

Long before Drumcree, British Governments had left their executive arm under the sufferance of others. Not just the sufferance of the bulk of the population, as in any civilised country. Under the sufferance of the rednecks. It cannot openly consent to leaving its arm there, for fear of being led into a train of events it would not even wish to name. It cannot decisively draw it out, or the magical illusion of oneness with the 'oul cause of the rednecks, is broken'. So it leaves it there, but telling itself 'It is only our military arm, not us. The execution of our policies will in no way be compromised. We will execute what we decide, after due deliberation... .' But this detachment in fantasy from its own compromised forces, merely confirms the depth of the Government's bad faith. For as long as your executive forces are under sufferance to the rednecks, Sartre's point holds. *La délibération volontaire est... truquée... . Quand je délibère les jeux sont faits*. When, in such a case, you claim to decide after deliberation, your claim is phoney. When you go through the motions of deliberation, the decisions are already made. So leave Ms Mowlam in office. Every worthwhile politician can be allowed one Bay of Pigs, and Drumcree was hers. But either pull the Army right out, or stop pretending that it is not really your Army, your executive arm.

Relativism: Opportunity or Threat?

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The postmodernist perspective is so amorphous as to almost defy description. A good deal of imprecision inevitably flourishes. Its description ranges from the superficial level of populist culture and its images, to an anarchistic nihilism. Many of its adherents are refugee post-Marxists sheltering under the banner of a relativistic abandonment of all *ideological* absolutes. Where is one to find the link between the post-structuralism of literary criticism and the postmodernism in the field of architecture and art? There are many who regard the process as a fundamental transformation in human self understanding. They regard it as a radical de-centring of the self and as a comprehensive embracing of relationality and relativism, (which

seems to be generating such concern in the breast of Cardinal Ratzinger and his colleagues), as a complete disavowal of the enlightenment project. Others, rather strangely on the other hand, see it simply as the next sequential stage in the modernising process, and equally a threat to the purity of faith. The emphasis, for them, is on its continuity with the past.

It is a difficult area and to be approached with diffidence. I am myself heavily dependent upon the contribution of Gerard Loughlin, who gave me my first introduction to the writings of Levinasian ethics in his article in *New Blackfriars* in January 1994.

Both the enlightenment and the reaction against it in postmodernity have at their heart an exploration of the significance of the *self* as it is confronted by a world in which it feels itself to be an alien. Prior to the change in Western European consciousness inaugurated by both the Reformation and by Descartes, the dominant medieval perspective seems to have been that of a holistic pyramidal model with God at its apex. This hierarchical image was also reflected in the manner in which both Church and State were organised. Although there were those who claimed that this model was organic, paternalistic and with the best interests of the lower orders at heart, it seems to some to have been largely concerned with the possession of power. Change was regarded as a threat to the status quo and tradition was the power base used to resist it by the establishment. The Church was in possession of the ultimate truths because of its claim to contain, interpret and to communicate Divine Revelation. The most potent threat to the established order of society was heresy.

In philosophical speculation, there were restrictions. Metaphysics was acceptable provided that it posed little threat to the ontological structure of a God-oriented and God-directed world administered by his legitimised authorities, Church and State. Ethics was largely founded on the human capacity (guided by the Church authority) to interpret God's law in the creation for which He was responsible, thus the law of nature. It was there for all to recognise and obey. This description is of course something of a caricature and an oversimplification. Nevertheless it was and is at least the underlying aspiration and myth generated by believers in the medieval system, both then and since. The individual had few rights other than those conferred upon him by his divinely legitimised superiors. Individual conscience did not head the list of priorities in the application of casuistry.

The Enlightenment project was directed towards the emancipation of the human individual from this mythical synthesis which had God

at its heart. This emancipation was to be achieved through the progressive exercise of the critical reason. Reality was to be reduced to a quantitative model, mathematics was to be the key to power. Newtonian physics gathered all that was considered to have any real significance into its orbit. The qualitative was consigned to the uncontrolled and private arena of subjectivity, no longer available for public truth claims. In that area, taste was to be the sole criterion. The critic and the connoisseur shared centre stage. Art inevitably became artefact. Its function could no longer be an invitation to explore the symbolic significance which it was designed to contain and mediate in the public forum. Private possession of it as an object of value satisfied the acquisitive needs of the art collector or decorative designer. Only music and to some degree poetry seemed able to resist. The pressure of rationalisation succeeded eventually in the de-centring of God and replacing Him with the individual, autonomous self.

Religious toleration in non-Catholic Christianity became for the first time a virtue, since religion could hardly be conceived of as making objective truth claims. Religion was generally acceptable until or unless it was deemed to threaten the public good, as defined by liberal orthodoxy. Religious *experience* replaced religious dogma and creeds or confessions, at least in liberal religious thought.

The Aristotelian/Thomist union between knowledge and love — *omne ens est intelligibile et omne ens est bonum*, with all its optimism for the suppression of non-being which was their estimate of the nature of evil and ugliness, was split apart. Goodness and evil were largely confined to the interior arena of the subjective self where alone there was space for god and demon, and the external physical universe was available to the individual only through the exercise of the power of critical rationality. The inner world and the outer world had lost the possibility of any convincing synthesis.

The subject/object divide engendered by both the reformed theology and the enlightenment philosophy isolated the self within the cocoon of impotent not-belonging. The individual must henceforth establish his right to belong and to participate in the common life through the exercise of power. Autonomy, maturity, independence became the key words at the heart of moral education. To be dependent on others became a sign of weakness. Those who could not compete in the struggle for self-control or power over their surroundings were marginalised. This isolation and centring of the human self initiated a sea-change in which the self and the other, the subject and object, could no longer interrelate or discover each in each. The symbolic value of the object could no longer contain and

mediate any transcendental presence with its invitation to explore its limitless meaning and mystery. It became *merely* a symbol, a sign which perhaps evoked in the now devalued interiority of the beholder the memory of an absence. The inner self now liberated from its conjunction with the outer world of experience became prey to gods and demons. The story lost its roots in reality; faith, as Kant boasted, no longer was dependent on the ambiguity of the historical event. God if not yet dead, was at least confined to the inner realms of personal predilection. History became subverted by historicism. Intentionality as the central presence in the historical process was replaced by a search for the facts. Reality was reduced to the quantitative, to physical law, to the value-added. There was no longer any meta-narrative in which the human individual or community could discover itself. Society had become a myth and no longer had any effective existence beyond the illusion. The iron cage of rationalisation, both inhuman and dehumanising, continues its relentless progress. Systems of quality control and non-human technologies are replacing the inefficient yet messily creative contributions of the human agent.

The modern world was born at the moment when human beings began to lose their sense of the organic unity of all things. The individual stood centre stage and looked at the world around as simply different and strange. Subject and object confronted each other. Each was precisely what the other was not. The bridge had gone. No longer was the myth, the story, the imagination able to include both within its mysterious embrace. The human individual was defined at birth and did not belong nor have value, until and unless he or she could acquire the power to control and dominate the environment into which they had been thrown.

Attempts were made in the 19th century to regenerate the metanarrative. The universal syntheses of both Hegel and Marx both generated idealistic utopian aspirations. Both submerged the unpredictable particularity and freedom of the individual as subject, into the totality of the whole. The particularity of the self, under the pressure of the dialectic, was relegated to the status of a disruptive irrational inconvenience. Subjectivity was thus suppressed in the interests of the ideological totality. And so the dichotomy between the object and subject was seemingly overcome. Subjectivity was entirely dissolved into the One, either the *Geist* of Hegel or the Matter of Marx. But at a cost. The individuality and awkward particularity of the autonomous human being was not liberated from the alienation which the liberal enlightenment had generated, it was simply replaced by another form of personal isolation and impotence. Personal feelings

and values were still to be excluded from human affairs of any significance.

The other significant attempt to reconnect the subject and object was that of Romanticism. It tried to situate the bridge between them in the *Image* generated within and by personal sensibility. It attempted to restore to, or to impose upon, the world of human experience the transcendent qualitative aura which the enlightenment had consigned to the escapist irrelevance of the subjective.

In the field of religion, for many Catholics it was the meta-narrative of Salvation History which began to emerge. The historical process was guided and directed by a transcendent Being who in spite of the vagaries of human freedom and its sheer awkwardness, was able to achieve his purposes nevertheless. For the liberal Protestant, in spite of centuries of obfuscation, the presence of God in history might be identified and supported by the historical sciences alone. Thus the 19th century quest for the Jesus of history and his exquisite capacity for religious or ethical sensitivity, was inaugurated. Thus also, the History of Religions School searched for common threads in the evolutionary religious history of humankind.

There was also the synthetic evolutionary Teilhardian optimism in which the rational self took control over the whole historical sweep of reality as it was seen to progress inevitably to the millennium of complete integration of the natural world.

In retrospect, the evaporation of such optimism took place only progressively. The roots of postmodernity, both in its anarchic and nihilistic form, and also in some constructive attempts to generate new possibilities and space for the human event, can be uncovered in a number of places. Schweitzer towards the end of the 19th century effectively put paid to the attempts of the liberal historicists to recover a portrait of Jesus sufficient to generate faith in contemporary believers. Nietzsche's devastating critique of the distortions which had corrupted the Christian gospel and the goodly life. Feuerbach's consignment of religion to the area of self-projection and the subsequent alienation which those images then generate. Conrad's exploration of the death of God syndrome in his novel, *The Heart of Darkness*. More recently we have watched the demise of ideology in Marxism and Socialism. It has to be noted though that attempts are still made to breathe life into the ideology of the market place.

Both Romanticism and Rationalism seem to offer no escape from the corrosive effects of Cartesian dualism. Are there then any grounds for hope in the human project? What if anything lies beyond modernity if a way backwards is sealed off? If the temptation to

reconstruct the past through religious or political or social fundamentalism is resisted? If romantic revivals or a re-creation of an organic synthesis or metanarrative on the medieval model is no longer available? If not even the attempt to revive Victorian morality is conceivable outside the cynicism of politicians?

Some of the Christian theological responses to modernity which have emerged during the past century confront the question as to whether there is any hope for the future of the human project.

Karl Barth was the first to repudiate totally the liberal modernism of 19th century German theology. God is the 'Wholly Other', he proclaimed, not to be discovered in any exploration of the created world in which we live nor in our own subjectivity. He himself is wholly and entirely 'subject' and is unavailable save within the relationship which he offers to us. He can never be conceived of as object. Before the divine initiative in which he freely discloses himself, his inaccessibility is complete. Every attempt to approach him must begin from agnosticism. It was, said Barth, unique to the Christian claim that this God who lies beyond all human comprehension had freely offered himself in a *personal relationship* in which alone he could be encountered and known. God was not a being existing within the perimeters of self identity, he was *essentially relational*. It was this decentering of man in favour of relationality which points towards the post-modern radical theological rejection of modernity.

This radical disavowal of liberal modernity in the theology of the 20th century was the starting point for others. Existentialist perspectives were incorporated into the theological explorations of Bultmann, Tillich and others. Their concern was to affirm that authentic human existence did not lie in the affirmation of unchanging absolutes even in the absolute of the self, but in exploring the unique possibilities which the exercise of authentic freedom in commitment to the other, discloses for human existence. Loving, courageous, unchanging obedience to the *other* in the confrontation with self-dissolution is the keynote of the life of Jesus.

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, identified the two primary relationships in which he claimed, we respond to the world of external reality. It was in and through the intimacy of the I-thou relationship that we encounter the eternal Thou at the heart of all existence. It is this relationship which is our primary and self-identifying experience.

This movement towards the displacement of the self in favour of relationality as the prerequisite for personal identity, was the foundation of the philosophical anthropology of the Roman Catholic

theologian, Karl Rahner. The constitutive existence of being does not consist in its static, simple self-identity prior to relationship. All being is multiple, he claims. Everything which exists achieves its self-realisation through its capacity for self-expressiveness. There is a dynamic at the heart of existence. All being in its movement outwards towards the other, generates its own symbolic self-projection in which it discovers itself and is available for the intimacy of union with its other in the mutuality of self-giving. It enables the possibility of being utterly close to the other and yet to experience through that process of self-dispossession the surprising truth and reality of oneself as it is transcended. This, he claimed, is the paradigm and paradox of the Christian Gospel. To go out of oneself in order to discover oneself. To die so that life might be possible.

To refuse the attraction of the other and to opt to remain within the static self-enclosed isolation of negativity is to refuse to *be* in its truest sense. It is to generate an imaginary self, an illusion, which has no real existence. This was the problem with Romanticism. It generated images constructed in the self-enclosed arena of the false inauthentic self, rather than in that which is simply there, warts and all. The God who is the product of self projected images is simply that and no more: a self-projected image, an idol. Barth was right. If the Christian Gospel contributes anything to the process of human self-understanding, it can only be when it ceases to be a religion. God is dead. The God of Rahner is a God at the heart of existence who achieves his own self-realisation through this same process of self expressive self emptying. In his own real symbol, the Word which he utters, he eternally encounters and achieves his own self-existence. Dynamic relationality is the ground of all being and in humankind this process becomes uniquely conscious and deliberate. We can choose in freedom to be or not to be. We are our relationships. No more. No less. There *are no discrete self-enclosed absolutes*. No truth exists independently of the one who speaks it. All truth claims are symbolic and perspectival. It is the singer not the song, the saying not the said. The Word made flesh, not the word, the *ratio* or *logos* of the Stoics.

This would seem to be the end of the grand meta-narrative which the post-Tridentine Church so prided itself in, and which is considered to exist in its own right and almost independently of its participants. Can the hierarchical structures of a totalitarian institution survive once it has been dispensed with? Is there still an underlying and overall meaning to be grounded in *any* dialogue with ideology? Perhaps the way ahead is for both history and theology to disavow the temptation to generate grand projects and to be totally contextualised and problem

centred. To spend more time exploring intentionality and relationships.

Emmanuel Levinas, the Jewish philosopher who died recently, claimed that the ethical relationship between the *Self* and the *Other* is the *primordial* relationship rather than that of the dichotomy between subject and object typified in the Cartesian scenario. His project was to prioritise ethics over the pretensions of ontology, and he saw 'the act of saying, and the exposure it entails, as the mark and the very possibility of ethical sincerity. Whereas ontology must reduce saying to the totalising closure of the said, saying is a state of openness to the other.' 'Saying bears witness to the other of the Infinite which rends me, which in the saying awakens me.' (*The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989. p.183). Subjectivity he defined as the dis-interested vulnerability of saying.

In advance of all systems, whether political, religious, or conceptual, and indeed prior to *Being itself* is the ethical responsibility towards the Other. Alterity consists in the otherness of that which comes to me as my own personal other. It challenges my congenitally *sinful* impulse to transmute it into a stultifying sameness, to reduce it to my cognitive possession, and so to have power over it. This process of destructive transformation of the *other* into the *same* typifies the ego in its desire for knowledge and mastery. On the contrary, 'I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself...to abdicate my position of centrality — in favour of the vulnerable other. As the Bible says: '*He who loses his soul gains it*'. The ethical I is a being who asks if he has a right to be!, who excuses himself to the other for his own existence' (quoted by Loughran, taken from '*Dialogues with Contemporary continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*', ed. By R. Kearney. Manchester 1981 p. 63)

This de-centring of the self in favour of the absolute other is at the centre of the *post-modernist* theological stance. It is a rejection of the absolute self-containment of the human self and the arrogant claim for the all-sufficiency of rationality. It opts instead for a profound relationality and relativity. The language of ethics is different from and prior to the language of phenomenology and philosophy. It transcends the Hellenic language of conceptual intelligibility. It transforms the language of dogmatic formulas into the language of explorative relationality

The ethical relationship, he claims, begins in discourse. But even before any word is spoken, the discourse commences in the non-verbal manifestation of the human face and skin. The other is a being of flesh and blood. It is in the corporeal contact with my other that the ethical

demand comes to me. So the ethic of Levinas is concrete and corporeal. He is not an idealist nor a romantic. It is the face-to-face encounter which is at the heart of the human reality. The problem is to find a way of maintaining the 'I' in the very act of going beyond the 'I'. To avoid the total dissolution of the self typified in Eastern spirituality. Self transcendence makes no sense in classical phenomenology either, since it is a self-contradictory notion. To go out of oneself in transcendency would mean that the self has ceased to exist and is no more.

Levinas takes as one of his models the erotic relation. In the sexual union, he says, we have the instance of a relation, a union, which in the mutuality of the coming together remains a duality. He rejects the platonic and romantic idea of sexual union as a becoming one. Levinas describes it as a union with an absolute Other, which remains other as it withdraws into its mystery. Knowledge gives way to the mutuality of voluptuousness.

Luce Irigaray (*Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of difference*, trans. Alison Martin, London, Routledge) finds it in the relation between mother and foetus during pregnancy. She cites the placenta as the means by which both mother and foetus are both joined and separated. She notes the 'almost ethical character of the foetal relation' and uses it as a metaphor for relation of the self to the Other. She describes the cry of the baby at the moment of birth as a moment of exquisite sadness. The cry of triumph 'I'm here!' It is the first goodbye of many. She sees its face and hands it over to others. It is no longer hers.

This prioritising of the ethical relationship over the ontological and phenomenological may be the way forward. Perhaps humanity can rediscover its sense of belonging and its significance. We can claim to belong before we have established our right to belong. We belong simply because we are here — in the powerlessness of our first cry.

'The moral priority of the Other over myself,' says Levinas, 'could not come to be if it were not motivated by something beyond nature. The ethical situation is a human situation, beyond human nature, in which the idea of God is the other who turns our nature inside out, who calls our ontological will to be into question....God does indeed go against nature for He is not of this world. God is other than Being.'

So perhaps the relativity so feared by the Sacred Congregation may yet be a source of celebration and eucharist.