HEART AND HEAD

Searching for God

By DANIEL CADRIN

IN MANY GROUPS I HAVE WORKED WITH, I have commonly heard this said: to be a good Christian, what matters first is the heart; the head must be left, with our shoes, at the door of the sacred place. Then the contrast is made between the generous, self-giving hearts of those who love their neighbour, and the dry, desiccated minds of those who lose their time in unending studies. As if our heart were only filled with warm, unselfish feelings, and love had nothing to do with thinking and making choices. As if our heads were only full of useless, irrelevant details, and study had nothing to do with self-giving and caring.

In the Bible, this antithesis is not found. The heart is the centre of decision, involving the whole person with all the affective and intellectual capacities. The integration of our desire to know and our desire for God is a difficult and central issue in today's spiritual trends. Intelligence is not high on the list of necessary companions on the spiritual journey. In many religious movements there is a clear mistrust of reason and reflection. Some spiritual masters, who have themselves spent their life studying, prefer that the truth they personally own be directly transmitted to their disciples without the mediation of too much active and critical learning. They can even explain this with many reasons, carefully thought out!

I have sometimes been shocked, especially in more fundamentalist Christian groups, to hear members worshipping the Bible and promoting its reading as the means of salvation, while being strongly critical of biblical scholarship as so much vain endeavour leading to non-belief. They do not seem aware that they could not even have the Bible in their hands to read if thousands of linguists, archaeologists, exegetes, historians and theologians through the centuries had not spent hours of ascetic and attentive scrutiny to establish, understand, translate and comment on these texts. They did this work often without any recognition, but they did it so that their fellow-Christians could have access to inspiring words that would nurture their faith, hope and love. If the blissful ignorance of the current anti-intellectualism was the only

available spiritual way, we would all end up dying of spiritual thirst and hunger in a wasteland surrounded by guarded fences.

Spiritual traditions

When I look at classical spiritual authors like Catherine of Siena, Eckhart, John of the Cross, and others, I am struck by the fact that these people were not only intellectually gifted but had sharp critical minds; they were not satisfied with simplistic approaches and a naïve perspective but were able to look at personal, as well as political and ecclesial situations, without illusion and with an accurate analysis. The same could be said of contemporaries like Madeleine Delbrel, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day or Jean Vanier. Their spirituality does not arise from a spontaneous, unlooked-at experience, but comes out of deep struggles and questioning, with crises and loss of certainties, that require ceaseless learning. I have found in them a great respect for the human capacities of attentiveness, questioning and reflecting, with all the learning process these involve. And their connections with thinkers, scholars, philosophers and theologians are numerous.

It would be interesting to look at some great spiritual movements in church history to see their relationship with scholarly research and reflection, the one sustaining the other. The growth of the mendicant orders and their spirituality in the thirteenth century was linked to the development of such universities as Paris, Oxford and Bologna. Las Cases and his evangelical struggle for the rights of the Indians, with his deep sense of compassion and justice, was directly connected with the works of jurists and theologians, such as Vitoria, at Salamanca. The works of Newman and Congar, their lifetime dedication to in-depth analysis and reflection, had direct influence on the emergence of a new vision of the Church and a new spirituality for the laity, emphasizing participation in the Church and commitment in the world. The experiment of the worker-priests and similar movements of solidarity with the working class in the forties and fifties was not without relationship to the historical and theological reflections on mission, creation and work, developed by people like Chenu. And when I see the importance given to biblical and theological studies for the formation of Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, born of Charles de Foucauld's spirituality, focused on poverty, incarnation and radical surrender, I know that their founders, Madeleine Hutin and René Voillaume, took learning seriously as a preparation for the desert experience.

I come myself from a specific spiritual tradition, the Dominican, where learning is not only a stimulating activity or agreeable leisure

pursuit but an essential component of our spiritual life itself, where it is unthinkable to talk of spiritual life without including the central role of study. This was embodied by witnesses through the centuries, from Dominic to Albert the Great, Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, Marie Poussepin, Lacordaire and Lagrange. In this tradition, loving God and one's neighbour involves using fully all your human capacities of seeing, thinking, reflecting and judging, and committing yourself to a lifelong learning process. It does not mean, as reality shows, that Dominicans always implement this programme! But the vision is there, along with those who witness to it, to awaken and stimulate us when we lose the active memory of our charism. This emphasis on study is also related to community life and the necessity of debating, arguing, confronting our experiences and perspectives – an exacting and enjoyable activity – so as to search for truth together, because we firmly believe that this search will bring us closer to God. It is one tradition among others, with its own gifts and biases, but it has met in the past, and meets now, the aspirations of diverse people looking for a spiritual road that would respect the human desire to know. And this study, finally, builds hope itself: 'St Dominic walked through the countryside singing, not just because he was courageous, and not just because he had a cheerful temperament. Years of study had given him a heart formed to hope.'[1]

The human condition

Any spirituality that wants to be Christian, or just simply to have a minimum of credibility and depth, must face the extremes of our human condition; its greatness and its limitations: our capacity to give life and to kill, our ability to rejoice in the beauty of the creation and to despair deeply of any meaning. The paschal mystery of the cross and resurrection has no sense without a very clear regard for our personal, social and ecclesial histories of domination and exclusion, creativity and communion, violence and kindness. Our century is especially significant if we want to look at our human condition without blindfolds: the huge numbers of human beings slaughtered, the magnitude of the destruction of the earth, as well as the tremendous scientific and artistic inventiveness, the committed search for freedom and justice. The dramatic dimension of human existence is easily emptied out in a liberal, privatized vision, which may lead to a quiet spiritual inertia and blindness. I was particularly reminded of this last summer in Rwanda, when I talked with young religious who had gone through incredible events and had hard questions about the presence of God. As one said:

'When the storm came, God was not sleeping in the boat; there was simply nobody'.

A spirituality that cannot face up to these questions, and struggle with them, is not much use to a good part of humanity confronted daily with life and death issues. The experience of the 'void' has many faces, 'such as absence, loss, shame, guilt, hatred, loneliness, and the demonic. The void is more vast than death, but death is the definitive metaphor.'[2] In order to see, to understand, to reflect on and to integrate these realities, we need all the intellectual tools we can find, from anthropology to psychoanalysis, from economics to theology. And the way we will be able, or not, to look at these realities and keep on hoping and loving, will be shaped by our world-views, with their depths or their deficiencies:

> I believe that our spiritual attitude to suffering is crucial because it not only determines the way we relate to those for whom we care but our very survival as carers. If our attitude is illogical because of ignorance or a flawed theology, we run the risk of being so overwhelmed by pain that we burn out. If, however, we are able to maintain a paschal overview, keeping the resurrection in the same perspective as the cross, then our inevitable human sadness will be tempered by the joy we experience in our faith in the loving purposes of God.[3]

Conversion and idols

Spiritual experience deals with conversion and refusing false gods. In the Christian tradition, the first commandment calls us to break with idolatry, which is our principal sin. Oppression and exclusion, personal and collective egoism, pride and greed, are not only social and moral phenomena; they are correlated to idolatry, the idols *par excellence* being the Self and Power, which are illusions, but which always imply the destructive denial of the existence of others. The prophetic voices, from Isaiah and Amos to Antonio Montesinos and Simone Weil, in the name of their faith in the living God, denounce selfishness and injustice as the false worship of dead idols. A basic role of learning in the conversion process is to keep us aware of the complexity of reality, of the mystery of God, which is always beyond our representations, and aware, too, of the lies we tell each other and ourselves to disguise our crimes, failures and blindness. Study may help us, in our wanderings, to open our eyes and to keep them open.

The tears of Dominic, in the face of the social and religious situation of his times, 'flowed from the discipline of an open-eyed spirituality that did not miss a thing'.[4] An open-eyed spirituality is one that is able

to see those who are at the margins of the picture, to see the amazing beauty of the world and of human achievements, and to be ready for new questions and new discoveries. To see a situation more widely, with all its promise of life and its risk of death, means abandoning the centrality of one's self-interest and viewpoint. For Simone Weil, love of God and of the neighbour needs more than warmth and the enthusiasm of the heart. It requires attentiveness; and 'the development of the faculty of attentiveness forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies'.[5] The ongoing learning process may help to sustain the ongoing conversion process by keeping the desire open, waiting for God, and by keeping the eyes really attentive to others. It may also help in avoiding blind actions which, in the name of love and God, may instead crush people or be self-destructive.

Our desire to know and our desire for God do not travel along separate roads. In Luke (10: 27), Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind. No part of our personal capacities and resources is excluded from the search for God and therefore from the conversion process. The search for God touches our whole person, not only our affective, moral and religious dynamism but also our cognitive capacities. Learning by itself is ambiguous. It also creates idols, enclosed systems and ideologies, which do not give life but repress it, which may stop us in our search for truth through self-satisfied contentment and reckless contempt for different perspectives and new questions. 'Elusiveness, frustration, and fragility are features that knowledge shares with other fundamental human desires.'[6] It is not only our hearts that need conversion: our minds also have to go through an 'intellectual conversion'[7] that implies moving to a more conscious critical appropriation of worlds mediated by meaning and of oneself as knower. Objectivity then is not reduced to seeing the real 'out there', naïvely, but is related to self-transcending or authentic subjectivity. We do not move automatically to new horizons. It is also a long, arduous and liberating transformation.

Continuity

Learning is central for continuity in any spiritual commitment. The long term is quite a challenge today, as for any meaningful commitment. A faith will remain alive and growing if it is grounded in solid basic convictions and if it is able to express itself, with gestures, words and symbols. This cannot happen without some personal appropriation of the core elements of a religious tradition and an appropriation that evolves through phases of life, with new learning and new means of

expression, in order to face new questions and life situations. Many people have not kept up in their spiritual quest, in part at least because their learning has stopped. This may happen when people leave their religious affiliation, but it may also happen even if they remain with it or wander from one group to another. Their community has offered no substantial food to help them in facing the difficulties of their lives and building inner convictions, understanding the complex world they are in and grasping the deeper sense of ecclesial reality. This can be seen in the new religious movements as well as in the main churches.

In the long run, good relationships, pious exhortations and lots of things to do and organize are not enough to make you keep on the road. When your meaning system collapses in times of crisis, when the joyful feeling of the beginning erodes, when you become aware of your contradictions in living the gospel, what is left to sustain you? You may try to re-ignite the original fire with wet matches, but it does not stay alight long and the cold comes back. Or the simple exhaustion of activism just ends the journey. You will need then the discipline and patience acquired by learning to go beyond the immediate perceptions and emotions and to keep on hoping. Otherwise, fear comes back, triumphant, with its favourite partner, ignorance.

Experiences and approaches

In a spiritual journey, learning will be useful and attractive in so far as it helps to explore, deepen and express an experience. Without these significant experiences behind it, learning becomes a tedious accumulation of futile information or an unimportant, however pleasurable, leisure activity. The lack of interest in learning related to spiritual life, or the failure of it, is often related to an absence of such experiences or, more frequently, to the absence of meaningful, fruitful connections with those experiences. In their adult life, people are faced with the birth and the breaking-up of close relationships, with choices to be made in daily issues involving falsehood and truth. They hear words and they see realities that shatter their world-view and ways of living, they have so many questions that they dare not ask or listen to, they experience moments of joy that overcome them. Through all this, a spiritual awareness happens that may lead them to a deeper spiritual experience: opening up to a loving reality beyond any limits, facing their finitude with a mixture of fear and gratitude, receiving a gracious healing that recreates them, grasping previously unknown meaning, giving themselves fully to people they care for, creating rich symbolic worlds through art, entering a new phase in their life, building up with

others a human community of respect and solidarity. If learning does not touch these experiences, people will not learn and will not see the importance of learning in spiritual life.

Concrete factors will also play a part in the lack of interest in or failure at learning activities: the disregard of basic rules for adult learning,[8] the inattentiveness to people's insights and accumulated knowledge, lack of awareness of the strong emotions linked with learning in many people (fear, no self-esteem, previous education . . .), insufficient sensitivity to their immediate motivation, approaches unsuited to their symbolic worlds and ways of expressing things, and inadequate settings. But frequently, the main problem, both in the facilitators and participants, is the underestimation of their capacities of seeing, understanding, imagining, reflecting and expressing. Two prejudices often impede learning as a necessary component of spiritual experience. The first one is to suppose that spiritual life is simple: God, love, etc. – no need of much discussion, just do it. The second one is that so-called ordinary people will find it too difficult or do not really want it; it will disturb them, etc. The integration of learning and spiritual life requires that these misconceptions be overcome.

But, even if the significant experience is there, and the appropriate approach, this integration remains a personal choice and a mystery, which cannot be programmed. I have seen some people who have gone through years of theological studies, spiritual workshops, lots of reading, and never shift one iota from their previous perspective. No connection is made, any new element only nurtures the previous vision or is discarded as irrelevant; two parallel worlds exist which never meet and are kept strictly apart. As if religious experience and learning, in fact, could not make an alliance. It is not surprising that some people with a scientific background enter very fundamentalist religious movements or become disciples of gurus who ask for blind obedience. The world of knowledge and the spiritual world are kept in different compartments or rooms and never encounter one another. This divorce however is not between heart and head, but between head and head, heart and heart. This is not without connection to our cultural context of privatized and fragmented meaning.

Learning and religious movements

We now have a plurality of religious movements in our societies, from fundamentalist to esoteric groups. Good criteria to use when assessing their spiritual health are the place and style of learning that they foster. They tell us much about their liberating or alienating

possibilities. Many aspects may be considered: Who can teach? Is there a place for questions and for learning from one another? Are outside resources used? Is the diversity of human knowledge integrated and respected – or mistrusted? Is joy connected with learning? Are the difficult issues and the dramatic dimension of human life seriously faced? Is learning a priority expressed in money invested for the formation of facilitators and teachers? What freedom do they enjoy? To what learning material do members have access? – and so on.

All this says something about their spiritual path: its respect for the dignity of human beings and the mystery of God, its capacity to sustain a long-term journey or only short exciting moments, its aptitude to nurture people in their personal and social crisis. It may indicate whether the inevitable tendency of this movement will be to keep people blind and call them to worship idols that have no heart, no mind, only interests; or whether it will involve them, with open eyes, in an ongoing and deep conversion process, integrating their desire to know and their desire for God.

Community life

The best context for the integration of the heart and mind, from my experience, is community life. Whether it implies daily life or regular meetings and activities, it remains for me the best setting for learning, for spiritual life, and for their integration. Both in the communities I have lived in and the many groups I have been involved with, I have seen so often the deep impact on community life made by learning, and the impact made by community learning on spiritual attitudes and practices. But there are conditions: a minimal climate of mutual trust and respect; a sense of freedom as the atmosphere for both learning and spirituality; a real diversity of people recognized and seen as positive; common rules to be respected in any sharing, debate or learning activity; specific and practical issues to be looked at and studied, at least as a starting-point; regular and long-term practice, not just the occasional exercise which has a limited transforming effect; the possibility of expressing all the questions, doubts, discoveries and new insights so that they come together, challenge each other and bear fruit.

Community that brings together the 'doers' and the 'thinkers' is very enjoyable. We may learn from one another if we take time to do it, if we see this as an important part of our spiritual journey itself and if we are really ready to give ourselves to it, just as we are, with our personal certainties, our anxious concerns and the wide gaps in our knowledge and experience. To do so implies the conviction that we can learn from

anyone, whatever their age, background and origin, and even from the silence of some. It helps the 'thinkers' to see the world as it is seen from the street and to become more perceptive scholars; it helps the 'doers' to widen their perspective and to become more reflective in their activity.[9]

Signs of hope

In many places, I have seen or heard of new centres where spiritual life and learning were seen as necessary partners. And not necessarily in countries with lots of academic and financial resources. In the midst of a country destroyed by war, in Angola, I remember the enthusiastic faces of those who were talking about their project of a cultural centre – a place where they could discuss religious and social questions as an essential part of rebuilding people's confidence in themselves and facing up to the tough issues of their country. In Iraq, devastated by the war and the trade embargo, a centre of Christian formation has been set up where almost one thousand adults from different Christian churches go each week, over a period of three years, to learn the foundations of their faith. I saw there young Christians eager to learn because it is a vital way to overcome despair and keep alive their spiritual tradition. In the Ukraine, a new theological college, involving both Catholics and Orthodox, is gathering students, even if it has no money or buildings and few professors. But what it does have is people who believe in its necessity. And many others. In the midst of all this, one can see, present and shining, the desire to know and the desire for God, faithful partners. One can see that heart and head belong to the same body.

NOTES

[1] Timothy Radcliffe, 'The wellspring of hope: study and the annunciation of the good news', *Religious Life Review* vol 35 (July–August 1996), p 205.

[2] James Loder, *The transforming moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989), p 84.

[3] Sheila Cassidy, *Sharing the darkness: the spirituality of caring* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1988), p 65.

[4] Chrys McVey, 'Being a Dominican today', *Focus* vol 15 no 1 (1995).

[5] Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), p 85.

[6] Edward Farley, *The fragility of knowledge: theological education in the Church and the university* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p 18.

[7] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in theology* (University of Toronto Press, 1990), p 238.

[8] Cf Stephen D. Brookfield, *Understanding and facilitating adult learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), pp 9–20.

[9] Cf Donald A. Schön, *The reflective practitioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p 323.