

# CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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THE AIM OF this article is to examine the relationship between cultural formation and spiritual formation: in particular to look at the way in which spiritual formation is shaped by, or in turn reshapes, the values of the culture in which we live. This potentially is a vast area and I cannot in any way attempt to be comprehensive. Rather, I would like to see this article as a somewhat meandering journey along the boundaries of Church and world, of faith and life, gospel and culture.

First of all, we need to examine what we mean by cultural formation. The culture within which we live is made up of myriad aspects. *Evangelii nuntiandi* describes it this way:

The vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, as well as the world of culture, or the sciences and of the arts, of international life, of the mass media. (*EN 70; CFL 23*)

Cultural formation takes place from conception to the grave, at many levels; within our own families and our neighbourhood, rural or urban. It involves our understanding of national identity and global citizenship. It involves formation in the norms and values of daily life, of the social contract—law and democracy—of the economic and class order. For some people, cultural formation includes the development of a religious identity, seen as membership of a particular religious institution.

For the purposes of this article, there are four points I would like to make about the process of cultural formation. I have chosen them deliberately because I believe they offer a particular challenge to the task of religious formation.

Firstly, much cultural formation is non-verbal and unconscious. As children and adults, we may be largely unaware of the ways in which we are formed by a given culture. Experience may lead us to reflect more deeply on those values, or to question them, but in general cultural values are transmitted invisibly and we simply take most of the values of our family and society for granted.

If those values are jolted or challenged, we experience 'culture shock'. For example, living in New York City for eight years challenged much of my cultural formation. The world looks and feels different from Manhattan than it does from South London. New Yorkers eat different food at different times from the British. They have a different concept of what is good manners and what is rude. The class system is utterly different—and it is as different from California as it is from Great Britain. Even apparently fundamental concepts like freedom and democracy mean something quite different in the USA. I could go on, but the point is that living in another culture or another country can offer insight into the many unspoken assumptions into which we have been inculturated.

Secondly, and related to the first point, culture is transmitted to a large degree by symbols. The Queen and the flag are symbols of our national identity. The clothes we wear are symbols—think of the pinstriped suit or the Roman collar—as are cars we drive. Symbols can be used and manipulated—they speak of whole worlds of meaning and emotion. Advertisers are masters in the manipulation of symbols. To sell their products, they associate the banal (instant coffee) with deep human drives (romantic love).

We swim in a symbolic world like fish who never need to be taught how. Symbols are as important to us as water is to the fish. Without them we cannot think nor can we communicate with other people. But when we come to try to give a precise definition of what symbols are and how they work—that is, to be fishermen rather than the fish—it escapes through the holes in the net.<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, and following from the previous point, cultural formation takes place increasingly through the media. Television and the tabloid newspapers form part of the daily diet of the majority of the population. The implications of this are enormous. For example, my seven-year-old son cannot help but be formed by weekend morning television: a relentless barrage of commercials for toys that he doesn't want and we can't afford, pop videos with blatant sexual imagery, and fashion competitions for children. In between, there may be cartoons such as the *Planeteers*, about a band of teenagers who campaign for an ecologically balanced world: but there is no help given by the presenters to discern between the possible value of some of the programming and the unadulterated rubbish that surrounds it. From infancy, our children are being formed for a culture of short attention spans, pop values, commercialism and consumerism.

Adults are similarly bombarded by the media. We are continually being formed by factors which appear to be beyond our control, including the artificial stimulation of greed for profits and possessions by advertisers and the manipulation of the news. When it is the journalist, rather than a diplomat, who breaks the news to Sunny Mann in a telephone conversation recorded for millions that her hostage husband is not to be released in Beirut as planned, then the journalist is no longer reporting on the news; he has both created and become part of the news. If the six o'clock news, trading on its air of respectability, regularly broadcasts the immediate responses of people to grief, tragedy and violence, then we may be deluded into thinking that this material is news. If the 'news' about the Gulf war is in fact a highly censored and selective account of what actually happened, how can we distinguish between truth and falsehood in the information given to us? If the private lives of soap opera stars are given front page space, we may be similarly confused about what is genuine news.

Because the news enters into our homes by print or screen, even far-away events compete for attention with the events of our daily lives. The tragic or the salacious may appear to be more significant than—and can block our awareness of—what is happening close at hand: matters which at one level may seem to be more unexciting, yet which are in fact more real and authentic. Further, the sheer repetitiveness of what is offered by the media may also dull our capacity to reflect.

Fourthly, what is characteristic of the contemporary culture in which we live is the speed of change. It is not only the content of the Saturday and Sunday programmes that my son watches that is different from my own childhood thirty years ago, but the fact that it exists at all. Redundancy and unemployment—temporary or long term—are now facts of life for all workers, replacing a social structure in which many people from coal miners to civil servants expected job security for life. Divorce and geographical mobility have affected the stability of people's lives. The political changes in South Africa and Eastern Europe and the new European identity are examples of change at an international level. The speed of social change leaves us feeling uncertain and out of control because we cannot predict the impact or the consequences of the unfamiliar. Here again, the media plays a crucial role in transmitting information about change immediately into our very homes.

These then are some aspects of 'the vast field of evangelising activity' (EN 70), the world, that the Church is called to transform

(CFL 1) according to the plan of God. When we speak of spiritual formation we need to raise all sorts of questions about the relationship of that formation to the world in which we live. It is easy to assume that our faith and the process of our growing in faith have something to do with our daily lives, and yet there is a mountain of evidence, rather, of the split between the gospel and culture which successive popes have called 'the greatest error of our times'. The more that society becomes secularized, the more difficult it becomes to make the connections between our faith and our daily lives.

Against this background, our first task is to examine carefully the aim and task of spiritual formation. One central aim must be to help children and adults come into 'communion, intimacy with Jesus Christ' (CT 5). This involves helping people to understand the implications in their own lives of Jesus's message that he came so that we should have life and have it to the full (Jn 10,10). This in turn implies that those involved with the task of formation be constantly reflecting on the implications for themselves of this intimacy with Jesus who calls people to full life.

Living fully implies full adulthood and full maturity: 'To become an adult and to live as an adult is a vocation given by God to human beings'.<sup>2</sup> Through mature adulthood, persons are fitted to play an active part in the growth of the Kingdom of God. The formation of adults is 'an invitation to judge all personal, social and spiritual experiences in the light of faith'.<sup>3</sup>

The task of adult formation presumes that to grow in mature adulthood will involve the individual becoming more deeply aware of his or her value, dignity and freedom as a human being, a unique individual called by name and loved by God. This cannot happen without the individual Christian becoming at the same time aware of the inherent value and right to dignity and freedom of other human beings and of humanity as a whole. It is our assumption as Christians that the path to full freedom, maturity and adulthood lies in the model of Jesus of Nazareth. The groundwork for our spiritual formation takes place in childhood, primarily through the home but also through the school and the parish. But it is inevitably as adults that people may grow to spiritual maturity.

The context for this growth is people's daily lives:

The need for personal formation is necessarily bound up with the role that adults assume in public life . . . In the context of society, the role of adults in the workplace and in the academic, professional, civil, economic, political and cultural spheres, and wherever

responsibility and power are exercised. This is the case because the believing adult is so often the only one who can introduce the leaven of the Kingdom, express the novelty and beauty of the Gospel and demonstrate the will for change and liberation desired by Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore primarily in the context of people's daily lives and their participation in society that spiritual formation takes place. The aim is to equip people to participate in the building of the Kingdom and the transformation of the world.

If we place the task and aims of spiritual formation in juxtaposition to the reality of contemporary culture, several things become immediately obvious.

Firstly, the task of spiritual formation must begin with daily life and experience. This may not be as simple as it sounds. If you invite ordinary people in parish situations to reflect on their daily lives they will often speak openly of many things: of the joys of family life, but also of the pressures and the strains. They will speak of the stress of modern life, of the daily rush, of noise and busyness—even of chaos. Of their fears of redundancy and unemployment and their fears for the future of the world their children will inherit. They will often speak of their need for, but the difficulty of finding, space and time for themselves.

If one went deeper, of course, one would learn of their struggles with bereavement, the financial pressures they are under, the stress they have experienced in their marriages or their difficulties with elderly relatives or rebellious teenagers.

But there may be understandable resistance to dealing with such matters in a group. In fact, even to ask questions about people's daily lives may meet with a reaction of bemusement or even threat. 'Why are you asking about our daily lives?' people may ask. 'We came here to talk about God.'

Secondly, we can see that the task of spiritual formation is an enormous and difficult one. In what way should we be reflecting on the unspoken symbols of our culture or the speed of change? People may have the desire to reflect and pray and yet find that it is almost impossible to find the space and silence to do so. They may be burdened with clerical images of prayer which are incompatible with the reality of lay life. It has become almost a cliché—although a welcome one—to say that evangelization begins with listening; that this involves listening to oneself, to others, to the world, and in and through all of this to God; and that listening must start with the

experience of being listened to. There are many people who have rarely experienced the transforming power of real listening.<sup>5</sup> The voice of God who speaks in a still small voice, and who says 'Be still and know that I am God' is only too easily drowned out by the noise and rush of daily life.

Faced with this challenge, it seems to me that there are several different ways in which the relationship between the Church and the world may be expressed. Each one of these has implications for the way in which the individual deals with the boundary between faith and life in his or her own life.

*Escape.* We may devalue the reality of our daily lives and escape from it into religious practice and piety of one form or another. In the extreme case, someone may join a sect—but there are many milder forms of escape. That which takes place in the world is devalued and seen as negative. Change may take place in society, but not in the Church.

*Uneasy alliance.* Churchy things happen in churchy places, and daily life goes on separately. Neither reality challenges the other. The Church doesn't bother the world, and the world doesn't bother the Church. The individual living with uneasy alliance may be 'practising' regularly or irregularly, but faith makes no measurable difference to his or her daily life.

*Trendiness.* The Church bends to contemporary culture and the values of society are allowed to influence the Church to such a degree that the message is obscured. The Church is reactive rather than proactive. If pop music is dominant in our culture, then it becomes dominant in our churches. If television is the main medium of communication, then we evangelize by television. If trendiness is the dominant value in society, then we will follow the trends in order to keep the pews full. Yet in this approach, the Church is reacting to what is most fleeting and superficial in human nature rather than taking on the far more challenging task of speaking to what is deepest in human nature, the search for meaning and identity.

*Dialogue and integration.* The Church as an institution attempts to operate in dialogue with the world, yet it never fails in its essential mission to proclaim Christ to the world. It is quick to affirm and support the growth of kingdom values in the world, yet it is constantly reflecting on reality in the light of the gospel and is equally quick to challenge what is destructive. It stands alongside and maintains a vital interest in all the structures and institutions of society. The institution is quick to adapt to the signs of the times, to reflect on and

integrate insights from whatever field of endeavour. It recognizes that the truth does not change but the language in which we express the truth and engage in dialogue may well change. In this sort of Church, individuals are helped to reflect critically on reality and feel in control of their response to change. They are helped to see that just as Jesus of Nazareth spoke to ordinary people in everyday circumstances in ordinary language, so also can the gospel and the message of contemporary faith speak to people in their modern circumstances.

At the beginning of this article, I spoke of the boundary between Church and world, faith and life, gospel and culture. With full integration, expressed in the 'final coming of the Kingdom', this boundary would of course disappear. Acknowledging that it exists and then finding ways of beginning to break it down are first steps in the task of evangelization.

In the Pope's recent document on mission, *Redemptoris missio*, there are many insights into the process by which the gospel may transform culture that are deeply relevant to the task of Christian formation in a secular world. The process of transformation, he notes, is a lengthy one and implies 'the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity into culture' (RM 52). In order to bring people to the mystery of Christ, Christians must 'immerse themselves in the cultural milieu . . . moving beyond their own cultural limitations'. They must 'learn the language' and 'become familiar with the most important expressions of the local culture, and discover its values through direct experience'. In this way, Christian communities will 'gradually be able to express their Christian experience in original ways and forms' (RM 53).

To conclude, I would like to offer the following issues that would seem to me to be important as we reflect on the task of spiritual formation against the background of our own culture and its values:

(1) A spirituality that transforms culture will enable adult Christians to live as people of faith in the world and for the world. With adult confidence in their faith, such Christians are, by definition, missionaries in a secular world.

(2) Central to the task of forming adult Christians must be intimacy with the Jesus of the gospels, encountered in scripture, sacrament and prayer. Such a formation cannot help but stress reflection on the meaning of discipleship, mission and Kingdom.

(3) Language remains a central issue in formation: 'There is a great need for a more adequate language of faith, which will be

comprehensible to adults at all levels'.<sup>6</sup> The language in which our faith is expressed is an accurate reflection of the relationship, or lack of it, between Church and world, gospel and culture, faith and life.

(4) A central task of Christian formation needs to be to help people to develop skills in reflection and discernment. This involves helping people to see and value silence and space for personal reflection in their lives. It means naming and understanding the symbols which have power over us, and making good use of the powerful symbols of our Christian tradition. It involves an awareness of Christianity as the path to free and responsible adulthood, in which we are aware that we are making choices at every moment of our daily lives and that the gospel speaks directly to these choices, helping us to discern truth from falsehood, God's plan from our own. Cardinal Basil Hume recently said:

Goodness is attractive and in fact deeply compelling. We must encourage the crucial inner movement from 'doing the right thing because I ought to' to 'doing the right thing because I want to and understand why'.<sup>7</sup>

(5) Finally, the task of spiritual formation must involve affirmation. Many people are already living out their call to holiness in a quiet way in their work and family lives. St Paul wrote to the Philippians in this way:

I give thanks to my God every time I think of you—which is constantly, in every prayer I utter—rejoicing as I plead on your behalf at the way you have all helped promote the Gospel from the very first day. (1,3-5)

Without affirmation, there is no confidence. With no confidence, there is no formation.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Arbuckle, Gerald: *Earthing the gospel* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), p 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Adult catechesis in the Christian community* (International Council for Catechesis, Vatican City, 1990), para 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Adult catechesis*, para 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Adult catechesis*, para 22.

<sup>5</sup> See Long, Anne: *Listening* (Daybreak, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> *Adult catechesis*, para 17.

<sup>7</sup> Address given by Cardinal Basil Hume to Catholic Secondary Teachers in the Archdiocese of Westminster, 24 September 1991.