

NO MORE SEA!

By ISHPRIYA MATAJI

Tigers in the Antarctic . . . ?

THE STORY IS TOLD OF AN ingenious adventurer of the last century who persuaded a number of businessmen to finance his research into the behaviour of tigers in the Antarctic. After spending three years and a considerable amount of money on the project he returned home. His backers arranged a public lecture at which he was to share his findings. The announcement aroused much interest and it was to an audience vibrant with anticipation that he addressed these opening words: 'Ladies and gentlemen. As you know I have spent three years in an exhaustive research into this topic. I am now convinced that there are no tigers in the Antarctic.' After this he sat down.

I would wish that with an equal finality I could at this point put my pen down! For the topic assigned to my reflection, 'How should religious life be revisioned in a Church that no longer sees "consecration" as the sole preserve of community-based celibates?', seems about as valuable as describing the adaptive behaviour of non-existent tigers! Why? Because I am convinced that religious life and Church as we experience them today will soon no longer exist. All the evidence of our times is pointing to the rapid deterioration of public credibility in the authority of the hierarchical structure of the Church. Across the nations, the laity give voice, in multiple ways, to themselves as being 'Church'. And however strong the ecclesiastical efforts to retrench, the former structures disintegrate daily.

It is impossible to separate religious life as we know it from these church structures as its legal and social existence is inextricably bound up with this model of Church and dependent on its approbation. The last thirty years of struggling to respond to the demands of Vatican II, by recapturing their original charisms, inculturating, refounding, revisioning and intensive vocation promotion, should have taught religious women and men that their obedience might be commendable but was sadly misdirected. It is surely time to recognize that in future there will be no tigers, no pyramidically structured, juridically powerful Church, no institutionalized spiritual path based on the mandatory profession of three specific vows.

This conviction has not been given birth in me without considerable struggle and pain. But as always when pain is lived – neither rejected nor exaggerated – it has led to a fuller life and more profound meaning. I find myself joyously excited by the challenge of the new which is already emerging at the same time as the securities of the familiar forms give way. It has left me also with a genuine sympathy for all those charged with government at any level in the Church and especially in religious congregations. For theirs is a threefold task: first, that of helping those who have never found meaning within themselves, to find and sustain meaning in a way of life which is at best largely no longer socially relevant and at worst mere slavery to an obsolete system.

Second, they must enthusiastically encourage initiatives to refound either Church or ‘evangelical life’, whilst realizing that perhaps none of these interim measures carry the seeds of the future. On and on go the illusions of the possibility of revisioning, for religious congregations, like any organizations, make their vision statements in order to achieve some clarity about their current purpose and direction. Visioning is their thinking into the future in an attempt to create some form or image of their goal. Often subconscious, but there nevertheless, is the hope that the clearer the image which is achieved, the more force the future will exert on the present, acting like some invisible law of gravity to pull all the membership into that desired future state.

This attempt is doomed to failure: we have said farewell to much of Newtonian physics and stand now in a quantum world-view which gives us a greater appreciation of the role of chaos in creation. We need rely far less on the clarity of our vision-images for understanding creation’s unfolding. Consequently, the third and most difficult task of ‘authority’ is to leave those who can surf the seeming chaos to do so without restrictions and with maximum trust. Trust, however, is difficult to win, especially when what was regarded as a permanent value is being set aside. So it is important to remember that only slowly during the last millennium of Western Christian history did the Church form the clear-cut expression of the evangelical following of Jesus which is now so familiar to us. Traditionally called ‘the consecrated life’, this evangelical calling has varied enormously over the centuries in life-style and ministry. The profession of the three vows in their present form took time to evolve and to become mandatory for all those wishing their lives of consecration to be approved by the Church. A constantly changing movement, religious life/consecrated life, has now begun the process of dissolution.

It is possible that its final disappearance will take another century to complete, a slow winding-down process which we can safely predict will end beyond the life span of you and me. St Ignatius is reputed to have said it would take him only fifteen minutes to adjust should the Society of Jesus be dissolved. One wonders how many years it is going to take his sons to do this! But disappear religious congregations eventually will and I find I have far less sympathy with those who try to preserve their traditional expression in some measure, than with those helping their natural dissolution.

For the would-be preservers, whether they be synods or congregations, are in fact delaying our discernment of yet unguessed, spontaneous responses to the fact of consecration. That such responses will emerge as socially organized expressions is not yet even a clear possibility. It may not even be a wise or desirable hope. Certainly there is a crucial difference in premise between an attentive watchfulness for what might yet be and an attempt to reconstruct or revision what has been. For me, the more pernicious attitude is one that reminds those professing a consecrated life that they have never been 'so self-consciously aware of their situation, and so equipped with the tools of modern research' that they 'can reflect on and *even direct the process of change*'.¹ Any attempt to direct the current process of transformation, no matter how sharp our tools of social analysis might be, seems to me to be a dangerous absurdity, and a non-understanding of the radicality of the changes humanity, and thus Church and evangelical life, are undergoing. Only a humble, wakeful attentiveness is adequate to discern the emerging newness.

So for all the above reasons I do not consider it would be honest to discuss the topic in the terms in which it was proposed. How then can I respond to the task assigned me? I can share only my intuitions and premonitions and something of the necessary process by which an interior space was created for their emergence. They are not solutions, they offer no blueprints for future forms, and they are still emerging. Like the travellers in the tradition of the Mayan Indians, I have learned that the Mystery itself lies hidden beneath one's feet and reveals the way as light, only one pace ahead. Yet without risking that one pace, one must remain forever in the darkness.

Examine the place where you stand . . .

In order to gain a fresh focus let our starting point be in the Buddhist tradition where the novice spiritual seeker is taught how to 'examine the place where you stand'. This is no mere intellectual analysis of the

individual's psycho-social, physical environments. This observation requires the steady gaze of a perception sharpened and freed by the serious practice of contemplative prayer or meditation. Then all events, external and internal, will speak the Mystery and the events themselves will not overwhelm us. Let me give you an example from my recent experience.

With his shaved head, soft orange robes and compassionate smile the young Hindu monk sitting before me seemed wrapped in an atmosphere of detached serenity. Yet the matters of which we spoke were such as pierce with terror the hearts of most of humanity and toss into confusion the minds of even the wise. We talked of the unprecedented escalation of human violence, the ravaging of society by ethnic cleansing, multiple corruption, torture, mass rape, starvation, child abuse, AIDS, irresponsible technological research, drug addiction and numerous other destructive forces which have set our entire world on fire with conflict. Our society seems terminally sick of a grotesque cancer called fear. It was a conversation such as most of us will have had in recent years, conversations which have left us feeling angry, depressed, sick with a sense of guilt or uselessness.

From time to time the young monk interrupted our conversation with the words: 'It is the Kali Yug, the era of darkness. It was expected.' Surprisingly, this was no statement of hopeless resignation, no fatalistic shrug of the shoulders such as comes only from those refusing social responsibility. Rather it was said with a simple recognition and a calm realism, much as one might imagine Jesus speaking as he put the question to his disciples: 'Can you not read the signs of the times?' (Mt 16:3). For without this simple recognition and calm realism we cannot *read* the signs.

The signs of our times are indeed stark. We may see them and be threatened by them, but have we truly understood their message? Perhaps not, for a reading of them will be very demanding. It is a daunting but essential task simply to recognize the events without trying to minimize or exaggerate their importance, or distort their message into what is more agreeable to us; to acquire that calm realism which does not need to resort to palliatives or hide from truth in dreams of Utopias. For if we cannot read the message of what now is seen, how will we be able to discern the emerging form of the yet unseen?

Some find the scientific discoveries of this era thrilling and others are stimulated by the wonderful possibilities of the social application of the new technologies; but, despite this, for the vast majority of people the advances of this age have robbed them of their essential security.

For them, the security of a personal God offered by the traditional religions which formerly underpinned the universally accepted basis of civilization, has now gone. In the western world at least, the personal God is, at best, a largely personal affair. The gap this has left in people's lives is experienced as a terrifying if unacknowledged abyss. Fear of this abyss, of the unfathomed inner recesses of their own being, of the very possibility of an Ultimate Reality, has climaxed in the loss of the sense of belonging and of ultimate purpose. Clearly both the Church and her religious have on the whole failed in the face of this crisis. Why? Can we read this sign, this failure, correctly? If we can, if we can hear behind the superficial reasons given, then the truth we hear will set us free.

Inevitably much of the degeneration evident in society at large will be reflected in both Church and religious life. A main reason for the present degeneration, Sebastian Kappen claims,² is the fact that Christians have for too long been following, not the God Jesus encountered, but a non-god of their own making. The Christian non-god is confusing in its ambivalence. For example, while exhorting people to love one another, popes and Christian kings were encouraging Christians to massacre millions of Jews and Turks in the crusades, to enslave tens of thousands of African 'pagans'. Currently, many of this non-god's leaders appear to remain mute in the face of atrocities and injustice of every kind. This is an awesome insight.

Similarly with traditional religious life: wherever it has led its professed to a protected élitism, a bureaucratic preoccupation with the 'small print' of the vows, or an inauthentic life-style, it has been a following of the non-god down the 'way of perfection'. This is a message which may be hard to hear but it is true. Yet only when we have calmly and realistically opened our hearts to these signs do we begin to hear their life-giving message.

For the violent rending apart of our times is vibrating with the apocalyptic cry: 'Behold, I make all things new' (Apoc 21:5). *New*, not adapted, not re-organized, not revised, but totally new. This is the message which makes us tremble with joy and radiant with gratitude.

No more sea . . .

Paradoxically, to be able to hear that voice, the voice of the One who alone speaks with authority, means that we have already grown comfortable with uncertainty, that we have come to accept chaos and confusion as prerequisites for a deeper understanding of the wisdom of evolution. The book of Revelation is unambiguous about the cost of a

new heaven and a new earth. Not only must the old heaven and earth be allowed to pass away but the dissolution must be so complete that there will be no more sea. It is impossible to conceive of this globe readapted to exist without water. In order that the new may appear, there must be a stripping back, beyond the primordial waters over which the Spirit hovered before the earth was brought forth. And so it is with the newness which is now in anguish to be released in society, in the Christian community, in those conscious of their consecration. Dare we allow ourselves to let go, to permit a return to origins we have forgotten?

Ekam sat . . . Being is One

This sublime synthesis of wisdom is uttered in the Veda, most ancient of scriptures. There is but one Source, origin of all life, continuously creating all that exists. From this one Source all being has come and to it all returns. To know experientially this ground of my being is to be unshakeably anchored in Reality. It is all I need to know. 'Jesus, knowing that he came from God and was returning to God . . . ' (Jn 13:3). There is no purpose in creation other than that God, the One, the Source, continually wills, desires all into existence. Made for and by God, we are thus consecrated by our very existence. To this unique consecration nothing can ever be added by whatever means – external rites, vows or life-style. No more, no less, is asked of each of us without exception than that we strive to grow to full consciousness of our consecration. And now our very mode of consciousness is changing radically and wonderfully.

Contemporary scientists and contemporary mystics speak cogently of the billions of years of creation being, for all its intricate complexity, in essence an evolution of consciousness. Proponents of the Gaia theory see humanity as creation come to full reflective consciousness at last. They claim that we are the 'earth' thinking itself into being and they find no breaks in the evolutionary unfolding. But now this organic process seems to have made a break, a quantum leap. A 'new' consciousness is slowly being revealed. It has the combined characteristics of two earlier modes but is different from either. To use the labels given by Ewert Cousins,³ *preaxial* consciousness was that of tribal culture, essentially cosmic and collective in experience, with no sense of an individual identity. A sense of being a separate 'self' was the characteristic of the *axial period* of consciousness, which was ushered in with the advent of the great religions. The emphasis on answering the question: 'Who am I?' dissolved all sense of oneness with others or creation.

This consciousness, dominated by the need to assert one's individuality, has been the mode until recent times. Now there are intuitions that human consciousness is developing the capacity to express simultaneously both an experience of oneness, of union of being with creation, and an equally acute awareness of individual identity, of unique self.

This mode of consciousness is truly other than what has been common experience until now. Cousins has called this *second axial* consciousness, but I propose that its authentic name is mystical consciousness, and that we have known it since the appearing of the first mystic among us. It is this mystical consciousness into which each one of us is charged to grow.

It should have been no surprise to us that the migration from the institutional Church which we are witnessing is accompanied by the breakthrough of strong mystical tendencies across a wide spectrum of society, spearheaded in those societies that are more industrially advanced. This sign is one which we also misread. It has been too often dismissed as no more than the peripheral mushrooming of cults or sects and condemned as the commercial spirituality of 'new age' movements. We must be more discerning. Within this era of darkness is the vital struggle towards light, and the development of mystical consciousness is the continuing creation of God alone, the Source of all that is.

Seven-year-old David had been the only child until his baby sister was born. Realizing that his parents had been giving far more attention to their new baby than to their son, his uncle tried to reassure him that everything would soon be 'back to normal'. David, however, knew better. Looking his uncle straight in the eye, he said: 'It will never be the same again'. Examining the place where we stand should have brought us at least to the same conviction as David, for what is being brought to birth in us is a profound transformation in our experience of God.

I saw the new-born stars . . .

A few weeks ago I flew low over the surface of the planet Mars and saw valleys the size of continents on planet earth. On earth, in conditions re-creating Mars, plants are growing, green and fresh, on recycled water as laboratory research aiming to 'green' Mars moves out of the realm of science fiction and personal dreams and into serious experimentation.

Through the laser eyes of a telescope on a six-year journey to the Galaxies and through the giant projectors of the Omimax theatre, I saw

new-born stars in Orion's belt and another sun orbited by its attendant planets. For me the experience was like a cleansing in the salvific waters of Truth and Beauty. For the small children around me in the science museum the experience was intriguing but normal! It is their future, their everyday life – now only a guess away.

Then how *will* it be? The relentless demand of the human psyche to know, to be in control, to be secure . . . can never be satisfied. But from what we see and read of the signs, we can intuit certain consequences of living a new consciousness and a new Christianness.

If the new consciousness is truly spiritual or mystical, then mystics of all traditions and centuries have already much to say to us about the essence of this way. Mystical awareness discerns the indwelling presence of the Mystery, God, in all this. The core experience is that *all* is in essence *sacred* because all is created and held in being by God. Every person, every thing, is God's. Mystical consciousness sees with an equal vision, a balanced mind. The spiritual discipline, or practice, which develops this consciousness is a reverent attention to every event, a fierce loving and a universal detachment. The demanding training in how to care and not to care, so that we understand that everything is important but, over against ultimate Reality, nothing matters, cannot be avoided. Can any one of us living now even imagine what it might be like when human consciousness matures to this level? The best each one can do is to reflect on what a transformation this would bring about in his or her own life, and then in society as a whole. But no utopias on earth. Where the light is strong and clear so are the shadows dark.

The God the mystics encounter is an untamed, wild God, who upsets all their expectations and destroys all order as they have known it. Where they form community, 'they must be . . . a community of broken people, painfully honest, undomesticated, rid of the pretence and the suffocating niceness to which religion is so often prone'.⁴ Such are the 'faithful' who have always been marginalized by the establishment. What might it be like when these faithful few become the main body of believers?

Are we witnessing the familiar institutionalized Church pass away into a new Christianness? Raimon Panikkar⁵ uses this term when he invites us to reflect on how the first communities of Christian believers passed into the unfulfilled dream of a global Christendom. Over time this too passed into the establishment of Christianity as a major world religion. And now that the influence of world religions is declining, are we to discover again the challenge of God's self-revelation in Jesus the Christ?

That challenge is being focused by forces both from within and without the Christian tradition. Our Christologies reform in the light of biblical scholarship. Largely European in context and expression, they still await the impact of Christologies out of Africa and Asia. This impact will carry the weight of millennia of spiritual wisdom in other traditions, as for the first time we can enter into the awesome mystical experience of the entire human family. Dialogical dialogue is still largely 'dream', but if we can dream it, can we not also live it?

The challenge, the glory of a new way of being Christian – can we rejoice in it?

No octave for Pentecost . . .

In his homily at Mass on the Feast of Pentecost the priest reminded us that this feast was second only to that of Easter! As I recovered from the mild shock of hearing a man, so wisely spiritual, make this statement, he explained that whereas the Church assigned an octave of celebration to Easter, Pentecost needed only a single day of rejoicing! Or was it rather that all the 'ordinary' time which followed Pentecost in the liturgical calendar was meant to be an unending celebration?

A crucial issue lies hidden in this simple question. Do we believe that in the life of Jesus we had the last and only self-revelation of God, or do we believe that Pentecost was also a self-revelation of the same one God as Spirit? Jesus himself told us that it was necessary that he go in order that the Spirit might come. Did we let him go? Would not a true evangelical following of Jesus require that we take seriously his command not to cling to his visible form? Certainly only by entering into the mystical fire of Pentecost will we awake to our consecration – and then to live it.

Do you ask how those living this mystical consciousness, this consecrated life, will be recognized? Those not yet awake will never recognize the mystics, for no externally devised signs will be adequate to identify them, no specific life-style, no one cultural context. This consecrated life cannot receive 'legal approbation' and cannot be promised to those 'keeping the rules'. Freedom, full and authentic, courage to walk the desert and the market-place with equal joy: these may be the first signs to read – and then to wait the dawn . . .

NOTES

- ¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Between the times: religious life and the postmodern experience of God', *Review for Religious* (January/February 1994).
- ² Sebastian Kappen, 'Spirituality in the new age of recolonization', *Concilium* (1994/4).
- ³ Ewert H. Cousins, *Christ of the 21st century* (Element Books, 1992).
- ⁴ Belden C. Lane, 'Countercultural spirituality in the desert fathers and mothers', *Cross Currents* (Summer 1994).
- ⁵ Raimon Panikkar, 'The dawn of Christianness', lecture, Maryville University (October 1991).