AN ARENA FOR GLADIATORS?

By BRENDAN CALLAGHAN

ONE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING SOMETHING of what has changed in ways of thinking about the spiritual life is in terms of tne implicit models at work beneath and behind our explicit speech and discussion. In the next few pages I hope to explore two models of spirituality which have changed in their respective influence in recent years, asking from the viewpoint of a psychologist whether or not all the change has been for the good.

From an understanding of spirituality that rested on a model of perfection, we have moved (knowingly or unknowingly, and to greater or lesser extents) to an understanding based on a therapy model. For some, this move can be seen as an abandoning of an inhumanly impossible enterprise in favour of a more incarnational approach to the gospel. For others, the same move appears as an abandoning of the search for holiness in favour of a preoccupation with personal healing and fulfilment. I would like to suggest that what is in fact crucial at a psychological level is not which of these models has the greater influence on our thinking about spirituality, but the adequacy or inadequacy of the theology underpinning our appropriation of each or both.

It is clear that, whatever else may or may not have changed in substance, the implicit (and always a little unreal?) model of the spiritual life as requiring a breaking-down of human qualities and achievements has given way to a less implicit model involving the necessity of fostering human growth and development. Conventual corridors which once saw intelligent and gifted religious endlessly scrubbing floors are now more likely to harbour human relations workshops. Any comparison is, of course, constrained by the difficulties of recreating, not the explicit, worked-out statements or doctrines about the spiritual life, but the unarticulated appropriations of these doctrines which found embodiment in the lives of individuals and communities. Often, I suspect, it was these lived appropriations which included vital and wise counterbalances to

the prevailing ideologies, counterbalances lost to our sight precisely because they emerged and existed in contrast to the received and published doctrines of the day (and gave them humanity). In consquence, any reflection on models of spirituality runs the risk of being one-sided in its grasp of the models as lived as distinct from the models as written down.

Within these limitations, one criticism of the perfection model is that it places its adherents in an impossible situation, something approaching a classic 'double-bind'. Achievement of perfection is not only the goal of life, it is also that which gives life meaning. This may not seem to be problematic, but I think that, at the psychological level if not at the doctrinal, there is a dangerous corollary: failure to achieve perfection diminishes the meaning of my life. If I come to believe that the spiritual life is the life of perfection (and that is only a short step away from what is stated in Church documents) then, knowing myself to be less than perfect, I know myself to be somehow out of place, to be deprived to some degree of my life having meaning.

Another way of exploring this same question is to borrow the terminology of Jung, and to ask to what extent a perfection model of spirituality obliges its adherents to attempt to live out the archetype of the 'hero'. I suspect that, in some appropriations of this model, I am required to do precisely that. I must be prepared to face all challenges, to rise to all occasions, to find within myself the resources necessary to meet each and every eventuality. Spelt out thus baldly, this is clearly an impossible undertaking, but wrapped up in a spiritualizing theological language, it can become a seductive model in its own right, allowing me to 'take on' the qualities of the hero, to be 'possessed by' this archetype. Interestingly, this seems to have happened to Ignatius before he left Loyola for Montserrat: 'If Francis did such-and-such . . . '

Taking this line of reflection a little further, it seems to me that the perfection model also runs the risk of becoming a model concerned with power, and with my increasing power as I approach perfection. One of the wise characters in Ursula le Guin's 'Earthsea trilogy' pins down this belief in terms of the magic and 'magery' which is the central symbol of these books: 'You thought, as a boy, that a mage is one who can do anything. So I thought once. So did we all.' And so, I think, did we all (or at least most of us), so that when we found that this was not true in our lives, we were faced with a dilemma. The model of spirituality that we had

assimilated did not match up to our experience of ourselves as less than all-powerful heroes; is it the model that I must discard, or must I recognize my failure to live according to the model? Either choice is frightening. If I discard the model of perfection, I run the risk of devaluing all the years of my life for which it was the guiding force. If I recognize my failure to live according to it, I run precisely the same risk, because according to this model, it is in the achievement of perfection that the value of my life lies. Little wonder, then, that it is more comfortable to push this question to the back of my mind, even at the cost of putting a brake on any growth or development in my life.

The perfection model has, I think, one major defect, at least in the form in which it is often assimilated. It fails to recognize the place of human limit, vulnerability, and brokenness in human life and therefore in the Christian life. In an interview in *The Independent*, the Irish playwright Aidan Matthews spelt this out in striking terms: 'Faith isn't an arena for gladiators, it's a hospital for people who are broken'. Approaches to spirituality resting on a model of perfection run the risk of overlooking this fundamental insight.

By contrast, the model of therapy can be seen as taking this insight as its starting-point, giving rise to understandings of spirituality which focus on the power of God to heal and make whole, at best, or to enable us to live with our brokenness, at the least. A historian of ideas might be able to trace the emergence of this very different approach to making sense of life. Three events or developments strike me as being relevant: the impact of the work of Freud on the popular imagination, the common experience of the Holocaust as a part of all our memories, and the rediscovery of mystery in the collapse of the Newtonian world-view:

> Nature and Natures laws lay hid in night:
> God said: 'Let Newton be!', and all was light.
> This could not last. The Devil, shouting 'Ho!
> Let Einstein be!', restored the status quo.

The novelist William Golding would take issue with the Devil being responsible:

> The Newtonian universe which went on forever is the ultimate damnation. And we now know that's not true. We now know that, in every direction, we come to the end of what our human

> nature can discover, describe, or even feel, and this seems to me to be a kind of boundless mercy. We understand that we are not only mysterious in ourselves but in a situation of bounded mystery.

This is not quite so much an aside as it might seem, as the interrelationship between 'world-views' and models of spirituality is a complex one but a real one, and whatever the causal mechanisms involved, the therapy model of spirituality has gained ground to the point where it is clearly reflected in the recent Roman instruction on formation for religious life, if not in the *lineamenta* for the synod on priestly formation.

The therapy model, however, can be seen as potentially trapping its followers into a different 'bind', that of being ill and (figuratively) disabled, and thus being unable to take control of those everyday aspects of life which need our intervention. In terms of archetypes, a too-total adoption of the therapy model can lead a person into attempting to live out an archetype of illness or disability, becoming overconcerned with the experiences of powerlessness which are common to us all.

But from the viewpoint of a psychologist with an eclectic interest in the insights generated by the various psychotherapeutic approaches and schools, I can, on balance, only welcome the emergence of a model of spirituality prepared to take account of the limit and vulnerability that contribute to what Galen Strawson calls 'the vast, essential, and desirable complication of normal human life'. From the viewpoint of someone with a limited awareness of the writings of different spiritual traditions, I have a sense that this model manages to remain open to many key insights from such sources. Central among these, and already touched on here as central to our discussion, is the place to be accorded to human limit and brokenness, and the paradoxical way in which God's strength is manifest most clearly in our weakness. The American writer Hannah Hurnard, (best known for her *Hind's feet in high places*), puts one aspect of this paradox like this:

> The very characteristics and weaknesses of temperament with which we were born, which seem to us to be the greatest of all hindrances to the Christian life, are, in reality, the very things which, when surrendered to the Saviour, can be transformed into their exact opposites, and can therefore produce in us the loveliest of all qualities.

It is no new insight that to be open to such an experience requires an act of trust (an acting-in-trust/an acting-out of trust), and that our capacity so to act is itself damaged and limited by the variety of experiences of betrayal we have endured, whether as victim or perpetrator. But it is also no new insight that such an experience has been a part of the lives of very many Christians, who have found the strength to bring their woundedness to an explicit meeting with God's power at work in the community of believers.

From a Jungian perspective, we can see here the process of coming to terms with the shadow, of acknowledging as an aspect of myself all those 'characteristics and weaknesses of temperament' which are furthest from (because they are the 'opposites' of) my ideal values and qualities—my image of personal perfection. Such a coming to terms with the shadow is an essential step in the process of individuation, of coming to be the fullness of the person I can become, which Jung uses as an account of human development. From a Jungian perspective also, such coming-to-terms makes it possible for what had been seen as essentially negative and destructive to take its place productively and positively in a more integrated way of personal functioning.

This might seem to have taken us a long way from any 'perfection' model of spirituality, and indeed the integration of the shadow-side of our ideals may sound quite contrary to any attempt to grow towards perfection. I would like to suggest that there are underlying links of which we often lose sight, and which can resolve something of the tension between these two models.

From the Hasidic tradition of Judaism comes a typically pithy insight: 'In him who is full of himself there is no room for God'. In the Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck we find one aspect of this insight taken further, in a way which is directly relevant to our discussion:

> Some people are naturally more inclined to be stable, and do not have to struggle so hard against instability as others, but this does not mean that they are necessarily more holy . . . Indeed, it often happens that someone who is naturally unstable, unrestrained and inconsistent tries much harder and reaches a more perfect way of life than one who is by nature calm, tranquil, and self-possessed.

In other words, we can grow closer to God from a position of unwholeness than from one of greater wholeness, as the French

Jesuit Louis Beirnaert points out: 'It is not easy for a man endowed with a nature favourable to the acquisition of virtue to die to himself and accept God'. In brief, both of the models we have considered can run the risk of leading me to be 'full of myself'. Just as the perfection model can lead to a self-absorption in the steps of my own progress, so the therapy model can lead to a similar self-concern for my own healing. In each case, my capacity to die to myself is weakened rather than enhanced by my model of spirituality—or rather by how I interpret that model against my underlying theology.

The danger of perfection models of spirituality is their capacity to enable us to overlook human limit and brokenness, while the danger of therapy models lies in their capacity to enable us to overlook our ability to transcend such limit and brokenness. In each instance, whether or not this danger becomes real seems to rely to a great extent on the theology of grace and human nature underlying the application of each model. In the presence of a sound theology, either model can provide an adequate way of talking about human experience in the light of the gospel. Without such a sound theology, each model has its manifest dangers.

Thus, an overly supernaturalist theology of grace and nature opens up the possibility of the perfection model being interpreted in such a way as to diminish the place of human growth in the life of the Spirit, coming to rely instead on an understanding of God's action that 'goes around' God's creation rather than working within it. Paradoxically, such an approach often insists on the perfectibility of human nature, at least within the bounds of what is seen as the spiritual life, whilst decrying the role played by natural processes and relationships within that growth into perfection. Let me repeat that I believe that a discrepancy exists between the living-out of this model as described in some works of spirituality and the living-out of the same model as experienced by those attempting to make use of it to understand their actual lives.

By comparison (or contrast) an overly naturalistic theology of grace and nature can lead to the therapy model being used so as to lead us to lose sight of the ways in which God's love acts in a transforming manner within the lives of those who love God. Let this Jesuit acknowledge Pascal: 'Grace is indeed required to turn a man into a saint; and he who doubts this does not know what either a man or a saint is'. It is possible to lose sight of this working-out of God's love by adopting too naturalistic a theology,

just as in the parallel field of pastoral theology a too-total acceptance of the adequacy of the counselling model of care can lead us to lose sight of the elements of prophecy, challenge and transformation in the proclamation of the gospel.

A firmly-rooted incarnational theology of grace allows us both to recognize the importance of the natural as the site of God's work in God's world, and to acknowledge the capacity of God so to work within the world as to challenge and enable us to transcend our experienced and real human limits and failings. Such an approach allows us to describe the goals of the perfection model in recognizable human terms, without having to have recourse to overly-spiritualizing language. It can also allow us to speak of the goals of the therapy model in terms that can go beyond any too-static and potentially complacent image of human wholeness, permitting us to include in the image of human wholeness our capacity for the transcendent both in our encounters with God and in our experiences of our own limits.

An analogy may provide a suitable ending. Writers ranging from poets to psychologists have tried to describe the experience of human love in ways that enable us to make some sense of this key aspect of our lives. I do not think it is stretching things too far to see the same 'models' at work here also, with an idealized romantic perfectionism on the one hand, and a realist anti-romantic therapeutic model on the other. Neither manages totally to encompass the experience of love, nor to provide us with adequate ways of articulating it to ourselves. The human experience of love teaches us both that we are not perfect and that our experienced limits find transcendence in loving another human person. The greatest paradox of all is that our experience of limit and incapacity within the loving relationship can itself be the point at which we encounter and experience our capacity to transcend such limit. Neither a perfection nor a therapy model is sufficient to help us understand adequately the mysterious aspect of human experience we call love; should we expect either to be adequate when we turn to recognize more explicitly the God at work in all our loving?