THE TRUTH THAT MAKES US FREE

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'YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH, and the truth will make you free.' (John 8:32) Jesus' words to his disciples leap from the page and challenge me to the core. I have invested nearly twenty-five years in graduate study and subsequently in teaching: days, weeks and months of reading, of wrestling with texts, of seeking effective ways to communicate concepts in the classroom, of attending seemingly endless meetings, and of searching for words to put on the page. Jesus' words cut through this welter of daily activities to remind me of what I am about in the first place: seeking liberation. And so I am challenged to ask: how has my experience of study been liberating?

What Is 'Study'?

I would like to define what I mean by 'study'. We experience study in all sorts of contexts. Academic study, of course, provides one obvious example. In an undergraduate or graduate setting we focus on a particular subject and on the methods appropriate for exploring that subject. 'Pastoral' study also comes to mind. Here we explore a subject, but also consciously seek to apply what we are learning in a communal, ecclesial or ministerial setting. Religious read about the charism of the founder; members of a parish participate in bible study; pastoral ministers become certified through programmes sponsored by their diocese. Finally, study can take place privately: we want to learn more about the Gospel of Luke, and so we slowly read through the gospel text on our own while consulting different commentaries. Study, as I am using the word, is not limited to academia.

Given this understanding of 'study', I wish to explore what is liberating about it. I shall reflect on my own experience, but I shall also enrich what I say with comments from colleagues at the Graduate

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Theological Union in Berkeley. I asked faculty and students in the Christian Spirituality Area to share their thoughts.[1] My examples are drawn from the field with which I am most familiar, Christian Spirituality, but I am confident that scholars from other disciplines could offer similar insights.

History

Learning the history of spirituality has led me to freedom in several ways which I never imagined. Because my research involved historical and archival work, I would like to comment on several aspects of how history can liberate.[2]

First, I am dazzled by the variety of the ways in which God touches people. For example, Mary Ann Donovan SC notes, 'What I find liberating is the study of history—knowing the truth of what has been does indeed give freedom!' The mystics and the great spiritual teachers of the Christian tradition form a diverse lot. They are male and female, cloistered and apostolic, drawn to God by the beauty of creation and by a darkness beyond all senses. They have prayed by walking in the woods, by ruminating on scripture, by following their breath, by going into the void, by singing, by sitting in silence.

This diverse historical witness both frees and challenges me. I am freed from the burden of finding the 'best' way to pray or the 'right' path of holiness. There is no 'one' or 'right' way. Seeking the correct formula may be the consequence of a US American predilection for pragmatic solutions, but I suspect that it also haunts people from many other cultures. And it certainly creates a debilitating tension in the spiritual seeker. In classroom teaching and in giving spiritual direction, I have seen people freed as they learned the varied witness of the holy women and men who have gone before us. People have been

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[1] In the text that follows the comments of colleagues will be presented as quotations without footnotes.

[2] For a discussion of how history can be used and misused in the study of spirituality, see Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998 [1991]).

especially liberated in discovering that they can pray with their anger or with their sexual desire or with other feelings that are often regarded as 'negative'.[3]

At the same time, this historical witness challenges me to plumb my own experience, in order to discover how God is calling *me* to walk the spiritual path. If there is no 'one' way, what is my way? Given the variety of ways in which God has spoken to others, how does God's call reach me? Given the variety of ways in which people have responded to God, how might I respond, especially in prayer? How should I praise the Giver by sharing my unique gifts with others? The witness of history invites me to a free and mature response to God's promptings.

My colleague Robert Hale OSB Cam, offers a second way in which history liberates:

> In my first years in religious life I had absorbed from a somewhat Jansenistic spiritual formation a dark view of creation, of 'the world'. The study of spirituality, especially of the Greek Fathers and of Teilhard, liberated me into a joyful acceptance of a creation suffused with the risen Christ, and so also of the real value of study and teaching to help witness to the Paschal message in its fuller dimensions. It was like being liberated into Easter joy.

Many of us have similar stories. James and Evelyn Whitehead note that all religious denominations are marked by both 'grace and malpractice'.[4] The religious categories which we inherit can be unhealthy and even toxic, and a familiarity with the history of spirituality can relativise these categories. Recently I worked on an article on the spirituality of the diaconate. My research took me into an exploration of the roles of deacons, presbyters and *episkopoi* in New Testament texts, in the letters of Clement of Alexandria and Ignatius of Antioch, and in other early Christian texts such as *The Shepherd of Hermas*. The diverse ways in which these ministerial roles were embodied in different Christian communities fascinated me. The research led me to what Johannes Baptist Metz has called a 'dangerous

[3] A helpful book in this regard is Ann Belford Ulanov and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

[4] James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 8.

memory'.[5] I saw that the static, hierarchic organisation of the Church with which I had grown up was a social and cultural construction reflecting a particular vision of central control. How freeing it was to realise that the Church had not always been thus, and might therefore not be thus in the future!

Third, knowledge of history roots us in a tradition and gives us a sense of participating in an adventure bigger than ourselves. Doctoral candidate Ray Maria McNamara RSM captures this sense of freedom:

> Reading the classic texts in Christian spirituality grounded my own spiritual journey in the rich Christian tradition …. This has given me a sense of belonging to something bigger while at the same time stirring a deep desire to continue to participate in and share this tradition with others.

As a student of history, I am invited to interpret my journey in relation to the journeys of those who have gone before me. They have used powerfully descriptive metaphors which can illuminate my experience: interior castles, dark nights, spiritual combat, caterpillars becoming butterflies. They have provided road maps so that I don't have to find my way through the forest by myself. They have shared their insights about growth in prayer and suggested some signposts to spiritual progress. They have outlined gradations of virtues such as humility and charity. They have given models of how to go about discerning God's call. This is not to say that we accept the tradition uncritically, because some voices have been left out.[6] But it is to say that history helps us connect our story with a much bigger one.

Fourth, the study of history has taught me the importance of cultural and historical context for the understanding of any spirituality. So Joseph Chinnici OFM writes:

> As an historian, I think the study of the history of spirituality can be liberating in freeing us from the cultural preconceptions which determine much of our thinking today. We inherit from various contemporary disciplines, which themselves are very much socially and politically shaped … certain prejudices with respect to people,

[5] Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology*, translated by David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980).

[6] I have explored this in 'Catholicism and Postmodernity: Faithing Our Practice', *The Way*, 41/3 (July 2001), 246-256.

> movements, texts. But part of spiritual growth itself is a ridding oneself of unconscious prejudices and misshapen intellectual and affective constructs and responses ….

For example, contemporary spirituality, especially in the United States, runs the risk of being co-opted by individualism and consumerism. In the popular consciousness, 'spirituality' is often separated from 'religion'. 'Spirituality' involves one's personal quest for meaning, whereas 'religion' involves institutional structures and credal statements. So we often hear, 'I am spiritual but not religious'. Spirituality runs the risk of becoming just another product to make one feel good.

As a scholar of spirituality, I am grounded in a tradition which frees me from the constructions of my culture and enables me to critique those constructions. I am impressed with the ways in which great spiritual teachers have been involved in the issues of their time. The men and women who fled to the desert in the fourth century were not simply escaping from the world; they were engaged in a radical critique of both their society and their church. Teresa of Avila, in her reform of the Carmelites, opposed the class stratification which typified convent life as she knew it. Sisters from the nobility often had spacious lodgings and even servants, whereas sisters from the lower classes had simple quarters. Teresa's convents, however, were to be small, so that relationships between the sisters could be based on friendship and mutuality. The list could go on and on: Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Ignatius of Loyola, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton. Again and again, I find spiritual teachers confronting the shortcomings of their cultures. Given this historical witness, I feel called to challenge the privatisation of spirituality which I see occurring around me. I am freed from the hegemony of contemporary constructions of the spiritual quest.

The great spiritual teachers were involved in the issues of their times

Methodology

Methodology, too, I have found liberating. A field of study is distinguished by its object (what it studies) and its methods (how it

St Jerome and St John the Baptist
by Masaccio (1401-1428)

explores its object). Most fields today employ a variety of methods.[7] Learning methodology requires discipline, and it is to some the least interesting aspect of a field of study. How often have I seen students' eyes glaze over when I've asked them to explain what method(s) they are using! Yet learning and employing a method stretches me. It takes me out of myself. It forces me to be reflective and self-critical about what I am doing and why I am doing it.[8] It gives me a yardstick with which to measure my progress in a research project, and a means of situating myself vis-à-vis other scholars in the field.

In my research I specialised in the history of US American Catholic spirituality, with special attention to two spiritual writers from the early twentieth century, William Kerby and Paul Hanly Furfey. In analyzing my topic I used the hermeneutic method developed by Sandra Schneiders, which involves three steps: a thorough description of a religious experience, a careful analysis of that experience, and an appropriation of the experience to the present.[9] Early in my research I sought to systematize the writings of William Kerby according to categories that I had devised. One of my professors pointed out that this was not fair to Kerby, and that I had, as it were, to allow Kerby to be Kerby even if it

[7] For an overview of methods used in the study of spirituality, see Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1997).

[8] Attention to methodology distinguishes the academic study of spirituality. A 'pastoral' study of spirituality (as mentioned above) may or may not attend to method. For a scholarly discussion, see Mary Frohlich, 'Spiritual Discipline, Discipline of Spirituality: Revisiting Questions of Definition and Method', *Spiritus*, 1 (Spring 2001), 65-78.

[9] Sandra M. Schneiders, 'A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, 2 (Spring 1994), 9-14.

seemed to me that he was inconsistent. My task was to be faithful to his writing, not to reform him according to my preferences. This turned out to be a paradigmatic experience. My method (the first step of which was to describe the other's experience) pushed me to see the other as other, and to allow him to stand outside my preconceptions. This lesson has been carried over into other areas of my life, from functioning in a classroom with people from many cultures, to teaching in an ecumenical setting with colleagues and students from different denominations, to conversations with friends and loved ones who often enough see things differently from me. How freeing it is to be enriched by the insights and viewpoints of the other!

Analytical Tools

Study has given me analytical tools. These tools can be used to analyze texts, but they have also helped me to explore life. Here are two examples.

During my first year of doctoral studies I participated in a seminar on *hermeneutics*. The authors (among them Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Ricoeur and Gadamer) provided a difficult and challenging read. Yet the concepts under discussion proved seminal for my later work. For the sake of brevity, I will mention three: horizon, dialogical knowledge and preunderstanding.

'Horizon' is the limit of the reality that we see from our viewpoint. On the literal level, if I stand on a beach and scan the ocean, I can see to the horizon. So, analogously, if I scan 'the world' from where I stand, there is a limit to what I can see. Other people, looking from other standpoints, have different horizons. When they walk into a store, my students from Africa experience the racial tension in the United States in ways that I do not as a white person. One can also speak of the 'horizon' of a text or a work of art, because the author or artist had a view of the world which they embodied in their work.

'Dialogical knowledge' is the knowledge that arises from the conversation between horizons. As a scholar, I can read, analyze and question a classic spiritual text such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but I do not really engage with the text unless I also allow *The Cloud* to question me. How, for example, might this text's teaching about the prayer of quiet challenge the way I pray? Dialogical knowledge

undermines the old scientific paradigm of a 'subject' analyzing an 'object'. The subject is also influenced by the object.

'Preunderstanding' denotes how I bring my personal, ethnic and cultural history to any situation. I do not come to learning as a *tabula rasa*. I am already interpreting before I am even aware of it, and my interpretation is particularly shaped by my language and culture. Standard English, for example, has lost the distinction between 'you' and 'thee', a distinction which remains in many languages (so in French, *vous* and *tu*). I am, accordingly, less conscious of whether my relationship with someone is more or less personal than a speaker of French would be. Further, the 'thees' and 'thous' which fill old prayer books seem quaint and outdated to me rather than powerfully intimate.

These concepts of horizon, dialogical knowledge and preunderstanding have not just influenced the way in which I read classic texts; they have also revolutionised the way in which I relate to other people. I seek to understand the limits of my own horizon; I do not think that I have an 'objective' view. I allow the other's horizon to challenge and stretch mine; I rejoice (maybe after an initial complaint!) when my view is widened as others share their horizons with me. I know that my preunderstanding both enriches and limits my approach to others. I try to welcome those irruptions of the other which shatter my preconceived notions. The dynamism implicit in these notions is liberating. Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman provides one example. This gentile woman's 'great faith' challenged and expanded Jesus' initial understanding that his message was meant for the Jewish people only, and not for the gentile 'dogs' (Matthew 15:21-28).

Irruptions of the other shattering preconceptions

A second analytical tool is *sociology*, which I employed as a cognate discipline to enrich my primary work in spirituality. Again, I will use just one example.

Early in my study I was introduced to Max Weber's sociology of religion, in which he discusses the different appeals to legitimacy that religious authorities may use: appeals to rational grounds, to tradition or to charism.[10] This typology has proved helpful to me not only in

[10] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, translated by Günther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1978), volume 1, 212-245.

analyzing the authority of a religious text but also in understanding some of the tensions in pastoral ministry today. We find all three types of authority in the Catholic Church. Authority rooted in rationality relates to those who are certified to work in financial offices or social agencies or educational institutions. One needs the proper credentials to be hired. Authority rooted in tradition relates to ordination: ordained ministers have the authority to preside at the eucharist because they are ordained to do so by a bishop, and this tradition goes back to the beginnings of Christianity. Authority rooted in charism relates to founders and the movements that they started. Charismatic individuals attract followers neither because of their education nor because of ecclesial tradition, but because of their personal magnetism.

These different claims to legitimacy can result in very different views of a given pastoral situation. For example, a pastor, whose authority derives from tradition, and a principal, whose authority derives from certification, might have to work out their respective roles vis-à-vis hiring teachers for the parish school. Applying this sociological tool freed me and enabled me to let go of my own preference, which is for charismatic authority, and listen to the legitimate claims of those with different viewpoints.

Self-Implication

The study of Christian spirituality has been freeing for me because it is self-implicating. Scholars in the field often choose research projects related to the spiritual questions that are particularly important for them. As Sandra Schneiders has noted:

> Many of us [spirituality scholars] probably felt drawn into spirituality precisely because our questions about spirituality were not heuristic devices to generate research projects or ways of participating in a scholarly guild. They were real, intensely personal questions that had implications for our own lives.[11]

The self-implicating nature of the academic discipline of spirituality demands that students strive to be aware of their preunderstanding and prejudices, so that their research is not clouded by their personal

[11] Sandra M. Schneiders, 'The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, 6 (Spring 1998), 9.

preferences. Self-implication can either trap one in one's prejudices or liberate one from them.

I came to the study of spirituality after some years of working with the poor and of trying to raise awareness regarding issues of social justice. I came to see how activists often got trapped in their own anger or frustration, and ended up bitter and burnt out. I sought insights about how to enter and stay in the struggle, insights rooted in a deep relationship with God, and undertook research on the relationship between spirituality and justice. Having the time to explore and write about such personal questions has been very freeing. Ray Maria McNamara captures this sense:

> The study of Christian spirituality has been freeing because it has become the place where I can best deal with my own questions related to meaning—specifically meaning in relationship to my experiences of God's call, God's movement in my life and my experiences of nature.

The 'Work' of Liberation

Early in this essay I suggested that 'study' can occur in different settings. But, regardless of setting, 'study' connotes for me a process of learning that challenges me to take in and integrate something new. As I grow older, I am more and more convinced that it is my assumptions, rather than my conclusions, which raise the greatest barriers to spiritual growth. It is especially when it challenges assumptions that the 'something new' of study engenders growth. During my graduate study, I experienced this challenge most pointedly on two fronts. First, exposure to feminist theology undermined my assumptions about the normativity of maleness and, most of all, about the masculinity of God. Second, close friendships with gay men undermined my assumptions about the normativity of heterosexual experience. At first I experienced these encounters with 'the other' as threats to my religious beliefs. At the moment of confrontation I faced a basic spiritual question: am I going to be open to this challenge, or am I going to hunker down and defend myself? If I choose to be open, I do not know where the challenge will take me.

Assumptions, rather than conclusions, are the barriers to growth

'Liberation' might sound like a wonderful experience, and indeed it is. But it is also hard work. We are usually unaware of our assumptions; they are like the water in which we swim and the atmosphere in which we breathe. We don't see them precisely because they are so close to us, so integral to who we are. They only come into the foreground, where we can see and confront them, when we are confronted by the 'other'. Some people sit in a classroom, or participate in a bible study, or work through a topic on their own, and simply become confirmed in their prejudices. They seek to strengthen their arguments so that they may convince others of the rightness of their views. Such people are not, in my estimation, really students. One who studies is willing to be liberated from his or her preconceptions.

Study as Privilege and Challenge

Writing this essay has given me a chance to review, and even to relive, my experience of study. The experience has reminded me of what a privilege study is. Millions of people struggle to feed themselves and their families each day. Millions more live in temporary, even squalid, shelter, as refugees from war or natural disasters. The threats of terror and war hang over us all, but they endanger the poor especially. We confront the horrifying gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. In such a world, how blessed are we who have the luxury of exploring a subject which is of interest to us. What an extravagance to have time to read, reflect, discuss and write!

If study is meant to liberate us, we must ask for what or for whom are we freed? The privilege of study challenges us to put its fruits to good use. Paul reminds us that gifts are given for the common good, not for self-aggrandisement (1 Corinthians 12:7). I hope and pray that my study may not only lead me to freedom, but may also serve those who suffer from injustice. The truth makes us free; let us hope that our freedom can serve the cause of our sisters and brothers in captivity.

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