CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE FROM THE SHADOW SIDE OF HISTORY

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IN ANDRÉ BRINK'S NOVEL *LOOKING ON DARKNESS* the South African 'coloured' actor Joseph Malan reflects on his personal and family story, while awaiting execution for the murder of his 'white' lover. Recalling the life of one of his ancestors, a blind musician in the late nineteenth century, he observes that there seems to be no connection between the 'significant historical events' of official South African history (the Great Trek, the Zulu Wars, the first Boer War) and the insignificant story of his own family. 'Of all that there is no mention in my chronicle. It surrounds our story but forms no part of it. For my tale is not history, but at most the *shadow side of history*' (italics mine).[1] In the past twenty-five years or so, however, there has been an enormous shift of interest away from history seen 'from above' in terms of important people and significant events, towards 'a history' in terms of the lives of the majority of ordinary people. There has also been an upsurge of interest in women's history and in 'history from the margins', a desire to recover the voices of those previously ignored and dismissed, not only as unimportant, but as unacceptable. This article will explore how such new frontiers in historical writing influence our understanding of Christian history and spirituality, and indicate some areas which may be significant for us if we recover alien and rejected voices from within and without our traditions.

History from below

It is impossible to do more than briefly sketch the outlines of what is called 'the new history', of which 'history from below' is a part. It has developed in reaction to traditional historical writing which was primarily concerned with powerful people and political institutions. The 'old' history was essentially national or international rather than local, public rather than private, and event rather than process orientated. This approach is well summarized in the following observation: 'Caesar's crossing of that petty stream, the Rubicon, is a fact of history, whereas the crossing of the Rubicon by millions of people before or since,

interests nobody at all'.[2] Today those influenced by *la longue durée* of geo-history or cultural history would reverse that judgement. The crossing of the Rubicon by millions of human beings is of immense importance to the history of migration and geographical mobility. Really to understand the past one has to know what is going on in the depths as well as on the surface.

The new approach would also question the so-called objectivity of 'historical facts'. For example, traditional history has tended to record the views of winners rather than losers. So a Eurocentric understanding of the 'discovery' of America in 1492 praised it as an act of pioneering courage and enterprise. But the indigenous peoples of that continent saw it as the invasion and exploitation of their lands, inhabited long before the arrival of the Spanish conquerors. It has taken many centuries for the voice of the conquered to be heard. 'What you see, depends on where you are standing' and much of our official history has been written from a European, male, white point of view, reflecting the interests of those at the centres of power, rather than at the peripheries. The 'new historians' would claim that the older dominant view of powerful élites (from above or at the centre) must be complemented by the history of the local and the ordinary (from below, or at the periphery). We are encouraged to cross the boundaries which box us into our own perspectives and prejudices, and try to have an openness and generosity of mind which accommodates the views of the minority, the loser, the enemy, the other – all of which constitutes history.

The late Fernand Braudel defined the new history as 'total history', not in the sense of accounting for every detail of the past, but as recognizing the connections between differing aspects of human experience.[3] The boundaries between history and the social and human sciences are less well defined, and open to reciprocal influence. Total history pays more attention to daily life and to social and cultural factors previously overlooked. These would include changing attitudes to family and kinship, sexuality and the body, to birth, childhood, death, cleanliness and dirt, crime, food etc. 'Everything has a history' (J. B. S. Haldane) and everything can in principle be reconstructed and related to the rest of life. What appears as normative routine, is in fact a social construct of shared values and 'mentalities' which can and do change. And it is from within these changing perspectives that we live our Christian lives and shape our ideals.

But a whole new perspective on the past has been opened up by the recovery of women's history and gender studies. These call into question the accepted schemes of periods of history – ancient, medieval and

modern – since they were derived from political and military history from which women were excluded. It needs a 'conversion' of mind to recognize that the Renaissance and the Enlightenment hardly affected women at all, and that art, philosophy, music and much of what we appreciate as our cultural heritage, represent male achievements in areas not accessible to women in the same way. Women have been virtually invisible to historians because their everyday lives and work have more usually been in the domestic and private space, and not in public sacred space. The experience of women, with some notable exceptions, has to be reclaimed from the underside of history, thus restoring a past to the majority of humankind. But it will not be something added to existing historical consciousness; it will radically transform it.

However, by trying to compensate for the omissions of a traditional approach the supporters of 'history from below' and 'women's history' run the risk of perpetuating another set of polarities and divisions. The concept of 'total history' has to include the perspectives of powerful *and* powerless, of women *and* men. Recent scholarship has focused more on the nature of changing relationships between the classes or the sexes, and on the fluidity of boundaries which differ according to time and place.[4] For example the vast differences between wealthy, white women and poor, coloured women are obscured if 'women's experience' is construed as something universal.

New frontiers in Church history

These new approaches in history have influenced our perceptions of the development of the Christian tradition and pastoral practice. First it has to be admitted that the official 'Church' has more usually regarded secular history with suspicion and even hostility. Until comparatively recently she has seen herself as apart from, and above, the processes of ordinary history viewed as worldly and contaminating. For Roman Catholics the barrier between sacred and secular history was breached only at the Second Vatican Council. Though it is still far from dismantled, there is a wide recognition that there is only one history, into which the Church, like her Lord, has been incarnated. Faith and history are inextricably knotted together. The Church is not *above* but *within* the human condition, bearing the good news of the gospel to all human persons irrespective of creed, race, colour or sex. 'History is not an accident or an extraneous fact but is constitutive of the salvation that Christians hope for and proclaim.'[5]

Traditional Church history has also been primarily interested in the powerful and the great – the activities of popes, bishops, and a clerical

and monastic élite. It was also selective and partial, setting up barriers between what was worthy of inclusion or exclusion. Western Church history showed a marked preference for the centre (Rome) rather than the periphery (local churches), for West over East, for orthodoxy over dissent or protest, for safe uniformity rather than creative pluralism, for clerical rather than lay activity.[6] As for the experience of Christian women, this remained almost unrecorded, rendering women as invisible within the Christian tradition as they were in politics. The exceptions tended to be the powerful, the noble or the unusual – queens, abbesses or seers and the charismatically gifted.[7] 'Official' Church history edited out the stories of dissenting groups and heretical beliefs, as well as aspects of popular belief and 'superstition'.

The concept of total history will pay attention precisely to those aspects of Christian faith and practice which have been neglected, marginalized or ignored in mainstream, 'orthodox' history. It will include accounts of nonconformist attitudes, minority tendencies and popular movements. It will also make us more wary of the assumption that the truth is given only from the top downwards or that Christians have a monopoly on it. 'Truth is a mystery to be explored, not something we possess', said the late Cardinal Leger of Montreal, when presented with a new 'syllabus of modern errors'. Christians can learn much from those who do not share our beliefs, and there is no point at which any of us can say 'we have arrived'. To accept this means

> living life at the boundary of Church and World in dialogue and partnership with others in a common search for the real. It takes us inwards and downwards to our depths (soul) and outwards beyond the boundaries of the ecclesial institution.[8]

Christology from below

Before giving examples of Christian experience and spirituality 'from below', it may be helpful to examine a further trend from contemporary theology. The terms 'Christology from above' and 'Christology from below' are useful, if inadequate, pointers to two distinct trends in Christology which go back to patristic times. An Alexandrian approach 'from above' began reflection on the pre-existent Word of God, who became flesh. An Antiochene approach 'from below' tended to start with the man Jesus, whom the disciples came gradually to understand as the embodiment of God's presence among them. Contemporary theology has shown a marked preference for the latter approach, seeing Jesus first from within the particularity of the Jewish religion and culture of his time. Jesus did not take on just a human nature, but a human history; his

life story was part of the story of his people and his culture. Jesus lived within, rather than above his community. Incarnation was in fact the deepest kind of inculturation, God's accommodation to the human condition as it was. Jesus' human faith was formed within the Jewish experience of God; Jesus learned to pray as did all pious Jews. His growth was sustained and nurtured by his parents and neighbours. He lived in a small village, in an occupied country, liable to insurrection and uprising. Jesus' revelation of God's kingdom, the good news of the gospel, was made in a very particular, small context. In its specificity and particularity, it is not so very unlike the medieval village of Montaillou in the Pyrenees or sixteenth-century Fruili in north-eastern Italy, which have been so brilliantly retrieved by the new historians.[9] The incarnation took place in the shadow side of history.

A preference for Christology 'from below' requires a corresponding Mariology 'from below' and a new look at our ideas of sanctity and sainthood. Mary may be acclaimed as Queen of Heaven now, but the reality of her life was that of many poor, unimportant women throughout history. The Mary of liberation theology is seen as sister, rather than Mother or Queen, precisely because she shared the struggles and problems of so many Third World women. Mary was assumed to be an unmarried mother, became the wife of a village carpenter, was widowed, witnessed her son as an executed criminal, and had to rely on the charity of others in old age. If Jesus and Mary are seen within the context of 'ordinary', everyday life, is it possible to continue to hold a 'high' and exceptional view of sanctity and holiness? 'The greatest objection brought against Christianity in our time . . . is the suspicion that our religion makes its followers inhuman' (Teilhard de Chardin). We need to discover (or retell) the stories of Christian men and women whose faith enabled them to be deeply human, and who embodied love and wisdom, common sense and generosity, and many other qualities which allowed them to be 'real presences' to others. 'The glory of God is the human person fully alive.'[10]

Reclaiming the life of ordinary Christians

There is a sense in which the Christian history of ordinary women and men has been denied them in much the same way as black slaves or indigenous peoples of the Americas were denied their history. To be without history is to suffer loss of identity. To know who you are and what roots have nourished your being is to be enabled to create a future. The growth in our understanding of the universal call to holiness of every Christian means making an effort to retrieve the Christian

experience of those who did not retire 'from the world', but engaged in their political and social responsibilities *within* it. Again this does not invalidate other traditions of spirituality, but complements them.

Recent scholarship has pointed to the efforts made by Italian humanist scholars of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to create a form of lay spirituality which met their actual needs.[11] Many were school teachers, professional scribes or secretaries in the employment of princes or cities, while others were distinguished scholars or public figures. They were convinced that neither contemporary scholastic theology nor the current styles of preaching and spiritual guidance met their needs and aspirations. They were aware that the ministry of the word extended beyond the pulpit to catechesis, counselling and advice given in confession. They questioned whether current sacramental practice *affectively* touched the core of a person's subjectivity before God, in the areas of conscience, inwardness, choice, fear and anxiety. Until now we knew little about these questions raised by humanist laymen because their views were 'concealed' in a body of informal writings, circulated among themselves: letters, lay sermons, funeral orations, dialogues, historiography. Their diffuse rhetorical style and scholarly language also discourages quick or easy reading. But the whole movement, linked with a desire to renew Christendom through a return to biblical and patristic sources, should be an inspiration for Christians in later generations 'to read the signs of the times' and respond to what is needed.

From the same period, but at the popular end of Christian piety and practice, we have the astonishing retrieval of the significance and importance of lay confraternities.[12] They first appeared in large numbers *c.* 1400, proliferated in the latter part of the century, only to be suppressed in the lands of the Protestant Reformation, and severely controlled in the Tridentine Church. Their dissolution probably affected the religious and social life of many Christians far more than did the better known dissolution of the monasteries.

Confraternities were voluntary associations of people, usually lay, who came together to promote their religious life in common, under the guidance of certain rules. Membership, and even office, was often open to women as well as men. By combining both religious and social obligations confraternities offered a form of 'insurance' policy against the possibility of misfortune in this life, or loss of salvation in the next. In an age which had no social welfare, members tried to meet the needs of those most at risk in an uncertain world. They were particularly sensitive to the needs of orphans, widows, and young girls without dowries. Some groups were more involved in charitable works such as alms-houses,

hospices or poor relief; others were more overtly devotional, such as the Blessed Sacrament, Marian or Flagellant groups.

But the deepest communal need of all was to be 'accompanied' during and after death by the prayers and support of the community. Members also walked with criminals on the way to execution, or gave Christian burial to the abandoned or destitute. Belief in the communion of saints was part of the warp and woof of corporate solidarity. There was a blurring of boundaries between sacred and secular since play and entertainment were part of the communal obligations. Time and effort was put into the decoration and painting of chapels, the candle and torchlight processions, and festive meals. This spirit of *fiesta* was to be transported from early modern Spain to the New World.

Much has been written about the invigorating growth of Base Christian Communities in the contemporary Latin America. In their own way the confraternities of the late Middle Ages successfully met the needs of their own time. It was precisely their independence and variety that later episcopal visitations sought to control and put firmly under the authority of the parish priest. The art and decoration commissioned for their chapels and churches provide visual evidence for the beliefs and devotional preferences of late medieval men and women, rather than those imposed by a clerical élite. Our greater knowledge of lay confraternities should provide the stimulus to look further into how small voluntary groups have functioned throughout the Christian tradition.

Marginalized traditions

What are some of the marginalized or neglected traditions which would have significance for us today? If official Church history has highlighted Western Christendom, it would be important for us to recover the insights and emphases of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and of the even less known Syriac Churches.[13] The Syriac gospels are our nearest clue to Jesus' own idiom (Galilean Aramaic) and the Syriac liturgy is the closest to the sources of most Christian liturgies. The rise and development of Christian asceticism in the third and fourth centuries has tended to focus on Egypt, obscuring the importance of similar movements in Syria and the Near East. Western Christians are largely unaware of the amazing missionary expansion of the Eastern Syriac Churches, spreading across the trade routes to India and Central Asia. In their homelands the Syriac Christians lived in peace with the Arabs until the Crusades did permanent damage to Muslim/Christian relationships. Syriac Christians were decimated by the Mongols (thirteenth century) and those in Iran and Central Asia suffered under

Tamerlane (*c.* 1400). From the mid-nineteenth century the Turks began the systematic genocide of Armenians, and during the first World War of Syriac Christians also. At the present time there is a large diaspora of Syriac Christians from the near East in North America, Australia and Europe. If one includes the descendants of those who settled in India perhaps eleven million Syriac Christians survive, whose rich heritage and tragic story is virtually unknown by other Christians.

The Christian tradition has often been marred by exclusivism and intolerance of the non-Christian 'other'. Bearing in mind the terrible nature of current 'ethnic cleansing' in former Yugoslavia or neo-Nazism in Germany, it would be important to uncover both the roots of intolerance in popular religiosity, and the times and places where tolerance flourished. While the 'orthodox' line claimed that Christianity was the one true faith and provided the only way to God, the scattered opinions of Christians who lived and traded with their neighbours was often surprisingly flexible and open. According to recent scholarship 'the first four centuries of Christianity display a breadth and variety of view rarely equalled since'.[14] An older view of the religious history of the later Roman Empire tended to use conflictual and militaristic language to describe the 'triumph' of Christianity and the defeat of paganism. A newer view has come to appreciate that despite sporadic persecution and inherent tensions, Jews, Christians and pagans lived for long periods in creative co-existence and mutual respect. In tenth-century Baghdad there was reciprocal understanding between the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities, especially among scholars. The same thing was true of medieval Spain under the rule of the Caliphate of Cordova.

Evidence of toleration is sometimes discovered in unexpected places, such as the documents of the Inquisition. The Friulian miller, Domenico Scandella, told his Franciscan inquisitor in 1599 that 'the majesty of God has given the Holy Spirit to all, to Christians, to heretics, to Turks, and to Jews: and he considers them all dear, and they are all saved in the same manner'.[15] It would be important for contemporary multi-faith dialogue to discover traditions of tolerance and mutual understanding, as also the causes for recurring periods of intolerance and persecution. A significant component of world peace is understanding between religions, at a popular as well as an official level.

Recovery of women's voices

The recovery of women's voices from within the Christian tradition is one of the most significant aspects of 'history from below'. In the Middle Ages Bishop Gilbert of Limerick observed that 'women marry, and serve

those who pray, work and fight'. This view of women's duties changed very little over the centuries. The roles for which they were destined – motherhood and homemaking – were invisible, silent and subordinate to male roles. Life in a religious community offered the only 'respectable' alternative to marriage, and when women engaged in charitable works they were usually extensions of their domestic roles – teaching children, caring for the sick and aged or feeding the poor. However, 'domesticity' undoubtedly meant something very different for the peasant women who worked in the fields than for the lady of the manor. Many women were honoured and esteemed in the home, but 'women's work' was not significant, not worth recording and not the 'stuff' of history.

Women did not normally speak for themselves, but were described or represented by men, who in general acquired literacy before women. The exceptions were the religious women who found a voice and an outlet in spiritual writing. The writings of medieval religious women on the eucharist have been brilliantly retrieved by an American scholar, who shows a connection between women's experience as providers of food (feasting and fasting) and the eucharist.[16] Women did not write formal theological treatises, but informally they created a profoundly relational spirituality of the eucharist. The problem about the recovery of women's voices is that written sources are so few. Memories of ordinary women were often preserved in the form of objects: a charm, a ring, a dress, embroidery, a psalter. A poor illiterate woman in a *barrio* in Lima recently shared her life story with her friends by means of several faded photographs, each marking an important stage in her life. Women down the ages must have found similar ways of telling stories and communicating them in a strong oral tradition. This is the way countless women transmitted their faith to their children.

But sources for women's history are emerging in unexpected places: Inquisition records, records of rioting and demonstrations (unruly women), accounts of marriage customs where women were ritually separated from their past and integrated into their husband's family. Recent research has uncovered the reality of the pastoral experience of women throughout the Christian tradition: segregated from the men in church, or having to submit to the 'purifying ceremony of churching before being readmitted to the Christian community after childbirth'.[17] The area of the pastoral experience of women, both as agents and recipients of pastoral care, needs far greater attention than it has received. So too does the fact that when women ventured beyond the boundaries of the domestic and private, they were immediately suspect.[18]

Conclusion

It has only been possible to give a few examples of retrieving Christian experience 'from below'. The list of other possible topics is endless: the experiences of the indigenous subjugated peoples of the Americas or Australia, the Celtic tradition, the poor and the marginalized. What matters is not the completion of the task but the will to discover. For recovering the shadow side of Christian history and experience is not simply an act of historical imagination; it is also an act of liturgical imagination. At the heart of the Christian experience is the eucharistic *anamnesis*, the act of remembering what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. But it is also a remembering of the experience of the whole body of Christ, the Christian community down the ages. There is 'something missing' if our collective memory is accidentally or intentionally selective,[19] or if we restrict it to the good and the great.

The experiences of countless Christians have been forgotten, neglected or marginalized because they belong to the shadow side of history. Most of all this is true of the experiences of Christian women. This is a very serious matter for a religion which has *anamnesis* at its heart. To remember can be painful but the healing of memories makes us whole. To remember can be subversive, because it keeps alive the struggle for justice and human dignity. To remember is also to be enabled to give thanks to God for the goodness of life and of human persons. But most of all to remember our collective past is to recover wholeness and make a future possible 'grounded in the memory and faithfulness of God and thus in the conviction that God will not forget us'.[20]

NOTES

[1] André Brink: *Looking on darkness* (London, 1982), p 35, cited in Philip Sheldrake: *Spirituality and history* (SPCK: London, 1991), to which I am much indebted.

[2] E. H. Carr in *What is history?* (1991), cited in Jim Sharpe: 'History from below', an article in *New perspectives in historical writing* ed Peter Burke (Polity Press, 1991), p 37.

[3] Cf Peter Burke: 'Overture: the new history' in *New perspectives in historical writing*, pp 1–20.

[4] Peter Burke: *History and social theory* (Polity Press, 1992) p 52.

[5] Giuseppi Ruggieri: 'Faith and history' in *The reception of Vatican II*, ed Giuseppi Ruggieri et al. (Catholic University of America Press, 1987), p 98.

[6] Cf Giuseppi Alberigo: 'New frontiers in Church history', *Concilium* 7:6 (1970), pp 68–84.

[7] See Brigitte Cazelles: *The lady as saint: a collection of French hagiographic romances of the thirteenth century* (Philadelphia, 1991).

[8] See Thomas McHugh: 'The RCIA twenty years on' in *New beginnings in ministry*, ed James H. Murphy (Dublin, 1992), p 94.

[9] Two famous and popular studies of 'history from below' based on Inquisition records: Le Roy Ladurie: *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French village 1294–1324* (London, 1978) and Carlo Ginzburg: *The cheese and the worms: the cosmos of a sixteenth century miller* (London, 1980).

[10] '*Gloria Dei vivens homo*' (Irenaeus: *Adversus haereses*, IV, 20, 7).
[11] See C. Trinkaus: 'The religious thought of the Italian reformers' in *The pursuit of holiness in late medieval and Renaissance religion*, ed C. Trinkaus and H. A. Oberman (Leiden, 1974), pp 339–366.
[12] See Christopher F. Black: *Italian confraternities in the sixteenth century* (Cambridge, 1989), and Maureen Flynn: *Sacred charity: confraternities and social welfare in Spain, 1400–1700* (London, 1989).
[13] I am indebted to Robert Murray SJ for drawing my attention to these facts about the Syriac Churches.
[14] Richard Price: 'Pluralism and religious tolerance in the Empire of the fourth century', *Studia Patristica* 24 (1993), p 188.
[15] Carlo Ginsberg: *The cheese and the worms* (London, 1980), p 51.
[16] Caroline Walker Bynum: *Holy feast and holy fast* (University of California Press, 1987).
[17] See Margaret Ashton: 'Segregation in Church' in *Women in the Church*, Studies in Church History 27, ed W. J. Sheils and D. Wood (Oxford, 1990), pp 237–294. In the same volume William Coste: 'Purity, profanity and puritanism.The churching of women, 1500–1700', pp 377–387.
[18] For example the case of the Beguines. See Philip Sheldrake: *Spirituality and history* (SPCK, 1991), chapter 6.
[19] See Marjorie Procter-Smith: 'Liturgical anamnesis and women's memory: "Something Missing"', *Worship* 61 (1987), pp 405–424.
[20] *Ibid.*, p 409. I am much indebted to this article.