

Walking, playing and delighting in God

A psychologist's thoughts for a contemporary traveller

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THE SPIRITUAL TRADITION OF MAZES AND LABYRINTHS is very old. The world wide web (itself something labyrinthine or maze-like) informs me that the earliest labyrinth symbol dates from 3000 BCE, putting even the Homeric story of Theseus and the labyrinth of the Minotaur into some sort of perspective. Today, walking labyrinths, often based on the great thirteenth-century labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral, have found their place in settings ranging from contemporary cathedrals to New Age festivals, while garden mazes have also enjoyed new levels of interest.¹ It seems to me, as a psychologist of religion, that there are a number of factors at play here. Some of them, at least at first investigation, are relatively superficial, while others seem to tap into deeper and potentially more powerful aspects of how we explore and experience our world.

An apparently small but necessary point needs to be made at the start. 'Labyrinth' and 'maze' are not interchangeable words. Follow the path of a labyrinth and you will come to its centre – reverse your steps, and you will return to its entrance. A true labyrinth contains no false paths, no traps, no dead ends. The 'purpose' of the path is to guide. By contrast, a maze includes false paths as well as true, dead ends as well as paths that lead to the centre or the entrance. In a maze you can get lost; in fact one of the purposes of a good maze is to create the possibility of getting lost. I would like to suggest that this distinction between maze and labyrinth can serve as a very helpful tool for reflection. While labyrinths can serve serious and foreseen purposes in our human growth before God, mazes can remind us that the most human aspects of human experience almost always have elements of the playful and of the unexpected.

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Oversimplifying the human

In the history books of future scholars, one of the more puzzling aspects of the twentieth century in the West will be seen as its reliance on oversimplistic models of what it is to be human, largely shaped by psychologists of one hue or another. An axiomatic belief for many psychologists was that human behaviour was largely determined by homeostasis – by the desire to return to a point of balance where all needs had been met. I feel hungry: I eat: I am content. I feel thirsty: I drink: I am content. I feel some/any form of tension: I act to discharge it: I am content. What matters is restoring the balance in whatever aspect of my experience or living has been put off balance. Clearly, this homeostatic model has its uses in accounting for some aspects of human behaviour, and for some aspects of animal behaviour, but even with the latter it seems inadequate. A few days ago, walking to the station, I got caught up in play – two large and exuberant dogs playing at keeping pace with the passing trains and each other. Walking in the countryside, I am reminded of the curiosity of young cattle, ambling over to inspect this stranger who has ventured into their world. Play and curiosity, manifest in non-human animals as well as in our own experience, throw into question any over-simplistic understanding of our functioning even more than do examples of ‘altruistic’ behaviour between non-humans, where the genetic biologists have at least one leg to stand on.

When we look at human beings, to what extent can we see play and curiosity as essential or defining characteristics? *Homo faber* is, in fact, less defining than *homo ludens*. Despite Freud’s limpid ‘lieben und arbeiten’, there is more to maturity than the ability to love and to work, and the inability to play can be seen as suggesting that there is something more deeply awry than the inability to work. To play is to move into a very particular sort of ‘space’, a realm of behaviour and experience that is neither simply governed by the external rules of the verifiable world, nor just the private world ‘inside my skull’.

Play and the symbolic

Psychoanalytic writers such as Donald Winnicott and Paul Pruyser see play as occurring in a particular psychological ‘space’ or world, between the autistic world of purely internal fantasy and dreaming and the realistic world of external, verifiable events and logical connections.² When we realize that this is the realm of the symbolic, the importance of our being able to experience and recognize this dimen-

sion of our humanity becomes clear. It is by means of the symbolic that we reach across the physical boundaries of our separateness and encounter each other: it is through symbols that we engage with the God who is beyond all symbols.

Labyrinths belong to the world of the symbolic, as do mazes. I would like to suggest that they reflect different aspects of that world, different forms of play: not opposed to one another, but complementary. The labyrinth, with its one complex route to the centre, enables me to act out something of the complexity that seems to attend my journey through life; one aspect of play is to enact, and in enacting rediscover, what may be difficult or impossible to put into words. The maze, with its multiple routes and blind alleys, expresses elements of the unexpected and unpredictable, as well as my capacity for mistaken judgements (to be serious) and for engaging in fun for the sake of fun (to be less serious). Both can function as symbols – but like all symbols, both can be distorted by our unwillingness or inability to recognize them as symbols – no more and no less.

Along with the modern propensity, at least among some scholars, for overly simple models of what it is to be human, we find a parallel tendency, that of assuming that other cultural groups, particularly non-technological ones, operate in a similarly simplistic fashion. Some of us, having cut ourselves off from the symbolic, then seem to assume that others have done the same, and that they can only be seen as dealing with 'primitive' magic and the like. We need to bear in mind that the capacity for complexity and richness in human thinking, and the ability to work with symbols and the 'between' world that is neither simply autistic nor realistic, are qualities of being human, not achievements of twenty-first century western technology. To the extent that we limit our understanding of the world to what can be dealt with in technological terms, rejecting everything else as purely subjective and possibly 'fantastic', we are missing out on much of what makes us human – 'playing only on the black keys of the piano' – and then wondering why we cannot express and experience all that we would wish. To the extent that we 'export' that limited world-view, we run the dual risk either of underestimating what other, non-technological cultures have to offer us, as being too 'primitive' and out of touch with the real world as we understand it scientifically, or of assimilating their symbols and rituals to our positivist scientism and so reading into them some sort of 'magic' attempt to manipulate the external world.

With that in mind, we can look very briefly at particular examples of labyrinths and mazes with an open mind. To say that the image of the

labyrinth or the maze is ubiquitous is an understatement. Images of mazes and labyrinths recur in cultures that are highly unlikely to have had any contact with each other.

Multiple symbolism

For those brought up in the West, the most famous labyrinth of antiquity is that which housed the Minotaur. In the *Iliad*, Homer recounts the myth, telling us that Aegeus, King of Athens, paid tribute to Minos, King of Crete, every nine years sending seven youths and seven maidens who were made to enter the Minoan labyrinth, there to be devoured by the Minotaur, half-man and half-bull. Theseus asks to be sent as one of the young people who make up the tribute: if he fails to kill the Minotaur, he will die with the others. Ariadne, daughter of Minos, falls in love with him, and gives him the help that he needs, in the form of a sword with which to kill the Minotaur, and a ball of red thread to unwind on his way into the labyrinth so that he can find his way out again.

The multiple symbolism survives even that simple rendering of the story: the hero going into the underground dark to face possible death, only to re-emerge into life and the light; the man facing that which is other than (simply) human, and requiring the help of the woman; the scarlet thread that is paid out (paid?) as the hero moves inward, and which alone indicates the path of return; all of these, and more, touch on themes that Jung's psychology would describe as archetypal. Where some of our images and symbols have particular or near-unique resonance for particular individuals, many have a commonality which suggests that they symbolize aspects of humanity that are both foundational in our experience and shared by all people.

Images of mazes and labyrinths have carried different meanings in different pre-Christian settings, ranging from tattoos and door-markings serving (because of their complexity) as 'traps' for unwanted influences in the world of the spirit, to marked-out ritual paths to be walked in order to ensure good fishing or fertility. Several of these meanings seem to find expression in the myth of the Minotaur's labyrinth. Originally designed to encompass and enclose the uncontrollable, not-entirely-human power of the Minotaur, and to ensure that the young people who were to be its victims could not escape, the labyrinth becomes in itself a place of initiation, a setting for experience that empowers rather than imprisons.

In passing, we should note, first, that the Minoan labyrinth, to be effective as a trap or an enclosure, needs to have been a maze rather than a labyrinth in the modern sense of the word, and second, that the 'mythic' nature of the labyrinth relates to the 'real' in the complex construction of the palace of Knossos on Crete, excavated in 1922. At the time the story of Theseus and the Minotaur was set down, the palace had already been lost to sight for the best part of a millennium after the sudden eclipse of the Minoan civilization. 'Realism' and symbol interact in unexpected ways. The practical purpose of the labyrinthine corridors of the Palace of Knossos is not known: parallels suggest that constructions such as these may have been tombs or temples. But whatever was the purpose of the Palace itself, the symbol of the labyrinth was sufficiently important to appear on Cretan coinage in the sixth century BCE.

Tools for pilgrimage

From Minoan Knossos to mediaeval Chartres may seem a strange jump across time and space, but it is at Chartres that we find the greatest extant labyrinth of pre-modern times. Built in the early thirteenth century, it is the best-known survivor of a great number of mediaeval labyrinths set into the floors of churches and cathedrals, and its pattern has been widely copied. These church labyrinths were, it seems, tools for pilgrimage. Not everyone could set out for Jerusalem, or Rome, or Santiago de Compostela. But everyone could make their pilgrimage on such a 'Chemin de Jérusalem'. The church labyrinths were 'virtual pilgrimages', just as the Stations of the Cross were virtual followings of the Via Dolorosa.

The church labyrinths took over the older, originally pre-Christian traditions that had developed over the centuries, incorporating much of their symbolism. Just as the Paschal Vigil takes up symbols of light and water, and creates a context in which these symbols are enriched and become more than they were, so the church labyrinth takes up the symbols of separation, of a journey inward and a return, of death and rebirth, and creates a context in which these too are enriched.

Symbols cannot be re-written to order, but they can be allowed to re-fashion and re-empower themselves. The renewal of the liturgy has enabled many key Christian symbols so to be reborn: to participate in honest liturgy today is to be caught into the world of the symbolic in a manner out of reach of most people before the reforms initiated at Vatican II. So in their day the builders of Chartres, reconstructing their

church after the great fire of 1194 which destroyed most of the cathedral and the city, incorporated into it a powerful symbol with origins outside Christianity, in the belief that this symbol had Christian resonances. With the words of the *Miserere* set into the stones of the labyrinth, and a relief depiction of Theseus and the Minotaur at the centre, we could hardly expect to see a clearer example of a Church take-over of a symbol.

Historians tell us that these labyrinths provided a popular means of expressing faith and participating in a transformative symbolic action, ironically at a time when the eucharistic liturgy had excluded expressive involvement on the part of the people of God, and had made any sort of transformative symbolic experience almost totally inaccessible to most. The church labyrinth provided a way in which I, as an ordinary person, could enact my living as a child of God, a way in which I could ritualize and symbolize what I sensed was being worked in me by the Holy Spirit.

Some recent writing on labyrinths involves notions that have little to do with the orthodox Christian tradition (and precious little to do with the original traditions it is claimed are being represented). Telluric forces, ley lines, goddess worship, alchemical physiological effects: all of these find space in current articles and books about labyrinths, to the great alarm of many (mainly evangelical) Christians, who see such writings as evidence of the presence of the occult, and thus of the inappropriateness of Christian involvement with the use of labyrinths as 'spiritual tools'.

The symbolic and the sacramental

It seems to me that part of what creates a problem here was referred to earlier – the importance of recognizing the symbolic as the symbolic. Paul Pruyser, a Dutch psychoanalyst who worked in the United States, puts it thus:

The transcendent, the holy, and mystery are not recognisable in the external world by plain realistic viewing and hearing, nor do they arise directly in the mind as pleasurable fictions. They arise from an intermediate zone of reality that is also an intermediate human activity – neither purely subjective nor purely objective.³

I think that much 'New Age' writing loses sight of this, and attempts to locate the symbolic simply in the external world. Pruyser talks about

this (in the context of religion) as the 'realistic distortion of religion'. Let me suggest that what we observe in much New Age writing and practice is an attempt to re-connect with the symbolic, but in a context where the whole significance of the symbolic has become difficult to recognize. With unparalleled access not just to information but to symbol, we are nevertheless so dominated by the technological world-view that we attempt to reduce symbol to the verifiable and to sense-impression. Along that path, I would suggest, lies belief in magic, where the realistic world is altered in its verifiable physical characteristics by the words we speak or gestures we perform.

This is the exact opposite of the symbolic and the sacramental, where action and word transform *us* in our encounter with our God in God's world. Bernadette Farrell, addressing God in her hymn *God beyond all names*, says something of what needs to be said to articulate the sacramental world-view:

All around us we have known you,
all creation lives to hold you
in our living and our dying we are bringing you to birth.⁴

The power of the labyrinth is a symbolic (and sacramental) power, not a magic power. We engage with this symbol, we put ourselves in its presence just as we put ourselves before a work of art or another religious symbol: we choose to allow ourselves to be touched by the symbol. The God who transforms us through our encounters with God's creation responds to our openness: just as the touch of a blessing can be a symbol, so can walking a labyrinth. At the most fundamental level, there is nothing more to it than that – which is to say that there is nothing less to it than an encounter with the ever-present Spirit of the God who is always and only God-with-us, and who works through and in God's world.

Walking the labyrinth

But in at least two senses there is more to walking the labyrinth than receiving a blessing. First, this is a symbol that invites action. I *walk* the labyrinth. Whether I walk it as a journey to that still centre of myself where I can more freely encounter my ever-present God, whether I walk it as a re-enactment of the God-gifted events of my life, whether I walk it as a virtual pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Rome – I am acting, I am engaging with this gift from God at this point in my life (I may, of

course, *dance* the labyrinth – which I trust illustrates the point even more forcefully). Second, this is a symbol that I enter, which encompasses me. In a very particular way, I become part of the symbol rather than an observer or a recipient.

It seems to me that these two aspects make a labyrinth a special gift in our world. Entering a labyrinth I can enter a space set apart, and move into a time set apart. The same can be true as I enter a church (or a concert hall), but walking the labyrinth keeps me, to some degree at least, aware of this apartness. In a crowded and busy world that, both figuratively and literally, has little time or space for the symbolic, I move (literally) into and in a space and a time that only has relevance in the symbolic. Little wonder, then, that many people find this a powerful vehicle of prayer while others are left searching for an appropriate form of words with which to articulate their experience.

To the eye of the psychologist, there is a further respect in which the labyrinth has something particular to offer, and that is in the possible ‘content’ of the symbol. ‘If you talk about Zen, it goes away’, say the Masters, and the only adequate way to explain a poem is to write a better one. Exploring what a symbol might have to say is therefore always a risky procedure, because there is always the possibility, to use Pruyser’s words, of ‘reifying the symbols and stripping them of their subtle nuances and mystery’. In the case of the labyrinth there are many possible symbolisms: the symbolism of journey itself, of the journey in to the centre and the necessary journey back to the everyday world, of separation and re-integration, of moving from the everyday and the known to the unfamiliar and the unknown. The labyrinth can speak of death and resurrection, of encountering the shadow within and experiencing the love of God that encompasses the whole of my being, light and dark, and of the mysterious way in which constraint can lead to freedom.

Mazes (with some help from Harris)

If it is true that for most people the idea of the labyrinth conjures up the image of the Minotaur, then it is probably true that for many people the idea of the maze conjures up Hampton Court, and Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three men in a boat*:

Harris asked me if I’d ever been in the maze at Hampton Court. He said he went in once to show somebody else the way. He had studied it up in a map, and it was so simple that it seemed foolish – hardly worth the

twopence charged for admission. Harris said he thought that map must have been got up as a practical joke, because it wasn't a bit like the real thing, and only misleading. It was a country cousin that Harris took in. He said: 'We'll just go in here, so that you can say you've been, but it's very simple. It's absurd to call it a maze. You keep on taking the first turning to the right. We'll just walk around for ten minutes, and then go and get some lunch.'

Mazes, it seems to me, have a different contribution to make to our reflection. For the most part mazes have been built for enjoyment. The use of complex pathways and blind alleys was sometimes a defensive strategy in, for example, Iron Age fortresses such as Maiden Castle, and if the rumour holds true, on one occasion the maze at Woodstock Palace was used as a device (ultimately unsuccessful) for keeping separate Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen to Henry II of England, and Rosamund Clifford, in whom the King had a less constitutional interest. But with such exceptions apart, mazes have been constructed for fun – at least on the part of those who constructed them. One eighteenth-century designer of mazes aimed at: 'an intricate and difficult Labour to find out the Centre, and to be so intricate, as to lose one's self therein, and to meet with as great a Number of Stops therein and Disappointments as possible'.

Harris kept on turning to the right, but it seemed a long way, and his cousin said he supposed it was a very big maze.

'Oh, one of the largest in Europe,' said Harris.

'Yes, it must be,' replied the cousin, 'because we've walked a good two miles already.'

Harris began to think it rather strange himself, but he held on until, at last, they passed the half of a penny bun on the ground that Harris' cousin swore he had noticed there seven minutes ago.

Mazes represent that element of play which has no serious intent, and about which it is difficult to write without sounding over-serious. Along with play which is enactment and discovery, there is play which is enjoyment, in which we revel in the unexpected and unpredictable, set ourselves goals which are goals only because we have set them, undertake tasks for the sheer joy of undertaking them and, in short, keep Sabbath at play in the presence of the Lord.

Harris . . . suggested that the best thing to do would be to go back to the entrance, and begin again. For the beginning again part of it there

was not much enthusiasm; but with regard to the advisability of going back to the entrance there was complete unanimity, and so they turned, and trailed after Harris again, in the opposite direction. About ten minutes more passed, and then they found themselves in the centre.

Labyrinths, mazes and the delight of God

Let me treat that last sentence with much more seriousness than Jerome K. Jerome intended, and bring our reflections to a close by suggesting that that is what both labyrinths and mazes each do, each in their own way. Both enable us to step outside the busy world of the verifiable and the measurably real, of the predictable and that which we are commanded to master, and to allow God's creation to speak to us in powerful and unexpected ways. Both enable us to find our way to the centre of our lives, and, if we are fortunate enough to see this clearly, be filled with joyful amazement at the God who dwells there and delights in us.

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NOTES

1 For a short introduction to this topic see Robert Field, *Mazes, ancient and modern* (Diss: Tarquin Publications, 1999).

2 A good introduction to the ideas of Paul Pruyser is H. Newton Malony & Bernard Smilka (eds), *Religion in psychodynamic perspective* (Oxford: OUP, 1991). For further material by and about Freud, Winnicott and other authors in this area, see a recent and very good collection, David Capps (ed), *Freud and Freudians on religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). For the enthusiastic, see Janet Liebman Jacobs and Donald Capps (eds), *Religion, society and psychoanalysis* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), which looks at each of the major writers.

3 Paul Pruyser, *Between belief and unbelief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974; London: Sheldon, 1975), p 113.

4 From *God beyond all names* (OCP publications, 1991), available as an accompaniment book, cassette and CD.