

TO AWAKEN THE DIVINITY WITHIN

Towards a New Theory of Evangelization

By JOHN O'DONOHUE

BEHIND EACH FACE AND VOICE lies the silence of the heart. This silence is as old as the universe. It holds within it a time before vegetation clothed the earth or animal walked or sound echoed. This silence waits quietly under thoughts, beneath actions, relationships, behind days, nights and names. No one owns this silence. No one can force it out into the light. Yet it is in this sanctuary that experience is sifted and transfigured. It is where our vanished days secretly gather. This silence is the home of memory and identity. It houses the spirit which coheres, articulates and shapes each human life.

In our western culture life has become so externalized that the self has grown ever more hollow. Interiority is continually threatened with eviction. There is no time for the opaque and quiet depths of the individual to express or signal its presence. There is no hospitality towards the awkward and shy nature of real human presence. Our age has no patience with presence. Instead it is obsessed with image. It is to image that it pays homage. *Hello* magazine could build an empire on glossy pictures of celebrities and pastiches of cliché and half-truth. Politicians and hierarchies employ PR consultants to groom their image to suit an image-hungry public. Appearance has become reality. The sophism of fifth-century Greece which Socrates valiantly struggled against has become the fashion. With the cosmetics of PR the sophistry of making the weak argument look strong is in full vogue. Driven by the flash of image and the bark of the sound bite, public discourse has little room for imagination, critique or vision. Words become cheap and dull when used to hold the real questions in a limbo out of reach. Even the most radical critique that art or literature presents is quickly absorbed and neutralized. The culture has become saturated with the trivia dreamed up by consumerism.

Media is the new emperor. It chooses and controls the images and establishes them in their hierarchy of power and colour. We live in an age that is visually aggressive. The horror of the Gulf War could be enjoyed in selected images, choreographed with an immunizing

read more at www.theway.org.uk

language as if it were fiction. Berlusconi is in a position with his media empire to hijack the reformation in Italy and get himself elected leader. The intensity and speed of the image affects our experience of time and consequently our sense of human presence. Video violence has even infiltrated the home. It saturates and dulls the human sensibility. Sexuality, the deepest secret of the self, is externalized and commercialized. This last privacy is continually invaded. Nothing remains private. Electronic communications can now infiltrate practically every last corner of privacy.

A culture that does not respect the secret cannot respect the sacred. The reductionism and fragmentation of our culture has relegated the sacred to the margins. Yet ironically this very process has only intensified the spiritual hunger that people feel. The further the human self extends outside itself, the more weary and uneasy it seems to become. Yet there is a definite demise in religious practice. Why does the spiritual hunger not then entail a return to religion? The old forms of religion seem incapable of bringing this hunger to articulation in its own rhythms. One reason for this seems to be that the spiritual hunger is complex and highly nuanced. It is in fact a new and diverse form of consciousness. The old answers and methods of religion are stuck in a different idiom and cannot even meet or recognize this. Church documents, exhortations and so much of its preaching have the tonality of an earlier, more uniform, authoritarian culture which modern consciousness has left behind long ago. Much of the language of religion is caught in this 'time warp'. It attempts to speak with the voice of a vanished age to a fragmented culture that has outgrown it. This kind of religious language awakens little more than nostalgia.

At this point it is imperative to ask: What is evangelization? Which territories now need to be evangelized? What are the methods of evangelization? Traditional evangelization was the process of bringing the 'deposit of faith' into a foreign culture. This deposit was clear and clean in form and content. A native response which took it on was termed a 'conversion'. Behind this whole process and sustaining it was an understanding of culture and theology which are now gone. Christian theology now recognizes that the Catholic Church is not emperor of theological truth but that all churches and religions participate in different ways in the truth. Together with the loss of theological arrogance, there has been a loss of cultural arrogance, namely a recognition of the autonomy and independence of local culture, a rediscovery and appreciation of their indigenous mythology and spirituality. The old authoritarian maxim, 'Go teach all nations', has had to be

radically qualified. Ironically, western culture is now looking more and more to indigenous culture and relearning from it the rhythms of spirituality that we have lost. From this perspective, it seems that western culture in its fragmentation, reductionism and spiritual hunger needs evangelization more than indigenous cultures.

The power of media has done immense damage to indigenous culture. Media and the world of image are modern vulgar versions of nominalism. This is a world made up of empty universals cut off from the living root of the particular. It builds a false meta-structure of ideology, image and discourse above the actuality of place, experience and memory. This is most evident in the homogenization of consciousness which the media are systematically engineering. The victim here is the individuality and rhythm of indigenous culture. One hears of villages in Africa where members of a tribe sit around a TV fascinated with the American soap *Dallas*. The media describe their empire as the 'global village'. But the global village has no name or face. It is a powerful overlay of fantasy. It is not a village at all. It is a no-place into which our energies of attention are seduced only to be dulled and controlled.

Can the concept of evangelization be retrieved for use in the context of western culture? What is evangelization? Evangelization is not the imposition of the gospel or religion on people. It is not about using fear or vulnerability to force people towards a religious message or system. Evangelization is not about interference nor is it an ideology into which people are indoctrinated. Evangelization is not the awakening of people's spiritual sense in order to institutionalize or control it.

The word 'evangelization' derives from 'evangel' which, in its Greek etymological root, means 'good news'. News is something that is fresh, interesting and new. This is also a happy and good news that touches the deepest origin, memory, identity and destiny of the human individual. It is a news that reaches deeper than the political level of image or opinion. It is not an élitist news reserved for some and excluding others. No one has to earn its content; it is given as a free gift without the politics of conditions. It is not a news from outside life which would force life into a joyless spiritual negativity. No. This news comes from the very well of life itself. It encourages life to celebrate and honour all its possibilities and risks. This is the news that life itself is the primal sacrament, life is the home of the eternal, albeit in veiled form; that the life of each person is a sacrament, wherein the eternal seeks to become visible and active; each individual is chosen for a creative destiny in this world; that each one incarnates a different dimension of God; that at death life is not ended, but elevated and transfigured into another form; that we are not outside, but within God.

Every concept of evangelization implies a concept of God. The difficulty with the traditional concept of evangelization was that the evangelizers seemed to own God or at least to have privileged access to him. Thus they saw themselves in a position to 'bring God' to others. The irony is of course that God was already there long before them. The omnipresence of God torpedoes the arrogance of this type of evangelization. God has no favourites. Each human body is a temple of God's presence and Spirit. If this is so, what then can the function of evangelization be? Evangelization does not 'bring God' to people. But evangelization can awaken the presence of God in them. This is the heart of the spiritual journey, to bring that presence to awareness. In a sense there is no such thing as a spiritual journey; if there is it is only a few millimetres long. Unlike physical space, there is no distance in spiritual space. Evangelization is then the process of bringing our presence in God to our awareness. This is delicate and sensitive work. Awareness cannot be forced; it can only be awakened. It effects great changes in the most intimate dimension of the person and spirit. Spiritual awakening is akin to sexual awakening. New and unknown levels of the self and its secret kinship with the invisible world are experienced. This awareness has different levels: it can extend from the cursory sense of presence to the depths of mystical desire for God.

Evangelization is then to be understood not as a doctrinaire programme of winning members for a religious club. It is far more sensitive and refined. It is in fact an inherent and ongoing activity in every act of faith. This is the non-linear journey from presence to awareness. Consequently, evangelization has an ontological aspect: it is Being becoming aware of and present to itself, its source and its destiny. An ontology of evangelization reveals that evangelization is perhaps most effective as witness. When a person awakens to the awareness of God around them, the light of this belonging suffuses their presence and radiates outwards from them. This is natural, wholesome and authentic. In the end the most effective and trustable witness is the integrity of individual presence. Witness does not have to be a deliberate or intrusive flag-waving exercise. Sometimes the over-distended gesture betrays its maker and reveals a mind that has sacrificed complexity to the fixation of a single position. Such witness is too self-absorbed to be trustable. Because Jesus had integrity of presence, he was always free enough to extend to his hearers the hospitality of disagreeing with or rejecting his way. This gives us a deep clue to the nature of holiness. Holiness is not piousness. Nor is it external membership of a religion. Pushed to an inclusive definition, one could say: to be holy is to be natural. God is not

a *deus-ex-machina*. God created nature and God's presence expresses itself through the rhythms of nature. To be in rhythm with one's nature is to be in rhythm with God. Evangelization attempts, then, to awaken the nature of God that is in us.

At its deepest level individuality is shaped in the image of the Trinity. So each human is more divine than human. This is in no way to diminish or to smother individuality; it is rather its highest affirmation, since the Trinity is the rhythm where the interflow of self and otherness enjoys its highest intensity and possibility. The Trinity is the primal well from which all individuality and difference flows. It is the imagination that drew each shape and presence out of nothingness. The world and its humans did not invent themselves. They were imagined and formed and sent here by the Trinity. Everything that is is within the Trinity; for there is nothing outside God. We are in this presence and of this divine nature. To awaken this recognition requires a sense of the invisible and its sublime depths. It requires a return to inwardness, where in silence and solitude one's kinship with the invisible awakens. This has to be the heart of evangelization in fragmented, externalist western culture. This return to the inner silence is not to be confused with introversion, individualism or quietism. This is rather a return to that inner ground where the secret kinship of all individualities is disclosed. There is a gentle irony in the fact that the genuine return inwards is a coming home to where all belonging is rooted, where people and things despite their external separateness are felt and known to be one — to belong together. It is the exact opposite of isolation or separation. To remain lost in the domain of the external is actually to remain in exile and separation. In terms of evangelization the intention is not to reconnect externally the fragments of atomistic culture. It is to go deeper into the inner ground, where the hidden connection between the fragments is felt and known. In theological terms it is the entry into the ground called 'Holy Spirit', the person who holds the intimacy and otherness of the Trinity and each human and object in unity. The Holy Spirit is Belonging. Evangelization is the awakening to and participation in the Holy Spirit. This is homecoming, coming in from the winter of exile that separates us from what we are.

What characteristics would such a theory of evangelization have? First, this theory of evangelization would be loyal to imagination. The Holy Spirit is the Imagination of Life, the spirit who mediates between the frontiers of dark and light, intimacy and otherness, fact and possibility, being and nothingness, death and eternity. Thus a doctrine of the Trinity is the most powerful affirmation of imagination. All imaginative activity, music, art, literature, love and suffering are about

the disclosure of the unexpected form in a matrix of experience and the ascetic process of allowing that to emerge. In fragmented culture, the artists are the secular priests and priestesses who keep the sacred alive, holding it in a form and reserve from the vulgarity of modern immediacy.

The concept of evangelization presented here would have an easy affinity with the world of the artist. It would not merely use moments in art as illustrations of theological truth; this is a cheap and facile exercise and brings neither theology nor imagination into creative encounter. Our concept would go deeper and be more respectful in its approach to the work of art and to its form and presence. It is in the search for the form best honouring the content that the mystery of imagination has most affinity with the reserve and shyness of the sacred. Evangelization could re-enliven the sacraments if they were to be reworked as constellations of spiritual experience hungering for form, rather than mere frames for repetitive and tired rituals. Such a concept of evangelization would have liberated itself totally from viewing the sacraments as fixed citadels externally dispensing grace to a culture outside them. Sacraments do not come from outside. The rhythm and individuality of the sacrament would be understood as predominately emerging from the resources of that culture and in this way satisfying its spiritual hunger. In this sense a sacrament is always new and is never repeated. Repetition denies sacrament.

Second, this evangelization would be loyal to questioning. One of the fatal aspects of reductionist culture is the poverty of its questions. Real questions are subverted and sidelined. This atmosphere allows no patience for questions that would go to the root of our dilemma. A real question is more creative and interesting than a secure answer. Such a question is a lamp that illuminates its own direction and territory as it proceeds. This art of questioning breaks the grid of dead language which reduces soul to image. It rekindles the latent hunger for the eternal within us. Unlike traditional evangelization, which foddered out absolute answers in a uniform culture, this evangelization would not put itself above the surrounding culture. It comes from within a broken culture and stands nakedly before the hunger of its deepest questions. Truth-seeking questions create a natural solidarity. This art of questioning is to be exercised as stringently on the church system as on economic, secular and legal systems that impoverish and imprison the spirit. The activity of such questioning gradually unmask idolatry and ideology as modes of false presence, simple vacancy that lacks even the energy of absence. Theologically expressed, this art of evangelization has a sense of God as

the great question: the question which has kept itself clean of idolatrous answers. It is especially the mystical tradition which has kept the sense of God as question alive. To retrieve and reawaken the mystical sense and its tradition is one of the most fecund possibilities for modern evangelization. Our culture is ripe for the mystical.

Third, this evangelization would be loyal to memory. Amnesia is one of the characteristics of our fragmented culture. Time is reduced to the instant; digital time shows only the second, not the circle of time. Such immediacy reduces human presence to what is called 'the attention-span'. It is not surprising that such instantaneity diminishes and suppresses the faithfulness of continuity. Without continuity, human experience becomes mere fragment and loses all its ontological weight. Only fleeting messages can be left on this thin surface; there is no depth of soil to sow the seed of vision and renewal. Yet beneath the thin surface of modern times lies the fecund memory of our past. Within this memory is the wisdom and illumination of centuries of powerful thinking and consciousness which tussled with the great questions of human origin, identity, beauty and weakness. Memory is the force which can balance us, qualify and restrain the immediacy of modern desire strained way beyond itself by advertising and image. This art of evangelization would free the silted sources of memory. This could be done powerfully in new liturgies which would carefully choose symbols to resonate our sleeping memory awake. Liturgy is the celebration of presence. When presence becomes thin and frenetic, liturgy must reach deeper into the earth of memory. Because a culture is a configuration of symbols, liturgy has here endless possibilities to deepen and renew human presence, to help people to become subjects of their lives rather than its victims.

Fourth, this evangelization would be loyal to the poor. The margins of a culture are the places where its violence and negativity become visible. The poor are its victims: those who have no money, the old, the weak, addicts, prisoners, the homeless and the ill. These are the people who experience famine in the domain of image and externality. As well as radically critiquing and fighting the structures which victimize or exclude them, this art of evangelization could gently open to them the resources and healing of the inner world. These people have a deep need for spiritual and psychic shelter in order to maintain their dignity and their hope. It is very encouraging in western culture that the people who work with the marginalized are no naïve do-gooders but intensely conscientized people who are ever more able to unmask the subtle ideologies of oppression. They also have an inclusive sense of the

reflexive nature of oppression, namely that those who oppress are oppressing themselves. This art of evangelization should also include the oppression of women and gay people, and racism in its many guises. Theologically considered, liberation theology has broken new and very instructive ground in this area.

Last, this evangelization would be loyal to human experience. Experience is the only path from world to self and from self to world. Through experience the self unfolds and comes to know itself. Anything outside experience cannot be real for the self. Therefore if God is not present in experience, then God is unreal. It is only in the penumbral and mysterious matrix of experience that the voices of the Trinity can be heard. Experience is then intrinsically sacramental. A new concept of evangelization would have an inclusive and multidimensional concept of faith which would honour the diversity, density and otherness in experience, and trust experience as the arena of divinity. It would have patience with the confused fragmentation of pluralistic culture and would avoid the temptation of fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism always short-circuits experience. At the heart of fundamentalism is faulty perception, the belief in the existence of a spiritual or moral bedrock which somehow manages to keep itself clear and clean amidst the flow of consciousness and culture. This is of course pure illusion, yet it functions as a kind of nostalgic ideal, as if we could return to a simple point of origin that never in fact existed. Fundamentalism is a strong temptation for a religion or theology that finds culture has become deaf to its message.

The advantage of an ontological theory of evangelization is that it locates the activity of evangelization firmly at the heart of Being. This dynamic of presence growing to awareness is a reality-dynamic which enjoys the balancing of celebration and critique. This precludes the danger of evangelization separating itself off and becoming functionalist. An evangelization which is functionalist lacks depth. It is mere posturing. It can blindly become the tool of idolatry or ideology, caught up in the famine fields of image and externality without even realizing it. It is particularly urgent to underline this danger, given the alarming turn to political, economic and religious fundamentalism in western culture. Such evangelization serves the deity of exile and separation. Real evangelization awakens us to the call of our destiny within the great creative weave of the Trinity. It awakens us to our inner silence where Being is Belonging, where memory transfigures transience, where death changes into divine life and where time is but eternity living dangerously.