

THEOLOGY, SPIRITUALITY, CONTEMPLATION

WCCM: Balally Parish, 26 November 2022

© Fr. Dermot Lane

Introduction

The title of my talk points us to different 3 topics I want to discuss with you this morning. One of the tragedies of the 20th century is that theology, spirituality, and contemplation became separated from each other. They were hived off into different compartments and this has had a damaging effect on each of these three disciplines.

Spirituality, devoid of theology, is in danger becoming rudderless and short lived. Theology without spirituality is dry, if not tasteless. Contemplation, without service, risks becoming an ego-centric exercise.

So let me offer a few introductory remarks to these 3 areas of life? First of all, Theology is about faith seeking understanding, or better, faith seeking a foothold in human experience. All good theology is a critical reflection on our experiences of life. Spirituality is about an analysis of what is going on in the interiority of the individual. Contemplation is about dwelling in the silence of life in a way that leads to action and animates service.

The aim of this paper is to try to reconnect theology and spirituality and contemplation in broad strokes -- a tall order for 20 minutes. All I can do is to initiate a conversation in this short talk.

Framing the Question

Let me begin by framing the question with a quotation from Seamus Heaney. As you know Heaney was acknowledged as an astute observer of what was going on in our lives. He wrote some time ago:

“The biggest change in my lifetime has been the evaporation of the Transcendent from our discourse” (Christopher Jamison, *Finding the language of Grace* , Bloomsbury, 2022)

In other words, the reality of God, the presence of God, has disappeared from public discourse. It is, as it were, that people no longer know how to talk about God . Discourse about the divine has disappeared from our cultural landscape. A similar expression of this malaise can be found in a poem by Denis O’Driscoll entitled *Missing God*.

Let me offer you just a sample of what he has to say:

- “Miss Him during the civil wedding when, at the altar of the register’s desk, we wait, in vain to be fed a line containing like ‘everlasting’ and ‘divine’ ...
- Miss Him when the tv scientist explains the cosmos through equations, leaving our planet to revolve on its axis, aimlessly..
- Miss Him when we stumble on the breast lump for the first time and an involuntary prayer escapes our lips.
- Miss Him, as the lovers shrugging shoulders outside the cheap hotel, ponder what their next move should be.”(*Exemplary Damages*, 2002: 29ff

A third expression of this cultural shift can be found in the often-heard statement:

“I’m spiritual but not religious.”

This means at the very least that the speaker has given up on institutionalised Christianity. But, it can also mean something positive, namely she is looking for something else that can be loosely called a spiritual quest for meaning. For some, this is a *cri de coeur* for an alternative to the disappearance of institutionalised religion.

So, the question must be asked, where do we go to find God, if God has already slipped off the cultural landscape. We may have to ask ourselves some new kinds of questions:

- Is it possible that we have been looking for God in the wrong places?
- Is it possible that we have experienced God but have failed to notice
- Is it possible that, up until recently, we have been looking outside ourselves for God, looking at the world around us.?

- Is it possible that we may need to look inside ourselves to find God?
- In brief, is it possible that theology needs to turn to the riches of spirituality and contemplation to find God at this time in our unique cultural circumstances?

T.S. Eliot captures quite accurately what I am trying to say in two lines:

*“We had the experience
But missed the meaning.”*

Is it possible that we may have already experienced God without noticing

I imagine that many of you have had the experience of looking back on your life, and saying to yourself, ah, that’s what was going on but I didn’t notice it at the time.

SPIRITUALITY

Theology needs to attend to spirituality. It needs to listen to spirituality to find out what is going on in the inside of human beings. Spirituality is about attending to what is going on in the interiority of our lives. For most of us, there is more going on in life than meets the eye. There are different layers of awareness, and different levels of self-consciousness. Spirituality helps us to get in touch with these layers and levels.

There is a story told about a Carthusian monk who had spent forty years in silent prayer. The monk was asked: “How did you pray over those years?”, to which he answered: *“When you pray, pray in, and only then can you pray up”*.

Teilhard de Chardin had a deep awareness of the importance of interiority within everything. He says, and I quote:

*“It is a fact, beyond question,
that deep within ourselves we can discern, an interior at the heart of things;
and this glimpse is sufficient to force upon us the conviction that in one degree or
another this interior exists and has always existed in nature.”*(The Human
Phenomenon, Oregon: Sussex academic press 1999: 56)

He also says:

"The time has come for us to realise that any interpretation of the universe must cover the inside as well as the outside – spirit as well as matter."(Op cit, 6)

It is instructive to note that biblical spirituality assumes the existence of an interior life. Psalm 138, for example talks about the "inner self":

"Oh Lord, you search me and you know me... It was you who created my inner most self. You knit me together in my mother's womb (Ps 138:13).

Jesus in Matthew 6/6 says when you pray:

"Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret".

St Paul in Ephesians says:

*"I pray that... You may be strengthened in your **inner being** with power through his Spirit"(Ep 3:16).*

So the question we must ask of spirituality is this: am I in touch with my inner self and if so what do I find going on there

One way, one Important Way, of getting in touch with the interiority of my heart is in and through contemplation. Contemplation, like spirituality, attends to the interior life. Christian contemplation seeks to find God in the presence of the stillness and in the sound of silence. It does this by invoking a mantra as part of the context in which we enter into the silence.

Contemplation is a response to the command of Yahweh: "be still know that I am God (Ps.46:10)" Contemplation does this by linking this stillness to a life of action and service. So, in contemplation there is attentiveness to interiority that results in an exteriority of action. It is as it were, that the interiority and exteriority of contemplation feed off each other into a new creative unity of mutuality.

So within these activities of theology, spirituality and contemplation, there are many different ways of experiencing and understanding the presence of God, different ways of experiencing God. And this means we need to say something about the different images of God in our lives. It is our image of God that influences our prayer life.

IMAGES OF GOD

I want to suggest three different images, three different ways of experiencing God in our lives. The first image we call the 'linear image of God', or a 'linear model of God's presence' which will be familiar to many of us. Within the linear model, God arrives at the end of a line of reasoning. We look at the world in different ways, we interact with the world, and then infer from what we experience to the existence of a being called God. This image of God is influenced by the proofs for the existence of God in Aquinas. This kind of God is one who comes and goes, a kind of interventionist God who comes to our assistance when we are in trouble.

The difficulty with this image of God, the image of a God who intervenes from time to time, is that it implies that, prior to the intervention, and after the intervention, God seems to be absent for the rest of time and that means for most of our lives. Further, these so-called interventions are often explained by the advances of science subsequently and so, over time, God gets squeezed out of the world and disappears altogether, or as Heaney puts it, our image of God evaporates.

A second image of God, a second model, affirms that God is present or, more accurately, is co-present in and through the many experiences of life that we have. This image is often referred to as the 'God of everyday experience' or the omnipresent God.

This presence of God in the world is not a presence that comes and goes; it is not a presence that intervenes from time to time. Instead, this presence of God does not depend on me, because God is already present to me.

Carl Jung, the psychologist, had a retreat centre in Switzerland and, on the door leading inside the centre, was the following:

"Whether called upon or not, God will be present."

In other words, we are talking about a presence of God that is given, a presence that is ahead of us, a presence that is already there before us. There is an of this God in Psalm139 which says:

*“Where can I go from your spirit
where can I flee from your presence
If I ascend sent to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in sheol you are there
if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the furthest limits of the sea,
even there, your hand shall lead me”.*

You will recall how St. Paul talks about the God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), the God who is already there ahead of us

In a similar way, Augustine, in his *Confessions*, Book 9, tells us how, in his own life, he went in search of God in all kinds of places, in fields and dens and caves of his memory. In his search, he discovered that God was already co-present to him, all the time. Augustine describes this search for God in the following way, addressing God:

*“And behold, you (that is God) were in me, and I outside you, and there I sought you
... and you were within me and I was not with you.”*

Augustine is a good example of someone looking for God outside himself when suddenly he realizes that God is already there within himself. Augustine is the great philosopher and theologian on interiority. It was Augustine who reminded us that ‘God is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves’.

In other words, in this 2nd model, let’s call it the circular model, we don’t find the presence of God, rather this presence finds us if we are still enough. We don’t construct this presence, but it constructs us if we pay attention. We don’t create this presence, but it creates us, and shapes us, and gives us an identity. In a word, this presence of God is often an experience of the most ordinary kind that takes on extraordinary spiritual significance.

A third model of God, a third image of God, is often referred to as 'the spiral experience of God'. In this model, we relate to God in and through the many different experiences we have of life. This image of the spiral allows for an ever-developing, an ever evolving and ever-deepening experience of the co-presence of God in our lives. In this situation, the human spirit goes beyond words and beyond all images, into the presence of a dazzling darkness. This spiral gives us the presence of 'God beyond the God' of all human understanding.

The value of this circular model and this spiral model is that each model suggests that the question of God is not about the absence of God to humanity, but rather the absence of humanity to the presence of a God who is already there. It is we who are absent to the God who is already present to us. I now want to move on to the third word in the title of my paper, and say a little more about contemplation.

CONTEMPLATION

Contemplation is one particular aspect of spirituality. Contemplation recognises that there is a depth dimension to human experience and that there is more going on in life than meets the eye. Contemplation is a deep awareness that we live in a world that is increasingly noisy and full of distractions and that, therefore, time is needed to tune into this deeper dimension of human experience. Contemplation is a call to enter into the inner silence of the soul and to embrace a stillness that mediates a divine presence.

For some, Contemplation is also an invitation to embrace the darkness in a way that helps us to see fragments of light, and for others it is the journey of the soul into God who is the source of light, a light which is so bright that it causes darkness.

So, for some contemplation is a journey from darkness into fragments of light, and for others it is a journey from light into darkness. What is distinctive about Christian contemplation is that it leads to a life of action and the service of others. In other words, Contemplation authenticates itself, as it were, in and through action.

A sign therefore of genuine contemplation can be found in the service of others.

Prominent here will be the service of the poor, the work of social justice, and action for the care of God's creation as a responsibility for all. Without this vital link with action, there is a danger that contemplation becomes a purely self-centred exercise, a form of self-help, without reference to anything outside the self, without an awareness of the otherness of God

HUMILITY

As we bring these thoughts to a close, and as we try to integrate the linear, the circular, and the spiral images of God, and as we highlight the enduring co-presence of God in human experience, it is important that we do this in a spirit of humility.

There is a deep awareness within Christianity about how little we actually know of God. Many of the great thinkers down through the centuries, emphasise the limitations of what we know about God, Augustine, Aquinas and Rahner all emphasise explicitly the incomprehensibility of God, the unknowability of God in this life. They point out that, if we think we know God, then it is not the God of Judaism, or of Christianity, or of Islam that we are talking about.

In contrast, we should be promoting what is known as a 'learned ignorance', a *docta ignorantia*, an awareness of how little we know of God, a knowledge that knows what it does not know. That unique kind of knowledge is the beginning of wisdom-- and that's a good place for me to stop talking and give you the chance to share your experience of God.