

Redire ad principia: The Mystical Theology of The Book of Common Prayer

There may be fifty ways to lose your lover and even fifty shades of grey which may or may not be the same thing, but the ways to lose your humanity? Not so many, it seems.

There is really only one question for our institutions, be they schools or churches, social clubs or societies. It is whether your institution is a factory producing robots or a breeding ground for Jihadis. In other words, are they places which contribute to a deeper understanding of our common humanity or are they simply the ghettos of nihilism, having despaired of anything intellectual and spiritual; in short, the places where we lose our humanity by becoming machines or by blowing everything up including ourselves?

When Stephen Hawking and Elon Musk agree that the greatest threat facing our humanity is AI, artificial intelligence, then perhaps it is time to pause and think about our technocratic exuberance. For the concerns are very real especially for the millennial generation most wedded to the digital forms of the technocratic world. At issue is what it means to be human. In Albert Camus' 1942 novel, *The Outsider*, the robot-woman is the image of a technocratic society in which technology is allowed to reign and rule and which in turn crushes and destroys our humanity and our individuality. We become robots. We make the machine that unmakes us. The novel ends with the Meursault going to his death which has been wrongfully decided on the basis of the absurdities of reason. He goes, tellingly, to the guillotine. The machine which itself is mindless is the machine that takes off your head. And that is the point.

The contradictions are startling. *Homo Deus* (2015) by Yuval Noah Harari turns out not to be about our humanity in God and with God but about our humanity as digitally enhanced as if that were a kind of divinity, a *deus ex machina*, I suppose. And while raising various problems about technology – all of which are, of course, solvable, since the naïve idealism of progress is his assumption – he denies that you exist. The idea of a self is an illusion. There is no you. We are nothing more than organic algorithms! He is oblivious to the ethical and philosophical problems pointed out last week in the Chronicle Herald by Professor Teresa Heffernan at St. Mary's whose research programme, *Where Science Meets Fiction: Social Robots and the Ethical Imagination*, looks at big data and algorithms. They can only replicate the human biases inherent in their structure. Brains are not minds and machines cannot think.

In a way, this is not new. In 1749, the year Halifax was founded, Julien Offray de la Mettrie wrote *L'homme machine*, 'Man the Machine', a completely materialist and atheist account of our humanity. Romanticism and Existentialism both would react against the reductive assertions of a narrow and empty rationalism which looks at the world and our humanity in mechanistic terms. That is part of the importance of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, where the monster is not the thing that is made but the one who makes it. We are the monsters of our own nightmares and the makers of our own

destruction. As Wendell Berry observes: "It is easy for me to imagine that the next great division of the world will be between people who wish to live as creatures and people who wish to live as machines."¹ This, too, is our world. George Bernanos wisely noted in 1946 that "between those who think that civilization is a victory of man in the struggle against the determinism of things and those who want to make of man a thing among things, there is no possible scheme of reconciliation."²

Our institutions are in disarray and confusion precisely about the principles that belong to their vitality and life. We live in the ruins of the church. Yet the challenge remains ever the same, and is wonderfully expressed, I think, by a character in Timothy Findley's anti-war novel, *The Wars*. In the face of the overwhelming destructiveness of the First World War which has defined the twentieth century and beyond, the challenge, as Lady Juliet D'Orsay, puts it is "to clarify who you are through your response to when you lived."³ Sometimes you have to sit in the ruins.

We live in the ruins of the revolutions, the revolts against spiritual and intellectual life which paradoxically can only be understood through what has been rejected. Alfred Döblin, returning to Berlin after an uncomfortable exile in America during World War II, found a Europe unwilling to hear what he had to say. What he had to say, perhaps, speaks to us. "You have to sit in the ruins for a long time and let them affect you, and feel the pain and the judgement."⁴ We are the children of experience who have to confront the meaninglessness, the nihilism or willful nothingness that we have chosen. Only so might we learn. But it may be, as Döblin discovered, that we don't hear and see "because [we] don't want to." It is a feature of contemporary culture, Alberto Manguel, observes, namely, "the readers unwillingness to hear."⁵

Such is the wasteland of modernity already powerfully imaged in 1922 by T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*. The first section is entitled *The Burial of the Dead*, which intentionally recalls the Order for the Burial of the Dead in the Book of Common Prayer.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

¹ Quoted in John Lukacs, *At the End of An Age* (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2002) p. 118.

² Lukacs, p. 118.

³ Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (Penguin Books Canada, Canada, 1977), p. 103.

⁴ Quoted in Alberto Manguel's *The City of Words* (House of Anansi Press, Toronto, CBC Massey Lectures, 2007) p. 20.

⁵ Manguel, p.20.

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.⁶

It is the image of the church in ruins. Eliot provides two points of reference both of which are scriptural. The "*Son of man*" is a reference to *Ezekiel*, the book of the great prophet-poet of the exile; the second, the images of death and decay in "*the dead tree*" which "*gives no shelter, the cricket no relief*", refers to *Ecclesiastes*, the book of the great poet-philosopher of the Hebrew Scriptures who contemplates wonderfully and profoundly the great truth that everything under the sun is but vanity; a futile emptiness without the hope of meaning. The dominant image is that of "*a heap of broken images*", again taken from *Ezekiel*, though unnoted as such by Eliot. "*And your altars shall be desolate, and your images shall be broken*" (*Ezekiel* 6.4). It is the biblical image of the church in ruins.

The church is "*a heap of broken images*" when it no longer stands "*under the shadow of a great rock in a weary land*". The church is in ruins when it turns away rather than towards God in his word towards us. The church is only the church, we might say, in the turning towards God. That turning is a kind of circling, a circling around and around and into the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. *The Book of Common Prayer* is about that kind of circling, that *redire ad principia* that is the nature of our participation in the life of God. It is, we might say, its distinctive feature.

"*Turn unto the Lord your God,*" Joel reminds us in Lent but that turning to God is more than merely a Lenten mantra. It is a constant feature of the Prayer Book liturgy. Far more than a collection of services designed to meet this or that occasional need, this or that concern, issue and circumstance, this or that crisis of identity, the Prayer Book offers an ordered pattern of life considered more comprehensively, spiritually and theologically. It is all about the turning of our human lives to God and to our being with God through God turning to us in Word and Spirit. It is already inclusive and universal precisely because it does not cater to the ever-evolving confusions and complexities of our broken and fragmented humanity which inevitably separate and divide us from one another. It remains resolutely focussed on our life collectively in Christ, without prejudice, it seems to me, to the various confusions that belong to the contemporary politics of identity.

The focus is on the meaning of our common humanity as found in our being with God. Our contemporary "*catastrophe*" as the French phenomenologist Michel Henry puts it, is the result "*not from hearing the word of Christ but from forgetting it*", and even more "*from*

⁶ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *The Poems of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015, ed. by Christopher Ricks & Jim McCue) p. 55.

the restriction that bans it", a feature of an aggressive anti-religious secular atheism that would presume to silence the forms of religious expression.⁷

He expands on the nature of our contemporary wasteland. *"Any sacred basis having been removed from human nature, as from the world which relies on it, humans find themselves delivered up to the facticity of material nature, to a network of blind processes devoid of any interior justification."*⁸ This has profound consequences for our life together since in place of love there is, instead, rivalry, the rivalry *"of struggle for material goods, money, power, prestige – hence the reign of artifice, of treachery, untruthfulness, adultery, envy, hatred, and violence"*, all summed up in *"the struggle of all against all"*, reminiscent of Hobbes' *"warre, as is of every man, against every man."* That struggle is only tempered, Henry suggests *"by the formation of cliques outside which the individual cannot survive any longer in the jungle of modernity."*⁹ We retreat into our various ghettos, the gated communities of our minds, having despaired of everything, lost in our anger and fear. We retreat into the tombs of our souls.

Yet Eliot's image of the church in ruins contains another Scriptural reference and one which belongs most importantly to the idea of turning, to redemption and life. It is the idea of *"com[ing] in under the shadow of this red rock"*. The Prophet Isaiah speaks of *"a king [who] will reign in righteousness, and princes [who] will rule in justice"*. *"Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a covert from the tempest"*, and, as the King James Version puts it, *"as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land"* (32.1-2). Without that there is only *"fear in a handful of dust,"* a reference to the practice of throwing earth upon the casket at the time of burial. But that image, too, turns us towards our eschatological hope in the Resurrection: *"earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life"* (BCP, p. 602). In place of *"fear in a handful of dust,"* there is hope and life.

It is all a kind of circling, a going forth and a return to a principle, to God. The classical Book(s) of Common Prayer are not a collection of rites but a complete pattern of spiritual life, a way of thinking and living in and with, for and to God as well as in and with, for and to one another. It is organic and dynamic not static and mechanical. The turning is about our being with God in his turning to us. That turning is about our participation in the life of God even in the ruins of an age. This is at the heart of the mystical theology of the Common Prayer tradition. It is the counter to the collapse of theology into the discourses of naturalism, historicism or scientism which dominate church and culture. John Webster has called this *"the de-regionalization of theology"*. The

⁷ Michel Henry, *The Words of Christ* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan, originally published in French, *Paroles du Christ*, Éditions du Seuil, 2002, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner, 2012) p. 56

⁸ Henry, p. 57

⁹ Henry, p. 57

theological disciplines “have been pressed to give an account of themselves in terms drawn largely from fields of enquiry other than theology.”¹⁰ Such is a loss of theology altogether.

To reclaim and celebrate the mystical theology of the Book(s) of Common Prayer is to begin to live again from the life of God. At the very least, it means to contemplate the possibilities of turning.

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope...

T.S. Eliot’s famous poem, *Ash-Wednesday*, is itself a meditation on the idea of our turning shaped not only by the prophet Joel’s words but by Dante’s *Vita Nuovo* and by Lancelot Andrewes’ Ash Wednesday sermon of 1619 about the nature of repentance, and, even more, about the nature of mystical theology. “Repentance itself is nothing else but *redire ad principia*, ‘a kind of circling,’” Andrewes observes, “to return to Him by repentance from Whom by sin we have turned away.” The patterns of contrition, confession and satisfaction operating within the principles of justification, sanctification and glorification are the ways in which we are drawn into the mystery of God through the Liturgy which is *The Book of Common Prayer*. The whole book is the Liturgy and one which marks our participation in the church mystical and universal, the form of our participation in the life of God.

The task of the Prayer Book Society is simply to recall ourselves and others to the formative and foundational features of the Prayer Book as embodying a way of being with Christ in God and with one another. It is not linear but circular, embracing the whole gamut of human experience in its being gathered up into the life of God: from birth to death, from death to life. We live in the mystery of God through the rhythms and patterns of Word and Sacrament, of prayer and praise, of service and sacrifice. They are the means of our incorporation into the life of God; our turning to God who turns to us that we may live in him and he in us. We are, as the Prayer Book puts it, “living members of his mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people” and “heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom.” (BCP, p. 85). The pattern of the Church year, the order of services in their interrelationship, the interplay of Word and Sacrament, all are part of the dance of theology, all part of our circling around and into the mystery of God in the going forth and return of the Son to the Father in the Spirit. The turning is really all about God’s turning both in himself and for us. There is the circle of the divine life of reciprocity and mutual indwelling, *Deus in se*, and there is God’s turning to us to draw us into the circle of his endless life, *Deus pro nobis*.

¹⁰ John Webster, “Theological Theology” in *Confessing God: Essays on Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&K Clark, 2005), p. 22.

The creedal and scriptural doctrines of the Christian Faith are not a list of propositions. They are all interconnected; each circles around the other. They belong to the dance of theology, a kind of circling around the mystery of God revealed in Christ. His life was but "*a continuall passion*," John Donne observes, connecting his Christmas day and his Good Friday as being "*the morning and the evening of the one and the same day*."¹¹ As Andrewes also notes:

Christ and His cross were never parted, but that all His life long was a continuous cross. At the very cratch, His cross first began. There Herod sought to do that which Pilate did, even to end His life before it began. All His life after, saith the Apostle in the next verse was nothing but a perpetual "gainsaying of sinners," (Heb. 12.3) which we call crossing.¹²

It is all a kind of circling. It recalls us to our humanity as found in the life of God, even in the ruins of our age. *Redire ad principia* for only so, as George Herbert puts it, shall we be made "*new, tender, quick*."¹³ Such is the mystical theology of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

(Rev'd) David Curry
Vice-President of the Prayer Book Society of Canada
Address to the AGM, Halifax, NS
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¹¹ John Donne, Sermons

¹² Lancelot Andrewes, 1605 Sermon on the Passion

¹³ George Herbert, Love Unknown in *The Temple*.