GODTALK WITH THE RELIGIOUSLY TONE-DEAF

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THE POPULATION OF LEIPZIG is roughly 16% Christian (4% Catholic), and 84% without any professed religion. Those belonging to other religious faiths are too few to appear in the statistics. Elsewhere in the former East Germany, the situation of Christianity is a little stronger, but in general the society is without religion. New Age movements and the like are notably less attractive here than in the West. The German philosopher Eberhard Tiefensee follows Max Weber in speaking of the 'religiously tone-deaf', and of *homo areligiosus*. The norm is to be uninterested in religion. The anti-religious education system of the old German Democratic Republic was all too successful.

It is in such a situation that, following the changes of 1989, the Society of Jesus, with the agreement of the local diocese, set up in 1997 a kind of Catholic enquiry centre, including a meditation room. Alongside myself, there is a sister, a half-time office assistant, and some thirty volunteers—mostly the recently retired, but also some young people.[1] It is out of the experience of working in this centre that the present article springs.

Biding One's Time

We do not just offer courses and events in our own space; we are also trying to talk to people in non-Church groups and settings, such as adult education classes. For years there has been in Grünau—a large prefab estate in Leipzig—a 'reflection club'. It meets monthly to talk about politics, society and life in general. Most of the members are of retirement

[1] See www.jesuiten.org/glaubensinfo_leipzig.

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An accordionist on a Leipzig street corner

age, and nearly all of them were educated relentlessly within the socialist system. At the start, one of the members was an Anabaptist brother. During a discussion after a few months about the point of life, he told the members of the group that they were all leading meaningless lives because they did not believe in God. They were unwilling to accept this, and the brother's response was to write the group a letter, with many quotations from Scripture threatening judgment and damnation. After that, he was never seen again. This made people angry. I stayed in the group, and did not identify myself either with the claim that their lives were meaningless or with the threat of damnation, because I felt no 'divine commission', no inner impulse, to do so. In the end, I just did not know—and I still do not know—what God thinks about these people.

For more than five years now, I have been a member of this circle. When the co-founder died, I was elected its chair. The co-founder, having talked with his wife, invited me before he died to conduct his funeral—this despite the fact that whenever I had talked to him before his death he had insisted that for him there was no God and no personal life beyond the grave. This was the first time I had conducted a funeral outside a Church. Most of the people there were his former Communist comrades. The texts consisted of the dead man's writings, and my own thoughts about hope for 'seeing each other again'—

something of which, surprisingly, the dead man's boss, a Communist, also spoke.

A couple of years ago, I was asked to tell the group a bit about my life as a Jesuit, and also about the Jesuits in general—but the stress was to be on my personal history in this 'association'. Shortly after I had done that, the group wanted to know more about religions in general and about Christianity in particular. It was all a matter of waiting—waiting and sharing life, or some aspects of life, with those for whom I thought I had a message. If we wait in this way, then when we are asked—in whatever form the request comes—for 'an accounting of the hope that is in you', we can give an answer, calmly and with respect for the convictions and life-history of those with whom we are speaking. Our consciences are clear (1 Peter 3:15). We do not need to justify ourselves; we can afford to begin just by listening.

Sharing Life

Before you can do any proclamation, you have to live with people and understand them in the context of their problems. Thus our centre in Leipzig has always combined information and discussion about matters of faith with counselling. In counselling it is important just to be there, to listen, to enter into the client's inner world. You should not try to bring things to a religious conclusion if that is not somehow being asked for, or if the door seems closed to such things. Most of the time, that is how it is, particularly with non-Christians, and also quite often with believers. But then again, the counsellor or preacher can be blind to a God who is often present in these conversations, even when this only becomes clear later.

Let me give an example. I once challenged a doctor to think about how she could, as a Christian, talk to people about God. She later wrote to me:

> What actually is one talking about when one speaks about God? It's a stupid question for me to ask you, because after all you're always showing us how to do it. But perhaps everyone has to find their own answer. My answer, if I were to give one, would go like this: get rid of all sentimentality; constantly be looking for your own truth; don't speak in clichés; try to look at the reality of life as it stands before you and to talk about *that*. I notice that God's name is not mentioned in my answer, even though I do think it important to proclaim His name. I also notice that my answer is

> pretty earthy—and it only touches on a part of what you're always going on about in your sermons.

I have the sense that God is present in some conversations even when His conventional name does not pass our lips—whenever we listen to people, especially people in need, whenever we accept them, whenever we reach out for meaning. God seems to me more present then than when I have spoken expressly about Him before the other person can hear or understand what I am saying. In those situations, God does not come to live between us, because the communication is not working; but when there is good contact, then there is a trace of God in our togetherness.

It regularly happens that people who do not raise directly religious questions in individual conversation later turn up to one of our more explicitly religious sessions. The relative anonymity of the group gives them a safe space in which they can feel their way towards asking religious questions.

Experience First

But those who are seeking their way religiously—whether or not there is any Christianity in their life-history—appear more often at meditation sessions. They are not looking for religious information, and certainly not for dogmas. They are looking for a way in to a sense of life's meaning and to transcendence, but generally not in terms of creed or doctrine. Rather they are looking for an experience, individual or collective, and for a structured way of life that is somehow credible. Without necessarily naming it, they are looking for a religious experience; unemployed or overstretched as they are, they are wanting peace, calmness, some meaningful content in their life. They may be reaching out for genuine contact with people, in contrast to the vacuum in which they are often living.

Nevertheless, many soon find the quest offered by such practices as meditation too demanding, too boring, too fraught with anxiety. Some remain, constantly looking for silence, in order to try to become inwardly empty, inwardly free from everything that dominates them and drives them. Some find the stillness threatening and meaningless, but others discover that the stillness can be sustaining and protective, and that taking time for oneself and just being there can bring strength and inner peace. Is this sub-Buddhist nonsense? Sometimes I suggest

to the group that when we as men and women are just being there, we are living out what the Bible calls our being in the image of God—our likeness to the one who said of Himself, 'I am who am'.

To understand God in these terms is to stress the divine immanence. Such an approach is more accessible to those among our contemporaries who are undertaking the religious quest than a concept of God centred on transcendence, which speaks of a distant, holy God whose life has been communicated to us through prophets, or through a Son who lived two millennia ago. What matters here is that God, the Absolute, is within us; that there is something of quite unnegotiable value in us; that what we can see is only the surface of things; and that there is something more, something wholly other, or at least something very different. That sort of language gets across more easily. From here we can begin to speak, carefully and reticently, preferably avoiding any conventional theological or religious language, in words that emerge chiefly from the mystery of our human relationships.

What matters is that God, the Absolute, is within us

Amid the various uncertainties of life, people can come to recognise how much our life as a whole is in question. They get in touch with a vague, diffused feeling that our life as a whole really has no basis within itself. However, such experiences often resist interpretation—especially when they are somehow stimulated by religious functionaries. The first step is always one of being present with the people, just staying with the situation.

Another example, this time showing how the movement towards faith by way of meditation is a long-term, slow business. At Easter in 2003, a young man was baptized in Göttingen who had begun some ten years early to do meditation with me in the university chaplaincy. He had needed ten years before his life stabilised to the point that he could enter into relationships and explore serious questions. Only then could he discover and articulate his relationship with God, and overcome his scepticism sufficiently for a proper conversation about this relationship to be possible. Then he had found another faith-community that had enabled him to find his way to the Church in an institutional sense.

Of course, meditation is not the only form of religious experience. People can have such experiences in nature, in conversations, through their commitments, in their anxieties or joys, in their experiments with

A Communist-era building in Leipzig being demolished

prayer. But I am convinced that many people cannot understand the Christian message about God, and that religion for them will be a dead letter unless they are given access to what the words are talking about: the experience of life pointing beyond itself. Unless they are given some kind of way in, they just lack what it takes to have such experiences—or if they do have them, they cannot reflect on them, do something with them, or clarify what they mean.

I cannot talk about colour to a colour-blind person unless I somehow give them some purchase on what it is to experience colour. I cannot talk about the Reality behind all reality, about the love that passes all understanding, unless the person I am talking to has undergone, and noticed, an experience of this reality—at least in the

form of longing. When such a person hears words like 'faith' or 'hope' or 'love', they do not connect the words with any religious experience. What people are looking for, then, is not so much information as a person—a person who can open them up to a 'spiritual' experience, to an experience of something sustaining life as a whole. Such people will obviously need to have had and accepted this kind of experience themselves, and to have reflected upon it.

Talking Intelligibly about God

It might be objected that 'faith comes from what is heard' (Romans 10:17): faith needs words, and ultimately faith needs dogmas. I am not disputing this claim. But the Word needs to be intelligible. Christians in general, and theologians in particular, assume far too quickly that people can obviously understand what they are saying. Sometimes I hear my colleagues saying, 'those who don't understand don't want to understand'. Of course that is sometimes the case. But many people have no idea how much Christian language provokes incomprehension among people who are quite sincere and in good faith, but know nothing whatever about Christianity, or have received only a garbled version of it. Moreover, surveys and our own experience of conversations suggest that the situation among baptized Christians is not much better. We talk conventionally about God and with God, and thereby make religious language a dead skeleton which does nothing but mislead. Why are we talking about grace, salvation, redemption, forgiveness of sins, and heavenly glory? Why are we not speaking instead about everyday experiences which might lead us to go more deeply, of freedom from inner and outer compulsions, of overcoming loneliness and hatred, of an insatiable thirst for love and life, of unconditional love and affirmation? Why cannot we make it clear that everyday things, whether pleasant or burdensome, can be heralds of God—as we see in Jesus' parables?

When I was doing teaching practice in Frankfurt, this point came home to me in a way I shall never forget. I was meant to be explaining what heaven was. I decided I would begin with the young people themselves, and I managed to get them to talk about what they really wanted: about their desire for a place of love and safety (most came from broken families), for a sense of acceptance, for experiences that would be fascinating. They began to speak quite unrestrainedly about

their dreams. When I said to them that they were describing heaven, their jaws dropped. The teacher supervising me stopped marking her exercise books, and the class began to listen. Up till then, heaven had been boring for them, and not something worth striving for. But love without betrayal or exploitation—that was something else, that was worth it. I can't remember how long it lasted—but at that point we communicated, and there was understanding. Heaven was near. It is 37 years since that class, and I have never forgotten it.

Finding God in People's Lives

Why don't we show how a knowledge of God's love and the thought of life within death can free us to overcome our compulsions and to live fully? Is it perhaps that we live in such a tense and unintegrated way that we do not want to be put to the test ourselves?

Perhaps one of the reasons why theologically trained people avoid talking to people who are searching is that they can only stutter, or else lapse into incomprehensible jargon, when they are asked just what some proposition of faith, or liturgical ritual, has to do with real life. But we say that our God is a God of life. Why do we find it so hard to preach on how it is of such importance to us that God is Trinity, that God is at once above us, within us, and among us? And yet we bless ourselves everyday in the name of the Triune God.

When a Christian, or someone trained in theology, is talking about the faith and begins a sentence with 'But you must understand …', my reaction is, 'there is absolutely no reason why they *must* understand'. It is the religious professional who has to do the learning, learning to translate God's message into the other person's life-experience. They should avoid saying such things as 'in their world there are no words for God and prayer'. If a person is alive, they have some idea of what life is. And God is the Living One. We cannot but, therefore, be able to speak about God, about the yearning within human life for infinity.

A recent survey has shown that more than half the population in the former East Germany are 'atheistic believers in Life'. They believe 'in Life'—Life in general, rather than conceived in personal terms. If they are believing in 'Life', are they really atheists in the full sense, or is it just that their faith in 'Life' has not yet been fully developed? And can we understand their 'Life' well enough—which will always be a matter of starting from what 'Life' means for individuals, not from the

The foyer of a new cinema centre in Leipzig

general idea of 'Life'—to point to elements within it that might lead them on further?

We need to stop complaining about how non-believers lead lives that are just materialistic, closed to the religious dimension. Perhaps such claims are true in one sense. But these people are capable of dying peacefully and calmly. I think of a simple old lady who told me that she was content with her life, and wanted nothing more. I think of people who helped others during the 2002 floods to the point of exhaustion, and who can name as the values that sustain them in time of crisis their friends, their family, their recreational interests, and the ideals to which they can commit themselves. I think of 55-year-olds, made redundant and sent into a harsh early retirement, who nevertheless can still find meaning in their lives. For me, people like this are the dwelling-place of God.

Obviously the people of the former East Germany see the matter differently. They do not use the word 'God' as a way of interpreting their existence. This word still appears 'unscientific', not respectable—a virtually ineradicable result of Communist propaganda and of an

earlier fundamentalist approach to religious instruction. It has been brought into disrepute by its association with the lifeless compulsiveness all too easily visible in churchgoers. I must take their self-description as 'godless' seriously, and I am not going to say to them, 'you actually do really believe in God—it's just that you don't realise it'. But that does not stop me reverencing the presence of God in other people, and trying to express this verbally in those peaceful, meaningful moments when this can be done without a sense of things being forced.

Why should I bother offering my interpretation of people's existence when they are quite happy with the interpretation they have? What justifies my doing this? My answer is rather pragmatic. I only talk about a religious interpretation of life with people who ask for it, either individually, or—as happens rather more frequently—in the context of an adult education course or of the various things we offer in our information centre. But it is hard to distinguish those who are happy with themselves from those who are not, and therefore we make what we can offer widely known. Anyone who wants to move beyond the merely conventional in this context is someone we can talk to. And we must make ourselves visible enough for such people to be able to find us.

I also think that human society, collectively and as experienced by individuals, is impoverished if the question about transcendence is not alive within it. This does not mean that society will survive only if it uses our language and our images. Karl Rahner once said that Christianity's task in the future might be simply to keep the question about God alive. This is the vision that I find inspiring—not the sense that I have to talk people into something, or get something across to them.

Growing in Dialogue

I hope it is clear from what has been said that we see proclamation as a matter of dialogue. I sometimes see and hear my colleagues saying that dialogue with non-Christians must in the end be monologue, because we have a truth to proclaim that other people do not have. This seems to me not to recognise the dignity of our dialogue partners. Is it really that we *have* the truth? Or is our conviction rather that we are *being led*

by God along a secure path, a path that can never lead us completely astray?

Vatican II observes that salvation can occur also in the other religions. It follows that we can profit from this. When we engage with people whose beliefs are different, we too are being constantly challenged to concentrate on what is essential in our faith. We need to become liberated from time-conditioned and all too human magical distortions, and to discover new aspects of our faith. Simple Christians often concede that they shy away from real dialogue with people whose beliefs are different from theirs, and that they are incapable of listening patiently. And they give a reason: they are uncertain in their own faith, and are worried that their sense of religious identity might collapse. There are some with theological training who cannot let themselves make such an admission. Perhaps we need first to deal with the unbelief within ourselves before we can understand and address our contemporaries whose beliefs are different from ours, and who are allegedly without any religion.

If parents really accept that bringing up children is a process of honest dialogue, and commit themselves to such a process, they themselves also become personally enriched. Similarly, if we let ourselves be challenged in conversation by our fellow citizens who are non-believers, or else believers in something very different from Christianity, the experience can increase and purify our own faith.[2]

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[2] This article was first published in *Stimmen der Zeit*. We are most grateful to the editors for their permission to reproduce it here in English. The images are taken from contemporary Leipzig.