'IN THE END THE LION IS GOD': A REFLECTION ON THE SACRED IN EXPERIENCE

By MARGARET BRENNAN

LOOKING FOR NEW WAYS in which experience is appropriated as sacred is not so much a matter of a scholar's research as it is one of being 'surprised by joy'. Sometimes that joy is preceded by a shock which initially imparts a disturbance in the mind and emotions but then gives way to delight. That is exactly what happened to me as I undertook the writing of this article. The experience itself has provided both a theme and a starting place.

In preparing for a course in ministry to be offered to deacons among the native people in northern Ontario I took up Vincent Donovan's book about missions entitled *Christianity rediscovered.* As this teaching experience was to be a new venture for me, I was hoping to find some methodology that would help me to become more knowledgeable of a cultural context radically different from the often speculative and highly academic aura of the university where I teach. The particular passage that proved to be the catalyst for my thinking, as well as providing the title for this article, might be described as Fr Donovan's hermeneutic of 'suspicion'.

In attempting to evangelize the Masai, a fiercely independent semi-nomadic tribe of herders spread over thirty thousand square miles of Tanzania, Fr Donovan met a people who have successfully resisted change for thousands of years. Young Masai people who have become Christians through attendance at mission schools almost inevitably return to a way of life foreign to Christianity when they resume tribal life. This reality led Fr Donovan to suspect the patterns of evangelizing. Rather than enticing the Masai to Christianity through education and health care in the context of Western cultural patterns, he set out to meet the people in their own communities, much in the manner of St Paul.

Overwhelmed by discouragement, his own faith underwent a crisis and he began to doubt that Christianity was valid for the Masai—and perhaps even for himself. It was a Masai catechist who re-enkindled his belief with a story about hunting. Fr Donovan's young native assistant recounted that the way a person believes in Masai culture is not simply 'to agree to'. This kind of believing, he noted, was like that of a 'white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act'.[1] But really to have faith is to be sought out by God much in the way that a lion seeks out its prey—nose and eyes seeking it out, speed to catch it, and all the power of its body present in the blow of its paw which kills it before the lion 'embraces' it and takes it to himself. 'We did not search you out', the catechist reminded Fr Donovan,

> '. . . you searched us out. You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not left our land. We have not searched for him. He has searched for us. He has searched *us* out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God'.[2]

The above passage served to underscore what has been a growing conviction for me in terms of educational methodology. At the same time, I found that the depth of such intellectually held convictions does not always reach those levels that are sources of our most deeply held feelings and perceptions. For some time I had been deeply convinced that the facilitation of adult learning encourages persons to trust in their own resources as well as those of the 'experts'. When this principle is applied to theological education the challenge is even greater. Here is an area of study where, until very recently (and even now very tentatively), we have *not* been encouraged to trust our own resources nor to look within our own experience as a source of the sacred.

Yet in my own search for a 'method' I found myself paradoxically contradicting what I so strongly believed but did not fully trust. Even more importantly, I also discovered that the metaphorical language of the young Masai catechist disclosed new levels of meaning for my own faith experience. What I learned was to arrive again at what I already knew but now in a surprising way that triggered new questions and deeper realizations in myself

about the manifold ways that God is experienced in the situations of life. As a result, Fr Donovan's book provided for me a kind of framework around which to articulate my thoughts in this article, as well offering me a context within which to approach the native deacons.

For Vincent Donovan, the story of the lion was to provoke a new perception of such depth that left him hurting not just in his head, but 'all over'. Rather than 'bringing the faith' to a pagan people he was shocked into the realization of what theologian Dermot Lane has described as 'one of the most significant developments in Christian theology in this century'.[3] 'God comes to man (woman) *in* experience', writes Lane. 'We receive God in experience. We do not project, create, or posit God in experience. Rather we find God, already there ahead of us, in human experience.'[4] The Masai catechist had intuitively recognized what Fr Donovan had come to through a painful crisis.

For me, the passage was to highlight some of my own 'suspicions' about faith that is intellectually assented to with a rock-like conviction but within which 'the embrace of the lion' is missed. In a way that surprised and somewhat startled me a series of questions rose up from a level in myself that I had not been present to in just this way before. Had *I* who have been 'blest' with the 'faith' from childhood, enjoyed commitment to it in religious life, contemplated it in depth through theological education, been able to experience so clearly and compellingly what this catechist described of his own people? Is it possible for a faith that has been 'received' and assented to intellectually to be the source of life without our ever having experienced that 'in the end, the lion is God'? Is it possible that we are able to miss the experience of the sacred in our very search for God? Is this the meaning of T. S. Eliot's provocative phrase: 'We had the experience but missed the meaning'?[5]

Raising these questions which were at first disturbing led me to search my own experience more deeply. What I discovered was not a new theological conviction. Rather, it was a recognition of how I have been 'surprised by joy' through revelations of the sacred in the lives of men and women from sources that are outside of the established categories and structures within which the experience of God is often thought to be normative.

To speak of discovering God in our experience is no longer a new and startling shift in the exercise of theology—nor was it

new for me. Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Bernard Lonergan, David Tracy and others have all addressed themselves to human experience as a locus of God's on-going revelation. But what *is* always new and startling is the *experience* itself and the often surprising way that it becomes revelatory of the sacred. Here theology departs from a kind of detached consideration of truths of faith as they apply to life and enters into the reality of particular experiences of living persons.

The purpose of this article is not to explore the contours of this important theological shift but rather to look at some of the ways in which the lived reality has found expression in the human experience of women and men who have discovered God and the sacred outside of the categories of faith where they had been taught to look. This is not to say that our faith is *not* a source of our experience of God, but it *is* to say that often our declared and operative theologies (that is, our understandings of God) are in conflict.

Eliot's phrase about missing the meaning of experience suggests that many of us go through life encountering many realities but fail to interact with them in depth and breadth. As a result of no interaction there is no new insight and understanding. As Bernard Lonergan would say, there is only the world of immediate experience rather than the world mediated by meaning.[6] When the truths of our faith are not rooted in the earth of life's experiences not only is there no new insight and understanding but God and the sacred become realities outside of life. They become transcendent experiences gratuitously offered to a select few who are thought to touch the holy in itself apart from creation or mediated through human consciousness. At the same time we need to acknowledge that God is *more* than what is mediated through human experience.

For Lane, one of the primary tasks of theology today is 'how to make the individual experientially present to God. The question of God is not about the absence of God to the person; it is about the absence of the person to God'.[7]

While I agree with Lane in establishing the above priority for theology, I would like also to highlight the need for theologians to reflect on the experiences of women and men today who are discovering the sacred within the human realities of life. Reflection on these experiences can be very enriching for theology itself where it is to bring the truths of faith to bear on the human problems of life.

In the remainder of this article I would like to illustrate some of these experiences of the holy which in turn became sources of the sacred for myself. Some of them reached me through the narrative of story-telling. Others come from shared life experiences of graduate students within the context of ministry.

Story-telling

Some of the richest reflection on the experience of the holy comes from stories. In the characters who have been touched by God we often meet ourselves and find the words and images with which to name God anew or perhaps for the first time. Many of these stories, particularly when authored by women, reflect the search for an experience of God that is rooted in *their* way of knowing and experiencing as women.

Such reflections are an attempt to reinterpret human experience by discovering disclosures of the sacred in a spirituality which is *embodied.* In this way they represent an 'epistomological rupture' which challenges the well-known dualisms that have been so present in the western Christian tradition. Rather than seeing God as the 'totally Other', women in a particular way are challenging this subject-object split which had taught them to search for the Divine outside of their own bodies so long thought to be the source of sin.[8]

Madonna Kolbenschlag, writer, lecturer and researcher has noted that:

> All good novels have a few scenes which could justly be called archetypal. Like precious jewels, once removed from their settings, they glow and refract with universal significance, with nuances and resonances that transcend their contextual meaning.[9]

Within the context of this article I offer two such scenes.

The first is from Alice Walker's Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The color purple.* It recounts a conversation between two black women. Celie is stunted by the memory of a lynched father, a deranged mother and a step-father who repeatedly rapes her and gives away her children at birth. In the midst of this tyranny, she struggles with traditional images of a white, male Deity that reflects her degradation and humiliation. For Celie, this God sits in heaven 'glorying in being deef' to the shameful situation of her life. Like so many women who feel alienated by patriarchal categories within

which to name and to address God, she acknowledges her estrangement but admits at the same time her need for God's presence in her life: 'Deep in my heart I care about God...it ain't easy, trying to do without God'.[10]

It is only when she meets Shug, a flamboyant blues' singer who shares her own journey and describes her discovery of the God within *her* and in all things, that she is freed.

> 'Here's the thing', Shug says, '... the thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for ... Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, Lord. Feeling like shit.'[11]

Dorothee Soelle, theologian and writer, comments that the conversation between the two black women is one of the best texts on religion that she knows of in contemporary literature. 'The exchange between Celie and Shug has a dual thrust. On the one hand, it is a critique of traditional religion, its God-talk and its God-image; on the other hand, it is an attempt to affirm God in a new manner.'[12]

In this story we find a creation-centred spirituality in which the experience of God and of the holy is grounded in love of life and a woman's embodiment. Shug's own journey away from God seen as an old white man summarizes her metamorphosis:

> My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact. When it happen, you can't miss it ... God love everything you love—and a mess of stuff you don't...[13]

The second scene is from *The road past Altamont* a novel which takes the reader into the heart of a child. Gabrielle Roy, a French-Canadian author, situates her story on the prairies of Manitoba in Canada. In an early chapter, young Christine has gone to visit her grandmother in a small village where 'in the complete immobility of the prairie, one had the sense of being drawn forward on

a sort of voyage across an endless land of everlasting sameness'.[14] The bored and complaining Christine is provoked into interest and curiosity when her grandmother offers to make her a doll. Incredulous that dolls could be found anywhere but in stores, she goes nevertheless to the attic and brings down her grandmother's big scrap bag. With bits of cloth and a stuffing of oats, yellow yarn for hair and a piece of curtain lace and blue ribbon which fashioned the dress, the grandmother creates a beautiful doll with a painted face and real leather shoes. Awed by the creativity of this old woman, a sense of grandeur, of infinite solitude came over the little girl. 'You're like God', she wept into her ear. 'You're just like God. You can make things out of nothing as he does.'[15]

But the grandmother, even though flattered at the comparison, saw God as she saw many others whom she loved—independent, selfish . . .

> And God too—even he in many ways has forsaken me. Because truly, no matter what the priests say, no matter how hard they try to make reason and sense out of it, he allows too many strange worrisome things to happen to us.[16]

But Christine will not be put off. Dozing against her grandmother's knees she sees her storm into Paradise with a great many things to complain about.

> In my dream God the Father, with his great beard and stern expression, yielded his place to Grandmother, with her keen, shrewd, far-seeing eyes. From now on it would be she, seated in the clouds, who would take care of the world, set up wise and just laws. Now all would be well for the poor people on earth... For a long time I was haunted by the idea that it could not possibly be a man who made the world, but perhaps an old woman with extremely capable hands.[17]

In the little girl Christine, an experience of the sacred reaches us from the experience of wonder so characteristic of the way a child sees things. A quotation from Virginia Woolf cited in the introduction to the book expresses well what the creativity of the old woman reveals: 'It expands in the mind and lies there giving off fresh ideas, emotions and pictures much as a moment in real life will sometimes only yield its meaning long after it has passed'.[18]

Shared life experiences

Dermot Lane notes that: 'A basic characteristic of experience is that no one experience discloses the totality of reality'.[19] What he is pointing out is the important place that a community plays in providing an horizon within which human experience begins to make sense. In religious experience this need is all the greater. After drawing up a number of criteria with which to judge the 'appropriateness' of religious experience, Lane summarizes his thought by declaring that: '. . . it should be clear that the evaluation of religious experience, most properly, takes place within the circle of religious faith'.[20]

The following experiences of community interaction in which a new sense of the sacred was not only enhanced but in some way discovered as well are indicative of the empowerment that comes from a shared faith. These experiences occurred within the projects for ministry undertaken by two Doctor of Ministry students in the Toronto School of Theology for whom I served as faculty sponsor.

'Aloud and in silent tears' (Heb 5, 7)—the prayer of suffering people[21]

This project was developed at a residential therapeutic centre for treatment of those who suffer acute emotional pain.

The director of this project, herself a well-educated and experienced spiritual counsellor at the therapeutic centre, had been deeply in touch with the suffering of the residents. In her own personal sharing with them she had discovered how their own struggling attempts to reach God often took the form of a prayer of lament. Combing the scriptures with this theme in mind she discovered how many of the psalms and the writings of the prophets use the language of disorientation in order to describe the raw hurts and the overwhelming frustration of personal suffering. Here she saw further that to experience in suffering a sense of the sacred and to discover God in the midst of acute emotional pain is a challenge that touches the utmost limits of the human spirit. Whether the sorrows that afflicted the psalmist or the prophet came as a result of their God-given freedom or from the illness, disasters or 'accidents' of creation, they were faced with having to respond.

In Jesus's own anguishing surrender to God in Gethsemane, the director saw a poignant expression of the spirit, goal and fruit of such a surrendering response: 'Abba, (Father) he said. Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I would have it' (Mk 14,36). The letter to

the Hebrews offered a commentary on this central text of Christian prayer as well as providing a framework for her ministry:

> During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears to the one who had the power to save him out of death, and because he submitted so humbly his prayer was heard. Although he was Son, he learned to obey through suffering, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation (Heb 5,7-9).

The goal of her ministry project was to provide an experience of prayer that was deeply individual and yet shared with a small group. The director of the project expressed her hopes and convictions for the participants in the following way.

> I believed that a group of six could provide a trusting and hence safe atmosphere within which to bring 'how they were' to God and to one another. I was convinced that if they could bring their suffering to the 'God-who-suffers-with' something would happen. I hoped also that through this experience they would learn about themselves and about God and how to meet God from their world as it is.[22]

Confident in her own way that 'in the end the lion is God', she recognized that it was not *she* who would offer the prayer experience, but rather she saw herself as 'helping the residents to ''let down the net''—it was up to God whether something would happen or not'.[23]

Over the course of two months the six participants expressed their own pain through images, the writing of a personal prayer to God in the form of a psalm, and the sharing of the isolation, loneliness and alienation that were the result of their own personal suffering. Writing the personal psalm enabled them 'to bring the painful, raw, ragged experience of life into dialogue with God. These contemporary psalms became powerful expressions of pain, grief or anger'.[24] In this way, some relief, freedom and a release of energy were experienced. The sharing of their 'disorientation' with the others added the support of a group of believers who offered understanding and acceptance from their own experience. In the end, this sharing itself became the central dynamic of the course.

The comments of the participants themselves testified to the divine/human dynamic at work in their sharing. While it was obvious that God touches us through one another, yet there was among the group a sense of mystery surrounding their disclosures. The director noted how some participants expressed quite directly *how* they experienced God in the group process: 'I experienced God in the stories we shared. I felt acceptance, understanding and nurturing'. Another identified the action of God as 'dependent' on that of the group: 'I think God will meet Beth when *we* can be with her in her suffering and despair'.[25]

To share suffering within the context of a faith community is a quintessential expression of the theological virtues. God is discovered in the brink of darkness between the shame and sorrow of the past and a future not yet known or experienced. A new sense of hope is found with the hopelessness itself that strains forward to a brighter horizon of desire. And love received knows a reality that is greater than violence, cynicism and a hatred of self.

Enabling the parish community to accept its role as primary sponsor for the candidates and catechumens in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)[26]

The director of this project came to her topic from her own conviction of the Church as the People of God. As a trained liturgist she had worked in the Liturgy Office of a progressive diocese in the United States. Through a diocesan formation programme in several parishes she came to the realization that while the people might readily own that they were the Church, they did not see that such a statement also carried with it a responsibility for the life of that Church. She was acutely conscious of the fact that, for the most part, Roman Catholic adults in a pre-Vatican II Church were passive recipients and 'consumers' of the sacramental life and religious services offered in parish life where the pastor made all the decisions. Desiring to further the Church's hope that the abilities of the laity as adult members of the faith community be respected and to affirm their responsibility for the life of the Church, she entered the Doctor of Ministry Programme at the University of Toronto. As a ministerial project she worked in a lower-middle-class parish in the city whose pastor wanted to initiate the RCIA.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is a product of the Second Vatican Council. Restoring the ancient rite of the baptism of adults is a process which necessarily involves the parish community who take part in the instruction and initiation rites of catechumens in various capacities. Above all, it requires that the parish views and experiences itself as a vibrant faith community.

The project undertaken was to spend a year leading the parish community itself through the instruction process and liturgical rites that prepared catechumens, even though they themselves were Catholics of long-standing. The challenge was to enable the people to move from a more *privatized faith* to the experience of themselves as a community whose faith was *shared* and whose sense of the sacred would be discovered in their communal prayer and worship and in their service of others. Believing that the RCIA process can constitute a primary conversion event for an ecclesial community through serious reflection on itself as Church, on the gospel and on relationship with God, the director developed a programme called 'Growing Together in Faith'.

As the year ended, even though only a small group of the parish fully participated in the programme, it was becoming obvious that a change was happening in the community. Events in the liturgical rites such as parishioners placing their names on a large wooden cross at the beginning of Lent were conversion events for many and contributed to a sense of community and solidarity. Lenten 'penance' became a communal event: 'Placing my name on the cross made me feel that the Lenten period is shared by all the community. We celebrate it together.' 'Placing my name on the cross made me feel that I belonged to these other people and with them, to Jesus.'[27] For those who came to the sharing reflection on the scriptures, new horizons of how the Word of God speaks in the journey of their own lives were opened up: 'On this journey I came to appreciate each day as it comes. I really enjoyed being here with people who are trying to find out about God or themselves.' 'I find it so hard to be with God because of things in my life. I was very lonely when I came here and now I am eager for Wednesday night to be with the group and to see that in my life God acts'.[28]

In summary, perhaps the words of the director herself best express the new experience of God and sense of the sacred that were re-enkindled in people who had known him all along but perhaps knew him now for the first time. 'There is a difference', the people had stated.[29]

> Because of what I believe about conversion and the evolution of the Church, this project is but a single step in an ongoing process. Because of its development and formation by and within the people of the parish, its life *is* the parish community without which this project would be but bare bones. As such, then, it can have no conclusion—simply more conversion events and a continual refining of what it is to be Church.[30]

A significant corollary for both directors was their own 'growth process' as they worked in these faith communities. The director of the prayer course noted that her own participation led to new discoveries as well as challenging questions for the future. Aware that she began the Doctor of Ministry Programme as a 'seasoned minister', she now saw 'new windows of thought' opening up to her. Instead of asking *why*? to the age-old question of how one can believe in a good God who is loving and powerful and who allows anguish and suffering in the lives of individuals and peoples, she has had to shift the inquiry to ask what this suffering can *reveal*. The tension which exists between the biblical portrait of God of the Covenant who cared, weeps for and identifies with the peoples' suffering and the God whom theology calls immutable raised new ways of dealing with the simple dialectic question: does God suffer? Related to the above theological questions was the challenge to confront her own formulation of the mystery of a transcendent God who is not an outsider to human life.

These questions grew from the 'ground' of the participants' own experience and offered a valuable insight for the director in her present and future ministry.

> There is a traditional spiritual maxim that says: 'Drink from your own well'. For me this means that we have the insight for most of life's problems in the depths of our own inner wisdom. The sharing of the participants left me in awe of their deep sense of what needed to be said about God, suffering and prayer. As spiritual director and group facilitator, this profound respect for their wisdom prompts me to curb my desire to offer solutions, or to give advice. This of course does not pre-empt the obligation of asking questions and confronting when necessary.[31]

For the director of the RCIA project this same respect for the inner wisdom of the parishioners proved to be a source of deeper personal conversion and of renewal in her own life as a pastoral

minister. Acknowledging that while initially she had come to the parish to share her own 'expertise', she only gradually and with some hesitancy came to the realization that the people must shape the project not the project the people. Coming from a progressive diocese she had tended to label these parishioners as 'conservative', that is, content with traditional ways allowing for as little change as possible. What she discovered instead was that they were unchallenged. It was only when they began to reflect on their own experience of God and to share that experience with one another that changes in the parish became evident.

The director began to see her own role as that of 'integrator'. As she herself participated in the project instead of standing on the side as its director, she discovered that as she ministered to the people of the parish they were simultaneously ministering to her. A further insight came with the realization that her own ministry to others included a ministry to herself:

> One's ministry is not separated from oneself and as someone ministers to others, she is at the same time ministering to herself. Ministry, I have always believed, is the personal investment of oneself in the proclamation of the gospel. Now I have come to see that that proclamation must also be at the same time to oneself.[32]

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to open out some of the ways in which the experience of God and the sacred is both a process of breaking accepted patterns and of triggering deeper questions. It is also a discovering of God as 'more than' previously understood. In the examples given, this experience was heightened in the lives of those persons (fictional or otherwise) who have already known God in some way. But more than often it was in a way that did not acknowledge that the search is more a question of being 'searched out'.

What has not been pursued here is another growing realization of our times—the recognition of the sacred in *all* experience even when such a perception is not theologically named. Karl Rahner has rightly expressed this reality: 'The tendency today to talk not about God, but about one's neighbour, and to use not the term 'God' but 'world' and 'responsibility for the world' has an absolutely solid foundation'.[33] When we are able to find and name God

explicitly in the experiences of life, we are only recognizing what was there all along.

In the end, we can return once more to the Masai catechist who knew this truth from the experience of his own people: 'All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God'.[34] This is what it is to be 'surprised by joy'.

NOTES

[1] Donovan, Vincent J.: *Christianity rediscovered* (Fides Press, Notre Dame Ind., 1978), pp 62–63.
[2] *Ibid.*, p 63.
[3] Lane, Dermot: *The experience of God* (Paulist Press, New York, 1981), p 5.
[4] *Ibid.*, p 3.
[5] Eliot, T. S.: 'Dry Salvages'.
[6] Lonergan, Bernard: *Method in theology*, pp 28–31, 238–239.
[7] *Ibid.*, p 17.
[8] See Beverly Wildung Harrison, 'From restoring from the tapestry of life: the vocation of feminist theology' in *The New York Theological Union News* May 1986, issue no. 7.
[9] Kolbenschlag, Madonna: 'Women's fiction: redefining religious experience', *New Catholic World*, pp 252–256.
[10] Walker, Alice: *The color purple* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1982), p 164.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Soelle, Dorothee: *To work and to love* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984), p 51.
[13] *The color purple*, p 167.
[14] Roy, Gabrielle: *The road past Altamont* (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1976), p 7.
[15] *Ibid.*, p 14.
[16] *Ibid.*, p 16.
[17] *Ibid.*, p 16.
[18] Marshall, Joyce: 'Introduction', *The road past Altamont.*
[19] Lane, p 9.
[20] *Ibid.*, p 27.
[21] McDevitt, Mary I.H.M.: Doctor of Ministry Project, Toronto School of Theology, 1987.
[22] *Ibid.*, p 36.
[23] *Ibid.*, p 15.
[24] *Ibid.*, p 42.
[25] *Ibid.*, p 103.
[26] Burkin, Nancy S.S.J.: Doctor of Ministry Project, Toronto School of Theology, 1987.
[27] *Ibid.*, p 130.
[28] *Ibid.*, p 110.
[29] *Ibid.*, p 136.
[30] *Ibid.*, p 150.
[31] Mary McDevitt, *op. cit.*, p 180.
[32] Nancy Burkin, *op. cit.*, p 144.
[33] Rahner, Karl: *The foundations of Christian faith* (D.L.T., London, 1978), p 64.
[34] Donovan, *op. cit.*, p 63.