

HUNGER FOR THE CONNECTION

William J. O'Malley

EVEN CARL SAGAN, THE WORLD-RENOWNED ASTRONOMER, felt it. Smugly dismissive he may have been about organized religion, but in every frame of 'Cosmos', the TV series in which he confronted the immensity and mysteries of the heavens, Sagan's face radiated the same astonished wonderment St Teresa and John of the Cross must have experienced when confronted with God; the same awe at the immensity of it all that Navaho and Mayans and Australian aborigines knew without need or ability to comprehend it; the hunger for a connection to the Energy Behind It All.

In his novel *Contact*, now a film, Sagan's inner self (not his rational mind) kept going back to that tremendous elusiveness, as helplessly as a finger to a loose tooth. At those times, Sagan the renowned scientist joined the bereft Lear and Edgar on the storm-blasted heath: 'Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art', so puny in the enormity of it all—yet blessed or cursed with the conviction we are somehow akin to and somehow in contact with the Force that energizes it all. Sagan felt—*knew*—there was 'something' out there. Perhaps not what we call God, but an intelligent, purposive *someone*. Sagan's conviction was undeniable, judging from his response: awe, wonder, yearning. Perhaps adoration.

Only the pitifully autistic and sociopathic among us can totally avoid that confrontation with the numinous, with what Hopkins calls 'the dearest freshness deep down things', a presence more riveting than its physical stimulus: a wind-savaged seaside; a mountain at dawn; an infant's tiny hand curled round your finger; the climax of the *1812 Overture*; hearing, 'And I love you so much, too'. Such moments are heart-stopping, breathtaking, mind-blowing, because they do, in fact, overload our merely mental circuits with an enlivening presence too large for them to accommodate. They ignite, if only momentarily, the slumbering human soul.

Yet today we have become nearly immune to atavistic awe, shielded from sunsets by high-rises, unaware of the sigh of the wind and the harrumph of the waves. As Hopkins complained in 'God's Grandeur', 'all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil . . . nor can foot feel, being shod'. The profoundest part of ourselves is anaesthetized by dispiriting work, lobotomizing meetings, *ersatz* entertainment, mindless schooling, listless liturgies. The soul atrophies.

Blame the Greeks. Blame Aquinas. Blame every philosopher who defined human beings as 'rational animals'. Blame every educator who said the goal of human growth is 'a sound mind in a sound body', as if we were no more than apes with implanted computers. Neither body nor brain (which we share with beasts) can explain our response to the numinous. Nor can the urge among the relative few for integrity, honesty, and unselfish love be rooted in sinews or electro-chemical interchanges. These specifically human activities, self-evidently part of us however much some want to deny them, have to arise from a third human power: the soul.

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My soul is the wellspring of all in myself that is unquantifiable, irreducible to the physical or rational, as elusive as the power within Carl Sagan—and the Power he responded to—when confronting the infinite carouse of space. Impervious to Geiger counters or x-rays, yet as self-evident as my impulse to survive death. The soul is not rational, but it is not irrational, any more than falling in love, or resolving to be honourable in a devious world, or seeing the 'David' in a block of flawed marble are irrational. And spirit is to soul as the flame is to the candle. Our only human purpose is to discover that soul and ignite it. Yet it would be rare to hear a homily or a religion class even advert to that profoundest of truths.

What Sagan's face radiated when he stared at the heavens was his (unacknowledged) soul, the religious impulse, what in every human being at graced times cries, 'Yes. Yes, there's *got* to be more!' Hope in the seeming darkness. As Newman put it, 'the heart speaks to the heart': *cor ad cor loquitur*.

For 50 years, despite all the colossal changes in lifestyle, prosperity, and moral ethos, the one character adolescents have been sure to identify with is Holden Caulfield, the central character in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. They are constantly searching for something to fill the disenchanted void in the self: the yearning,

unevolved soul. The malaise begins once you find your parents really aren't perfect, that everything about Christmas was a hoax, that people can't be trusted, that the Teflon cocoons are really impenetrable. You discover the truth of what Matthew Arnold wrote in the nineteenth century:

. . . the world which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain . . .

So we settle in for a journey across a featureless landscape, coping, improvising, surviving, dead-end souls.

Most often, falling in love cures the disenchantment, at least for a while. Someone cares for you as helplessly as your mother used to; you are affirmed despite your faults, a prince and princess again, 'at home'. But unless being-in-love flowers into loving—a commitment of two souls—then in mid-life the second disillusionment looms. Like Updike's Rabbit and Ibsen's Hedda, you find your spouse is no longer Cinderella or Prince Charming; your children have minds of their own; other people's agendas have come between you and 'the top'; the booze and pills aren't panaceas but only placebos; your body begins betraying you even more treacherously than in adolescence. Then you die. Which, in too many cases, is redundant.

Sisyphus embodied it. Fellini captured it. And Peggy Lee nailed it:

Is that all there is? Is that all there is? If that's all there is, my
friends, then keep on dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a
ball, if that's all . . . there is.

Even believers sometimes feel that. And unbelievers feel it all the time, however unable they are to focus the formless malaise, the hunger that defies words and dogmatic formulation. The reason is that we lost our souls. Or, more likely, we never found them.

The Seismic Shift from Heart to Head

The conversion our society has undergone in the last 50 years—from Norman Rockwell to Andy Warhol—has been so gradual that only

those of us in our latter years appreciate how profound it was. The shape-shift in our society's soul is as deep and diminishing as the transformation from the harsh complexities of Christendom to the harsh simplicities of the Reformation.

From Lush to Lacklustre

Medieval times were hardly as idyllic (at least for ordinary folk) as some historians of ideas would have us believe, dwelling as they do in loftier eyries. Medievals were savaged by plague, subject to the whims of despots, in service to most unChristian crusades, benighted in superstitions. Because they were on such intimate terms with death, they became obsessed about purgatory, calculating times and indulgences.

But even though feudal society was unfairly determined by accidents of birth, everyone at least knew where he or she stood. The ethos—and each individual in it—had a soul, a connection to the transcendent, a sense of being 'at home'. Each ordinary citizen of Christendom had a matrix of beliefs, symbols, and customs that made some sense of it all, situating the soul or self in a communion of saints transcending the mortal and momentary. Each day named its time-segments from the cycle of the liturgical hours; each week integrated the secular and sacred; each year offered a web of feasts and fasts, pilgrimages and processions. Read Ellis Peters' stories of Brother Cadfael. Read historical novels like Sigrid Unset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*.

The root of 'religion' is *ligare*, to bind—a connection—and the lowest peasant *felt* that connection of all Christendom with the Beyond in their midst. Even the meanest church had its rood-loft and candles, its statues and frescoes of our ecclesial family, its windows in which the common belief was radiantly captured. Nearly everyone felt 'at home' within the common myth. Thomas More did not surrender his head for the pope, or even for the papacy, but for the unity of the family of Christendom.

However, even More admitted that world was also riddled with superstition and greed, power-mad emperors and barons and popes, relic racketeers, unseemly monks. So reaction was inevitable. First Luther, then the more rigid Calvin, challenged its excesses. Then, tragically, as the reformist juggernaut gained momentum, its basic conviction became (at least in England) that the only way to reform was to destroy.



The Warning to Swearers, St Laurence Church, Broughton, Buckinghamshire

The Pietà is surrounded by nine well-dressed young men holding either Christian symbols or parts of the body, as a reminder to those who swear 'by Christ's feet' or 'by the Cross' of what their language signifies.

Reason pre-empted the soul, the imagination, the hunger for more than doctrinal purity: the connection of the ordinary self to the wellspring of the Spirit.

Zealots pulled down idolatrous crucifixes, whitewashed church frescoes, smashed statues and stained-glass windows, replaced tabernacles with the Bible and the *Sanctissimum* with a homily, hurled out altars to replace them with plain tables, sold vestments to be cut up for gowns, tied sacring-bells to the necks of their sheep. (Imagine what

an iconoclast might have done to the Sistine Chapel in the name of theological probity.) Most tellingly, they forbade the elevation of the host with its accompaniment of bells and lighting candles on the ground that it was idolatry, and the formula for Holy Communion degenerated into: 'Take and eat this in *remembrance* that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving.'

The Reformation dismantled a whole symbolic world, a communal context, a great cycle of feasts and fasts, a shared repertoire of beliefs, a system of assurances by which they gauged their lives, and an accessible catechesis for the unlettered, for those outside the ivory turrets of speculative theology, for those of flickering faith. It snuffed out the soul of religion, a complete denial of the affective lives of ordinary Christians, in the name of a purity of doctrine in which they were not at all interested.

A gallant (and surely not rational) few clung to the old matrix of meaning, hiding priests and vestments, at the risk of their property and their lives. They genuinely believed their souls were more important. The majority conformed, but what kept the conformists 'in church' despite the numbing homily and the sterile, stripped-down service was that inner need for a *felt* connection to the divine, even without the spirit-quickenings externals. Many now believe that could describe the contemporary Church.

Surely the Reformers had legitimate complaints about the ways simple folk believed that prayers and Masses could manipulate God regarding torments either in this life or of the next, and that sacramentals truly were effective talismans. But like many reformers, they were reductionists, pulling up the wheat along with the tares. Icons can indeed become idols, but rarely. If all the paintings and statues in medieval churches were idolatrous, what of the ubiquitous images of Queen Elizabeth on which her toadies doted? When does a symbol focusing the wandering mind become an object of worship? True, the proliferation of (sometimes dubious) saints and especially of the cult of Our Lady might 'distract' us from God; but do many truly good friends (even among us sinners) begrudge other mutual friendships?

The Reformers' tragic simplism denied the imagination, and submitted it to rationalist doctrine. Theology negated religion: the spirit-to-Spirit connection. The head paralyzed the heart.

For all Christendom's simple-mindedness and superstition, it was a root affirmation of that most fundamental Christian doctrine, the profoundest connection of heaven and earth: the Incarnation, the embodiment of the sacred within the human community, the hallowing of the commonplace when 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us'. For the great majority of believers transubstantiation was *not* a theological abstraction. It *was* the Incarnation, more concretely real than the presence of Yahweh in the Holy of Holies, right there in their village churches! As Malle, the madwoman in Hilda Prescott's great chronicle, *The Man on a Donkey*, sighs to her young friend, 'Think of it, Wat! God, in a bit of bread, come to bring morning into the darkness of our bellies!'

It is no wonder the rape of the monasteries and chantries, the prohibition of liturgical spectacle, gave rise to the popular entertainment of the English theatres—just as in our own time many rock concerts have become liturgies celebrating the Id in us. But the human spirit remains hungry, restless.

From Vatican I to Vatican II

Just as the medieval ethos was not as idyllic as *Camelot*, no one who lived in the US in the 50s and had survived a Great Depression bracketed by two world wars would claim that life then was as idyllic as *I Love Lucy*. But there was a civic sense of community, a mythic awareness of a national soul—precisely because of those three communally endured afflictions, and there was a (religious?) sense of a common, meaningful matrix of beliefs. For theologians and thinkers, the Roman Catholic Church at the time was shamefully repressive, and even the local monsignor was often a martinet. Yet for men like my father, it could never be, 'Church is church; business is business'. Ordinary men like him went willingly to novenas, missions, retreats, and rosary rallies in the stadium. Why? The hunger for a connection to something more fulfilling than survival. Even teenage boys were unembarrassed carrying a rosary, wearing a scapular, singing at May crownings. My own vocation was all but settled in senior year high school once a Jesuit scholastic had taken two of us to Holy Week *Tenebrae*: heart-stopping, breathtaking, mind-blowing.

I submit that the 'vocations crisis' is not rooted solely in the issue of celibacy. It is a question of meaningfulness, a problem of unenlivened souls. I teach baptized pagans.

For all its simplism, the Church that nurtured my vocation provided a pageantry that supported the faith of those who said, 'I believe. Help my unbelief': a pageantry which could touch the soul even of an unbeliever like Henry Adams at Chartres.

And now it's gone.

As most Elizabethan Christians did, we went along with the unnerving changes, partly because, like them, we are mostly docile, and because the priests have bigger heads, more time to think about these things, and probably know what they're doing. But the soul's unfocused restlessness and hunger remain as unsatisfied as the brain with tabloids and the belly with junk food. We purport to have the truth. But the truth should set you free, give you joy. Can anybody *see* Christian freedom? Can they *feel* Christian joy? Do Christians seem to have more enlivened souls than unbelievers? Those are rock-bottom questions.

Vatican II was a great leap forward—at least for bishops, theologians, and liturgists. It proclaimed religious liberty, collegiality, ecumenism, social justice, and a greater participation by the laity in comparatively small liturgical and parochial affairs. And many other Christian traditions in the 60s and 70s made similar reforms. But what did it do for 'the ordinary folk', the serfs and yeomen, the truck drivers and beauticians? These people who feel the divine hunger but are too tied up with agonizing practicalities, too self-deprecating to read and ponder, too distracted by the seemingly important to focus on the truly important? Who speaks for (and to) most of the occupants of our pews and classrooms? Clerics? Academics? Liturgists?

Jesus didn't go for the head, for niceties of discipline and doctrine. He went for the heart, for conversion of values, for enlivening the

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spirit. Perhaps my perspective is too limited, but I don't see too much heart in the students I teach—or in their parents; in making moral and career decisions, their values are no different from the decent atheists' down the block; they seem as *dispirited* as everyone else. They seem to have far less awareness of the numinous and holy than even Carl Sagan had. Only a handful would dare claim to be atheists, yet their lives and choices at least seem to be made within a reality in which God doesn't exist—or is at best negligible.

Let me play the game of ‘what if’. What if every Church leader, every bishop, every priest and deacon, every parish minister, every catechist were to put aside *everything* else (perhaps, for a time, even the Christian gospel and the Church) and focus *only* on one question: How can I touch and enliven that hunger for the divine which lurks confusedly in the people I truly want to serve?

What strategies can I use to convince them they even *have* souls, powers within themselves irreducible to bodies and brains? How can I convince them there is a flame already burning in those souls? What means can I use to activate those souls—simply on a human level (to begin with)? It’s called pre-evangelization, about which there is much talk but little substantive action.

Only then can the people we serve even resonate to the gospel of altruism, of forgiveness, of transcendence-in-our-midst, of the living communion of saints within the Body of Christ. Without a genuine connection to God there can be no genuine religion, only ineptly dramatized theology that fails to move anyone.

I once had an unfortunate encounter with a well-placed churchman. He had just concluded a talk to religious educators, saying that he and his fellow bishops would do anything they could to make our job of evangelization easier. Overcoming my wonted shyness, I suggested that, since the liturgy is the only place the lives of the people we serve intersect with the visible Church, perhaps the greatest service the episcopacy could offer would be—at whatever cost—to enlist the services of theatre directors, playwrights, poets, and composers to come up with a liturgy which speaks to the human heart, which rouses the soul, which challenges rather than merely cherishes. We have a surfeit of theologians and liturgists and catechists. What we need is symbol-makers, people who satisfy not the mind but the soul.

It was a grave mistake. The speaker replied, mostly in italics, ‘Oh! *You* want to go back to the days of the *bells* and banners and banjos! When they were all jumping *ship*!’ He continued, but I was too busy creeping back to my seat in hopes of finding a moderate-sized black hole along the way.

Similarly, I have known publishers and catechists who nod in complete agreement at the need for pre-evangelization, for making our audiences aware first of their souls’ importance and potential, for focussing that restless hunger, for encouraging an awareness of the

divine dimension to our existence which feeds that hunger, and *only then* for moving on to the gospel and, if possible, to Catholicism.

But in practice, they feel the need to 'jump into the syllabus' because the administrators want test results; in preparing classes and liturgies, they have neither the time nor, I fear, the conviction to let their imaginations engage with the needs of those they serve, rather than with the clear-cut and coercive needs of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or the diocesan office. One publisher said about a morality text I wrote based solely on natural law, without a hint of scripture or Church doctrine, 'Nobody'll buy it unless it *screams* "Catholic"! And we're in business to sell books'.

They have substituted catechizing for conversion. To be fair, their own training was in most cases almost undilutedly headtrip, with very little instruction in the ways of the soul.

'Is that all there is?'

What if every bishop, priest, deacon, and catechist could start right there? Not from the Creed, not from the *Catechism*, not from the syllabus, but from the actual felt needs and confusions of those they honestly want to serve: from that religious impulse—the hunger for more than survival. Where Jesus started. 'Of course that's not all there is. I'm half-blind myself, but maybe I've groped my way forward a bit more than you have. Far enough to be sure the quest is worth it. Take my hand. We can both come closer to the One who justifies our yearning that there be more. Come and see.'

Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't that be sane?

'Surely you jest. How could one possibly *grade* that?'

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