POSTMODERNISM AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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OUR TOPIC MAY SEEM A CONTRADICTION in terms since postmodernism is often associated with the chaotic, provisional and sceptical. But spirituality, the self's experience before God, occurs in history. If not absolutely determined culturally, that experience occurs nevertheless in the forms and ways of seeing of a given culture. The culture within which it occurs thus constitutes the Gestalt of the faith experience and gives it its peculiar style.[1] Yet to return to our initial point, what if the style of postmodernism is – as it seems to many – determinedly and essentially atheistic? What could it have to say to the spiritual life?

The answer to that problem, however, lies in the nature of spiritual experience itself, the experience of the deepest self, a 'spark that glows beneath all deep structures, beneath all social and beneath all physical experience and historical circumstances' and catches fire at the breath of the Spirit of God.[2] There is no culture and no situation beyond this breath; the Spirit's love is universal and utterly compassionate. We may regard one culture as better than another. But before God 'even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales' (Isaiah 40:15). We may say that we do not believe in God, but, as one of Patrick White's characters says, God continues to believe in us and love us. Styles of living and believing may change, but that love remains constant. 'God goes on ways to Godself', as Eberhard Jüngel reminds us, 'even when they lead to other places',[3] even to those we regard as Godless.

It is a good thing to remind ourselves of this because even – or perhaps especially – religious people are often in danger of forming a god to our own image, substituting our beliefs, prejudices and desires for God's limitless freedom and mystery. In times like ours, postmodern times, complex and complicated, excitable and ambiguous, in which ideas and beliefs seem to be merely another aspect of changing fashion, appearing and disappearing, it is tempting to make a god who corresponds to the need for security this situation generates: serene and unchanging, a god who rejects what we dislike and blesses what we like. But that is not the God who gives himself to us in Jesus, the

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'Christ in agony until the end of time' (Pascal) who has thrown in his lot with human history. The present world may disappoint us but God loves it still and shows himself still within it, revealing its divine possibilities and continuing to work in it and with it. Since there are postmodern people living in a postmodern world, therefore, there is the possibility of a postmodern spirituality. But what do we mean by 'postmodern'? What is it that we are talking about?

The operative part of the phrase is probably 'post'. What we are talking about claims to have come after, to have superseded previous ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. It deconstructs them, to use the fashionable term. In a world of cybernetics, the global village and global economy, computers, lasers and virtual reality, of corporate plans and multinational corporations, older ways seem to be coming to an end. It is no longer a world, for instance, in which talk of love, truthfulness, belief, loyalty and so on has much meaning. It is governed instead by efficiency, success and technological rationality. These generate power and material abundance beyond previous dreams, it is true, yet also loneliness, anomie and the threat of annihilation. It is also a world of ceaseless change. New models replace the old, constantly and seemingly inevitably, as the system seems to function automatically without need of people or without human decisions. Even cultural artefacts are no longer meant to endure but to be consumed and replaced, and the world seems perpetually in process, a process of dissolution. Moreover, everything seems to tend to disorder rather than order and the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that entropy is increasing and the world is running down, seems to have become the only article of faith.

Individual will is supreme. But it floats without anchor in the past or in any larger scheme of belief, alone and often afraid in a world over which it has little control and where there is little companionship. People seem estranged from others, the world around them, and often, it seems, from themselves. They have no overarching canopy of meaning, purpose or value apart from the imperatives of technology, efficiency and success, as 'reality' becomes a matter of representation, abstract signs and symbols on the TV and computer screen, rather than physical evidence. To survive, we have to play various roles, as a professional, spouse, club-member, friend, believer and so on, wearing different masks to suit the occasion with little sense of a solid core of identity. To borrow Julia Kristeva's phrase, it is an age of 'mascara and soap opera',[4] of people enmeshed in a web of signs without substance, conditioned by a kind of mass hypnosis to see only what others see,

governed by the collective perceptions of the media, living to consume and in loyalty to the products we consume and the pleasures we are promised.

Despite the stark realities present to us every day – the threats of disaster implicit in the wars and rumours of wars, the growing gap between rich and poor and the devastation of the environment which is part of it – the world can seem strangely insubstantial, almost like a collective dream. One of Salman Rushdie's characters expresses this sense.

> Information got abolished sometime in the twentieth century, can't say just when, stands to reason, that's part of the information that got . . . abolished. Since then we've been living in a fairy-story . . . Everything happens by magic . . . [we] haven't a . . . notion what's going on. So how do we know if it's right or wrong? We don't even know what *it* is.[5]

Caught in this ceaseless flow of images, the self almost ceases to exist, breaking into fragments, identifying only with the flow. Right and wrong become a matter of personal taste, depending not so much on what is done but who does it. The centre does not hold because there is no centre. As Rushdie's character continues:

> The modern city . . . is the *locus classicus* of incompatible realities. Lives that have no business mingling with one another sit side by side upon the omnibus. One universe, on a zebra crossing, is caught for an instant, blinking like a rabbit, in the headlamps of a motor vehicle in which an entirely alien and contradictory continuum is to be found.[6]

Meanwhile, of course, in the 'actual' world the gap increases between rich and poor, nations break into warring tribal groups, new and deadlier weapons are developed, as millions die of starvation and the polluted and ravaged planet struggles to survive.

Seen in this context the theories of postmodernists like Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari do not seem so far-fetched. In a sense they are merely describing what is the case: that language no longer seems to refer to anything outside itself, meanings are not fixed and the ceaseless circulation of desire has become the rule of life. The important thing about their work, however, is that it represents an extended reflection upon what would otherwise be a more or less automatic process, an attempt to make some sense of and find some significance in the apparent chaos. What they find points indeed to the theological significance of this situation, to where God may be working in it.

In the first place these writers make it clear that we have reached the end of the Age of Reason, of the belief in the powers of human reason reflected in Descartes' 'I think, therefore, I am', a belief which made human reason the arbiter of all reality. Having absorbed the lessons of contemporary science, postmodernism is profoundly sceptical about these claims. The physical world as a whole is seen as ultimately incalculable and beyond the laws of the human mind. Confidence in reason gives way to a profound, sometimes nihilistic relativism. Yet, however negative it seems, this may also allow the return of wonder, the basis of faith's commitment to realities at present unseen (Hebrews 11:1). The distrust of common sense which Nietzsche – perhaps the first postmodernist – expressed in his attack on the 'true world', may also point in the same direction.

> An idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating – an idea which has become useless and superfluous – *consequently*, a refuted idea; let us abolish it.[7]

Common sense may be giving way to the openness which is a prerequisite for the humility of worship.

Since the Enlightenment, western culture has been preoccupied with the products of the human mind, confident in our power to rule the world. But these products and this power are now threatening to overwhelm us, and the absurdity of the project in the first place is becoming more and more apparent. As its fruits make increasingly clear, we are not omnipotent and may have been appallingly mistaken in the 'pride of life' which undergirds our technological triumphs. So we return to what Descartes' great contemporary, Pascal, called 'the silence of the infinite spaces', the void which opens out to the human mind and spirit when we honestly contemplate the world within and outside us. So for those prepared to reflect, reason must humble itself, acknowledge that we are not lords of all we survey, and discover the 'reason' that reason knows not of.

Any authentic spirituality depends upon conversion, on turning away from the ways of inappropriate self-love to serve the living God. This crisis which confronts us, painful as it may be, shaking our confidence in our own prayers, may therefore represent an occasion of grace. It is uncomfortable, of course, to realize and acknowledge that we are not after all in control of the world, that reality is much larger than our human mind and that we are all, in Conrad's phrase, 'thirty thousand fathoms out', floating on the ocean of being, dependent upon the One in whom we, all of us and all creation, live and move and have our being.

In this sense postmodernism points us away from the God of the philosophers (who can all too easily become an idol, made in our own image) towards the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jesus, the living God, beyond all definition, understanding and control. Moreover, the sense of absurdity which is another characteristic of our situation may well be more in tune with the logic of this God, whose wisdom and power seem like foolishness and powerlessness to human understanding, than is traditional theology's reliance on reason and analogy. As the mystics have always insisted, the way to this wisdom is a way of unknowing; if you wish to arrive at the All, as St John of the Cross knew, you must go by a way in which you have nothing.

The traditional piety of the past can appear smug – and that is one reason why many people today are repelled by it. But if we look honestly at our present situation as members of affluent, urban, post-industrial society, there is no room for smugness. We are confronted with the gap between our situation and the disasters facing us, and between our confidence in ourselves and the resources we have. But it is this gap, of course, which teaches us our need of the God whose 'being is in coming',[8] a coming which is often more interruption than consolation, a 'call to go further'.

One of the particular ways in which postmodernist thought may prepare us for this coming and this interruption is by means of its distrust of language. Since the time of the Greeks, western culture has generally believed that words are in a sense the equivalent of things, thus tending to make us read Scripture, for instance, literally rather than as the 'poetic' expression of the inexpressible God. Thinkers like Derrida, however, have challenged this belief, reminding us that language is, in fact, a set of conventions, apart from the world it attempts to describe. 'Meaning' is what a given culture agrees upon. At best language leaves 'traces', evidence of something not present – people, things, events and so on remain what they are, apart from the words used about them.[9]

This may seem abstruse. But it has theological significance. All too often religious people confuse the name with the reality of God, thinking that when we have pronounced the word 'God' we have somehow achieved some kind of understanding of what it means, even sometimes some power over it – as phrases like 'first cause', or adjectives like 'omniscient', 'omnipotent' and so on may suggest. But to the postmodern, naming never coincides with what we name. This is even more true of the reality we call 'God', who exists beyond all categories, even as Jean Luc Marion argues, the category of Being

itself,[10] whose self-given name is 'I Am Who Am', the One who is supremely free and supremely dynamic.

Once we accept the provisional nature of language, then, we enter into this new sense of reality and into a new kind of space in which it is no longer possible for identity and meaning to be closed in upon itself or to be absolutely confident of its powers. Rather, it is a 'bountiful meaning-laden space'[11] in which He/She Who Is comes to us, speaking beyond words in the depths of our being, in the midst of our dividedness calling us out of the narrow limits of knowledge and control towards the mystery Who Is. Significantly, that great master of intelligence but also great mystic, St Thomas Aquinas, understood this also in his discussion of how Scripture can bear multiple senses:

> The author of holy scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science (theology) has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification.[12]

That signification, of course, is love, something existential: we can understand love (which is the life of God) only by loving. But love is essentially dynamic, always in search of its fulfilment which, of course, lies at the heart of the mystery of the Trinity.

This intuition, that existence is essentially 'nomadic', renews the traditional image of spiritual life as a journey; the movement is not external but interior. Of postmodern thinkers it is Lévinas who develops this intuition in specifically theological terms. In his thought life essentially involves a dialogue between ourselves and others and through them with the Other, who goes ahead of us and whom we know only in the traces left by this movement. Thus:

> 'To be created after God's image' does not mean that we are icons of God, but that we are following in the track of his footprints. The self-revealed God of our Judaeo-Christian spirituality retains the full infinity of his personal absence. He shows himself only by his footprints, as in chapter 33 of Exodus.[13]

This is important because it reminds us that even in Jesus the Godhead is concealed as well as revealed, revealed as absence: as what is, and must be, beyond us so long as we live. Nor is this as austere as it sounds, since it is the way to transfiguration. Lévinas continues:

> The 'having passed' of the transcendence that remains transcendent – that is His track. Following in His track I lose the 'weight' I receive

> standing before His face, standing before my Master as a 'faithful servant'. I even lose the weight I received as a 'secret friend'. Following in His track the 'hidden son of God' is born. I am here consumed by the flames of love itself. In God I die of all individuality of spirit and live a life in conformity with God.[14]

This may seem a long way from the postmodern city, the glittering world of signs. But it may be that that world, with its profound sense of absence and emptiness, points in this direction. Disillusionment may be a better way to God than confidence in this world, as another of Rushdie's characters suggests.

> You can either break your heart trying to work it all out, or you can go sit on a mountain, because that's where all the truth went, believe it or not, it just upped and ran away from those cities where even the stuff under our feet is all made up, a lie, and it hid up there in the thin air where the liars don't dare come after it in case their brains explode. It's up there all right.[15]

Postmodernism knows, as Buber put it, that 'a world that is ordered is not THE world order' not the order of the incalculable and mysterious God. It also knows that it is often precisely in the experience of rupture, dividedness and disillusionment that reality – for us the living God – may enter our world, 'beams of power streaming into the world through gaps dissolving again and again'.[16]

A new kind of spirituality thus begins to emerge, very different from the classical tradition de Guibert defined when he referred to spirituality as 'the science founded on revelation that studies what Christian perfection is and how (we) can aspire to it and attain it during (our) life on this planet'.[17] That was a spirituality of confidence. But a postmodern spirituality is more humble and less abstract. Since reason and abstraction seem treacherous, it returns us to the body, finding in its vulnerability as well as its capacity for joy an occasion of grace. Love, excess even, is the motif of much that is postmodern, as Edith Wyschogrod argues powerfully in *Saints and postmodernism*.[18]

Postmodernism is also aware of the oddity of the Enlightenment notion of the person as 'a bounded, unique cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement and action organized into a distinctive whole',[19] which feels itself somehow apart from the flow of existence. Hence the influence today of Master Eckhart, the great medieval mystic who saw the spiritual life in terms of openness and receptivity. The soul for him is essentially virginal,

indifferent to all possessions and all other possibilities, waiting for God to come as gift, fecundity, love. 'The Other, the touchstone of moral existence, is not a conceptual anchorage but a living force' drawing us on.[20] Thus the central mystery of existence is one of generosity, excess even, eucharistic, God's dwelling within us and bringing divinity to birth in us and in the whole of creation.[21]

This is the antithesis of the alienation, but it is a different kind of belonging, a resting in God as the source of all existence, beyond being itself, but known in wordless joy and peace. In turn this leads to a rediscovery of the world and of others. Possessed of God, the soul loves all those God loves, and glories in the creation which is God's work and God's glory. In this way 'the tumult within eternity',[22] the 'great swarm of being'[23] unfolds within us, redeeming but not rejecting the energies of the postmodern world.

But no spirituality is genuinely Christian if it is exempt from the pain of the world. So a postmodern spirituality will be aware of the 'wretched of the earth', the victims of the 'death event'[24] of contemporary history who bear its wounds in their bodies and minds. The ceaseless flow of sensation through the media often distracts us from this reality and turns it into mere spectacle: 'blood and mayhem, mayhem and blood, the same tonight as every night. Only the names are different.'[25] But the flow of divine love dissolves the boundaries of self and self-interest, bearing us beyond the merely sensational into community with those who are poor and oppressed and are therefore peculiarly loved by God, since they bear the mark of the Crucified.

Essentially, a spiritual life is one in which compassion for the Other, who suffers in and with these others, compels our love. In the agony of the contemporary world we can thus catch a glimpse of what Kees Waajiman calls 'the irresistible pathos (of God) working for the oppressed and humiliated, moving them (through us) toward liberation; Abba who in his unconditional goodness is a house with room for everyone'.[26] The sufferings of our time are not therefore meaningless, as a mere secular postmodernity would see them, but the groanings of creation in labour until it brings forth redemption, the final triumph of God's love.[27] Similarly, lives lived in this love on behalf of the powerless show the ultimate powerlessness of the evil which has so wounded them,[28] and thus witness to a new and transformative kind of power, quite other than that of technology and money.

A postmodern spirituality, then, may be the hope of the world, not a mere projection of our human needs but God's challenge to them. It calls us to renounce the power which is in danger of destroying us, and

to return to a humble faith in God, who is always coming towards us and going before us. It is in this patience, this humble acceptance of the One whose presence we long for, that the postmodern world may be transformed.

NOTES

[1] B. Frahling quoted in O. Steggink, 'Study in spirituality in retrospect', *Studies in Spirituality* 1 (1991), p 26.
[2] *Ibid.*, p 21.
[3] E. Jüngel; *God as the mystery of the world* (Grand Rapids: W. Eerdmans, 1983), p 159.
[4] J. Kristeva, 'Postmodernism' in *Romanticism, modernism, postmodernism*, edited by Harry R. Garvin (Lewisbury: Bucknell University Press, 1980).
[5] Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p 313.
[6] *Ibid.*, p 314.
[7] Carl A. Rascke, 'The deconstruction of God' in T. Altizer et al. (eds), *Deconstruction and theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p 5.
[8] Jüngel, *God as the mystery*, p 159.
[9] Rascke, 'Deconstruction', p 11.
[10] Jean Luc Marion, *God without being* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).
[11] Rascke, 'Deconstruction', p 11.
[12] *Summa theologiae* I 1.10. c.
[13] Cited in Kees Waajiman, 'Spirituality as transformation', *Studies in Spirituality* 1 (1991), p 33.
[14] *Ibid.*, pp 33–40.
[15] Rushdie, *Satanic verses*, p 313.
[16] Waajiman, 'Spirituality as transformation', p 31.
[17] Quoted in Otger Steggink, 'Study in spirituality in retrospect', *Studies in Spirituality* 1 (1991), p 7.
[18] Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and postmodernism: revisioning moral philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
[19] Clifford Geertz cited in Hein Blommestjin, 'Découverte de soi-même ou quête de Dieu: l'itinéraire de soi en Dieu chez Maître Eckhart', *Studies in Spirituality* 1 (1991), p 79.
[20] Wyschogrod, *Saints and postmodernism*, p xxi.
[21] Blommestjin, 'L'itinéraire', pp 89–90.
[22] Wyschogrod, *Saints and postmodernism*, p 90.
[23] Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's last sigh* (London: Cape, 1995), p 59.
[24] Wyschogrod, *Saints and postmodernism*, p xiv.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Waajiman, 'Spirituality as transformation', p 31.
[27] Romans 8: 18–30.
[28] Wyschogrod, *Saints and postmodernism*, p 89.