Theological Trends

Catholicism and postmodernity

Faithing our practice

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I WISH TO EXPLORE A TERRITORY SHAPED by the encounter of two vast cultural movements: Catholicism and postmodernity. I am under no illusion that this terrain can be adequately mapped in a single article! I will, however, make a preliminary foray into the thicket. I will first describe some characteristics of postmodernity, attending especially to their pastoral implications. Then I will explore some implications for Catholic spiritual practices. Finally I will suggest some pastoral responses. We Catholics often speak of the need to 'practise our faith'. Postmodernity challenges us to speak of 'faithing our practice'.

The postmodern context

The term 'postmodernity' is controversial and hardly univocal.[1] It engenders a variety of philosophies and stances towards life, from nihilism to fundamentalism. For the sake of clarity, I will indicate some characteristics of postmodernity as I understand it. I invite you to evaluate these descriptors in the light of your pastoral experience. Do you notice these characteristics in the people with whom you minister?

The prefix 'post' implies that we no longer live in the 'modern' world. Modernity, the beginnings of which historians usually place around 1500 and which was profoundly strengthened by the Enlightenment, is marked by grand, unifying themes: trust in reason and the human ability to reach 'objective truth', belief in scientific progress and confidence in the forward march of human progress. The harrowing events of the twentieth century, from the holocaust to the atomic bomb to widespread environmental disasters, have undermined confidence in these great themes.[2] Postmoderns are left with a world marked by, among others, the following characteristics.

Pluralism The average person in a postmodern culture encounters diversity on many levels: of ethnic groups, of religious and secular worldviews, of consumer choices. One has only to ride the transit

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system in London or New York or Paris to rub shoulders with a diversity of peoples and hear a variety of languages. One has only to walk through a shopping district to encounter goods and products from around the globe. Further, electronic media and the internet have destroyed what used to be the givens of time and space. One can be virtually present in nearly any country on earth with a few clicks of a mouse.

Reflexivity This is a consequence of pluralism. 'Reflexivity' means the ability to see one's viewpoint as one among many. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof notes: 'This capacity of understanding that one's own view is just that – *a view* . . . creates consciousness about the positioned nature of all our perspectives.'[3] Pluralism invites one to become aware of the viewpoints of the others with whom I share the neighbourhood or the city or the planet. They have their stories, just as I have my story. In the late nineteenth-century someone who was a product of Western culture was likely to regard a native of India as culturally benighted and in need of education and even religious conversion. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, one is more likely to regard such indigenous persons as having their own rich culture with its valid viewpoints. Reflexivity, then, is one outcome of pluralism: the variety of viewpoints which I encounter makes me increasingly conscious that my 'take on reality' is one among many. I am more likely to question my assumptions and permit my viewpoint to be challenged as I encounter those whose interpretations of the world differ from mine.

Suspicion of totalizing myths and stories Some myths and stories attempt to encompass all other stories within them and give a total explanation of reality. The Western colonization of indigenous peoples, for example, could be justified in terms of the superiority of Western culture. Or, closer to our religious home, the slaughter of the Aztecs could be justified by belief in the superiority of Christianity; these people should either convert or be killed. Postmodernity fosters suspicion of such totalizing stories, even more socially benign ones. Postmodern critics note that such stories mask the self-interest of those who proclaim them. Thus, the myth of the conversion of the Aztecs masked the greed and thirst for world dominance of those who pillaged that civilization. This challenges all those religious narratives that seek to explain the creation of the world and the place of human beings in that world. The dispute over the holy city of Jerusalem provides one stunning example of this. Jewish religious officials have declared that God intends the Temple Mount to be forever under the control of Israel;

Arab religious officials have decided that God intends the very same piece of land, Haram Esh-Sherif, to belong forever to Islam. This cannot but cause an outside observer to wonder about such transcendent claims. And Christianity is not exempt from such suspicion as well. How, as Christians, are we to proclaim the Jesus story without trying to force all people into that story? How do we root ourselves in our narrative without imposing it on those who live by other stories?

Suspicion of institutions Postmoderns are prone to distrust institutions for the same reason that they distrust totalizing stories: institutions ultimately serve those who run them. Postmodern societies are marked by a widespread sense that the traditional nuclear family does not foster the good of all its members, that schools don't teach, that health-care organizations can do harm to patients, that government serves its own bureaucracy more than citizens, that corporations are concerned only with profit. Churches are, of course, not exempt from suspicion. They are sometimes accused of doctrinal narrowness, and reports of sexual abuse have undermined the credibility of the clergy. Such incredulity probably arises from several sources. Widespread education renders people less gullible and more suspicious of institutional claims. Also, many of the institutions mentioned above have in fact had public failures: problems in education, health care, and churches get regular airing in the press. One effect of such suspicion is to push people towards a more individualized understanding of spirituality, as will be explored below.

Emergence of the other Revolutions in communication and travel mean that people now encounter more frequently those from completely different cultural contexts. During the Vietnam war, for example, the government of the United States claimed to be taking a stand against communism. But seeing a naked, napalmed child fleeing her village shocked the peoples of the world. And seeing the suffering of war brought into the nation's living rooms night after night eventually swayed public opinion. Today the U.S. seeks to justify its embargo of Iraq, but religious and non-profit groups regularly travel there to witness the suffering of the Iraqi people, especially the children, and opposition to the embargo grows. We encounter the other, the victim, the one who is on the receiving end of government propaganda. Similarly, the totalizing stories of the past hid certain voices: those whose story did not match the dominating myth. Thus postmodern culture seeks to recover the voices that have not been heard before: women, ethnic minorities, gay and lesbian persons. Our

understanding of creation, of God, of life itself is enriched by the recovery of those voices. The emergence of the other implies a recognition that this other has his or her own story and that that story need not be subsumed into my story. This awareness of the other has implications for contemporary spirituality.

Postmodernity and the popularity of 'spirituality'

Why, in such a cultural context, has 'spirituality' grown in popularity over the last thirty years or so? Modernity, with its emphasis on reason and science, proved to be hostile to discussions of the soul. Wade Clark Roof notes:

> Actually not all that long ago – even in the early 1960s – the word *spiritual* was conspicuously absent in the public arena; religious language and social ethics captured the day, prompting theologian Paul Tillich to speak of 'the almost forbidden word "spirit" and of the spiritual dimension of life as 'lost beyond hope'.[4]

One could contrast this absence of discussion to the widespread interest in spirituality today. Nearly any bookstore has a section on 'spirituality' devoted to a wide range of topics, from classic mystical texts to accounts of near-death experiences to astrology. Many people (in the U.S., 40% of adults according to Robert Wuthnow's research) participate in small groups such as Bible study or recovery programmes rooted in twelve-step methodology.[5] Many lay people in the Christian churches seek to discover the divine in the midst of their everyday lives through such traditional practices as prayer and spiritual direction. In one of the stranger uses of the term, a spokesperson for President George W. Bush said that his inauguration would be a 'spiritual' event.

'Spirituality' has become so popular because it is uniquely adapted to postmodern conditions. How does one commit oneself religiously in a context marked by pluralism, reflexivity, suspicion of totalizing myths and of institutions? 'Spirituality' gives people a way of engaging the spiritual quest while questioning or abandoning or re-affirming their commitment to a religion. One goes on one's own quest, picking one's way amidst the conflicting claims of the plurality of viewpoints in which one is situated.

Effects of postmodernity

What effects has postmodernity had upon traditional Roman Catholic practices? For the sake of discussion, I would like to narrow this down to four: the shift to interiority, the uprooting of practices from their context, the practice of mixing practices from different traditions, and the commercialization of spirituality.

Shift to interiority

Popular culture views 'spirituality' as concerned with one's inner search, so that spirituality becomes a private matter. Popular culture distinguishes 'spirituality' from 'religion'. 'Spirituality' has to do with one's personal journey, one's search for the divine. Roof, for example, defines 'mysticism in its broadest sense' as 'personal moments of encountering the sacred . . .'[6] 'Religion', on the other hand, purportedly has to do with institutions, creeds, doctrines, and formal worship. Spirituality is 'in', religion is 'out'. How often have you heard, 'I don't consider myself to be religious, but I've never been more spiritual,' or 'I don't go to church any more, but I'm more serious than ever about my spiritual life'?

This social construction of 'spirituality' overlooks the connection between the personal and the communal. In the Christian spiritual tradition the quester belongs to a community, which functions to teach, validate, and challenge his or her spiritual practice. The disciple also expresses his or her conversion through charity and service to others. The contemporary construction often overlooks the social and political implications of the spiritual quest.[7]

Uprooting

Postmodernity fosters the uprooting of spiritual practices from their cultural contexts. The plurality of viewpoints and the reflexivity of the self encourage one to explore different traditions. But this exploration is often focused on experiencing a particular practice rather than seeing how that practice fits into the context from which it arises. Thus one might listen to Gregorian chant without understanding its role within monasticism, or participate in a sweat lodge ceremony without understanding how it fits into the Sioux culture, or engage in a process of Ignatian discernment without understanding its roots in Ignatius' experience or its place in a lifestyle based on his teachings.

Mixing of traditions

Once practices become uprooted from their traditions, they can be mixed across traditions. Roof describes it this way:

> Responsibility falls more upon the individual . . . to cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful.[8]

To use the examples from the paragraph above, the same person may include in his or her spiritual practice listening to chant, participating in a sweat lodge, and practising Ignatian discernment in meeting with a spiritual director. Such an assemblage of practices would be judged by 'what works' for the person, what helps him or her to grow spiritually. As will be explored below, the relationship between the seeker and received wisdom traditions becomes significantly altered.

Commercialization of spirituality

As was noted above, postmodernity is much more open to spirituality than is modernity. This openness is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, people are willing to explore the great religious traditions. On the other, the popularity of spirituality turns it into a commodity. People no longer need to seek their spiritual guidance from religious institutions; they now have a whole new set of suppliers. People can 'get' their spiritual teaching from books, audio tapes, video tapes, correspondence courses, workshops, and lectures. One can choose a philosophy or spiritual outlook or contemplative practice from a variety of sources, just as one can walk into a computer store to choose a computer from among a variety of products.

I once had a rather chilling experience of this commodification. I was invited to the home of a high school teacher who was hosting a dinner for his class in comparative religions. I was there as a representative Catholic; also present were a Muslim, a Hindu couple, and an Episcopal priest. After dinner the students asked us questions about our faith. After a few minutes I realized that they were essentially 'shopping' for religious beliefs, as if to say, 'Convince me that you have the best product to offer, and then I'll buy it.' I suggested to them that this approach would completely miss the point of religion, which presumes some rooting in a tradition (even if one decides to leave it), a wrestling

with beliefs and practices that engages one's whole being rather than shopping among a variety of offerings.

In summary, postmodernity has the potential to alter radically the relationship between the seeker and spiritual practices. In the Christian tradition, the seeker becomes a disciple, apprenticing himself or herself to a teacher or to a community in order to learn certain spiritual disciplines. The teacher or the community introduces the practices and validates the seeker's mastery of them. In a postmodern context the seeker easily becomes a consumer rather than a disciple. He or she investigates different practices and different traditions to try them on to see if they fit, if they help. One weaves together Zen meditation, belief in Jesus, a conviction about re-incarnation, and healing practices from Mexican popular religion. In the Christian tradition the practices measure the seeker, challenging the disciple to deepen his or her conversion by becoming more proficient. In postmodernity the seeker measures the practices in the light of what works. The relationship between disciple and tradition is reversed.

Christian ministry remains vibrant when it remains in conversation with the culture in which it finds itself. The culture (or, more accurately, someone influenced by that culture) poses questions to our teaching or practice; we ignore those questions at the peril of becoming irrelevant to the questioner. The postmodern context clearly poses several challenges to traditional Christian practices. How might we as ministers respond?

Telling one's story

Postmodernity images the self as choosing from among a variety of conflicting viewpoints. Such an image tends to fragment the self into numerous compartments: career, home, recreational activities, religious involvement, and so forth. Encouraging people to tell their stories is one way to overcome this fragmentation.[9] Story has a way of drawing people's lives into focus and providing narrative coherence. Stories have a beginning, a middle, and (eventually!) an end. They encourage people to reflect upon their roots, explore their past, situate their present, and at least implicitly project a future. Often in the very act of telling one's story one comes to new insights and understandings about one's experiences.[10]

Ministers can encourage people to tell their stories in the context of pastoral contacts. Of course, this can be time-consuming! Parishes may

want to offer particular venues in which stories can be told, such as spiritual direction or faith sharing groups or twelve-step programmes.

Human stories are always embedded in other stories. My life story, for example, is rooted in the stories told by my family or by the people in the suburb of Cleveland where I grew up. The story of my being an American is embedded in the myths about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and the American West. The story of my Christian faith is likewise embedded in the biblical narratives of the scriptures, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. It is also rooted in the thousands of stories that make up the lives of the saints and the church's unfolding through history.

Pastoral ministers, then, might encourage such embedding as part of story telling. Helping people to make connections with their family, their ethnicity, their national and religious heritage counteracts the individualism and even solipsism that can typify today's spiritual seeker. 'My story' does not begin with me but carries me into an ancient, deep and vast narrative stream. It offers people a way to 'faith their practice', to situate their spiritual quest within their religious tradition.

Helping people develop practices

Focusing on spiritual practices, some authors argue, provides a fruitful path to spiritual development, especially in a postmodern context. 'Practice' can especially address the concern about individualism. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, for example, has argued for a spirituality based on practice, suggesting that 'spirituality deepens only as it is practiced and . . . practice includes such activities as prayer, meditation, contemplation, and acts of service.'[11]

Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, in their 1997 study, note several characteristics of spiritual practices. Practices introduce one into a whole way of life, a way which is necessarily lived in connection with others, since practices are developed, carried and validated by communities. Practices, according to these authors, address fundamental needs and conditions through concrete human acts such as eating, managing household economics, discerning decisions, praying, singing, caring for the sick, burying the dead. Practices are developed over time in the life of denominations; thus one who is engaged in a practice is also connected to those who have gone before him or her. Communities establish standards of excellence regarding practices; one receives feedback from the community to see how one is 'doing'.

Practices sanctify the daily, connect one's routine with the divine.[12] Readers who are old enough to recall the devotions of pre-Vatican II Catholicism will immediately recognize these characteristics.

Many people today express keen interest in spiritual practices. Pastoral ministers are likely to find a willing audience for classes, workshops, or retreats devoted to various styles of prayer, discernment, journaling, and spiritual direction. The presentation of such topics would probably be most effective if they avoided the uprooting from cultural context that was discussed earlier. Thus a workshop on centring prayer may introduce people not only to this method of praying but also point out its historical roots and development, its relationship to Catholic beliefs, and its role in the lifestyle of the people who practice it. Such 'faithing' of practices remains important.

A 'new' practice?

Postmodernity adds a new dimension to the ancient and perennial experience of encountering 'the other'. The cultural conditions explored above (pluralism, reflexivity, suspicion of totalizing stories, and suspicion of institutions) create an environment in which one is likely to encounter an 'other' – someone from another culture or religion, someone whose voice has been silenced in the past – more commonly than was the case in the past. And how is one to relate to this other? First, if I am truly to encounter this person, then I must allow my own viewpoint to be questioned. The other sees things differently, and that places a fundamental question before me. Will I attempt to see his or her viewpoint, or will I insist upon my own? This does not mean that I be won over by the other's viewpoint, but it does mean that I allow him or her to question mine, that I try to see from his or her point of view. Second, I am called to develop skills in order to carry on a conversation in which cultural assumptions may differ. Whose language will be spoken? Whose concepts will serve as the starting point? How do I indicate my respect of the other even if I ultimately choose not to remain within his or her viewpoint?

In any true encounter, both parties are changed. The encounter with the other, then, invites us to reflect upon the meaning of conversion. For some, conversion may be a change of mind: thinking new thoughts, replacing false concepts with new ones. For others, conversion may mean a change of heart, a moving away from self-love towards a love more focused upon God and neighbour. The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius offer a method for re-ordering one's affections so that one's

activities are brought more in line with one's deepest desires. But conversion may also be understood as a willingness to change one's cultural gestalt, to be challenged by the viewpoint of the other. In the New Testament we see this shattering of categories in Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, who impresses him with a faith not seen even in Israel (Mt 15:21–28). Jesus, in turn, shatters cultural expectations by telling parables about a Samaritan who ministers to a Jew (Lk 10:29–37) or about an owner who pays the last hired as much as the first (Mt 20:1–16). Finally, the early church overcomes its cultural imperatives in deciding not to require that gentiles observe the Mosaic law (Acts 15).

As I noted at the beginning of this article, I have here begun to explore a small thicket in a vast territory. It is a fruitful parcel marked by the intersection of postmodernity and Catholic practice. While journeying into this land is not without its difficulties and dangers, it also holds the promise of treasure hidden in the most unexpected places. Sharing the spiritual riches of our tradition with our brothers and sisters who are influenced by postmodernity makes this exploration both important and worthwhile; the tradition will challenge them and they, in turn, will challenge it. And in the dialogue the good news of Jesus lives on.

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NOTES

1 A helpful discussion of postmodernity can be found in Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian identity in a fragmented world* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). For a shorter treatment see T. Howland Sanks, 'Postmodernism and the Church', *New Theology Review* 11 (August 1998), pp 51–59. I explored the implications of postmodernity for spiritual direction in 'Spiritual direction: stalking the boundaries', in Robert J. Wicks (ed), *Handbook of spirituality for ministers: vol 2: Perspectives for the 21st century* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), pp 315–326. Finally I wish to express my gratitude to my colleague, Jerome Baggett, Assistant Professor of Religion and Society at the Jesuit School of Theology, for being a stimulating conversation partner and insightful reader of an early draft of this article.

2 See Ann W. Astell, 'Introduction', in Ann W. Astell (ed), *Divine representations: postmodernism & spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), pp 1–18, for an exploration of how Nazism affected Christian spirituality.
3 Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual marketplace: baby boomers and the remaking of American religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p 75 (emphasis in original).
4 Roof, p 89 (emphasis in original).
5 Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the journey: support groups and America's new quest for community* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
6 Roof, p 52.
7 For a critique of the privatized construction of mysticism from a theological perspective see Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical theology: the integrity of spirituality and theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998); from a feminist perspective see Grace Jantzen, *Power, grace and Christian mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
8 Roof, p 75.
9 For one explanation of the importance of narrative, see Alasdair McIntyre, *After virtue: a study in moral theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp 210–226.
10 For a study of narrativity and spiritual direction, see Janet Ruffing, *Uncovering stories of faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).
11 Alasdair MacIntyre discussed the importance of practice in his classic, *After virtue*. Robert Bellah and his associates picked up on this notion and discussed it in their classic *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), see for example pp 154–155. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra further developed an approach to spiritual practices in a 1997 study funded by the Lilly endowment; see Dorothy C. Bass (ed), *Practicing our faith: a way of life for a searching people* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997). Robert Wuthnow, *After heaven: spirituality in America since the 1950's* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p 170.
12 Bass, *Practicing our faith*, pp 1–12.