

Refounding and repeating

Ways to the new

Michael Kirwan

I WANT TO BEGIN OUR EXPLORATION of this theme by referring to two 'refounding' narratives, one scriptural, the second philosophical. Firstly, from the Book of Jonah:

The Word of Yahweh was addressed a second time to Jonah: 'Up!' he said, 'Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to them as I told you to.' Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of Yahweh. (Jon 3.1–3)

Let us remember what has happened to Jonah before this. He has received his commission as a prophet: the highly improbable and dangerous task of addressing and denouncing the people of Nineveh. Nineveh is the capital city of the hated Assyrian empire, therefore a byword for cruel imperial hegemony. Not surprisingly, Jonah decides to run away from this task – though, since he admits in Jonah 1.9 that Yahweh is 'the God of heaven, who made the land and the sea', his attempted escape to the end of the world does not show much theological consistency. Then there follows the storm, the appearance of the large fish, and the hilarious irony of Jonah uttering his moving 'de profundis' from the belly of the fish, immediately before his ultimate humiliation: 'Yahweh spoke to the fish, which then vomited Jonah on to the shore.'

But we should not allow the delicious slapstick of this incident to engulf the poignant words which follow. Jonah is given what we all want and need in life – a second chance. 'Now preach to them as I told you . . .' is a refounding of Jonah's mission as a prophet, a wonderful expression of the Lord's determination to complete his will using his chosen instrument, this petulant and self-centred Israelite. My meditation upon this delightful but very curious story remains a memorable highlight of my Long Retreat as a Jesuit tertian one year ago. Twenty years (half a lifetime) after doing the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius for the first time – twenty years, not of flight exactly, but of a thousand lesser compromises, evasions and apostasies, to hear my call

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as a religious and as a priest being confirmed and renewed was immensely powerful. 'See if you can get it right this time.' Tertianship, or 'third probation', the final phase of Jesuit formation before full incorporation into the order, is in many ways the hidden gem of Ignatian spirituality. Surprisingly little has been written about it, yet it seems to me the obvious institutional expression, for Jesuits, of those concerns and ambiguities which cluster around the notion of 'refounding'. Tertianship is never simply about the renewal and consolidation of the individual Jesuit who undertakes it, but has to be seen as the rejuvenation of the Society – and of the Church – as a whole. Unless we think it is possible to speak of institutional refoundation without the conversion and renewal of individuals?

Between recollection and hope

We shall return to Jonah and his 'second chance'. Before that I would like to explore, in a more existential vein, precisely these same ambiguities around 'refounding'. Søren Kierkegaard does not use this word, but he does introduce the notion of 'repetition' as a third category between 'recollection' and 'hope' – a strategy, in other words, between nostalgia and revolutionary optimism:

Repetition's love is in truth the only happy love. Like recollection's love, it does not have the restlessness of hope, the uneasy adventurousness of discovery, but neither does it have the sadness of recollection – it has the blissful security of the moment. Hope is a new garment, stiff and starched and lustrous, but it has never been tried on, and therefore one does not know how becoming it will be or how it will fit. Recollection is a discarded garment that does not fit, however beautiful it is, for one has outgrown it. Repetition is an indestructible garment that fits closely and tenderly, neither binds nor sags. Hope is a lovely maiden who slips away between one's fingers; recollection is a beautiful old woman with whom one is never satisfied at the moment; repetition is a beloved wife of whom one never wearies, for one becomes weary only of what is new. One never grows weary of the old, and when one has that, one is happy. He alone is truly happy who is not deluded into thinking that the repetition should be something new, for then one grows weary of it. It takes youthfulness to hope, youthfulness to recollect, but it takes courage to will repetition. He who will merely hope is cowardly; he who will merely recollect is voluptuous; he who wills repetition is a man, and the more emphatically he is able to realize it, the more profound a human being he is.¹

Kierkegaard is asking 'is repetition possible?', a question which he poses on a number of levels, the 'aesthetic' and the 'religious'. To simplify the argument of this short but challenging work: Kierkegaard sets out a failure to achieve repetition 'aesthetically' when he describes his protagonist making an 'investigative journey', trying to recreate or relive a memorable visit to Berlin in his youth. 'So I arrived in Berlin. I hurried at once to my old lodgings to ascertain whether a repetition is possible.' A series of disappointments follows: his lodgings, the atmosphere of the town, and above all his visit to the theatre, are all different and inferior to the original experience, and convince him that 'there is no repetition at all', or at least only repetition of the wrong kind: 'the only repetition was the impossibility of a repetition'. The sheer contingency of the stream of events which is life makes this experiment a failure.

It is precisely this failure, however, which opens up the question in Part Two of *Repetition*, of whether repetition is possible on a higher level, the spiritual or religious. Here the centre of attention is the 'young man' whose intense romantic involvement parallels Kierkegaard's own crucial engagement to Regina Olsen. The crisis is resolved when the young man reads in the newspaper that the girl has married, and 'I am myself again'. The torment of the whole affair he associates with the ordeal of Job – 'If I did not have Job!' The young man identifies with 'freedom's passion in him', and with the final restoration of Job's fortunes: 'Job is blessed and has received everything *double* – this is called a *repetition*.'² His own passionate commitment is rediscovered, as it were, in a different and higher key:

Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning? Compared with such a repetition, what is a repetition of worldly possessions, which is indifferent toward the qualification of the spirit? Only his children did Job not receive double again, for a human life cannot be redoubled that way . . . I am myself again; the machinery has been set in motion. The inveiglements in which I was entrapped have been rent asunder; the magic formula that hexed me so that I could not come back to myself has been broken. There is no longer anyone who raises his hand against me. My emancipation is assured; I am born to myself . . .³

With this release of creativity and insight – 'ideas spume with elemental fury, where thoughts arise uproariously like nations in

migration', 'at other times there is a stillness like the deep silence of the Pacific Ocean, a stillness in which one hears oneself speak' – comes a new sense of answerability:

I belong to the idea. When it beckons to me, I follow; when it makes an appointment, I wait for it day and night; no one calls me to dinner, no one expects me for supper. When the idea calls, I abandon everything, or, more correctly, I have nothing to abandon.

Restoration or creative fidelity?

I make no claim here to elucidate Kierkegaard's ideas adequately, or even with any degree of accuracy. I merely want to enlist his distinction between repetition on the 'aesthetic' and 'religious' levels – only the second being truly possible – to pinpoint some ambivalence concerning the notion of 'refounding', above all with the way it can imply quite divergent political and ecclesiological strategies. The foremost contributor to the literature of refoundation is the Australian religious priest, Gerald Arbuckle,⁴ who draws an explicit parallel between the pressures for reform in religious congregations and the Church as a whole. In *Refounding the Church* he sets up the tension between two contemporary models or strategies for reform: the 'paradigm shift' instantiated by Vatican II, and the 'restorationist' agenda, which professes commitment to reform but in practice seeks a return to ghetto Catholicism. For Arbuckle, the second of these falls short of the radical change which is called for; it is the difference between repairing a car's puncture and imagining a new form of transport altogether, such as a hovercraft.

So also, when thinking of the Church's primary task of preaching the Kingdom within an ever-changing world we need apostolic creativity of quantum-leap proportions. In other words, renewal or the refurbishing of existing pastoral strategies is insufficient. Rather we require radically different and as yet unimagined ways to relate the Good News to the pastoral challenges of the world, for example, secularism, materialism, secularization, environmental destruction, political and social oppression. That is, we need pastorally creative quantum leaps in our thinking, structures and action. Thus prophetic people or 'apostolic quantum-leap' persons are needed within the Church to critique, or dissent from, the conventional and ineffective pastoral wisdom of the present. Without these courageous people the Church simply cannot fulfil its mission. I believe the word 'refound-

ing', not 'renewal' or even 'transformation', best conveys the dramatic nature of what Vatican II is asking of us.⁵

There will be few readers of this present article who are not in broad agreement with Arbuckle's plea for 'creative fidelity',⁶ and who do not share his dismay with the forces of paralysing and alienating retrenchment so evidently at work in the contemporary Church. Arbuckle's use of cultural anthropology and organizational theory to outline the task of transforming individuals as well as ecclesiological structures is certainly helpful. There are further questions which are begging, however, before his project of 'refounding' can truly convince. For the purposes of clarifying this project, let us pick out two such questions here:

- How will we ever be able to recognize the way forward if it is 'radically different and as yet unimagined'?
- Is there a way of seeing the models of 'refoundation' (Arbuckle's paradigm shift at Vatican II) and 'restoration' (the neo-conservative backlash) as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive?

The first is definitely a philosopher's question, and indeed explains part of the rationale of Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, since the Platonic notion of 'recollection' is meant to account for our ability to know anything at all. Knowledge, for Plato, must be an act of recognition, an 'unforgetting' of what we knew before we came into the world; but it is precisely this unsatisfactory, 'nostalgic' account that Kierkegaard wants to replace with 'repetition'. Only repetition can allow for the truly present, the truly religious, to take place. It might be helpful to map Arbuckle's tension between 'restoration' and 'refounding' onto Kierkegaard's examination of different kinds of repetition; more specifically, to see neo-conservative retrenchment as an attempt at 'aesthetic' repetition, such as that attempted by Kierkegaard's protagonist on his visit to Berlin. This attempt to gain insight by an essentially external recreation of the circumstances in which previous significant experience took place is doomed to failure, such a recreation is not possible. It is a nostalgic strategy which disappoints, whose only insight is 'the repetition that there is no repetition'. And yet it is a perfectly understandable attempt to take refuge in the known, in what has proved effective or valid in the past.

The problem with Arbuckle's formulation remains: how will we recognize what is not only unknown but as yet 'unimagined'? If Kierkegaard rejects recollection because it is 'a discarded garment that

does not fit, however beautiful it is, for one has outgrown it', remember he also rejects hope as 'a new garment, stiff and starched and lustrous, but [which] has never been tried on, and therefore one does not know how becoming it will be or how it will fit'.

The second question posed to Arbuckle – can we see the two models of restoration and retrenchment as complementary rather than mutually exclusive – seems on his analysis to require the answer 'no'. He is under no illusion about the scale and organization of what he explicitly calls the 'anti-Council' movement, and is critical of the habits of secrecy and witch-hunting that characterize its defensiveness. Horns are well and truly locked, there just seem to be two incompatible visions of Church. Perhaps Arbuckle's pessimism and his call to arms are justified, but I want to probe further into the relationship – even the affinity between these two titanic forces – than a simple juxtaposition of models will allow us to do.

Building on the ruins

The clue, again, lies in Kierkegaard's dramatic account of repetition, a drama in two acts as it were. Only with the failure of aesthetic repetition does the possibility of a repetition on a 'higher', spiritual plane emerge; perhaps in the way that Paul Ricoeur speaks of metaphorical meaning being founded on the 'ruins' of the literal sense, so repetition takes place upon the ruins of Job's former life, or indeed of the promise made to Abraham concerning Isaac and his future progeny. Or to put this another way, the reality we are considering is paschal. The problem with simply looking at, then choosing between, alternative models of ecclesial change, is that this absolves us from a struggle; the paschal 'ordeal' must be undergone. Restoration and refounding, to use Arbuckle's terms, are related perhaps not as alternatives, but as successive moments in the paschal drama. Only when the possibilities of the first are exhausted – when every *thinkable* human certainty and probability were impossible – are the knot and the entanglement tightened which can be untied only by a thunderstorm (*Repetition*, p 212). But to get to this point an imitation, a repetition of the gesture, is required, as Kierkegaard would have it, a silent walking in Abraham's footsteps towards the mountain.

Even here I am uneasy; intriguing as the notion of repetition may be, it seems to me that Kierkegaard's Lutheran rupture, especially in *Fear and trembling*, may be just as unhelpful as an essentially liberal or managerial 'models' approach; the first stresses the disjunction, the second emphasizes continuity and comparability. Perhaps a better

image is the re-enactment of a script or the execution of a musical score; implicit here is the notion of a 'theo-drama' as the most suitable framework for thinking these issues through. Dramatic theology, as a number of theologians have suggested, offers a way of speaking of the interaction of different freedoms – divine and human – so that one does not overwhelm the other. Through drama, as von Balthasar asserts in his *Theodrama*, 'man attempts a kind of transcendence':

The world of the theatre will only provide us with a set of resources which, after they have been thoroughly modified, can be used later in theology. All the same, the model of the theatre is a more promising point of departure for a study of *theo-drama* than man's secular, social activity. For in the theatre man attempts a kind of transcendence, endeavouring both to observe and to judge his own truth, in virtue of a transformation – through the dialect of the concealing-revealing mask – by which he tries to gain clarity about himself. Man himself beckons, invites the approach of a revelation about himself. Thus, parabolically, a door can open to the truth of the real revelation.⁷

Christian resources

For the Christian, the only resource for this is the script of Jesus which is to be enacted, 'interpreted' anew, in the hope and expectation that something surprising will occur. Here, surely, is the limitation on Arbuckle's vision of an unimagined apostolic quantum-leap: if the Church has a genuinely Christian future, surely it will be eucharistic and paschal, and therefore still recognizable as an enactment of the Church's drama, however surprising or innovative. It is not clear to me that creative fidelity calls us to do anything other than act out the drama once again, to acknowledge our failings and weakness and yet still to 'go and do as I told you'.

This may seem a rather low-key conclusion, but it may not be. On the contrary, what may be at stake here is the very identity of the Church, and the way we speak of its nature and function. Let us return to Jonah to see how this is so; at the same time, we may be relieved that we are finally talking about the renewal of the Church, having moved away from what can be a very individualist paradigm. For what could be further away from a concern for Church renewal than a discussion of Kierkegaard's solitary 'knight of faith'? For that matter, what can we learn about ecclesial revival from the struggles, however impressive, of heroically isolated biblical figures such as Jonah or Job?

In fact, the Book of Jonah reads much more powerfully as a story of communal than of individual conversion. There is little evidence that Jonah himself, the Jewish prophet, has grown in insight or compassion, despite his adventures and despite his 'second chance' as a prophet. And yet this strange and quizzical story played an important role in the liturgy of Yom Kippur, the great Jewish feast of communal repentance. It is worth trying to disentangle what is going on here. Sandor Goodhart notes the lack of interpretations which make satisfactory sense of the Book of Jonah as a whole, especially if we take into account the curious, final part of the narrative, the exchange between Jonah and the Lord around the gourd which springs up and dies.⁸ The vehemence of Jonah's disappointment at the death of the gourd (the Hebrew word is *kikayon*) follows his churlish response to the conversion of the citizens of Nineveh: 'I am greatly angry, even unto death.' These two responses, says Goodhart, may be connected:

What God is showing Jonah, in other words, in the first instance is that what has troubled him – 'even unto death' as he says – is nothing more terrible than a matter of personal discomfort. What 'angers' him, in one case as in the other, is the loss of his own personal protection from the heat of the sun, the fear of his own exposure in the light of day. What has angered him in the salvation of the Ninevites is the loss in some way of his own security, the threatened exposure of his own weaknesses and failings, the loss of his shielding *kikayon*.

The strength of Jonah's outrage at the loss of this *kikayon*, Goodhart suggests, indicates its idolatrous significance for him: his own protection had become a form of divinity. And here it becomes apparent that Jonah's attitude towards Nineveh is idolatrous in just the same way. His refusal as a pious Jew to preach to Nineveh is rooted in his zealous desire to reserve salvation for Jews alone, and thereby bolster his sense of racial and religious security – and yet what distinguishes Jewish identity over against Nineveh is precisely its refusal of idols! 'He would make an idol, ironically, of the law of anti-idolatry itself.'

For who are the Jews? . . . They are precisely, those who have left, those who have given up the sacrificial ways of the lands from which they came in order to be Jews in the first place. The Jews, in other words, are ex-Ninevites and by this same understanding, as those who have given up their sacrificial and idolatrous ways and turned in repentance to the religion of the LORD, the Ninevites are the new

Jews . . . The Ninevites are the 'other' of the Jews at every point if and only if they are at the same time the future or the past of the Jews, the future or the past of where the Jews already are.⁹

There is, Goodhart asserts, a profound diachronic continuity between Israel and Nineveh, one which is sustained at every point by the radical difference between divinity and idolatry. And here is the most urgent question of all to be asked of strategies of 'refounding' and 'restoration' alike. Are they a genuine response to God's initiative, or are they perhaps a disguised idolatry, attempts to shore up insecure identities? The startling implication of Goodhart's reading of Jonah is that even the prophetic spirit's assertion of difference may be 'deconstructed'; it is literally only a matter of time: the Ninevites are the future Jews, the Jews in turn are only former Ninevites. This is the true nature of the 'repentance' to which all – sailors, Ninevites, Jonah – are called, and above all the gathered Israelites at the Yom Kippur festival of repentance.

The paradox of refounding

A 'refounding' of the Church will face the same paradox. It is interesting to note that significant contemporary theologies, of liberation for example, or interreligious dialogue, stress radically new ways of conceiving of Church – to the dismay and concern of ecclesial authorities, as is well known. Whether we are speaking of the 'Church of the poor', of 'base human communities', or even of 'anonymous Christianity', it seems that a new fluidity characterizes theological discourse, dismantling the formerly dependable distinctions of who is inside and who is outside the community of the chosen. The very act of assertiveness implied in any gesture of refoundation will therefore work back on itself, dissolving all possible candidates for our *kikayon* (which Goodhart finally paraphrases as 'an excuse, a defense, an idolatrous substitute for our own fears of exposure').

Again, such a dialectic of undermining is familiar enough to the retreatants who hand themselves over to God – a self they have not created, for which they have not laboured, a self that will perish overnight. They do so by handing themselves over to the power of narratives, dramatic encounters, parables, scenes to be contemplated, whose effect is to subvert and destabilize before reconfiguring. And while it is not easy to describe communal analogies to this experience, something of the same happens in liturgy, especially in those seasons

and festivals when Christian worship is at its most confident and articulate.

I am aware that instances of such transformation, whether individual or communal, can seem comparatively rare, certainly far too few given the need and the scale of the challenges facing the Church. The brutalities of injustice, environmental despoliation, disfiguring secularization – the sheer scale of these realities can render us speechless with horror and drive Christianity to the irrelevant margins of the human struggle. Clearly, something has to change. Nevertheless, a thirst for the apocalyptically new in such situations is an ancient and understandable temptation, and if it is accompanied by a fundamental mistrust of the symbols, narratives and practices which have sustained Christians in the past, then it will be doubly suspect. I have tried to suggest that an easy division between good and bad versions of reform – ‘restoration’ and ‘refoundation’, for example, as proposed by Arbuckle – is of a real but limited usefulness, and that it may be better to see these in ‘profound diachronic continuity’. That is to say, that conservatives and radicals represent different moments within the same dramatic process; all are defined in terms of the divine call to demolish idolatrous bulwarks, and in terms of their fidelity or otherwise to that vocation. I have attempted to en flesh this insight in the narrative of the prophet Jonah, because the more puzzling features of this story seem to point to precisely such a deconstruction of identities.

Finally, I have hinted at the personal context (my experience as a Jesuit tertian) which gave a particular sharpness and clarity to these reflections; and I have put forward Kierkegaard’s fascinating discussion of ‘repetition’ as the most lucid philosophical description that I have come across of what this experience felt like. Here too was a ‘profound diachronic unity’, of the forty year old tertian priest, and the novice twenty years his junior: a dialectic, if you will, of past and present, of youthful enthusiasm and reflective experience (dare I suggest, even a dash of wisdom). Kierkegaard introduces what looks like a spiritual version of the ‘third way’: repetition is a counter to the nostalgia of recollection, but also the fragile uncertainty of radical hope, because ‘repetition’s love is in truth the only happy love’. Perhaps our age is more inclined to see the dangers of the nostalgic route than the radical one; yet Goodhart’s reading of Jonah, if correct, is a sobering reminder of how even the most sublime prophetic mission may be a mask for vast swathes of resentment and insecurity – something again, to which one humbled but grateful tertian can give adequate testimony. ‘For hope is a beckoning fruit that does not satisfy; recollection is petty travel money

that does not satisfy; but repetition is the daily bread that satisfies with blessing.¹⁰

Michael Kirwan is a Jesuit priest lecturing in systematic and pastoral theology at Heythrop College, London. He spent the last year completing the final stage of Jesuit spiritual formation.

NOTES

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, pp 131–2. Quotations are from H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (ed and trans), *Fear and trembling/Repetition* (Princeton University Press, 1983).

2 *Repetition*, p 212. This theme is of course explored at length in the figure of Abraham in *Fear and trembling*, the companion volume to *Repetition*.

3 *Repetition*, p 221.

4 Gerald Arbuckle's writings on the theme include: *Out of chaos: refounding religious communities* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988); *Grieving for change: a spirituality for refounding gospel communities* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991); *Refounding the Church: dissent for leadership* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993).

5 Arbuckle, *Refounding the Church*, p 22.

6 The term 'creative fidelity' has been preferred recently by some as a synonym for 'refounding'. As ever, words crack under the strain: on hearing this phrase a friend wondered to me whether it carried the same undertones as 'creative accounting'!

7 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: theological dramatic theory I: Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p 12. See also the Introduction to Raymund Schwager, *Jesus and the drama of salvation* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

8 Sandor Goodhart, *Sacrificing commentary: reading the end of literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

9 Goodhart, pp 155–6.

10 *Repetition*, p 132.