

Privacy

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I am associating Privacy with “Do not disturb, I want to be left alone”. On the face of it, this is an egoistical anti-social standpoint. But is there anything that can be said for being anti-community? In this paper, for the sake of argument, I align myself with this attitude because from this position I can make certain observations and raise questions related to the other.

I

Whether we like it or not, the mood of the day favours privacy rather than community. Individual privacy is more and more sought and jealously guarded. For many people community is bad news. It evokes a sense of restriction and narrowness rather than openness, conflict rather than harmony. One has only to think of, Islamic community, Serbian community, Protestant community, Roman Catholic community, David Koresh’s community at Waco, the European Community—all these give out negative signals. Even ‘basic community’ has echoes of an in-group and can be seen as a form of protest or elitism. Sometimes it seems as if the only communities that have any popular appeal are fictional ones like Ambridge or Coronation Street. These are fanciful, idealistic creations, real life is much more grim. Survival depends on individual effort. This rejection of community is often the result of its failure to satisfy our needs or its degeneration into such positions as extreme nationalism. But a denial of community often leads to a sense of isolation and loneliness. We can note that both the 1991 General Household Survey of the U.K. (published in 1993) and the recent Report into European Lifestyles by MINTEL draw attention to the fact that over a quarter of all British homes are single person households and about 14% of households are people living alone. We must remember that among single parents there are not a few who have come to accept their life without a partner as a positive good. These have had a bitter experience of living together in a relationship that just did not work out. It made impossible demands. There are others whose experience of life has led them to make a firm decision to live alone unmarried and

seek fulfilment in some profession or activity that does not involve community living, even in a family. Even the happily married have usually spent part of their lives single. There are also the aged who live alone because they have no relations to look after them. Present social trends have restricted the availability of any alternative to catering for themselves. The growing tendency in our society is that we have only ourselves to rely on. In the supermarket we select for ourselves and not via a personal relationship with the shop-keeper. Our meals can be obtained at a self-service food counter, our household repairs are D.I.Y. Some men and women have to learn to manage without a marriage partner, to be fathers or mothers without the help of the other half. It is not only a matter of shortage. In some cases it has come to be looked upon as a more satisfying way of life. The Church is affected by this present trend. Parishes have to manage without a priest and where there is no resident priest there is a para-liturgy, a quasi-eucharistic celebration on the lines of a self-service meal. The comparatively recent flourishing of retreats for the laity and courses in spiritual direction is a response to the long years when people have had to rely on a do-it-yourself spiritual direction. It is only in moments of extreme crisis that one has recourse to a priest for advice. Even those who make use of sacramental confession do not as a rule extend it to receiving spiritual direction. The received view is that in ordinary day to day living we have to do as best we can. We are on our own, we have to carry our own burdens, we are responsible to our own conscience. We have to keep going, and so, heads down, grit your teeth and avoid at all costs getting into a situation where you just give up. Say your prayers but don't get involved or involve others. This is not only a matter of the internal forum. Not everyone wants to be caught up in communal parish activities. The old don't want to be pushed around at somebody else's pace. The young want to work things out in their own way and as things crop up. It is no use offering them a blue-print for every eventuality and giving answers to questions they have never asked. They don't even want to be dictated to by their peer group. In such a climate socialism is rejected because it is seen as an intrusion into private affairs. The entrepreneurial spirit and private initiative is welcomed as an exercise of human freedom. Social concern has not disappeared but it has become privatised and is a matter for the individual conscience not for a concerted action by a superior state authority. Our privacy is violated by personal information being held on file and all too easily accessible. Except when it is a case of public figures, many deplore the intrusion of the press into the private affairs of the ordinary citizen. But there is also an objection to the interference of the Church into privacy especially

where it is a question of sexual behaviour. Does what goes on between the sheets, and who does what to whom concern anybody other than those directly involved? Conscience has become privatised. In our society a liberal attitude towards sexual practices is prevalent as long as individuals are not harmed. The possible effects of privately consenting individual behaviour of adults on society at large are not considered seriously because in the words of Margaret Thatcher 'there is no such thing as society'. A heightened sense of the individual is the order of the day. Because so much in life is governed by powerful impersonal forces, my privacy has become linked with my identity. So the cry goes up "Leave me alone, don't confuse me with others, I am different".

II

Rather than attack, let us pursue this thought and desire to escape from the crowd and see where it might lead us. In making this journey we shall find ourselves in very mixed company. In asserting our individual difference we are associating ourselves with the highly privileged who don't want to be disturbed in their castles and mansions, with those who resist the oppression of fascism or communism, and also with the hooligan who lashes out against the conventions of society. In a less violent gesture Horace fled to his Sabine farm, Paul the first hermit went off into the desert of Egypt, Juliana of Norwich to her anchoress' cell, the Emperor Charles retired to Yuste and his son Philip II built the Escorial. More recently, only one hundred years ago in the *fin de siècle* prior to the present one, Huysmans set out to establish his 'refined Thebiad'. In *à Rebours* we have his private world of decadent delights, a construct of the mind and imagination which substituted for the exterior world of nature. Where artificial flowers are more beautiful than real ones, where the blending of perfumes and the mix of colours is more varied than those found in nature, where there is no need to travel since one can create a perfect mirror of distant lands here at home. Technology can provide machines more perfect than human beings. The engines of the Northern Railway of France are more beautiful than any woman. *à Rebours* reminds us of the present day world which has invented the giant Imax screen, virtual reality, Disneyland and the theme park. But Huysmans was led beyond this stage, to the Trappist monastery where he was received back into the Church, to Chartres and the life of a provincial city, to two years as a Benedictine oblate and finally to a confrontation with cancer and death. Huysmans moved from privacy and self indulgence to solitude.¹ Let us then pursue our private world to its very depths. Like Anselm let us enter into our cell and shut the door on the world and see what is left if we are really on our own.

III

There is the problem of identity. Who is this me whose identity is threatened by the crowd and other people?

We might have at one time come across an old photograph of ourselves and asked 'was this really me?' I am confronted with an incident that I had completely forgotten, perhaps one that I cannot even recall now that I see the photograph. Or, perhaps we have been told of something we once said to somebody which has now totally passed out of our mind. Has it been deliberately suppressed? Did it really take place all that time ago? Whose memory is at fault mine or somebody else's? Can I be guilty of past faults? Are there hidden sins which I have to atone for? Is time a healer or a cheat? Can I dismiss thoughts like these as mere scruples? Is the past part of me or is it about someone who no longer exists, an 'other'?

But we do not need to stir up past memories in order to encounter the other. There is the ever present conscience, an other calling attention to the distinction between what I do and what is expected of me. Don't we sometimes exclaim, "Why did I do that? I don't know what came over me". For a former DPP one day at King's Cross was an unguarded moment that cost him his career, reputation, and marriage. We do not know what depths lie within ourselves. This is an aspect of the human person that novelists often exploit. Apart from the world of Iris Murdoch, there is Patricia Highsmith's character Ripley and the way in which he takes risks that make our blood run cold because he actually carries out a course of action that we would never dare to do but which we know has occurred to us as a possibility. We have cast it out of our mind as a temptation to be resisted, but he has welcomed and acted on it.

Long before Highsmith there was Jekyll and Hyde the two selves in the one individual. Graham Greene quite deliberately explored this dangerous edge of things, following Browning:

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist, the demi-rep
That loves and saves her soul in new French books.
We watch while these in equilibrium keep
The giddy line midway.

Like other writers Greene was interested in stories of double agents, of not knowing on what side a person really stands, of secrecy, of spying. He gave the title *The Human Factor* to one of his novels since this ambiguity is deeply rooted in humankind. One of his characters

objects to “those idealistic types who want to change the nature of human beings”. However, later on in this novel he remarks “The Colonel belongs to the hush-hush boys, and so in a way does a clergyman when you come to think of it, the secrets of the confessional is the hush-hush business too.’ But this is not completely true since the secrets we have in mind are much too elusive and transitory to be considered as matter for confession. To introduce them would run the risk of being accused of wasting priest time. So what does one do with these fantasies and temptations? Does one keep the ‘other’ part of self under wraps? Could we argue that Cynthia Payne helped people to recognise the other in themselves by offering personal services in a safe environment?

There are also temptations to self destruction, to throw oneself off a high building. Greene used to play at Russian roulette. This was not an attempt to do away with himself so much as a relief to boredom. It was a means of reinstating the idea of life at a risk, as something precarious, hanging on a thread. This is an aspect of human existence that is often covered over by the veneer of *culture*. *One sometimes* speaks of being bored to death. Isn't a lover of life more likely to be thrilled by death? Perhaps this explains the popularity of horror stories and films. Being scared, having our heart in our mouth can create a hunger for life, a zest for living, a sense of joy in being alive. This whole underworld of instinct and feeling is not adequately expressed in a version of Christianity that simplifies the world into sunsets and flowers and dancing children, nor in a theology that presents a completely logical plan and map of living. We must avoid making existence like a painting of a Dutch interior where people and objects occupy a clearly defined and ordered space. In fact one sees real live examples of this in Holland today where rooms are well lit and open to the gaze of passers by. The blinds are drawn aside so there is not a dark corner anywhere. Even prostitutes are subjected to this exposure. The interiors are really exteriors, they have become public places. How different from Southern Europe! The chiaroscuro of Caravaggio, the dark recesses, who knows what might lurk behind the arras or the folds of the curtains and drapes. Areas of light and brightness are offset by the dark and the unknown? The ladies of the night ply their trade in dimly lit streets and thus preserve a vestige of eroticism. To portray the human situation truly, one has to allow for a space that is free, uncharted and mysterious. One can only approach the other as other, if the private remains private. You can only make love in the dark. There has always to be a last veil that still remains. If it all ends with “Is that all?” you can be sure that you have not attained the Beatific Vision or indeed the vision of what it

means to be human.

We are not only confronted with an unknown other in ourselves when we consider the past and the present. There is also the mystery of the future, the future in this life as well as the hereafter. What will happen to friends, family, our health, finances, career? Some of these fears can be irrational, guilt feelings stemming from the past and projecting into the future. There are phobias, those things we keep to ourselves, reasonable hopes as well as unrealistic expectations. Our experience reminds us of our own weaknesses and so we become less sure about our future conduct. This is often put forward as one of the objections to the possibility of a firm purpose of amendment in sacramental confession. How can we honestly say we will avoid the occasion of sin and not sin again? How, for that matter, can one make a perfect commitment to marriage or celibacy or priesthood? Surely it is only a person who is unaware of their own weakness and grossly lacking in self-knowledge who can do such a thing?

IV

All the foregoing adds up to a messiness about human life that confronts us even after we have retired from the world into our private cell. There is so much we wish to disown as other, as alien in this area of our lives over which we seem to have little control. This mysterious conflict within ourselves has been recognised by christian theology from the time of St Paul and his "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want, is what I do" (Romans 7,15-18) It is an aspect of the human condition that is to be found in Augustine and in the biographies of the saints and the writings of mystics and visionaries. It lies behind the theological controversies about grace and freedom. It is formulated in the Reformers' "*Simul justus et peccator*". J.B. Metz has drawn attention to the presence of unbelief in the believer and if Karl Rahner spoke of the existence of anonymous christians there seems little reason why christians should not be referred to as anonymous atheists. To quote Browning again:

All we have gained then by our unbelief
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith
For one of faith diversified by doubt.

If we want to clarify the issue by referring it all to original sin, then we have to remember that this is one of the results or aspects of original sin that does not go away with either baptism or sanctity. In this respect at least, baptism does not make us Mr Clean. As this is very much the

human condition it is not an area to which the professional theologian has exclusive rights. Popular christianity has tended to reify and personalise the problem. The internal conflict is attributed to the presence of an evil spirit or spirits and this is set against the presence of a guardian angel or the presence of the Holy Spirit pulling in the other direction. The human being becomes a battle ground for these two forces—*mors et vita duello confluxere mirando*—each fighting it out for the possession of the soul. Where is our privacy now? It seems as if we cant even call our soul our own.

Psychology can be called in to instill a sense of responsibility for our actions and prevent us surrendering completely to the ideas of the New Age and a modern form of demonology or spiritualism. But the healing and therapy offered by psychoanalysts although undoubtedly helpful to those who can afford or respond to their treatment does at times seem a little bland. Lawrence Kohlberg's account of the development that progresses from a pre-moral stage, through a conventional role conformity to self-accepted moral principles, has a certain detached air about it that makes it a little unreal and academic. Not everybody is prepared to drink their hemlock of inevitable old age, maturity and death, with resigned composure. There is the feeling that Dylan Thomas with his "Do not go gentle into that good night" is nearer the mark.

While contemporary theologians have tended to neglect this area and turned their attention to the external world of social action and practice, it has been left to the Press to remind us of this sordid and steamy side of life. But it has tackled the problem in an indirect manner. By regaling us with stories about other people and their wayward behaviour, crime, sexual scandals, violence, it has kept before our minds this aspect of human nature without actually accusing and so offending the reader. The Press has allowed us to exercise our moral judgment, but on other people's behaviour. Sensational news sells because it has a ring of truth about it. We know the rich and royals must have dirty secrets because we have them too. But this act of indirect or vicarious confession of our faults does not always satisfy. After one has laid bare the sordid secrets, what does one do with it all? This applies not just to the popular press. Many respectable biographies make it their business to tell the story of a life, warts and all. If a writer is not judgmental he is criticised adversely. Why is this? Are we to take it that the writer is expected to draw attention to the failings of his subject in order to show that he or the reader is a better chap than the one he is writing about? Or is it a case of an impulse toward nihilism, a despairing view of human nature, we are all basically rotten? A more subtle

temptation could be the desire to legitimise and condone human failure. The fact that no one is without sin, may prevent any stones being thrown, might it not also imply that anything goes, all is permissible?

V

A discovery of the other can take place within oneself. What the preceding survey comes down to is the existence of a 'secret', an unknown at the heart of each of us. The private world is not a cosy one. As individuals we find ourselves situated in a complex of instincts, emotions, ideas, choices. The other manifests itself in unknown aspects of myself. My consciousness, my awareness, is limited. Learning to know myself is a never ending task. Deep within me there arise problems akin to the problems I encounter and perhaps seek to avoid in the exterior world. I am not in complete control. I am not at the centre of my world. There are forces at work that I want to reject, to alienate, to declare 'other'. There are things that I assimilate, identify with, make my own. Where do I end and where does this other begin? Where do I begin to be independent of this other? This is a personal problem, private to me, but I can presume that other people have similar experiences so I can talk about this meaningfully and thereby relieve myself from something of this 'angst'. I can share what I have, what I experience, with others. But I cannot communicate my identity, I cannot share what I am. As Levinas remarks, My existence is intransitive. My secret is my own and I am not even let into my own secret.

Is there any means of escape from this situation? Somewhere along the line there has to be a breakthrough from the other side. This other which surrounds us has to speak and show it is not a dark menacing shadow—a néant—but purposeful, creative, loving. A voice from the cloud assures us that we are indeed unique, irreplaceable, loved into existence. My private self, my identity and all other identities and selves cannot be understood for what they really are without reference to this Other. The muddle and the mess begins to take on the appearance of Mystery.

- 1 Huysmans died in 1907 a few months before the publication of the encyclical *Pascendi*. There is nothing to suggest that Pius X and J K Huysmans were acquainted with each other, but they were contemporaries. It is interesting to recall that when the official Church was making its stand against Modernism, Huysmans as well as Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Symons, Mark André Raffalovich, John Gray and other aesthetes and decadents were finding or rediscovering that their home lay in Catholicism. Their acknowledgement of the existence of a dark and mysterious inner world with its bizarre and erotic images proved to be the first step towards the recognition of a much greater other transcendent beauty.