering', the self-protection in which the soul engages, and to bring these hidden or forgotten truths gently into the light. Sometimes indeed these forgotten truths will be of a very material kind. They may be truths which require action of a direct or immediate kind. To see them and to do them is to be a spiritual being. This, in the end, is something of the burden of St. John's Gospel. The truth, the Word or Logos, is there, but men have missed his coming. We can, by attention to and faith in the existence of the hidden Word of God, see him, but when we see the truth it has to be responded to in order for us to become part of it.

This is why the word spiritual and the reality of what it means to be spiritual has to be placed firmly within the arena of public life and not secreted away into a separate existence known as 'religious'. One important reason for this is because so much of our public life, our public discussion of politics and economics, is conducted in a totally superficial manner. But the superficiality derives not so much from the lack-lustre arguments as from a lack of comprehension as to why people come to understand and accept truth in the first place.

The sterility of public debate is a sign of our dislocation. We assume that people primarily exist in an intellectual or rational mould. We are

nervous of linking a person's intellectual convictions with his inner orientation as a person, with his hiddenness or his spirituality. That, we assume, is his private affair and his mental activity can quite easily dissociate him from all that. Once again we are thereby caught in a particular kind of sterility because of our refusal or inability to recognise the place that the spiritual plays in the intellectual and moral development of the person. We have become so dislocated that we are unable to see the hidden bleeding that is going on within the person or group of persons with whom we are faced. And yet we do know, instinctively almost, when certain arguments are being proposed to us which function within the life of the proposer as more than just arguments. We know when these arguments are part of the given reality for that person and constitute a whole way of seeing things. We also know that, in order to persuade the same person that his or her way of seeing things is false or misleading, simple rational argument will not prevail, however rational or accurate the argumentation may be. The position of the proponent derives from certain experiences and reflection upon these experiences which have then become locked into a certain understanding of life. These experiences have become the interpretative experiences for that person by which everything which comes his or her way is judged. In the debate about nuclear weapons, for example, the traumatic experience of Europe at war and the events leading up to that war have, for many people, become determinative in the whole discussion of the nature of defence. The only thing which will affect a change of position is a further set of interpretative experiences more powerful than the first. Not to see this and allow for it as we discuss nuclear weapons is to betray just how dislocated we are.

Prayer and spirituality then become important as those realities which enable people to remain open to change and development, maturation of various kinds. They are also those realities which enable people to discern between false and unnecessary change and real, needful change. Without prayer we should simply be open to the force of the strongest set of experiences and be forced to accept those as determinative. Without prayer we are crippled, living either by a single immutable set of interpretative experiences, unwilling or unable to change, locked into nostalgia maybe, or a monistic world view which may or may not correspond to reality; or we are subject to the whims of fancy, fashion and the strongest life force around, unable to decide which of the experiences we have are to be accepted as interpretative for us. Genuine spirituality is that attitude of heart, mind and will which prevents me from doing one of two things. It prevents me from allowing a particular set of powerful interpretative experiences from becoming so important that they become an ideology, so predetermining all rational response. It is also that which prevents me from being so ignorant of which of several conflicting sets of powerful interpretative experiences are 'mine' that I am tossed from one set of views

to another and therefore live continually at the mercy of the strongest set of forces available. Either way lies dislocation from my true self and the true ends of that self.

Prayer keeps me in touch with myself, it prevents me from so damming up the life of grace that I staunch the bleeding of the spirit within me. Here the ancient theological concept of grace is still relevant. Grace, the free gift of God's love, enables me to trust gladly in the partial nature of human insight. It prevents me from putting my complete trust in a single set of experiences which then become ideological and so exercise a dehumanising impact upon me. Grace prevents me from putting my trust in princes rather than the invisible and unseen God. It is that which enables me to trust that new and equally genuine and formative experiences may be in store for me—that God has new truths waiting to break forth from his word—and, just as important, that I will be able to discern which of these truths is from God and which is the product of illusion or fantasy. Grace enables me to trust myself to the processes of change both in me and in society and so liberates me to participate in the creation of a new world with confidence. To do that is to believe in God.

Prayer and ideology

Regrettably, there is a snag. While it may not be very difficult for us to recognise that prayer is necessary to our health as human beings, we do not recognise quite so easily how prayer is used to reinforce or protect who or what we are and what we possess. Prayer *itself* may become part of our dislocation and instead of allowing us to bleed healthily may be used to stop the bleeding and to shore up a particular way of life. At a particular point religion, and the spiritual practices which accompany it, become oppressive, a duty rather than a source of liberation. At a particular point human beings take their religious selves so seriously that their spirituality becomes a 'structure' or 'sacred canopy'³, an 'act' which they adopt because they feel they ought or because they need the protection they believe it brings or because they are, quite simply, afraid. There is an inbuilt tendency in human beings to turn religion into a structured possession in order to reinforce their position in society, or to protect them from their own inadequacy, or to preserve their own power. The roots of this kind of 'structuralism' are fear and desire. The use of religion as an unconscious front for inner fear and confusion is often present in closely knit religious communities. This is difficult enough, but the more difficult situations are to be found where religion is overtly used as a supporting mechanism for power. This happens blatantly in South Africa and Israel as well as, latterly, in America and Northern Ireland. It also happens within the recesses of our own souls.

It is well known that some of the most savage attacks upon religion as a prop for power and capital come from the pen of Karl Marx. A
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contemporary philosopher who, in a study of the relationship between Christianity and Marxism, has understood very clearly how religion functions as an ideology is Denys Turner. Ideology, he says, is 'a socially lived falsehood'.⁴ Religiously speaking, it is contained in the relationship which obtains between the authoritarian preacher declaring from his *authoritarian pulpit that the people of God are all equal and the reciprocal acceptance of this act by the people themselves*. Both the preacher and his congregation 'socially live an enacted contradiction, a contradiction which is internal to their form of life'.⁵ Turner goes on to unravel the ways in which prayer can also participate in this performative contradiction which is characteristic of ideology. The Marxist can only too easily conclude that Christians are 'fated, by the demands of their own discourse, to live out a permanently uncertain and ambiguous relation with the demands of the material social world.'⁶

Turner does not think, however, that Christianity is *inherently* ideological; rather he thinks that the supreme contribution which Marxism can make to Christianity is to rescue it from the permanent necessity of being ideological. He does see certain forms of Christianity as ideological, for example some specific forms of twentieth century Christianity which are rooted in Barthian 'fideism'. These forms of faith seem to rely on no evidence whatsoever and so cannot be contradicted by any evidence whatsoever. When this happens 'religious language is ... materially one of the ways there are for not knowing the social forces which govern our material world; it is a way of living out a contradictory relationship with reality.'⁷

What is particularly interesting about what Turner is saying—at least for our present purposes—is that it reveals just how little Christians realise that their activity participate in a condition of 'not-knowing'. He lends considerable philosophical support to the popular notion that religion in general and Christianity in particular participates in and lend reinforcement to the ideological condition of modern man. In this condition men and women are forced to live 'out of joint', living a contradiction between their true selves and the selves with which they are provided by the social forces of the age. Thus ideology and dislocation become one and the same thing.

On the purely practical and observable level the churches do use religion as a means of accruing to themselves at least the sensation of power if not actual power itself. It should disturb us greatly that religion becomes a matter of big business with spiritual fulfilment being sold in churches which claim success in evangelism. We should be even more disturbed when we realise that many of these churches are set in urban areas where the divide between the rich and the poor is as great as it ever was, if not greater, and in a nation where the resources available for the deprived are being cut back day by day. This 'ideological' condition of the

churches is especially visible in the large conurbations of the tropical third world. The churches of the third world often claim to have large congregations in the cities together with a considerable development of 'spiritual' awareness and thousands being added to their number each month, yet this happens with very little regard—except amongst a small number—for the living conditions of many thousands in favellas and townships of the worst kind in their immediate vicinity. Never has Denys Turner's 'performative contradiction' been more evident as far as Christianity is concerned. Nor is this simply a third world problem. It happens in the West and it happens to us individually.

All of this can only mean that much religion has become a means of protection *against* seeing. The more religious we are, often the more blind we are. Religion then becomes a source of alienation rather than peace and freedom. Religion and oppression, historically at least, have a strange fascination for each other and those who claim to be religious without actually recognising that this is true can hardly substantiate the claim. The further difficulty lies in persuading people that this is so. Persuading people that they risk being the victims of a 'performative contradiction' when they go to church is not an easy task. We are conditioned into believing that if a person prays or goes to church then that is automatically and necessarily a good thing. As most good pastors know, nothing could be further from the truth, but there is no rational process which will enable us to understand that this is so. Such a contradiction is the result of our dislocation. Religion, in the Western understanding, is seen to be the adherence to a set of beliefs which are understood by the believer to be 'true'. This effectively relieves him of the task of seeing himself and his beliefs within their social context. We are the victims of adherence to the tenets of religion rather than the existence of the living God. Perhaps we should read Meister Eckhardt (or his contemporary champion, Don Cupitt) when he says:

Anyone who looks for God in any particular way gets the way and lets go of God⁸.

Human beings cannot deliver themselves of the need to pray, and indeed prayer does liberate from ideology; but, strangely enough, prayer and worship can also be the sources of the deepest alienation known to man, especially when these religious practices become allied to power and so effectively support the structures of oppression. Prayer can either release us from dislocation or it can be used to reinforce it.

The desert way

But this set of insights into the contradictory nature of prayer is by no means new. In particular these insights were known to those who began the monastic tradition in Christianity by fleeing to the Egyptian desert in the fourth century. The remarkable thing is that the Desert Fathers fled to the desert at the same time that Christianity became the established cultus of the

Roman Empire. They sought for a true spirituality because religion was becoming a source of alienation, reinforcing the oppressive structures of the state. But they also knew that the problems of human beings were at root spiritual ones, and so they went to the root of their lives to rest in the silence of God. They sought salvation and the avoidance of sin, and by sin they meant the contradictions of a dislocated existence. They sought to avoid alienation, whether this was economic, political or religious. They knew that the problem was finally an inner one, deriving from interior restlessness. Cassian reminded his monks that even the desire to save others could derive from a restless inability to sit still and accept oneself. The task of the monk was to come face to face with God and to avoid all the disguises which life and religion allow us to wear and which prevent that eventual encounter. As Thomas Merton was aware, 'Once spiritual experience becomes objectified it turns into an idol. It becomes a thing, a reality we serve. We were not created for the service of any thing, but for the service of God alone, who is not and cannot be a thing.'⁹

The inner purpose of the Christian faith—that is, not why we must have faith, but what it must do to me if I have it—is to enable me to abandon my disguises, to take me out of my divided and dislocated self, and to give me a face, the face which God gave me at the beginning.

When you said 'Seek my face',

my heart said to you,

'Your face, Lord, I will seek'.

Do not hide your face from me...'¹⁰

The face we really have, the one with which we shall be able to see 'the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living', the face with which we see God and which he sees in us, this face is present and may be discovered in us in silence, peacefulness and solitude. Solitude is essential to sight. Silence is essential to speech, and prayer is essential as the place where, if we persist long enough, disguises will drop away. We have to lose these disguises, which in the end are only expressions of our dislocation, if we are to live with God and our fellow human beings as a human being.

To pray is to descend with the mind in the heart
and there to stand before the face of the Lord,
ever present, all seeing, within you.¹¹

1 R.S. Thomas *Frequencies* Macmillan 1978, p. 5.

2 R.S. Thomas *Between Here and Now* Macmillan, 1981, p. 107.

3 See Peter L. Berger *The Social Reality of Religion* Penguin 1973 esp. ch. 1.

4 Denys Turner *Marxism and Christianity* Blackwell, 1983, p. 6.

5 Turner op. cit., p. 31.

6 Ibid., p. 172.

7 Ibid., p. 172.

8 Cited by Don Cupitt.

9 Thomas Merton 'The Inner Experience', an unpublished manuscript cited by William H. Shannon *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981 p. 129.

10 Psalm 27 vv. 8, 9.

11 Theophan the Recluse cited in *The Art of Prayer* p.63.