

THE JESUIT BLINDNESS

The Crisis Jesuits Will Not Face

Ama Samy

RECENTLY AN INDIAN JESUIT SCHOLASTIC, who was doing his theology, took a leave of absence and then left the Society altogether. He was a fine person, very intelligent, affable and practical, liked and appreciated by both his companions and his superiors. I asked him why he was leaving, and he told me that he was having a crisis of faith—in God, in Christ and in the Church. When he shared his crisis with his guides and teachers, they told him that it would pass in the course of time; that he should not worry about such questions since these were matters of faith which he should just accept in trust and belief; and that what mattered in the Society was the option for the poor and serving the dalits.

The scholastic had worked among the poor before he began to study theology, and serving them was his greatest consolation. However, this did not help with his problems: when God, Christ and the afterlife are all in doubt, what is the point of giving oneself to the service of the poor? He had become a religious in order to realise the presence of God in his life, and to bear witness to this realisation; but without a relationship with God, what was the point of giving his life to being a social-worker or a teacher? I asked whether his companions had similar doubts, and he said that a number of them did. But some did not want to probe any deeper; some were agnostic and opportunistic, preferring the relative security and privilege of the Society to a precarious life in the world; and some hoped that the questions would disappear.

I am not attempting to discern all this individual's motives and problems, nor to question the vocations of some Jesuits. More is involved in such decisions and judgments than a person necessarily admits. But I suggest that what happened in this case is symptomatic of a wider crisis that the Society of Jesus is reluctant to face, that it will not see. The Jesuits are good social workers, church administrators,

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organizers, philosophers and theologians, but they do not always have a spirit-filled relationship with God. Henri Bremond wrote that the Jesuits in seventeenth-century France were anti-mystical and obsessed with the human to the point of forgetting God and grace, and that they were trying to hide the atheism of their hearts by external works and achievements.¹ This accusation retains its potency today, in a postmodern world where so much is placed in question.

The Conversion of the Jesuits?

The General Congregations

Peter Bisson has provided a fine analysis of the recent Jesuit General Congregations (GCs), applying Bernard Lonergan's theory of conversions to their work.² His main thesis is that the GCs have



Pedro Arrupe

revolutionised the nature of religious meaning for the Society by articulating social commitment as the heart of its mission. For him—though I remain sceptical—this commitment to social justice constitutes a moral conversion. Inspired by Vatican II, the 31st General Congregation (1965–6) opened itself to the idea of ‘reading the signs of the times’, and to no longer treating the secular and the sacred as two separate, watertight compartments. Sin was seen as social and structural as well as personal, and the Society committed itself to the world, and to the work of justice in the world, as

¹ Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, quoted in Justin Taylor and Albert Dilanni, ‘What Is Religious Life’s Purpose?’ *Review for Religious*, 59/2 (March/April 2000), 148–155.

² Peter Bisson, ‘The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations: Social Commitment Constructing a New World of Religious Meaning’, *Lonergan Workshop*, 19 (2007) 1–35.

fundamental to its apostolate. Pedro Arrupe was elected General at this GC, and he brought fresh air into the Jesuit mission and apostolate. However, it was the 32nd General Congregation (1974–5), with its Decree 4, that was the turning point:

The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement.

Social justice was no longer one apostolic sector among others, but became ‘the orienting dimension of the Jesuit’s entire world of religious meaning, that is, as a constitutive dimension of mission’.³ The traditional mission of saving souls, propagating the faith, and converting and baptizing people into the Church was transformed into a twin commitment to ‘service of faith’ and ‘promotion of justice’. Justice acquired a religious meaning; personal conversion was entwined with the transformation of social structures.

The introduction of social consciousness into the constitutive level of religious meaning made the boundary between private and public that had characterized the reciprocally defining opposition between the religious and the secular extremely porous. In effect, the change made the private public, and the public private ... it made the world religious, and the religious worldly. These boundaries became porous both within the structure of personal religious and cultural identity, as well as externally in the structures of communal identity.⁴

Can we call this a moral conversion? Lonergan talks of three conversions: religious, moral and intellectual. Religious conversion is surrendering to God’s unconditional love and thus becoming a subject-in-love. Moral conversion involves making choices in terms of values rather than in terms of satisfactions or fears, and taking responsibility for one’s choices. Intellectual conversion means knowing how one knows: that is, knowing what one does when one experiences, understands the experience, and judges the correctness of the understanding.

Bisson would say that GC 32’s option for justice was a moral conversion of the corporate body that is the Society. It was certainly a

³ Bisson, ‘The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations’, 14.

⁴ Bisson, ‘The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations’, 18.

transformation of the Society's vision and outlook on the world and on religion. But I would argue that this transformation was part of something that was already happening in the world among various religions and peoples. The Society was observing the signs of the times and following the lead of others. And it was also finding a relevance for itself in the changing, modern world.

The option for justice gave a new vitality and vision to many Jesuits, both young and old. But it also brought tensions and conflicts to the Provinces. Some Jesuits campaigned for social and political revolution or joined aggressive political movements. Paradoxically, factionalism, partiality and prejudice were intensified—mainly over the choice of policies and programmes. The Society's religious vision should have limited it to non-violent movements for justice; but sometimes this vision was lost in the conflicting cacophony of interest groups. There is now a general understanding and acceptance that justice work is essential to the Jesuit apostolate. But talk of moral conversion, particularly of individuals, is questionable.

The 33rd GC (1983) elected Peter-Hans Kolvenbach as General. This GC clarified and deepened the option of GC 32. It specified that the faith-justice commitment was fundamentally spiritual in nature, received from God through the Church.



Mural from a Nicaraguan church featuring Che Guevara

It repeated in various ways that Jesuit mission was not faith alone or justice alone, and not even faith and justice juxtaposed, but rather one single mission and existential commitment rooted in 'love of God and love of neighbour'.⁵

It recognised the Society as the corporate subject and agent of mission; it also focused on the collective experience of the Society as such and asked for communal discernment in decision-making. The Society was beginning to turn its social consciousness on itself.

GC 34 (1995) articulated the mission of service of faith and promotion of justice comprehensively in terms of human life's structural, social, cultural and religious aspects:

No service of faith without
Promotion of justice
Entry into cultures
Openness to other religious experiences

No promotion of justice without
Communicating faith
Transforming cultures
Collaboration with other traditions

No inculturation without
Communicating faith with others
Dialogue with other traditions
Commitment to justice

No dialogue without
Sharing faith with others
Evaluating cultures
Concern for justice⁶

It began to focus on the different dimensions and operations of this mission in terms of religious experience. It saw the Society's work for justice, dialogue and inculturation in terms of encountering Christ; Christ, not the Society, was the agent of mission. The whole Society, the corporate body, however, was seen as the instrument of Christ's work. The Society saw itself contemplating the world through the gaze

⁵ Bisson, 'The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations', 22.

⁶ *Documents of the Thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), decree 2, no. 47.

of the Blessed Trinity; it did not simply focus on its tasks in the world, but on the Word being sent into the world. It understood its mission as working with Christ in his mission to the world.

Jesuit Mission

Up until GC 34, the Society's understanding of mission was of a task 'out there'; but now there was a growing realisation that mission begins 'in here'.

Thus in GC 34 the object of the Society's attention is no longer only the world as object of mission, or the systematic understanding of mission, but also includes the Society's inner experience as the corporate subject of mission and the operational performance of the subjectivity.⁷

It is not simply a matter of the Society's 'reflecting on the quality of its engagement with the world, but on the quality of its engagement with Christ actively engaged in the world'.⁸ Bisson remarks on this turn to interiority:

By identifying and recommending the performance of the mission operations of social consciousness and religious consciousness, from a basis in interiority, GC 34 not only attains a heightened awareness of the nature of its transformed subjectivity, but chooses this subjectivity and deliberately accepts the transformation This acknowledgement and acceptance of the transformation suggests conversion.⁹

Before GC 34, the Society was asking 'What are the needs out there, and what should we do about them?' GC 34 asked instead 'What is Christ doing in our world? How are we being invited to join in his activity?' According to Bisson this change is evidence of both moral and religious conversion. But what about intellectual conversion, which asks 'How do we know?'¹⁰ For Bisson the transformations of the Society are already part of intellectual conversion. The next step, he suggests, will be,

... the practice of communal apostolic discernment of the signs of the world by recognising in its collective experience and

⁷ Bisson, 'The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations', 29.

⁸ Bisson, 'The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations', 32.

⁹ Bisson, 'The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations', 30.

¹⁰ Bisson, 'The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations', 30.

transformations the communal consolations and desolations that indicate the presence and action of Christ in context¹¹

Finally, ecological concerns will have to be incorporated into the Society's consciousness.

The Jesuits in the Postmodern World

What has happened to the Society is that it has adapted itself to the times in order to make itself relevant. It has woken up to the social and secular dimension as an essential part of the spiritual dimension. It has come to realise that the kingdom of God is not detached from social, political, economic and ecological liberation in this world; that the non-Christian religions are not the work of Satan; and that Christianity cannot avoid working together with them. All this implies a change of mind-set, mostly in response to the modern, or postmodern, world; but can we call this conversion in any of Lonergan's senses? If one can talk of conversion at all, it is rather *confessional* conversion as explained by David J. Krieger—that is, a conversion which does not involve any absolute change of world-view and which will be an intensification of pre-existing attitudes and practices.¹²

The recent GCs have tried to streamline and unify the works and mission of the Society, both externally and internally. They have done the committee work of analyzing, tabulating, categorizing and correlating what has to be done; the result is policy statements and formulations. What Bisson calls the 'turn to interiority' is a sort of colonisation of the hearts and minds of its members by the Society's own vision and ideology, increasing their commitment to its work. The GCs relabel Jesuit experience as Christic experience; they attribute presuppositions, concepts and images to the inner world of feelings and emotions. This is ideological education, not spiritual transformation. Moreover, all the talk of interiority and experience is framed in terms of, and for the sake of, commitment to the outer mission; the mission does not intrinsically flow from the inner experience. There is nothing wrong with this; the Society has done what an institution should do in order to be alive and effective in the world. But we have to be aware of what is

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¹¹ Bisson, 'The Postconciliar Jesuit Congregations', 34.

¹² David J. Krieger, 'Communication Theory and Inter-religious Dialogue', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Summer–Fall 1993). See also my 'How to Teach Zen to Christians', in *Zen Meditation* (Bangalore: I. J. A. Publications, 2006).

happening, and of its limitations. There are, however, two serious problems that I would like to focus on here, both of which are relevant to the experience of the scholastic mentioned earlier.

Faith and Justice

The first of these problems has to do with justice. Much confusion, misuse and distortion surround 'the promotion of justice' as 'an absolute requirement' of 'the service of faith', although successive GCs have tried to hedge and qualify it in terms of 'faith and reconciliation'. The problem is that the idea of justice becomes implicated in a dualism of the just versus the unjust. Masao Abe, a Zen Buddhist scholar, contrasts the Christian notions of love and justice with Buddhist wisdom and compassion:

If justice, or righteousness, is the sole principle of judgment or is too strongly emphasized, it creates serious disunity and schism In Buddhism, compassion always goes with wisdom. ... unlike the Christian notion of justice, however, the Buddhist notion of wisdom does not entail judgment or election. Buddhist wisdom implies the affirmation or recognition of everything and everyone in their distinctiveness or in their suchness. ... the notion of justice creates an irreparable split between the just and the unjust, the righteous and the unrighteous, whereas the notion of wisdom evokes the sense of equality and solidarity. Love and justice are like water and fire: although both are necessary, they go together with difficulty. Compassion and wisdom are like heat and light: although different, they complement each other well.¹³

Eastern religious thinkers have pointed out that an over-emphasis on justice often leads, paradoxically, to injustice and irreligion. Masao Abe's understanding is more perceptive than that of many Christian theologians. He agrees that 'our religious experience of God is deepened and expanded by our actions for justice', but warns,

If ... liberation theologians mean, however, that our action for justice is the *ground* of a new religious experience of God Himself, I cannot agree. The authentic religious experience of God must come from God Himself, because God is the ground and the source of liberation. ... Our actions in time and space, however serious and

¹³ Masao Abe, *Zen and Modern World: A Third Sequel to Zen and Western Thought*, edited by Steven Heine (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P, 2003), 11–12.

important they may be, cannot be a ground or source of God-experience, though they certainly can deepen and expand it.¹⁴

There is always a danger of politics taking precedence over grace. If the option for the poor becomes mixed up with party politics and institutional ideology, an idolatrous obsession with formulations, slogans, resolutions and rules may replace sensitivity to the concrete, singular individual and the concrete, singular situation. Ethical or religious conversion disappears, both for individual Jesuits and for the people who are supposed to be liberated. And when justice and mercy clash, or when self-care or fidelity is on the line, how will you deal with such dilemmas? John D. Caputo puts it sharply:

Ethical judgments occur in the singular, in the unprecedented and unrepeatable situation of individual lives. That means that we can never say a law or a principle is just, for that would be too sweeping and pretentious, the manifestations of its injustices being right around the corner, and certainly not that a human being at large is just—the more just the individual the less likely he or she is to make such a claim. At most, we might say, with fear and trembling, that a singular event was carried out with justice the singularity is always the exception, the excess, that which exceeds and excepts itself from the sweep of universality, from the horizon of predictability and foreseeability.¹⁵

The Fiftieth Gate

The second problem may be illustrated by a beautiful Hasidic story called 'The Fiftieth Gate'. Rebbe Barukh of Medzebozh had a disciple who was too much caught up in intellectual questions. The Rebbe could not answer them all. The disciple withdrew from the Rebbe and the community, and began to dig more and more into his own doubts and questions; which only led him deeper and deeper into despair and thoughts of suicide. The Rebbe one day went in search of him and said, standing face to face with his disciple:

'You are surprised to see me here, in your room? You shouldn't be. I can read your thoughts, I know your innermost secrets. You are alone and trying to deepen your loneliness. You have already passed through, one

¹⁴ Abe, *Zen and Modern World*, 34.

¹⁵ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2000), 173–174, 181.

after the other, the fifty gates of knowledge and doubt—and I know how you did it. You began with one question; you explored it in depth to discover the first answer, which allowed you to open the first gate; you crossed and found yourself confronted by a new question. You worked on its solution and found the second gate. And the third. And the fourth and the tenth; one leads to the other, one is a key to the other. And now you stand before the fiftieth gate.

Look: it is open. And you are frightened, aren't you? The open gate fills you with fear, because if you pass through it, you will face a question to which there is no answer—no human answer. And if you try you will fall. Into the abyss. And you will be lost. Forever. You didn't know that. Only I did. But now you also know.

'What am I to do?' cried the disciple, terrified. 'What can I do? Go back? To the beginning? Back to the first gate?'—'Impossible', said the Master. 'Man can never go back; it is too late. What is done cannot be undone.'

There was a long silence. Suddenly the young disciple began to tremble violently. 'Please, Rebbe', he cried, 'help me. Protect me. What is there left for me to do? Where can I go from here?'—'Look in front of you. Look beyond that gate. What keeps man from running, dashing over its threshold? What keeps man from falling? Faith. Yes, son: beyond the fiftieth gate there is not only the abyss but also faith—and they are next to one another....' And the Rebbe brought his disciple back to his people—and to himself.¹⁶

This story does not tell us exactly how the Rebbe brought the disciple out of his despair and doubt; but it is likely that the caring compassion of the Rebbe and of his community helped him.

Communities are built on narratives, symbols, rituals, tasks and caring relationships. And a community is what the Society of Jesus is trying to build. I am not decrying this work; and I am not against theologies, philosophies, analyses and programmes. But I would argue that unless we face the abyss beyond the fiftieth gate, unless we reach the point at which

¹⁶ Elie Wiesel, *Four Hasidic Masters and Their Struggle against Melancholy* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 1978), 29–31. This story is also told in Alan Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 107–109. See the chapter, 'Awakening: A Metaphorical Process', in my book *ZEN: Awakening to Your Original Face* (Chennai: Cre-A, 2005).

the intellect will not suffice to answer our questions and we encounter faith, we will not come to authentic spirituality and mission.

The Abyss

In our so-called postmodern world, it seems that all ideologies, world-views and belief systems have been placed in question; they are seen as no more than power-plays. How do we decide between their competing truth claims, except on the basis of power? There is no pure knowledge innocent of power. Biblical criticism has evacuated even the Bible of its unquestioned authority. The Bible story has become a myth like other myths, upheld within our communities by ritual and repetition, as well as by social authority.¹⁷ We do not know what ultimately is, what is really real; we do not have certain security anywhere. The ultimate has become a meaningless cipher to our intellects.

We weave philosophies and theologies as what Peter Berger calls 'sacred canopies', constructs that provide us with meaning and legitimation, that cover up the void. It has been argued that our civilisations and cultures are defences against and denials of this void at the heart of existence, and of death.¹⁸ Our human world is a constructed reality, a social web of elaborate images, concepts and rituals; it is a façade of interpretation built upon interpretation. There is an Eastern story that illustrates the point. A king asked the sage, 'What is the ultimate base of the world?' 'The world is resting on the



¹⁷ See *Jivan: News and Views of Jesuits in India* (August 2002).

¹⁸ See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

back of a giant tortoise, Your Majesty.' 'What is the base on which that tortoise is resting?' 'Another tortoise, Your Majesty.' 'And that tortoise ...?' 'Your Majesty, it is tortoises all the way!'

The thing that we are failing to see, or rather that we do not want to see, is the void: nothingness, emptiness gaping at our feet. Keiji Nishitani puts it thus: '... in modern nihilism, nihility has deepened into an abyss: the nihility that one becomes aware of at the ground of the self and the world extends all the way to the locus of the divine'.¹⁹ We dare not look into the abyss. But there is no true spirituality, and no authentic ethical action, without letting ourselves fall into the void and thus coming to resurrection and to compassion.

An example of what this might mean is the experience of Walter J. Ciszek, a Jesuit who was held in the Russian Lubyanka prison and who underwent a sort of falling into the void and coming to resurrection.²⁰ Ciszek was a US Jesuit of Polish ancestry who went to work underground in communist Russia. He was discovered, captured and, under extreme questioning, came to sign documents saying he was a spy for the US and for Rome. After this he experienced a depression and a 'dark night'. He came to realise that he had relied on his own will-power and his mind to withstand evil, in part because of the confidence that his Jesuit training had instilled in him. But in losing himself and falling into the abyss of darkness, loss of faith, and despair, he came to a revival and resurrection of faith.

But Ciszek's experience, because of its unique circumstances, cannot provide a model for spiritual practice. Moreover, Ciszek, as a good Jesuit, was anxious to interpret what happened immediately in terms of his theology and world-view. Of course, as Christians, we ultimately see the world and reality in terms of the Christian vision; but first we have to pass through darkness, death and emptiness. This calls for a fundamental conversion: falling into the void and dying to the self and the world, and awakening to a new heaven and a new earth. Without such a conversion our morality and religion may be little more than ideologies and ego-trips, and we are vulnerable to fear and to doubt.

¹⁹ Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, translated by Jan van Bragt (U. of California P, 1982), 95.

²⁰ Walter J. Ciszek, with Daniel Flaherty, *He Leadeth Me: An Extraordinary Testament of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), chapters 6 and 7. A summary is given in my German book, *ZEN: Erwachen zum ursprünglichen Gesicht* (Stuttgart: Theseus Verlag, 2002).

The Jesuit Blindness

What I have written about facing the void is not something new, which Jesuits do not know, nor am I the first to write about it. But where in our spirituality do we deal with this dimension? The GCs have classified, categorized and correlated our tasks in the world and clothed them in spirituality and theology. They talk about interior or spiritual experience, but this is only another layer of interpretation. The Spiritual Exercises are the foundation of the spirituality that the GCs presuppose. But there is no place in the Exercises for facing the void and emptiness; they are framed in terms of a world-view that already takes for granted God, Christ and the Church. Even in the Third Week there is no explicit sharing in the experience of Christ on the cross crying: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' The Exercises are good for those who are already believing Christians, but they do not answer the modern and postmodern questions. St Ignatius talks a great deal about interior knowledge in the *Spiritual Exercises*, but this is only the reflection in feelings of the images and exercises that he describes.

Meister Eckhart's spirituality of the nothingness of God as one's own groundless ground can better respond, perhaps, to the experience of the void: the soul, he says, 'wants to go into the simple ground, into the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed, nor the Father, nor the Son nor the Holy Spirit'.²¹ Keiji Nishitani writes that Eckhart,

... refers to the 'essence' of God that is free of all form—the completely image-free [*bildlos*] godhead—as 'nothingness', and considers the soul to return to itself and acquire absolute freedom only when it becomes totally one with the 'nothingness' of godhead.²²

Eckhart is inspiring, but he remains a marginal figure in Christianity, and his spirituality is based very much on intellectual theory and on Neoplatonism. There is, moreover, no specific spiritual practice associated with him.

²¹ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 48, in *Everything as Divine: The Wisdom of Meister Eckhart*, translated by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist, 1996), 21–22.

²² Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 99.

It is Buddhism, and particularly Zen Buddhism, that seem to have confronted the problem of void and emptiness, impermanence and groundlessness most directly. Of course, institutional Buddhism has its own problems, and there are different kinds of Buddhism. Zen, too, comes in different kinds, and its value depends much on the maturity and depth of the Zen master. Nevertheless, Zen as a whole is a tradition and a praxis that has confronted the void, and have shown how to enter it and be transformed—in Christian terms through death and resurrection. It is not that Zen itself gives us the grace and the power; but it shows us the way and points out the possibilities. Above all it gives us a successful praxis that has been tested over time.²³ Of course, Zen cannot be the way for most Jesuits, but for some it can offer a much-needed vision and open up new possibilities; and in that sense it can be a grace for the Society as a whole if we have the willingness and receptivity to explore it. Let me end with a Zen koan:

Master Kyogen said, 'It is like a man up a tree who hangs from a branch by his mouth; his hands cannot grasp a bough, his feet cannot touch the tree. Another man comes under the tree and asks him the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West. If he does not answer, he does not meet the questioner's need. If he answers, he will lose his life. At such a time, how should he answer?'²⁴

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²³ I have written a great deal on Zen practice and how Christians can practise Zen. Some of my articles have been gathered in *ZEN: Awakening to Your Original Face and Zen Meditation*.

²⁴ Zenkei Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, translated by Sumiko Kudo (Boston: Shambala, 2000), 53. 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?' is a Zen idiom which basically asks: 'How do you realise salvation and liberation?'