

# The institutional dark night

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IN HER MAGNIFICENT ACCOUNT OF RUSSIAN LIFE under Stalin, Nadezhda Mandelstam writes of a critical moment of recognition.

That evening, guarded by three soldiers in the coach to which I had been taken in such comfort, I had lost everything, even despair. There is a moment of truth when you are overcome by sheer astonishment: 'So that's where I am living, and the sort of people I'm living with! So this is what they're capable of! So this is the world I live in.' We are so stupefied that we even lose the power to scream. So that's the place I am living in. It was this kind of stupefaction, with the consequent loss of all criteria, standards and values, that came over people when they first landed in prison and suddenly realized the nature of the world they lived in and what the 'new era' really meant. (*Hope against hope*, pp 48–49)

Mandelstam's cry is poignant and universal, because the desolation which she recognized was not simply her own, but that of her class and nation. Her eyes were opened to the sinister reality of her society which she had thought to be better and more effectual than it turned out to be. What had once seemed more or less normal was now seen clearly to be irremediably pathological. So, while her discovery alienated her from her society because she could no longer share the illusions which made it bearable to others, in her isolation she was identified with a society built on alienation.

Nadezhda Mandelstam's account is canonical, because the society which she described was deeply corrupt, and because she delineated layer by layer the moral corruption of Stalinist Russia. Her writings are not only a personal judgement but a record of truth.

Her experience of disillusionment, however, has been shared by many others who live in much less extreme situations and the truth of whose criticism is much more debatable. Among those who would identify with her moment of recognition are some Catholics who have seen a Church that has lost its soul to liberalism. There are also others who have seen a Church that has betrayed the gospel for the sake of power. Similarly, there are many who have become

disillusioned with the selfishness and tawdriness of western societies.

It would be hard to argue persuasively either that the evil of the Church and of contemporary western societies is comparable with that of Stalinist Russia, or that the fact of disillusionment necessarily indicates great moral corruption. The experience of disillusion is not self-validating.

Nevertheless, whether it is justified or not, disillusionment that is widely shared spreads beyond the individuals who suffer from it. A widespread alienation and perception that one's fellows are dispirited and live in bad faith amounts to institutional desolation. When many members feel the power of darkness, the whole body endures through a shared dark night.

In this article, I would like to explore this institutional dark night, and ask how it is to be endured. I shall begin by describing the wide range of perceptions which many of my friends – variously Catholic laypeople, priests, religious and refugee workers – have described as the grounds for their disillusionment. This list of discontents is by definition negative and one-sided. It represents the narrow and fallible perceptions of a narrow range of people. I do not imply that their reading of their world or their response to it are realistic, balanced or just.

But because, in each case, disillusionment is shared by a relatively large group, their perceptions cannot be dismissed as being only of individual interest, with no implications for the groups to which they belong. They reflect an institutional dark night.

### *The seeds of disillusionment: hard times for idealism*

In recent years many people have found it difficult to retain their hope in the Catholic Church. They feel the burden of restorationist policy of the Church in such disparate events as the excommunication of Tissa Balasuriya, the exclusion of inclusive language, the appointing of organization men to positions of authority, the prosecution of narrow church policies about the use of contraceptives at the expense of potential AIDS victims or of the destitute, the complicity of church ministers in murder in Rwanda and in Argentina, and the military honours accepted by leaders of a martyred people. They are also discouraged by the evidence that they live in a declining Church which speaks with a lack both of conviction and of honesty about significant human problems.

Many priests have also found it difficult to continue in their ministry. Many of their colleagues have left the priesthood in order to marry, or have resigned, worn out by a losing battle. In ageing and declining congregations, they experience their ministry as the polishing of a reliquary rather than as minting the gospel afresh for the people of their world.

Many also find it hard to maintain their own esteem in the face of the widespread abuse of power by other priests in relationships with women or children. Their own natural warmth may well be replaced by a hesitant caution. They find that their celibacy, once regarded as odd but strangely admirable, is now more commonly held to foster perversions or is seen as a cloak for having a little bit on the side. When they hear of articles on their fellow priests in the newspapers, they do not anticipate them with pride. Instead, they cringe, wondering what new crime or oddity will be paraded.

Then there are members of Catholic religious congregations; many of them are priests. They, too, must live within the Church. In addition, many feel themselves to be treading water with a drowning group whose hope is limited to preparation for a decent death.

Many realize that the enterprises to which they have given their lives have neither assured future nor line of succession. The paucity of recruits and the many departures, including close friends in their middle years, threaten the future of the congregation. Moreover, the reasons for which their companions leave the congregation offer further grounds for discouragement. Some hunger for a deeper intimacy than any they can find in religious life, while others are worn out by the effort to live by the gospel in a Church which has abandoned it as too difficult. Some have not found in practice the loyalty and trust of which congregational rhetoric speaks.

Disillusionment is common among those who work for the marginalized in society. Certainly, those who work with refugees live in hard times. In the community, there is little support for or understanding of asylum-seekers. Consequently, governments feel free to disregard their human dignity by instituting inhumane and unfair procedures. As a result, the few people who are concerned for refugees feel increasingly isolated. They find that decisions on refugee status are made hastily and tailored to government policy. Laws are passed that have innocent people imprisoned without access to review, and deprived of support, shelter and access to work or medical treatment. All this is done with the tacit support of the general population.

Under these circumstances, refugee-workers can do little more than respond ineffectually to the latest infringement on human decency. They have neither time nor energy to respond creatively to the real needs of asylum-seekers. If, in addition, they must seek public funding for their work, their relationship with other organizations which are their natural allies will become conflictual. They may become increasingly isolated and discouraged on their harried and disordered retreat from Moscow.

*The sprouting of recognition: points of unillusioning*

It is difficult to live and work in a society which we see to be infected by evil or futility. But this difficulty is usually recognized as desolation only after a particular moment of recognition. A match is required to ignite the vapour of disappointment, and like anything that triggers an explosion, the occasion for recognition may be quite inadequate for the results it produces. For some, the match is relatively straightforward – a casual act of unconsidered brutality or treachery whose very ordinariness proves that the coals of the spirit have become ash.

For others, the trigger of recognition is paradoxical. In Nadezhda Mandelstam's case, for example, the ordered politeness of the servants who took her from gaol to join her husband on the train disclosed the omnipotent brutality of the order imposed by their masters.

For others, the match is a moment in which they discover the embers of their own lost humanity. In the love of a friend they come to recognize their own misery and isolation and the stunted lives of their companions. When it is illuminated by the intimations of a normal life in which darkness can be forgotten, the world to which their idealism had led them is discovered to be a place of illusions.

These moments of recognition are experiences of darkness both by the individual member and by the group. Individuals find themselves isolated in the Church, priesthood, religious congregation, or in the committed groups to which they belong. As they ask who is perceptive enough to be trusted, they find themselves isolated from people whom they had previously assumed to share their ideals and their hopes. Nadezhda Mandelstam journeys through Russia, constantly betrayed in smaller and larger ways by the cruelty or fear of those who in good times had been her friends. And she is isolated further by her discovery that she alone recognizes that she has been

betrayed. Others have failed to see for what it is the casual betrayal that is a necessary part of everyday life.

But in her journey, as in other contexts, isolation is also discovered to be a shared condition. When many members are alienated, the Church and presbyterate suffer from the effects of alienation, even if the suffering is unrecognized. The disillusionment of those who work with asylum-seekers is a distemper at the heart of national life. When a significant number of people resonate with Mandelstam's mordant phrase, 'So these are the people I have been living with', the society to which they belong is wounded by this moment of recognition, and all its members – those who are disillusioned and those who find no cause for disillusionment alike – must grapple with its effects.

*The autumn of language: the poisoning of the wells*

When people shed illusions, they inevitably detect lies that are hidden in the shared language of their society. The two volumes of Nadezhda Mandelstam's autobiography are devoted to her poet husband Osip's vocation to uncover the emptiness of apparently solid rhetoric and to ask whether it is possible to find honest words.

Her discovery that the wells of language are poisoned is not unique. Catholics, for example, may detect in clerical commendation of Christian forgiveness the refusal by Catholics in power to admit the wrong which they themselves have done. In the linking of the authority of the magisterium to Jesus Christ and the Apostles, they find a masked defence of power. In the statement that the priest represents Christ, they find enshrined the determination to exclude women from any decision-making role in the Church. They find fidelity to be identified with passive submission. Community, communion and grace are used as abstractions to hide the impersonal, often polarized and authoritarian character of relationships within the Church.

Those who work for refugees also find themselves swamped by a debased language. Asylum-seekers fleeing for their lives become queue-jumpers, economic migrants or job-stealers. Relations between citizens and non-citizens are described through medical metaphors. Refugees are a cancer or a source of germs in the body politic, which consequently must excise or disinfect them. The national health requires such measures. Imprisonment is renamed protection. Repatriation to a country where refugees will live in

inhumane conditions and have good reason to fear death is described as national reconciliation.

Those who help refugees are damned as bleeding hearts, do-gooders or liberals. As governments control the public language, the words with which human dignity could be defended are either discredited or are used in manipulative or fraudulent ways to describe abusive policies.

When groups can no longer trust or draw life from their common language, they become dispirited. They not only doubt the authenticity of the groups to which they belong, but also doubt the reality of their own commitment. It is difficult to work together for a shared goal because the language in which they have described their purposes can no longer be trusted. Nor can they find words to share with others what is most precious to themselves. The places in their hearts where honesty and idealism lodge are locked in silence.

The condition of the institutional dark night, then, is one of isolation, wordlessness, alienation, helplessness, depression and loss of spirit and language. If the institution is expressly committed to the recognition and service of God, it will find it increasingly difficult to speak persuasively of God. The focus of attention will turn to the quality of human exchanges within the situation. If these relations are inhumane, it will become increasingly hard to believe in the divine which the institution commends.

### *Wintering out: acknowledging the truth*

In such circumstances, you will hear no end of voices which counsel return to the normal – lift up your head, look at the world realistically, stop feeling sorry for yourself and get on with it. The problem is identified as the individual's loss of faith, and the solution as a stronger faith, more robust spirit, and acceptance of the common vision. In religious terms, the crisis is seen as the desolate individual's loss of faith, and the way back is identified with a strong faith, nourished by the large words and practices which build faith. A critic whose faith is not strong enough to accept the imperfections of the Church and to recognize its deeper dignity should pack up and get out.

This criticism has the merit of insisting on a balanced perspective. But it is open to question on moral grounds. If your grounds of complaint are well-founded, but you are either physically or morally unable to walk away from your commitments (believing, for example, that outside the Church there is no salvation), then you

may not in good conscience ignore the evil or dismiss it on the grounds that it is accompanied by good aspects. Such reasoning led some to minimize the evils of Nazi policy because Hitler loved children. Where evil is real, to capitulate to it by silent acquiescence is to despair. Mandelstam's comments are telling: 'If nothing else is left, one must scream. Silence is the real crime against humanity.' So she prefers even indiscriminating protest to silence: 'I would rather have the bull with his blind rage, the stubborn beast who doesn't weigh his chances of survival with the prudent dull-wittedness of man, and doesn't know the despicable feeling of despair'.

Where disillusionment is widely shared, moreover, the exhortation to lift your game is ineffective. Those who are advised to live out of a stronger faith see all too clearly the pathologies which infect their advisers' faith. As previously infant mortality was often caused by strong and dutiful midwives who unknowingly but fatally infected mothers at childbirth, so in Mandelstam's Russia those who soldiered on, denying the evil of Soviet life, were deeply enslaved by it. When a prophet confronts you with the evidence of malaise, it is always easier to square one's shoulders, take a few sprightly steps and adopt a confident smile, at least while the prophet is in the room, than it is to consider honestly the malaise.

In any case, Christian resources suggest a more robust and honest approach. In their laments, both prophets and psalmists complained about the infidelity which had infected national life and the compromises which their leaders had made in the interests of national security. It was the false prophets who considered the recognition and denunciation of evil as blasphemous and morale-sapping, and who canonized business as usual. In the Christian Church, prophetic denunciation has been no more welcome than it was in Israel. But its importance, at least in life of the Church previous to one's own day, has always been recognized.

### *Filtering the stream: the testing of language*

In times of desolation, however, the deepest ways of living fruitfully are generally slow, silent and enduring. The task of recuperation is too delicate and too radical for it to be carried by protest alone, especially when institutions find it so easy to marginalize protest.

In the dark night, the first challenge is simply to allow the language to become light-bearing. Where the language of faith and commitment has been devalued, the hollowness of large words

needs to be felt and demonstrated, and their use eschewed. This sieving of language is an enormous task as the experience of recovering from the dark night suffered by societies like those of apartheid South Africa and Nazi Germany shows. It can be undertaken only by small prospectors, and not by large batteries.

If it is to be purified, the large public language must be tested against small, personal experience. If the detention of asylum-seekers, for example, is publicly described as a policy of humane deterrence, this large abstraction is to be tested against the experience of asylum-seekers who are deprived of their freedom. That experience shows the claim to humanity to be a large lie. Detention is best described as arbitrary imprisonment. Similarly, if religious submission is invoked as a Christian duty, we must ask who invokes it, in what interests it is invoked, and what is the quality of relationship assumed between those who invoke it and those upon whom it is imposed. Large and abstract words need to be tested against the smaller reality of enacted human dignity.

This preliminary stage is essential. But if we do not move beyond it, we are in danger of losing the mystery that the public language once guarded. Where the larger religious rhetoric of discernment, fidelity, forgiveness and obedience is reduced to a narrow and culturally defined understanding of human relationships, the high claims for divinity and humanity can alike be eroded. We can be left with a reductive psychological or functional analysis of God's action and presence, having stripped away the imaginative power that underpins our commitment to prayer and to the care of strangers.

Within the Christian tradition, this danger has been met by encouraging the way of silence that recognizes the mystery beyond words in God and in the human stranger. While the pretensions of a misused public language are tested and punctured by being set against simple human relationships, there is much more to human beings, Church and God than can be uncovered by analysing any set of human relationships.

### *Nurturing humanity: simple human experience*

If the path through the dark night begins by testing a discredited language, it becomes life-bearing when we nurture the seeds of humanity. The dark night of the Church is illuminated when we share the reality of the daily lives of the people who compose it. Sacramental and scriptural symbols come to life within small celebrations. Similarly, those who serve asylum-seekers and refugees



rebuild hope through simple companionship with refugees and by sharing their anxiety and their moments of deliverance. The things which nurture growth are ordinary – small communities, small celebrations, the sharing of food and drink, and the ordinary ways in which we celebrate a common and flawed humanity. The sharing of simple humanity is the raw material from which an organization in desolation can be renewed, and with which the isolation which infects it can be healed.

These small experiences of humanity and Church are also the building blocks of a renewed language. They make withered symbols and empty language fertile. When large words that form the public language are associated with experiences of simple human dignity and simple relationships, they become clean and are available for proper use. Words like community, service, authority and dignity, which are alienating when they are commended abstractly in a context of inhumane practices and impersonal relationships, have a precise and comforting meaning when spelled out in terms of direct and simple human relationships.

In wintertime, the Christian touchstone is the simple humanity of Jesus Christ. The large theological language about God and Church is measured against the simple stories and path that Jesus took in the gospels. This focus on the humanity of Jesus is not driven by anxiety to recover his real history. It reflects the need for a simple, compelling and authoritative image of humanity, out of which the large, long-used but suspect words about God, Church and the human condition can be renewed. The humanity of Jesus is of interest because it is the Christian way to God and the test of Christian discourse about God. The image of Jesus both provides an image of what simple human dignity involves, and sieves the larger public language about God and about God's ways.

### *Enduring the ark: waiting and loving*

At the end of the day, Mandelstam's account is one of suffering, endurance and patience, of partial vindications and partial recoveries. Those who recognize her experience as paradigmatic of their own must finally accept the burden of endurance. On the path of institutional recovery, too, the milestones are suffering, endurance, fidelity, integrity, patience and forgiveness. There is no guarantee that in our lifetime the blind will come to see, that a society will show a more adequate respect for human dignity, that Church, priests or religious congregations will be renewed. There is no

reason why winter should not last, nor that a generation or more should not pass before seeds of humanity sprout in barren institutional soil.

The Scriptures encourage the long view, a thing easier in an agricultural society, which knows seven good years and seven hard years, than in a technological society where a generation is defined by a computer's obsolescence or by the electoral cycle. The seasons of humanity are longer and more unpredictable than is culturally acceptable. Thirty years ago, only a brave judge would have predicted both the end of the communist world and the selfishness of the international order that followed its downfall. In the middle of winter, spring is always inconceivable, but so are the hot winds that summer will bring.

In the meantime, however, endurance can be creative. It is for life and not for mere survival. On the ark, Noah first sent out a raven and then a dove. If the dove had not come back, he would presumably have sent out a galah to see if life could begin again. Arks are for riding out the flood during the long winter. They are not a place in which to live for ever. When the corpses of a dead public language and order have corrupted and are pushing up daisies, arks are broken up to construct homes.

But finally, if we choose to endure any dark night, it will be because love claims us. So Jacob was claimed by love for Rachel. Laban first used the large language of family obligations to extract seven years' free labour from him. Then he misused the language to palm Leah off on to Jacob and to secure another seven years of service in return for Rachel. Of that endurance, we are told only of the first seven years: 'Jacob worked seven years for Rachel. And they seemed to him but a day, for his love was great.'

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