

meetings, Wojtyla did advise Pope Paul VI on questions of conjugal morality and wrote several articles in defence of *Humanae Vitae* when the encyclical was finally published. One of the permanent themes of those writings is the compatibility and continuity between *Humanae Vitae* and the doctrine on marriage and the family contained in *Gaudium et Spes*. For Wojtyla (and later for Pope John Paul II) *Humanae Vitae* represents the logical culmination of Vatican II's teaching on marriage and the family. Pace certain authors (e.g., Charles Curran, Joseph Selling, Andrew Greeley et al.) Council and encyclical do not represent a break for Wojtyla: *Gaudium et Spes* and *Humanae Vitae* represent complementary aspects of the same doctrine. *Humanae Vitae* also represents the logical outcome of the thinking Wojtyla had already articulated in the 1960s in his book *Love and Responsibility*, a compelling basis upon which a post-Conciliar Catholic sexual ethic can be based. There are many other potential strands of influence on the prepapal thought of Karol Wojtyla but the seven identified here represent the main building blocks which appear again and again in Wojtyla's prepapal corpus as well as continue to color his papal Magisterium as well. Wojtyla's prepapal thought is a rich treasure, a deposit still awaiting extended scholarly mining, but one which rewards the effort in terms of locating the key elements from the Polish roots of Karol Wojtyla that still animate the thought of this "Slavic Pope."

Truth, Tragedy and Compassion: some reflections on the theology of Donald MacKinnon

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To read Donald MacKinnon's theology with the presupposition that he was a systematic theologian must be a great disappointment. Reading MacKinnon leaves one with the impression that his work is rather unfinished, yet this is its quality. Embodied in his work is the belief that any system cannot in the end do justice to the realm of irreducible fact. There is a sustained rigour in his writing which is so deep as to give the reader the sense that MacKinnon is involved in an interrogation so

penetrating as to be at times harrowing in its execution. George Steiner, quite rightly, speaks the word 'sombre' of MacKinnon's work, but I think 'interrogative', with the accent on the restless even painful questioning of MacKinnon's genius to be the better description. If MacKinnon can be said to have a method it is Baconian. The question rather than the thesis is the cutting edge of his theology. There is a Barthian insistence about his thought which wants to put all understanding, all subjectivity to the question in order to disclose a deeper level: the subjective must give way to the ontological. Implicit in his writings is the belief that to be a theologian is to be a realist: to be sensitive to the limits of understanding, to let God be God.

The main concern of the following is to explore the motives for MacKinnon's belief in tragedy. The principal questions are: 'What form does MacKinnon's appropriation of tragedy take?', and 'What things, both philosophical and religious, brought MacKinnon to embrace tragedy?' These questions will be illuminated *via* the exploration of two recurring themes: first, MacKinnon's belief that the work of Christ is more adequately represented as a tragedy, and secondly, his polemic against idealism.

The Story of Jesus as Tragedy

The greatest damage that Plato's authority inflicted on the Christian tradition was, according to MacKinnon, his flight from the tragic. MacKinnon thought the idea of evil as privation inadequate and ill-thought out especially when confronted with concrete examples of physical and moral evil. Like an obstinate historian who comes up with an inconvenient fact, MacKinnon's understanding of irreducible particularity eclipses the blinding light of Plato's sun. For MacKinnon, there is no solution to the problem of evil. While, then, he is sensitive to the problem of reconciliation and its setting in the material context of human history, MacKinnon's ethical reflection reveals that this necessitates the Marxist-Leninist plea for historical struggle, but also the realisation that the very act of reconciliation is fraught with tragic consequences. As Sophocles suggested by the figure of Oedipus, man is betrayed into evil-doing by his very effort to avoid its perpetration. Those who would fight against corruption have to do so within the situation it has created, and may even in the fight against it find themselves its victims in the end.¹

It is in the engagement with this irreducible particularity that MacKinnon directs our ultimate questioning. From this follows his belief that the most appropriate form of representation for the work of Christ is tragedy. That is to say, MacKinnon believed that the only way of speaking about the transcendent that would not be another avoidance of the world,

an escape into a realm of security—would be to stress the identification of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnation of the eternal into the stuff of human history, with the irreducible particularity of harsh human reality. In this way MacKinnon appears to be reactivating Paul's elusive notion that Christ was 'made into sin'.

the history is a human history and therefore it moves to death. Its telos is a lifting up on a Roman cross, a final condemnation of Jesus to annihilation, that is of course also the last judgement of the world. In that condemnation the whole tragic potentiality of human history is actualised and comes to rest on the central figure, who experiences defeat in no make-believe sense, but in the sense that he must let all those whom the Father has not given him slip through his grasp. Judas goes out into the night. Christ's ministry ends in sheer disaster.²

Here on the cross the very identity of the Son with the Father is put at risk. Yet in this risk, in the abandonment of the Son by the Father, the quality of God's relationship to humankind is given its terms of reference. The cross, then, takes on paradoxical significance: transcendence and tragedy cannot be thought apart. The historical fact of sheer disaster illustrates the depth to which Christ descended. It is so radically scandalous that it demands a response. Too many of the responses have been to muffle Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross in an attempt to domesticate the scandal, and to proclaim the resurrection of Christ as a descent from the cross made all the more spectacular by a thirty-six hour postponement.³ By contrast, while the resurrection is the *prius* of his whole argument, MacKinnon enlists the tragic as a barrier against facile optimism.

But what of the charge that in the tragic vision there is an intractable surd element which the redemption Christ won for us cannot reach? MacKinnon is elusive in his answer to this question. But we can explore it in two ways. First, tragedy is not determinism. As MacKinnon puts it, 'no determinist could write an effective tragedy'.⁴ Tragedy affirms a freedom of open possibilities as well as an irresistible surd element in the scheme of things. MacKinnon, therefore, rejects a complete determinism, because it is another human desire: determinism satisfies the deep human wish to give up and to get rid of responsibility. Reconciliation rather than determinism is the real problem. Yet while remaining sensitive to the work of Hegel and Marx, MacKinnon believed that by providing an answer to the problem of evil, both claimed to 'know the answer' ahead of resolution. For MacKinnon, Hegel hides the truth about our condition, while Marx's claim that reconciliation can be realised by way of manipulation rather than understanding relies too heavily on the dream that there is 'a secular equivalent to grace'.⁵ Such sensitivity to the deeply

rooted problem of fate and guilt, pervaded the work of the late Klaus Scholder. In a short address, to be found in *Requiem For Hitler*, Scholder prefaces a brief discussion on the rise of Hitler with Schleiermacher's insight that successive generations have great difficulty dealing with the guilt of the one before, so much so that the new generation hides the guilt of the old in new and more monstrous guilt. The problem of reconciliation is central but it is unresolved. Rather, for MacKinnon, tragedy discloses the truth of the situation one is in.

Electra could have gone the way of her more accommodating sister, and thereby avoided the kind of disintegration that was the price of her refusal to compromise with the truth of the situation in which she found herself. It was her steadfastness which betrayed her, her refusal to pretend that things were other than they were...⁶

The main point is that MacKinnon sees tragedy less as a conflict between equal goods, and more as a conflict between the claim of truth, the claim of seeing things as they are, and the claim of pity and compassion. It is the latter claim which MacKinnon saw as the besetting temptation of us all. We would rather clothe ourselves in a security in which there are no real defeats. But MacKinnon bids us to live an exposed life. 'For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame' (Hebrews 12:2). MacKinnon's ruthless criticism of Establishment can be found here. This is not simply with Establishment in the narrow sense, 'but with the cultivation of the status of invulnerability, issuing in a devotion to the structures that preserve it.'⁷ An established church has its hands tied, it inevitably succumbs to complicity in its backward glance at the preservation of its own structures. In a recent talk at New College Durham, the Bishop of Durham defended establishment on the grounds that it makes possible an informed Christian presence in the places where great decisions are made. But what is lost sight of here is the irony that the crucifixion proclaims: 'Honour and dishonour, praise and blame, what odds?' (2 Corinthians 6:8). Exploring the question, 'Can any *great* thing come out of Nazareth?' MacKinnon finds himself drawing an analogy with Lenin and the Russian revolution:

it was in places into which those who were self-consciously at ease in our Zion hardly deigned to glance, that the tools which were to shake the world's foundation were being hammered out. It was in fact in the very humdrum out-posts of a consciously godless world.⁸

It is this searching irony, so pervasive a feature of the fourth gospel, that MacKinnon fastens upon in order to separate the relative claim from the claim of the absolute.

The second way to explore the problem of tragedy is through the

concept of identification. Rather fittingly it may seem, there is an ambiguity in MacKinnon's approach in so far as the plumbing of the depths which Jesus' death achieves leaves a sense of the unresolved. Like all human action Jesus' going to his death has consequences that escape the agent. Not being masters of our fate, we cannot construct or tailor an action that will annul all measure of ambiguity. We act in an already constituted world. The ambivalent nature of Christ's death remains: he left his contemporaries with a terrible guilt and provided an excuse for his later followers to fasten that guilt upon the Jewish people and their descendants. Furthermore, the problem of evil, according to MacKinnon, cannot be seen apart from the betrayal and rejection of Jesus. This is not a question of evil somehow occasioning good, but is the site of that which is unresolved: 'good were it for this man if he had not been born'.

The concept of identification is explored further *via* the conflicting claims of truth and compassion. MacKinnon pursues this through his fascination with the ordinariness of Jesus and by his unusual reading of the parables.

Jesus is so accepted as an ordinary person that following his missionary activity he is rejected by the people of his village. Could it be that his gifts so bountifully given away in the early part of his ministry occasioned an unwanted stream of people seeking him out, rather like some fanatic who seeks the birthplace of his idol only to annoy those still living there who knew the idol differently? The question of who this man really is begins to interrogate witnesses. Furthermore, Mark represents Jesus' life as a movement from an initial explosion of charismatic activity to a more elusive ministry, as if to guard himself and the people against any easy optimism. As Jesus' ministry progresses miracle is seen as ethically out of place. Finally, Judas has to kiss Jesus as if, with a deep irony, the one who is a threat to the establishment can simply walk about unrecognised. It is this emphasis on the ordinariness of Jesus that is the catalyst which enables people to see things as they really are. Following Luke closely at this point, MacKinnon emphasises that the temptations were not isolated episodes of Jesus' life, but constant afflictions. Jesus' temptation was the temptation to security, to retreat from the rough edge of life and pander to the desires of the people. As MacKinnon puts it:

Christ's subtlest foes were those who would make him king, imprisoning him so completely in the structures they would erect on the foundation of their devotion that his work of being lifted up from the earth to draw all men to himself was put in jeopardy by their anxious zeal.⁹

There is tragic necessity here which is brought out in MacKinnon's exploration of the claims of truth and compassion in the parables. Let us

take the example of the Good Samaritan.

MacKinnon begins by stating that the choice of the Samaritan as the one who fulfils the commandment to love is telling of those who respond to the gospel. Unlike the levite and priest, the Samaritan has no responsibilities that must constrain him from fulfilling the concrete command of the gospel. While the parable is critical of the indifference of the levite and priest it is, according to MacKinnon, open to them to claim that by passing on the other side they were exercising a proper discipline, refraining from any well-intentioned but possibly disastrous attempt to do for the injured man what they could not do. In the parable the Samaritan is well suited to his task. That is to say, his involvement with the man on the side of the road is beneficial: the Samaritan happens to be skilled in the use of oil and wine for the purposes of first aid. Furthermore, he has the money to make good the victim's convalescence. But what if on crossing the road, the Samaritan found his hands infected and his oil rancid? As MacKinnon puts it: 'human beings are not thrust into the sorts of situation to which they must respond as agents perfectly designed to suit the emergencies that they must meet.'¹⁰ How many times have we seen the claims of compassion lead to disaster when after a car accident or on the rugby pitch those who have been first on the scene have, through their incompetence, contributed to a paralysis that could have been avoided?

It is true that action is perilous and that there is a lack of symmetry between our capacities and the claims of the situation. As Hamlet knew 'the times are out of joint'. Yet there is a time, according to MacKinnon, when we must be judge in our own cause, and not fall back upon the claims of compassion or the institution in order to secure ourselves against the demand to act. This is not easy to do, since it is often in action that our self-deception is unmasked. But to be judge in our own cause is to protect ourselves against 'the sort of self-deception to which, in our action, we may find ourselves exposed, and indeed from which we may suddenly seek to escape by turning aside from what we must do, by passing by on the other side lest, by our intervention, we imperil not only ourselves, but those who have none other than ourselves to give them succour.'¹¹

In this way, MacKinnon discloses the significance of Jesus' journey to the cross. Jesus did act, but at the last he did not entangle himself in the claims of compassion. It is this that occasions tragedy. He abdicated any responsibility that his influence might have conferred on him to arrest the movement of his people towards the final catastrophe of AD. 70. Therefore, to be judge in our own cause is at the very least a posture of indifference. 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children' (Luke 23:28). But this abdication possesses ultimate significance. Yet this is no occasion for optimism.

Jesus cry of dereliction on the cross is testimony to the interrogation, even unto death, of the conflict between the claims of truth and the claims of compassion. In a sense, MacKinnon appears to be suggesting that on the historical level, the level of human existence, the Jesus affair is unresolved. 'Consider the possibility', he says, 'that Jesus, in his supreme hour plumbed the depths of unreason, reached that place wherein those who reach it (and that, alone in the Christian faith, the pioneer of our salvation has done) are overcome by the contradiction between the claims of truth, the claim of calling things what they are... and the claims of compassion for the individual caught, so it seems to the eyes of pity, in the toils of circumstance...'¹² MacKinnon believes that the tragic accompanies the plumbing of the depths, its irreducibility cannot be extinguished. He enlists the tragic to disclose the unfathomable and identifies the unfathomable as the place of the transcendent. What Jesus accomplished remains intractable. Its import is ontological in the sense that his life finds its resolution, not on the horizontal horizon but in the intersection of this horizon with the vertical. That is to say, it is impossible to resolve contradiction with a formula, only a deed is sufficient. But *this* deed lies beyond the frontier of our comprehension: it was the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. In other words, while the resurrection is the *prius* of his whole argument, MacKinnon is reticent about its meaning as victory. It is not a reversal, but rather a reality in the light of which the tale of Christ's endurance discloses the ultimate secret of the universe. The fact is that Jesus went to death a failure. MacKinnon's recurring theme on this point is Christ's identification with and presence to humanity. The assurance is one that 'in the worst that can befall his creatures, the Creative Word keeps company with those whom he calls his own.'¹³ The joy that is set before us is, it seems, a joy at present inconceivable. Like the life we predicate to Jesus, a life which no longer moves toward death, this joy is something in which there is no darkness. As such we have no firm grasp upon it except to fix our gaze upon the cross and find in its darkness the means of that light.

MacKinnon's Polemic against Idealism

It is the fault of the idealist always to seek escape from the authority of the tragic, to avoid reckoning with the burden of inescapable fact.¹⁴

MacKinnon found in the logical pluralism of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore a powerful means of liberation from the seduction of Oxford idealism, which so pushed the doctrine that 'all cognition is judgement', that things as we know them could not but be the creation of our minds.¹⁵ Russell and Moore were reacting against F. H. Bradley's doctrine, neatly

summed up by Moore, of 'internal relations'. The doctrine that the relations into which a term entered with any other term, substantially affected the being of the term in question, and so to know the one term meant knowing the other. Truth on this theory consisted in the coherence of one judgement with every other. This was open to the charge of logical confusion since it entailed the idea that one thing was knowable only if everything was knowable. Yet this idealist theory was readily theistic in that it saw a profound connectedness in things akin to the theist's understanding of the unity of the world by reference to its total dependence on God.¹⁶ By contrast, Russell and Moore were fixated upon the irreducible facticity of reality and their atomism was self-consciously empiricist and atheist. As MacKinnon comments:

There seemed in the world of the atomist no pathway to God, no means even of seeing the world as a whole as something setting a problem by its very existence; the very notion of the world as a whole seemed logically suspect.¹⁷

Russell and Moore's pluralism is not to be understood, like Oxford idealism, as a form of immanence. It was rather a powerful critique against any kind of anthropocentrism. And it is this that gave MacKinnon his religious and moral interest within it. MacKinnon uses logical pluralism to disclose something about creatureliness. At the last realism is reticent about man.

Inspired by Moore's own doctrine of 'external relations'—the doctrine that something is not made to be what it is by our cognition or appropriation—MacKinnon made it an axiom of his thought in epistemology and theology that there is a distinction between 'self-existence' (substance) and dependence. That is to say, for MacKinnon, what understanding understands is something given rather than something created. There is that which transcends our every conceptualisation and escapes the plumbing of its depths. It is this emphasis on self-existence permeating all his work, that illuminates MacKinnon's obsessive critique of anthropocentrism and discloses his preference for the tragic vision.

The stress upon logical atomism shaped MacKinnon's preference for a pluralist metaphysics eschewing the demand for an all-embracing theodicy. The attempt to enclose the sheer irreducible facticity of reality within an all-pervasive system blunts the edge of particularity, takes away its shock, and so is a lie. There is in MacKinnon's pluralism a deep ambivalence which took Russell's remark 'that the pluralist must necessarily in the end find himself an atheist' with an ultimate seriousness and issued in a profound agnosticism with regard to any easy assertion concerning the so-called victory of Christ. Yet this precise difficulty

inherent in the pluralist conception, its 'ontological indifference', occasioned MacKinnon's belief that attention to the human history of Jesus disclosed the grounds of ultimate adherence. While, then, there is no epistemological way which leads from the empirical world to its divine source, the two intersect in the person of Jesus.¹⁸

It follows that MacKinnon's preference is for christology over ecclesiology. This distinction, which risks offending our increasing hermeneutical sophistication, is important, since it provides one of the keys of MacKinnon's criticism of the idea that the religious life is its own justification, finding in its internally coherent principles and practices, the ultimate grounds of adherence. He was dismissive of an autonomous faith that created its own objects; a faith which tried to secure for itself an invulnerability against the ravages of human existence. According to MacKinnon, faith not at the last open to falsification is simply an idea, an untruth, a self-deceptive buttress against insecurity.

The fissure which MacKinnon opens between irreducible fact and interpretation while the weakest point of his polemic, provides him with a theological device of enormous significance in his critique of anthropocentrism. MacKinnon always sides with Marx against Hegel, realising that that which is irreducible—the act or deed—has greater weight than thought or understanding. Marx's critique of idealism is, if not in-itself theological insight, at least the set of co-ordinates from which the theologian must continuously take his bearings. In contrast to explicit attempts to demonstrate the symmetry between the Christ-event and its appropriation, MacKinnon implicitly smuggles into his understanding of the Incarnation the notion of self-existence.

At the foundation of the faith there lies a deed done, an incarnating of the eternal in the stuff of human history. It is not the delicate subtlety of our imaginative interpretations that is constitutive of this penetration of our human lot; what these interpretations seek to represent is the *act* that sets our every essay in conceptualisation in restless vibration.¹⁹

This expresses MacKinnon's fear that the emphasis upon anthropocentrism allows what is believed to terminate, not in God *via* the historical reality of Jesus, but in an autonomous, internally coherent ecclesiological belief in a contemporary Christ. The price of this secure enclave for faith, attempted by Bultmann is, in the eyes of MacKinnon very high: it blunts the cutting edge of the story of Jesus for which nothing short of an incarnation into the irreducible particularity of human history could divine the depths of the human condition. An invulnerable faith cannot plumb the depths of our nature, it fails to be redemptive, it rather fuels our delusions of self-sufficiency.

In the end it is MacKinnon's moral interest in irreducible particularity that makes his embrace of tragedy intelligible. The question of intelligibility is, however, an intriguing one in its own right. It is unquestionably the case that MacKinnon mobilises the tragic to bring to ruins our constant temptation to make reality in our own image. The world is not made to be what it is by our fashioning, rather in our fashioning we are coming to terms with what is. MacKinnon enlists the tragic as a *via negativa*. As such the world makes sense only in so far as we recognise the reality of irretrievable loss and defeat. And it is the depth of this paradox that is plumbed in the incarnation of the Son. Intelligibility becomes a quality of relationship not simply a process of rationality. In our commerce with the real we discover our creatureliness rather than fashion our self-sufficiency.

- 1 D. MacKinnon, 'On the Notion of a Philosophy of History', *Borderlands of Theology*, Lutterworth Press, 1968, p. 163.
- 2 MacKinnon, 'The Problem of the 'System of Projection' appropriate to Christian Theological Statements', *Explorations in Theology*, Vol. 5, SCM Press, 1979, p. 71.
- 3 MacKinnon, 'Order and Evil in the Gospel', *Borderlands of Theology*, p. 95.
- 4 MacKinnon, 'Atonement and Tragedy', *Borderlands of Theology*, p. 101.
- 5 This phrase derives from Michael Ignatieff's book entitled *The Needs of Strangers*, Vintage, 1994, p. 64. In its original context, the phrase derives its meaning from Ignatieff's discussion of Augustine's *City of God*.
- 6 MacKinnon, 'Atonement and Tragedy', p. 101.
- 7 MacKinnon, 'Kenosis and Establishment', *The Stripping of the Altars*, London and Glasgow, 1969, p. 33.
- 8 MacKinnon, 'Lenin and Theology', *Explorations*, p. 20.
- 9 MacKinnon, 'Kenosis and Establishment', p. 32.
- 10 MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 140.
- 11 MacKinnon, 'Ethics and Tragedy', *Explorations*, p. 186.
- 12 MacKinnon, 'Subjective and Objective Doctrines of the Atonement', *Prospect for Theology: essays in honour of H. H. Farmer*, ed. F. G. Healey, Nisbet, 1966, p. 175.
- 13 MacKinnon, 'Order and Evil in the Gospel', p. 93.
- 14 MacKinnon, 'The Conflict Between Realism and Idealism', in *Explorations*, p. 164.
- 15 F. Kerr, 'Idealism and Realism: an old controversy dissolved', *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, ed. K. Surin, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 18. Rowan Williams' 'Trinity and Ontology' from the same volume was a source of great illumination. My debt to this fine essay will be apparent to any one who is acquainted with it.
- 16 MacKinnon, 'The Conflict Between Realism and Idealism', p. 161.
- 17 MacKinnon, 'Philosophy and Christology', *Borderlands of Theology*, pp. 62-63.
- 18 George Steiner, Review of Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 May 1995, p.7.
- 19 MacKinnon, 'Lenin and Theology', p. 22.