Children of Babel

Belonging in postmodern society

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Introduction

IN THE COURSE OF MY GRADUATE STUDIES, I served as chaplain at a residential treatment centre for severely emotionally disturbed children. Like many of the children, Jesse, a young African-American boy, came from a troubled family and could no longer remain with his parents. On hearing several of the other children call me 'Father Bill', he inquired whose father I was. When I responded that I was not the father of any of the children there, he asked, 'Will you be my father?' 'Jesse,' I replied, 'I am not a real father.' 'Will you be my fake father then?' he asked – a request I could hardly refuse.

Jesse's story bears vivid testimony to the frayed sense of belonging many feel at the cusp of the millennium. Linked in getting and spending as never before, we speak of a 'global village' in the accents of strangers. Indeed, the attenuation of traditional bonds of kith and kin gives rise to complex, yet often anonymous associations in the global marketplace. In the evening news, we become familiar with the tragedies of Bosnia or Rwanda but, like the children of Babel, our moral speech is confused. What moral responsibility do we bear to our distant neighbours 'scattered all over the earth' (Gen 11:4)? And how is such responsibility to be mediated by our differing obligations to family, Church and fellow citizens?

In these pages, I will consider how the disciplines of moral theology (in particular, modern Roman Catholic social teaching), and Christian spirituality illumine the normatively salient features of belonging in society. In part one, I argue that the norms of what Karl Rahner terms 'essential ethics' guide our moral deliberations regarding our responsibilities to our neighbours, near and distant, by setting the stage for our particular (or in Rahner's words, 'formal-existential') vocational discernments to which the second part of the essay is devoted.[1] I conclude by remarking upon the distinct, yet finally inseparable roles played by moral deliberation and spiritual

discernment for disciples who 'belong to Christ' (1 Cor 3:23) as 'fellow citizens' in 'the household of God' (Eph 3:19).

Moral deliberation: acting justly

Like the lawyer in Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan, we may well ask, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Lk 10:25). How can I respond faithfully to the many, diverse and even conflicting claims upon me, for the stranger I meet on the way is legion? Perhaps, like the priest and Levite of the parable, we are tempted to 'pass by on the other side', consumed with matters of greater theological import (Lk 10:31–32). Yet if theology is inspired by discipleship, we must, in the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero, 'approach him or her as did the good Samaritan', for only in 'seeing and having compassion' do we 'make our way' (Lk 10:33).[2]

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus responds to the lawyer's question by demanding his 'reading of law' (Lk 10:26). And it is the lawyer who responds, 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself' (Lk 10:27). Yet anxious to justify himself, the lawyer asks a further question, 'And who is my neighbour?' (Lk 10:29). Now the familiar tale of the Good Samaritan is often read as a hortatory illustration or example story (*Beispielerzählung*) of the Great Commandment, revealing the universal scope of Christian love (*agapē*). *Agapē*, in the words of moral theology, enjoins equal respect for every person as created in the *imago dei* (image of God) and thus belonging to a comprehensive moral community. The 'exemplary narrative', writes Wolfgang Schrage, 'shows that the obligation to love has no limits: love does not reach a boundary beyond which nothing is required.' For 'love does not follow the dictates of convention and prejudice but dares to ignore them, dares with sovereign freedom to surmount the barriers that separate people. A person who loves can see in anyone a neighbour in need.'[3]

'Seeing' thus, we acquire the 'moral squint' of modern Roman Catholic social teaching.[4] Inaugurated with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum novarum* (1891), the Church's social teaching reminds us that persons possess intrinsic value, not merely price, and as such, cannot be weighed in the balance of social aims and policies. The biblical injunction of *agapē* bids us respect our neighbour as irreducibly valuable prior to distinctions of merit or desert. Indeed, the

notion of dignity or worth differs 'from every kind of *merit*, including . . . moral merit, in respect to which there are vast inequalities among persons'.[5] Yet as in the tale of the Good Samaritan, such impartial regard for my neighbour's equal dignity justifies preferential attention for my neighbour in distress.[6] The narrative of the Good Samaritan reveals the boundless, universal scope of love precisely in enjoining a moral solidarity with those who suffer.[7]

Essential ethics

In modern Roman Catholic social teaching, the essential dignity of persons implies respect for their basic claim-rights (as a moral minimum).[8] In the encyclicals of Pope John XXIII and his successors, the discourse of rights becomes a lingua franca for the Church, a means of speaking to, and learning from, the differing cultures, regions and religious traditions to which we belong in postmodern society. To be sure, respecting our neighbours' rights does not suffice to specify our particular responsibilities which, in large measure, derive from our belonging to distinctive narrative communities. Yet it is of utmost significance that in 'loving tenderly' (Mic 6:8) or in 'showing mercy' like the Samaritan (Lk 10:37), we never do less than 'act justly' (Mic 6:8); for there is finally no 'suspension of the ethical' in our Christian narrative.[9] Justice, in Karl Rahner's terms, is dictated by the general requirements of 'essential' ethics, i.e. the 'sum of the rights and duties which of themselves follow directly from [our] nature' as beings who, created in the divine image, are 'endowed with reason and free will'.[10]

To the lawyer's question, 'Who is my neighbour?', we may thus say – as a matter of strict or essential ethics, rather than of mere piety – that we must honour the basic rights of our neighbour in need. Our moral entitlement to *equal* respect or consideration justifies *preferential* treatment for those whose basic rights are most imperilled – in Camus' phrase, our taking 'the victim's side'.[11] For inasmuch as respecting persons *as* equals does not necessarily entail identical treatment, we may distinguish legitimately between an indiscriminate regard for moral persons and a discriminate response to their varied situations.[12] What Aquinas says of *unequals* – that a servant who is ill merits greater attention than a son who is not – pertains, a fortiori, to equals.[13] The satisfaction of *equal* basic rights, in materially dissimilar conditions, justifies a discriminate moral response.

In social-ethical deliberation, our discriminate response finds expression in the graduated moral urgency of differing human rights, i.e. the relative priority of persons' basic rights. An example is that of adequate nutrition, over other, less exigent claims such as property rights; and in the differing material conditions presupposed for the satisfaction of the same human rights, the greater nutritional needs of pregnant women.[14] The rhetoric of such basic rights and attendant obligations serves as the 'deep grammar' of our particular narratives, permitting our Christian, Jewish or Muslim traditions to flourish within a comprehensive moral community. Conversely, the rights of children like Jesse, or of the victims of genocide in Bosnia or Rwanda reveal the *morally* tragic character of their suffering across our differing traditions. So it is that rights' rhetoric, if adequately interpreted, does not so much suppress our native tongues, as ensure that Jesse's claims 'speak' in our cultural idiom.

Yet while all are obliged to respect persons' basic rights, the specific obligations that fall upon us to protect persons' rights or aid those deprived will vary with our differing social roles, abilities and narratives. Fulfilling such positive duties typically presumes structural or institutional mediation. Thus, although we are all morally obliged to honour the rights of both near and distant neighbours, how we do so will differ. The nutritional rights of children such as Jesse are typically fulfilled by family or near neighbours, while, in extreme situations, obligations may fall upon distant neighbours to aid or protect from deprivation, e.g., as in our residential treatment centre. Even so, a working, blue-collar mother with a large family bears a different responsibility from a corporate CEO or government official whose policies may affect poor, working families.

The schedule of graduated rights and duties thus provides a map, if not an itinerary, for our moral lives. Moral deliberation, invoked for instance in the 'General Examination of Conscience' in the First Week of the Ignatian Exercises, frames our particular spiritual discernments so that we may fittingly distinguish the moral labour of *deliberating* between moral good and evil from the spiritual labour of *discerning* the greater good, e.g. of a particular vocation to married or celibate life. For the order of our loves (what St Thomas Aquinas called the *ordo caritatis*[15]) is internally constrained by the dictates of justice and the hierarchy of human rights. In a similar vein, the general norms of essential ethics illumine the systematic distortions of narrative traditions or spiritualities which may be invisible to their adherents, e.g., New Age cultic practices which

espouse violence or a cultural ethos that perpetuates racial inequities borne by children like Jesse.

As St Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises bid us recognize the personal temptations to which we are subject, so a contemporary reading of the Exercises reveals the systemic, and often subtle distortions of such social sin which obscures the moral exigencies of our belonging in society. Yet these too must be redressed if, in the biblical metaphor of discipleship, we are to make our 'way'. In their recent pastoral letter on the economy, the Roman Catholic Bishops of the US wrote, 'No one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of the hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this world'. 'Followers of Christ', they conclude, 'must avoid a tragic separation between faith and everyday life.'[16]

Individualism

Of all the factors contributing to the modern (or postmodern) temptation to forswear our faithful obligations in everyday life, perhaps none is more telling than our regnant 'individualism'. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in *Democracy in America* in 1835, was among the first to coin the word: 'Individualism', he writes,

> is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself . . . Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.[17]

With the eclipse of the traditional, ethical ideal of the common good, we typically think of the moral actor as an 'atomistic' individual, abstracted from the ensemble of social relations and belonging to none but the 'little society' of family or friends. Social bonds, once derived from the biblical ideal of Covenant fidelity or the medieval *bonum commune* (common good), are now 'constructed' through the exercise of individual will, e.g. in the distinctively modern device of a 'social contract' of sovereign selves. Morality is accordingly confined to the private realm – to the norms of loyalty, probity, and fidelity governing interpersonal relations – while questions of public policy are consigned to the realm of *Realpolitik*. Within such a foreshortened horizon of discernment, we may, like Emerson, demur, 'Do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my

obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor?'[18]

Yet the 'moral squint' of Roman Catholic social teaching belies such moral myopia in determining our moral responsibilities to the 'greater society'. Indeed, our 'acting justly' is finally less a discrete object of discernment ('are they my poor?)', than its *sine qua non*. As Gustavo Gutiérrez observes, our 'commitment to the poor is not "optional" in the sense that a Christian is free to make or not make this option, or commitment, to the poor, just as the love we owe to all human beings without exception is not "optional"'.[19] A love, 'costing not less than everything', cannot be less than just.[20]

Spiritual discernment: loving tenderly

In the preceding section, I have offered a sketch of the moral *mise en scène* of our discernments, assimilating the role of moral deliberation to what Rahner terms 'essential' ethics, e.g. the fundamental moral motifis of justice, human rights and the common good. Our reflections reveal that even as we discern our particular roles and responsibilities to near and distant neighbours, we remain, in the words of Martin Luther King, 'caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny'.[21] Yet if the Christian 'justices'[22] in her moral deliberations, so justice bears the mark of love in the way that a spirituality of 'showing mercy' (Lk 10:37) illumines the context of 'acting justly'.

To the lawyer's question in the parable, 'Who is my neighbour?' – seeking a precise delimitation of rights and duties – Jesus replies with a question of his own, 'Who is it that proved himself neighbour?'[23] The lawyer's reply, 'The Samaritan', is richly ironic, for the Samaritan, a despised schismatic, not only proves himself neighbour, but in exemplifying neighbourliness as the fulfilment of the law, is the one whom the lawyer must imitate: 'Go and do likewise!' (Lk 10:37). Jesus' parable is not, then, merely a hortatory midrash illustrating the great command of love. For the question posed in Jesus' reading of the law is not finally 'Whom shall I love?' as if I were myself the still point from which love radiates, but rather 'Who shall I become (prove myself to be) in loving?' In Kierkegaard's words, 'Christ does not speak about recognizing one's neighbour but about being a neighbour oneself, about proving oneself to be a neighbour, something the Samaritan showed by his compassion'.[24] And this makes all the difference.

Formal existential ethics

In salvific irony, Jesus thus answers the lawyer's first question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' in reversing the second. For the command to 'love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself' (Lk 10:27) is fulfilled not in this or that particular deed of love,[25] but in one's 'selving as neighbour':[26] if the disciple is to live, she must enter the world of the *anāwîm*, of the half-dead stranger; she must belong to Jesse's world. In Christ, we are always, already in communion with the *anāwîm*; our solidarity implies not merely taking the victim's side (the essential requirement of ethics), but taking the victim's side as our own (in Rahner's terms, the formal, existential demand of love).

In Rahner's spirituality, 'essential ethics' defines the sphere of *universal* norms, rights and duties, while a 'formal, existential ethics' pertains to discerning the *particular* call of God to the disciple as *'individuum ineffabile*, whom God has called by name, a name which is and can only be unique'.[27] Like Dante's Virgil, moral deliberation brings us to the brink of discernment, but in the formal, existential ethics of discernment, we are summoned by name in the fullness of Christ's crucified love, summoned to discern how, here and now, in our concrete circumstances, we shall belong to Christ in the crucified people.[28] The distinctively Christian virtue of solidarity with the *anāwîm* thus defines the disciple's horizon of discernment. For 'to be a Christian', says Gutiérrez, 'is to draw near, to make oneself a neighbour, not the one I encounter in my journey but the one in whose journey I place myself.'[29]

Conclusions: walking humbly with our God

In these pages, I have sought to assess both morally and spiritually salient features of our belonging in postmodern society. Morally, we must 'act justly' in the prophet Micah's words, lest in our discernments we succumb to the moral myopia of personal or social sin. For citizens of pluralist, postmodern societies, the rhetoric of basic human rights and correlative duties transcends the babel of contending voices in our differing narrative communities, linking us in a 'network of mutuality'. Yet the mere recognition of personal and social responsibilities for our near and distant neighbours fails to exhaust the Christian 'surplus of meaning', for the disciple who follows Jesus on the way must 'love tenderly'. She must, that is, emu-

late the Samaritan in 'passing to the side' of the poor, not only taking the victim's side, but taking it as her own. Our spiritual, vocational discernments express a sense of the fitting, so that we 'see and have compassion' (*esplanchnisthē* signifies being moved in one's inmost heart), even as compassion (literally, a 'suffering with', a belonging so different from the pity the proud bestow upon their beneficiaries) becomes a way of seeing. Compassion not only guides us in the fitting application of universal, essential norms, e.g. the rights of the poor, but gives rise to existential (personal and ecclesial) imperatives as we walk humbly with Jesus, our Good Samaritan, who, as St Augustine wrote, comes to the aid of our wounded humanity.[30]

If, then, the ethical maxim of respect bids me love my neighbour as myself, i.e. respect my neighbour's rights in answer to the lawyer's question ('Who is my neighbour?'), so Jesus' question ('Who is it that proved herself neighbour?') demands my becoming neighbour to Jesse, my loving even as I am loved. We must not only do the deeds of justice, but do them with 'the mind of Christ Jesus' (Phil 2:5). And so we act against the cultural grain of those who, as Tocqueville lamented, 'clutch everything and hold nothing fast'.[31] In a world of loose connections, we confess that we who 'belong to Christ' (1 Cor 3:23) 'are no longer strangers or sojourners', but 'fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God' (Eph 3:19).

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NOTES

1 Karl Rahner, 'On the question of a formal existential ethics' in *Theological investigations* 2, trans Karl H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963), pp 217–234.

2 Oscar Romero, 'The political dimension of the faith from the perspective of the option for the poor' in *Liberation theology: a documentary history*, ed Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1990), pp 292–303, at 295.

3 Wolfgang Schrage, *The ethics of the New Testament*, trans David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp 74, 76.
4 The phrase 'moral squint' is drawn from Robert Bolt, *A man for all seasons* (New York: Random House, 1990), p 19.
5 Joel Feinberg, *Social philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p 88.
6 See Gene Outka, 'Universal love and impartiality' in *The love commandments: essays in Christian ethics and moral philosophy*, ed Edmund N. Santurri and William Werpehowski (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1992), pp 1–103, at 10–11.
7 Schrage, *The ethics of the New Testament*, pp 78, 81.
8 See John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* in *Catholic social thought: the documentary heritage*, eds David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), pp 131–138.
9 Cf Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling and sickness unto death*, trans Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp 64–77.
10 Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Concise theological dictionary*, ed Cornelius Ernst OP, trans Richard Strachan (London: Burns & Oates, 1965), p 305.
11 Albert Camus, *The plague* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p 230. In the present context, the term 'victim' serves as an evaluative moral description referring to those suffering deprivation of their basic human rights rather than to a subjective, psychological state.
12 See Gene Outka, *Agape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p 20. Cf Ronald Dworkin, *Taking rights seriously* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), p 227.
13 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2–2, q. 31, a. 2.
14 For a rights-based analysis of priority principles for public policy, see Henry Shue, *Basic rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp 111–130.
15 See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2–2, q. 26, a. 6.
16 US Catholic Bishops, 'Economic justice for all' (1986) in *Catholic social thought: the documentary heritage*, pp 584, 573.
17 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans George Lawrence, ed J. P. Mayer (Garden City, New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1969), p 506.
18 Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Self-reliance' in *Essays and lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp 261–262.
19 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation: 15th anniversary edition*, trans Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1988), p xxvi.
20 T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', 'Four quartets' in *The complete poems and plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p 145.
21 Martin Luther King, 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail' in *A testament of hope: essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), p 290.
22 See Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'As kingfishers catch fire' in *The poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edn, eds W. H. Gardner and H. M. MacKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p 90.
23 See John Donahue, 'Who is my enemy? The parable of the Good Samaritan and the love of enemies' in *The love of enemy and nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp 137–156.
24 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of love*, trans Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p 38.
25 See Karl Rahner, 'The "commandment" of love in relation to the other commandments' in *Theological investigations* 5, trans Karl H. Kruger (New York: Seabury, 1966), pp 439–459 at 453; cf. 'The theology of freedom' in *Theological investigations* 6, trans Karl and Boniface Kruger (New York: Seabury, 1974), pp 178–196; and Rahner's observation that 'freedom is not simply the capacity to do this or that but (formally) a self-disposing into finality' in

'Reflections on the unity of the love of neighbour and the love of God' in *Theological investigations* 6, pp 231–249 at 240.

26 See Hopkins, 'As kingfishers catch fire', p 90.

27 Rahner, 'On the question of a formal existential ethics', pp 217–234. Essential ethics, as we have seen, refers to the set of universal, action-guiding moral norms ascertained by natural reason (e.g. respect for persons' basic rights); we need not assume that such norms rest upon a foundationalist or essentialist metaphysics.

28 See Jon Sobrino, 'Companions of Jesus' in *Companions of Jesus: the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp 3–56.

29 Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'Toward a theology of liberation' (1968) in *Liberation theology: a documentary history*, pp 62–76, at 74.

30 Augustine, *Quaestiones evangeliorum* 2.19; cf. also *De natura et gratia* 43, 50.

31 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p 536–538.