

THE CONTEMPLATIVE: A PROPHET IN SOCIETY?

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In the long run, the sword is overcome by the spirit. Napoleon.

WHEN ANYONE SAYS that members of religious orders, and especially contemplative religious, bear a prophetic role, we are a bit inclined to agree seriously and wonder vaguely what it all means.

This article may not offer many answers, preferring more realistically to try and loosen up the whole subject and perhaps to open avenues of thought which had previously seemed choked off. Contemplative is taken to mean those who live in a contemplative community, canonically established in the Church, though very little is said which excludes the many others who live a form of contemplative prayer; society is taken in its widest meaning of the global village, though with a bias to Western Europe but not simply to the south of England. This inevitably means a shift from the concrete to the abstract, but I hope it will not result in vague generalities which disguise, more or less cunningly, an absence of ideas.

Whether those living the contemplative life would label themselves as 'of' the world or not, we are undoubtedly 'in' it, and this is the *Gestalt*, the setting, out of which contemplative prayer springs and to which it is, we trust, relevant. Much contemplative thinking and writing is, rightly, concerned with hiddenness and withdrawal, so that very little has been said about the tide which returns from us to the world in which we live. This is partly so, as well, because there is a tendency among contemplatives to be unimpressed by theories, preferring to get on and live the life, pray the prayer rather than to talk about it. It is also due to the extreme difficulty of speaking about something which is not usefully productive to a meritocratic world, a structured and hierarchical world sorted into sizes by grids of money, class, status, talent, success or the sheer drive to power. We lack, or appear to lack, a common language.

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Bonhoeffer was certainly right when he said that God was allowing us to edge him out of our lives.¹ This seems, for our society, to be part of a long process of loss of faith, at least in a God of institutions, and we may legitimately wonder where this development is leading us, where God is leading us, where the divine thrust to incarnation is, so to speak, leading God. The truth is that God is as marginalized as anyone else these days. If the polls are accurate, a huge majority believe in him but fail to see the relevance of the Churches. On the other hand, a few years ago, a contemplative sister passing through London, for instance, would probably be approached by an elderly lady or two saying, 'It is so nice to see a sister in a habit'. Today she is more likely to be approached by younger people, especially, it seems, by out-of-work young men, asking serious questions about God and Christ and the search for meaning. They assume that we know something about this, not because we have studied, but because we have prayed. There is also an assumption which is quite correct, that the contemplative can speak to the marginalized precisely because she or he, too, is marginal, both to society and to the visible activities of the institutional Church—which is not to say that contemplation is marginal to the Church.

To move to the fringe of a group or society is, paradoxically, to express a relationship with it, if only by renouncing the powers and privileges which confer status within it. This in itself is a comment on, if not a condemnation of, those powers and privileges. Many of us had little of either to renounce, which is why our comments are footnotes, and our altered relationship with society no great shock to either of us; yet the fact remains that both our going and the manner of it can be taken as fair comment on the values of the group we have left. Celibacy indicates that we have not moved out in order to establish our ideal, alternative commonwealth, as the Shakers have done in the United States, for instance, since a celibate, one-sex community is not ordinary human living. Nor are we living uncomfortably now in the hope of better things in the next world. Nor are we merely reacting against the mores and customs around us. What we are doing is focussing our lives on a single goal, seeking out how we may pursue a way of life intuitively glimpsed and not easily verbalized. At the same time, the gospel is a statement about how human life is best lived, and in so far as the contemplative life is an effort to live by the gospel, just so far can society have the reasonable

expectation that at least we do not reflect its own ills back to it. This may be far more searching than at first appears, since we are all tarred with consumerism and power and extravagance. We live in a world rushing to the brink of social, ecological and economic disaster, if not of total nuclear obliteration, yet as Paul VI remarked, we also live 'at the pinnacle of the Christian conscience'.² It may be that the desperate plight of our world will—or should—oblige us to rethink our traditional silence and that the interest which so many show today in mysticism and myth is all part of a shift back towards the centre of things where the great work of incarnation and redemption and union is as accessible as ever.

Turning to the prophetic dimension more specifically, we must keep hold of the idea of prophecy as a society-related phenomenon, as it was presumably not by chance that classical prophecy in Israel more or less began and ended with the monarchy. One of the activities of the prophet was that of commenting, criticizing and spotlighting imbalances in the way that society was being run. The prophet stood over and against contemporary values, confronting them with the ignored realities of those whom Yahweh valued, the marginalized, the exploited and the poor, though at the same time he ran the risk which we all run of becoming what he resisted: blinkered, biassed, one-sided. The contemplative, fortunately, does not stand only, or mainly, in this tradition of social awareness, but looks back to the far older tradition which began with Abraham, the prophet who will intercede for us.³ Scripture scholars say that remark is a late interpolation, but however late, it is still fairly old in relation to us today and contains a relevant truth. Like Abraham, the contemplative stands at a place where there has been a theophany, a self-disclosure of God. The enclosure, this place of theophany, is set apart, not in recoil from the wicked world, but as a place of worship and intercession, because here God has manifested himself and prayer has been valid.⁴ In fact, the original meaning of *templum*, one of the root words of contemplative, is an open space for observation. The value of enclosure resides in what goes on inside it, not in how strictly it is kept. Its value resides in the quality of our observation in our open space, and the goal of our observances. Like Shechem, the enclosure is a place where the foreign gods of the people are buried⁵—or to say the same thing in a phrase already used, the ills of society are not (we hope) reflected back to it. Who is this

theophany for? Throughout Scripture and the history of the Church, 'I saw the Lord and he said this to me' is always followed by 'Go and tell',⁶ and if the enclosure is a place of repentance and reconciliation, these must in some way be between God and all people, as well as between God and the individual contemplative. It is this role as the servant of worship and reconciliation which qualifies the contemplative to inherit the prophetic mantle of Abraham.

There is a tension, even an imbalance, however, between our awareness of the universality of this Good News that God and humanity are reconciled,⁷ and the apartness which is intrinsic to the processes of contemplation, especially if contemplation is seen as the goal of reconciliation. Similarly there is an ambivalence in agreeing that many, if not all, are called to contemplative prayer in some degree, and yet that we ourselves need to live it under such highly specialized conditions. It is possible that some of the conditions which are considered essential are, in fact, only helpful. It is also possible that some of them are rooted in a negatively conceived 'flight from the world' with which many of us today are no longer happy. It would be sad if the contemplative communities became the last bastions of the nineteenth century while the people in them struggled to measure up to the demands of their prophetic role in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

One of the main duties of the prophet is to be clear-eyed about the global village and to live that vision with courage. For instance, we must live with and not evade the knowledge that the technology is there to feed a world in which 700 million lack enough food,⁸ but that the will is not there because our society is completely permeated by the processes of exchange, not by the Christian act of giving. Even the Church is finding that it needs to use money as a bridge between Messianic virtues such as conversion, compassion and selflessness on the one hand, and on the other hand the heart of suffering in our world. Aid cannot replace the social and economic reconstructions which are really needed and which are conversion in action. Alienation spreads through our world like a fungus. It becomes increasingly difficult for one person to help another person. No amount of aid organizations could replace the essential thrust towards justice and solidarity and confrontation with evil. The only cure for alienation is reconciliation across the many chasms which divide us, and reconciliation is properly a

fruit of contemplative prayer simply because that prayer is essentially unitive. There is something demonic about consumerism and it can never be reconciled with contemplation. This touches on the second thing which society should be able to find in the contemplative and that is a richness of humanity. Life with God is good for human beings and should be seen to be so. There is another paradox here, namely that although the canonical requirements around enclosure can sometimes rate as minor lunacies, yet the enclosure wall is transparent to those who know the community. Local people are quick to discern the truth of a house, to know if all is not well. The medium of the contemplative's message may normally be silence, but people are well aware of the difference between the silent sharing of the *anawim*, the poor of Yahweh, and the deafening silence of those with nothing to say.

The impact which the Church can have on modern society amounts to an effective living of faith and love, not to any external power exercised by purely human means.⁹

Surely an effective living of faith and love are exactly what the Church and the contemplative life are all about? The latter is not the heart of the Church because it pursues some recondite activity peculiar to hearts but because it lives in concentrated form that same life which is expressed throughout the Church in many various forms. The desperation which is so characteristic of human beings acts as a summons to faith and, in the prayer of the contemplative, it meets that hope which is an experience of the power of the risen Christ. This experience is not a vague belief at large in the universe, but a happening in the life of a specific person at a given place in a given time.

The fundamental act of union is the incarnation. The primary analogue of this is our union at Mass with Christ, become human that we might become God.¹⁰ The secondary analogue is marriage—which is not at all to suggest anything second-best about marriage. In the unfolding of the Mass there is a progression which is also found in the life of prayer, from the symbolic self-offering of the Offertory through to identification with Christ, and on to that communion which is the condition of mysticism and the goal of all our activity: one Body and one Spirit with Christ. By endeavouring to align herself with the pattern of Christ in this way, the Christian contemplative nun is lifted onto the cosmic

level where the mystery of redemption and union is at work. This is one reason why it would be highly appropriate for a contemplative to celebrate Mass with her community. It would be a unique and uniquely accurate expression of their shared contemplative life and its place in the on-going redemption.

Probably only a small proportion of contemplative women are actively wanting ordination, but we are too large a body of women to be indifferent to feminist issues. There is still a tendency for us not to be seen as women who might have disturbing views; we can still sometimes be that Third Sex, the Nuns. Apart from wider and more secular issues where, I would suggest, we have yet to discover both our position and our contribution, if any, there is much thinking still to be done on whether or not there be a specifically woman's approach to prayer. If so, does it differ only in attitude, or developmentally as well as in its fruits? As the days are now happily past, in most countries, when an unmarried woman entered a convent as one of the few available options, this cannot be the reason why there are so many more women's contemplative communities than men's. It seems probable that there is a whole intuitive world, rich in imagery and feeling, deeply rooted in the everyday, which is characteristic of the women's approach to prayer. Women in most walks of life have become so skilled at fitting into a way of doing things which has been thought out and categorized by men, that we almost lose sight of the adaptation ourselves. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the fact that there can be something quite frightening about a completely feminine world, which at it worst can be both ruthlessly destructive and irrationally sentimental. In fact, both men and women need liberating from the existing moulds and freed to make their specific contributions, not from polarized positions but as full individuated and harmonized people. It may well turn out that one of the contributions of the contemplative community to any society is to provide a setting in which to work through this individuation process, that journey of balancing out masculine and feminine elements and of integrating the suppressed shadow side. In its fulness, this is such a demanding process that it is extremely difficult for people in many walks of life to see it through to its end. They cannot give it the required space and often lack the necessary support and encouragement. Yet for the health of any society it is essential that there should be a quorum of such people—analogous to the ten just men¹¹—who have not merely

made this journey themselves but are ready and able to help others. The healing of deep wounds and hang-ups is one of the concomitants of contemplative prayer and is doubly difficult to attain without it, precisely because contemplation unites us within ourselves as well as among ourselves, and opens up the unconscious to the life of grace. As soon as we let God into our lives things begin to happen. This is another aspect of that enriched humanity which follows upon life with God.

In recent years there has been a strong move, almost a request, from the Church, that the contemplatives offer some directing to others who are seeking to grow in a life of prayer. They (contemplatives) offer assistance—without prejudice to enclosure, and the laws that govern it—to persons in the world, and share with them their prayer and spiritual life.¹² This development has by no means reached its full potential as yet but it is to be hoped that it will as it could contribute a great deal towards energizing and integrating the Church's life. Today very few are seeking direction on the authoritarian model, preferring an alongside person who will be a point of reference, one ready to share her own discoveries and experiences, an aspect which is doubly important here, for contemplative prayer is not so much an activity which we can learn to do rightly, like an acquired skill, but far more like a colour stain which spreads through the rest of life.

There is still—and may always be—an unresolved tension for contemplatives between witness and separation. In a Church which, since Vatican II, has increasingly understood itself in terms of mission, where does the contemplative fit? What about the traditional pattern of returning from the mountain-top to the marketplace to share the fruits of the contemplative experience? What are the place of involvement and information in intercessory prayer? These and other questions still need attention. The actual position of the contemplative communities in relation to a national Church, I would like to suggest, parallels the position of that Church to the local society. If the contemplatives are thought of as being so spiritual as almost to be outside the range of ordinary human life (a disease Rome is not immune from—how, for instance, are we supposed to do our necessary shopping?) the chances are that the Church, too, in that place, will be lacking a dynamic presence. 'The profoundly ecclesial nature of religious life becomes a pre-eminent aspect of their mission within the Church and within secular society itself.'¹³

Also, what is the message for the traditional communities from the modern contemplative groups which are being established without enclosure or structures, sharing their prayer life with any who wish to come, being very clearly immersed in the prayer of the Church? Undoubtedly contemplative, they bear a prophetic witness to the Church's mission to bring the Good News to everyone. To understand the traditional communities primarily in terms of enclosure—cloistered rather than contemplative—may become a statement of fact but does not reflect those communities' present self-understanding.

One of the difficulties of talking about the contemplative and society is that there is no sense in which it can be said that a dialogue is going on, still less a discussion. Yet we are all part of that same spectrum of human living which ranges from the solitary life to extreme political involvement. No inquiry into where the contemplative stands vis-à-vis society will make much sense in sociological terms, although there too a community does have insights to offer. Even a community of hermits constitutes a 'shared milieu' in the sociological sense and has accumulated wisdom and experience in the art of living together. At the same time, a contemplative community is not just a more successful cross-section of society. However tempting, we cannot simply say to our world: if we can live together, you can; for the truth is that we do not keep incompatible elements, while society has to, but that need not mean that we have nothing at all to say about sharing a milieu. On the other hand, it is no part of the contemplative or prophetic task to be didactic; we are not teachers in the Church, though it would be relevant for us to ask ourselves what messages we do give to society, whether they are the messages which we would wish to give and whether the message reflects the truth at the heart of contemplative prayer.

To travel from a contemplative house to, say, London, is to experience that one does live in a real way at the hub of a wheel, seeking the still heart of things. The hurrying, anxious people on Victoria Station live at the rim where the spin is maximal but where, mathematicians demonstrate, a given point at a given moment is stationary, going nowhere—which is rather how the generality of people feel about their lives. Yet the wheel is turning and we with it. What frightens people is that it feels directionless, or directed into places where we do not wish to go. The point I would like to pick up from this image is not the one of whether

the hub or the rim determines the direction, but that hub and rim constitute one wheel, are parts of the same whole. In the complexus of human living, contemplatives measure up to the requirements of their prophetic vocation not by doing but by becoming what God wants them to be—fully themselves. This is true, of course, of everyone; the added dimension here is that the prophetic individual is precisely one who lives in society wholly by her vision, in which doing and being meet and both are altered. This vision is just the simple insight that nothing is more important than prayer. This is what even Napoleon glimpsed darkly when he said that in the long run the sword is conquered by the spirit. Ultimately the more important prevails in spite of everything because it is nearer to the truth and, pragmatically, it is the only way which works. This is the human ground of our hope.

In the short run, the Church measures up to its own prophetic role by mediating to society the contemplative's vision that nothing is more important than prayer. This is not merely to state a priority on how time should be spent, but to define a priority of values. It is to open up a perspective which confronts, challenges and contradicts the preoccupations of our society and our political leaders. The earlier suggestion that the Church's presence in society echoes the vitality of the contemplative's presence in the Church logically includes an appropriate Christian political involvement. 'The Church', said Pastor Fallot, one of the early French ecumenists, 'must be catholic or she is not the Church; the Christian must be protestant or he is not a Christian'.¹⁴ And it was Palmerston who maintained that 'in the long run, English legislation follows the Dissenting conscience'. An important part of the Church's prophetic role is to be the dissenting conscience, to protect the individual who 'has been bought at a great price',¹⁵ but the dissenting voice which speaks to the bureaucratic Church itself is that of the religious and specifically the contemplative religious, not by critical statements but simply by this 'living at the pinnacle of the Christian conscience'.

This may not reflect what we see going on around us. When Cardinal Hume, in 1986, defined the contemplative as 'expert in God', he was pinpointing something of which we may ask: how much does it permeate the Christian spectrum? The Church is in danger of becoming as fragmented as society itself, instead of mediating unity and reconciliation to it. The correction for this is

not a restructuring of the monolith but an opening up of communication channels. This is one reason why, when a group of contemplative nuns met the Bishops of England and Wales in 1986, so many had the intuition that what had happened was far more important than the sum of the subjects discussed. Unless each part of the circuit is in place the current cannot flow. There is an appropriate Christian involvement across the spectrum of society which is a necessary part of the circuit. It is also a part which the Third World nations are discovering and which is enabling their Christian voice to be heard as it issues not from the leaders only, but from the roots of society. Surely we, on our better diet, should be able to think equally creatively? And not merely to think—and to act—creatively but to keep alive that condition in which eternity breaks into our daily lives, not as an occasional event but as a constant? Unless this happens, as Karl Barth has spelt out for us, 'our hearts become thoughtless and our thoughts become heartless'.¹⁶ This is a comment on our world which most of us would recognize and a comment which can only be answered by the simple, prophetic conviction that nothing is more important than prayer.

NOTES

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Letters and papers from prison*, Letter to Eberhard Bethge, (SCM Press, 1971), p 360.

² Pope Paul VI: *Evangelica testificatio* no 19.

³ Genesis 20,7.

⁴ Eliot, T. S.: *Four quartets*—Little Gidding, (Faber and Faber, 1944).

⁵ Genesis 35,4.

⁶ Moses: Exodus 3,1-12; Samuel: 1 Sam 3,10-14; Mary Magdalen: Mark 16,9-10.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5,19.

⁸ CIIR 1986, *Annual Review*.

⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, 42.

¹⁰ Offertory of the Mass.

¹¹ Genesis 18,32.

¹² *La Plenaria* 26, SCRIS Jan 1981 and *Mutuae relationes* 25.

¹³ *Le scelte evangeliche*, Introduction, SCRIS Jan 1981.

¹⁴ Boegner, Marc: *The long road to unity*, (Collins, 1970), p 29.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 6,20.

¹⁶ *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth, 1:19-21.