

THE BELIEVER AS CITIZEN MYSTIC

John Sullivan

Fervour does not consist in feelings, nor in pious narcissism, but in the will to do good. (Liber ruber of Mary Ward)

WHO IS THE SPIRITUAL PERSON? Some might say the cleric or the religious; others, dismissively, the neurotic or the naive. Spirituality, however, is not primarily canonical or even contemplative, nor is it therapeutic, nor immature. All that is human is spiritual. Human beings are 'spiritual animals' just as much as they are 'political animals'; indeed the two are closely connected. The spiritual person is the ordinary, everyday believer, and spirituality is a process of transformation through which believers approximate ever more closely to the Model of what they, as believers, aspire to be. What matters is not where a person's life in the Spirit begins, but how it develops.

The lives of believers are many and various, from the heroic to the abject, with a good number of the merely inconclusive in between. All go through growth and change, but this does not always lead to spiritual development. World-weariness, for example, and cynicism, along with the contempt and pride that vitiate so much stoicism, cannot be seen as fruits of the spirit. There is, to use a biological metaphor, a spiritual orthogenesis, an evolutionary path, which enables us to discriminate between desirable and undesirable changes according to where they will lead us. And just as an organism may develop a whole new range of characteristics when it comes into contact with new genetic material, so human beings are transformed by the action of the Spirit.

It may be argued, however, that at least some of the language traditionally associated with spirituality is unhelpfully remote from human reality. The custom of speaking of the subject of spirituality as 'the soul', for example, has had the effect of distancing believers from

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the world in which they are incarnate, and even, at times, as Kenneth Leech claims, of suggesting a kind of ‘false inwardness’.¹

The Human Condition in Practice

What, then, are everyday believers like in the real? Few of us today are hunter-gatherers, wandering scholars or stateless nomads. We are all citizens, men and women alike. A citizen is a member of a juridically established civic order, from which the state proceeds for the purpose of governance as the immediate sovereign, but which retains the ultimate sovereignty. Within the civic order we are artisans, professionals, administrators, politicians or pensioners. The character of the regimes under which we live may vary: there are degrees of liberty and oppression; there are different levels of civic consciousness. But humans are not now found in isolation or in loose aggregates; they are located, as citizens, within recognisable social and political structures.

It is as citizens that we have duties and rights, and that we have opportunities to serve the community. Consequently the economic and political structures which determine us as citizens are a necessary part of our spiritual understanding. A spirituality that passes directly from the sublime intuition of creaturehood to a simple, anecdotal preoccupation with immediate circumstances ignores the social



structures within which incarnation places us, and within which our rights and duties, our prayers and actions, acquire civic, political and theological meaning.

In *Winnie the Pooh*, Christopher Robin’s childish prayer is ‘God bless Nanny and make her good!’ But the simple act of bringing Nanny before God in prayer cannot be

¹ See Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend* (London: Morehouse, 2001 [1971]), xvi–xviii.

abstracted from the social structures in which Nanny is incarnated: from her ambiguous position, at once a member of the family and a paid servant; from her salary and conditions of service; from the inequality of opportunity she will have experienced as a woman, or as a result of her social class, and so on. Christopher Robin is a little boy, but as adults we are aware of such circumstances, and we need to incorporate this knowledge into our prayers and our spiritual life. While the ever-popular prayer of petition costs nothing, the deeper reflection that leads us to behave as citizens and work for the realisation of justice and peace also brings us hard work, loss of prestige and probable failure. But this is what we choose when, in the language of Ignatius (Exx 46–63), we prefer the standard of God to that of Satan.

The Need for Mysticism

Notions about mysticism are various and sometimes conflicting. Denys Turner suggests in *The Darkness of God* that there has been a fundamental misconception about the nature of mysticism, by which the epistemological and ontological austerity appropriate to discourse about God becomes an experiential hypothesis about the union of the believer with God. I shall not attempt to propose a definition here; rather I shall focus on two characteristic features: mysticism acknowledges that all our theological efforts, including negative theology, collapse in face of the incommensurability of their object—and hence it is central to belief in God. And anyone who sees ‘the holy’ diffused through the whole of creation brings a mystical attitude to bear upon reality, and therefore can be regarded as a ‘mystic’. It might be objected that all believers acknowledge the ineffability of God and see holiness throughout creation, but it would be truer, perhaps, to say that all believers are called to these insights.

My conception of mysticism here is not primarily concerned with phenomena such as visions, voices, altered states of consciousness and so on, but is firmly grounded in ordinary life, even when ordinary life is recalcitrant or humiliating. A mystic in this sense is ready to accept repeated disaster while continuing to find God in all things here and now. Such a person has no need to be preoccupied with expectations of religious triumph in a foreseeable future.

The mystic understands the world as it is in reality, not in some fanciful way, yet is never shallow or superficial. One could never say of

the mystic that 'a primrose by a river's brim, a yellow primrose was to him, and it was nothing more'. For not only the beauty of the flower, but the complexity of its unique, individual development make it a matter of wonderment. The social and political world, too, is a source of wonder to the mystic, whose quest to find God in all things leads to the discovery of God's presence everywhere there is human goodness. This quest also, however, exposes the denial of God that is apparent in the abusive and oppressive aspects of human societies. The mystic's capacity for wonder and openness to the Spirit enable him or her to read the signs of the times more perceptively and more accurately than the impatient activist or the contented quietist.

Like St Paul, mystics see that, behind the panoply of 'spiritual' and 'temporal' emblems and distinctions, all their fellow citizens and all their fellow believers are equal as children of God (Colossians 3:11; Galatians 3:28). The more institutional religion is unsatisfactory, inadequate or deplorable, and the more the world is opaquely secular and oppressive, the greater the need for mystical intuition among believers. The mystic can bring serenity to the thankless task, equally that of the citizen and of the believer, of urging clerics and politicians to support the cause of justice. It is often our duty, as believers and as citizens, not to acquiesce but to admonish.

Citizenship as a Way of Life

The fundamental responsibility of citizens is not to the state but to the civic order and to their fellow citizens. It is quite wrong, therefore, to think of the good citizen as someone who always obeys the state or its government. On the contrary, the good citizen will often defend his or her fellow citizens and the civic order against the unjust actions of the state or of the Establishment. In this respect many believers, such as Mary Ward, or Jacques Sommet in our own time, have been exemplary citizens.

The discernment which we are bound to practise as believers includes an enlightened reading of the signs of the times. Believers should have the courage to admit, for example, that beneath the bland and functional language used to describe the socio-economic order of the Western democracies today there can be discerned greedy and manipulative societies in which bullying, sycophancy, cheating and violence are everyday phenomena. The believer should not accept his or

her society as it is, and should be a witness to truth rather than a complaisant collaborator.

The relations between spirituality and politics are not contingent, but necessary and inevitable. Political good works should not be seen merely as means to a spiritual end; although religious belief usually motivates ethical judgments, even for the uncommitted religion retains a significance that goes beyond mere ethics. The pursuit of justice, however, remains an essential preoccupation of revelation and of politics alike. It is clear also that solidarity among humankind is necessary both to revelation and to justice.

The Citizen Mystic

Citizenship is at once a fact (I am a citizen by birth) and a moral imperative (I ought to behave like a good citizen). Good citizenship requires altruism and self-transcendence—a constant rejection of egoism, and also of the complex of prejudices that we inherit from the very societies of which we are citizens. These prejudices are more fundamental to us even than our own autobiographical selves, for it is in terms of them that we elaborate the self. And it is only by transcending our origins and loyalties, by shifting the self from the centre to the periphery of consideration, that we can embark upon the journey that leads to citizenship and to mysticism alike.

For in a society of citizens, the independence of the individual is an illusion and the isolated self a nonentity. As citizens we only exist



Intersecting Space Construction, by Ryoji Goto

in relation to others. It is clear, therefore, that we need a spirituality of solidarity—with our fellow citizens and, as far as possible, with all humankind. It is inappropriate for us to look for a safe, privatised spiritual abode where we can disregard the inequities of the society in which we live. We have an obligation to partake in the sufferings of the oppressed and of outsiders of every sort. And once we have grasped how central, how numerous and above all how typical the oppressed are, we shall understand why ease with oneself is never an unambiguous criterion of spiritual advance.

It is difficult to see how the person who has no concern for politics can be considered a mature citizen. Likewise, those who do not place spirituality in the wider ethical setting of citizenship cannot be considered as mature believers, however great their commitment to the Church. Individualism, though demonstrably unjustified as a personal philosophy, is not only politically ubiquitous, but persistent and subtle in its incursions into spirituality. Despite the influence of social ethics and political theology, an unavowed individualist prejudice remains latent in some expressions of spirituality. But in a world so overwhelmingly in need of human solidarity, spiritual development cannot be achieved individualistically, as a sublimation of self-centredness.

The Prayer of the Citizen Mystic

As many religious activists have discovered, the attempt to combine a simple conventional piety with an optimistic social activism may give rise to tensions and instabilities in the face of everyday reality. One way forward is a model of spirituality based on an internalisation of a well-known and widely used method for determining social action, the ‘cycle of praxis’.²

Groups of believers seeking to promote justice and peace first consider their own insertion in the world through their spontaneous perceptions and evaluations. They then apply a more explicit form of social analysis which examines causes, probes consequences, delineates linkages and identifies actors. In the course of a theological reflection ‘the word of God brought to bear upon the situation raises new

² See Peter Henriot and Joe Holland, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).



Diamond Structure, by Ryoji Goto

questions, suggests new insights and opens new responses'.³ Then follows the complex process of planning, decision and action, as a result of which their original situation is modified, giving rise to further analysis as a basis for further action. When all this is internalised it becomes, not a formula for group action, but a pattern of godly living.

It may well be objected, of course, that to adopt this model is to conform the life and prayer of the believer too closely to the contingencies of social action, and thus to neglect the continuous deepening and enrichment which is an essential feature of spiritual transformation. But this objection is superficial. None of the four 'moments' of the 'cycle of praxis' is motivated merely by the *ad hoc* needs generated by particular problems. Reflecting on our insertion in the world involves coming to terms existentially, day by day, with the complex reality into which we are incarnated. The moment of social analysis allows the intellect to go about its God-given task of understanding human reality in all its interlocking moral complexity.

³ Henriot and Holland, *Social Analysis*, 9.

And the theological reflection, above all, cannot be performed simply *ad hoc*, for theology is a lifelong project. Theological understanding develops in continual meditation, through an ever-returning cycle of prayer, on the relationship between our familiar human contingencies and our glimpses of the inexhaustible reality of God.

One thing is certain, that prayer and life cannot be separated. We may experience privileged moments of sharper focus or deeper recollection, but nonetheless we are to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and this is possible because, while the believer's life is one of action in contemplation, prayer is contemplation in action.

The Spiritual Life as Civic

Parents disappointed by their children's meretricious way of life often claim, with obvious sincerity, that they have lavished care and advice, prayer and good example on these children, but to no avail. Should they accept their disappointment simply as God's inscrutable providence? Of course not: the structures that determine how young people are exploited by the greedy and the unprincipled are not in the least inscrutable. No thinking parent could possibly expect to counteract the peer pressure and commercial influence that are brought to bear on children simply by exhortation and example. But where individual parents are powerless, parents combining in solidarity to defend the whole community's children from exploitation would be a formidable citizen force.

All who combine in this way are potentially citizen mystics. Their care is directed towards the community, and they persist even if they have little chance of success. They find God in the social and political realities of the world where they live out their faith. As believers we have a special bond with our fellow believers, but we live our lives alongside all our fellow citizens in the world of work, of culture and of politics, not in some parallel world of exclusively religious concerns. And thus, because of our shared citizenship, our mystical grasp of the world becomes incorporated into our society and all our relationships.

Our tasks as citizen mystics are already determined for us by the social and political reality into which we are incarnated; we have neither the need nor the right to use our individual initiative in finding them out. As good citizens, believers should also be good electors, taxpayers and neighbours, and they should act visibly in society as

guardians of the weak, counsel for the oppressed, friends to the stranger, and, as occasion demands and their gifts allow, as politicians and as prophets. In this they are not different or special; they are simply citizens among citizens, brothers and sisters of all God's children.

The Two Great Commandments and the Citizen Mystic

When asked by a scribe (Mark 12:28) which is the first commandment of the Law, Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (6:4)

He goes on to add a quotation from Leviticus (19:18), 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself'. In the context of Christ's life and teaching, these two traditional commandments furnish Christians with a way of life which demands a radical change of outlook, not only on the Law but on the whole of reality.

It is my belief that this change consists in transforming our everyday historical and scientific view of reality into a mystical view—that is, into a view of reality that is constantly aware of the presence of God in all things—and in transforming our everyday individualistic view of society and the state into a citizenly view.

In the first place what, exactly, does it mean to be commanded to love? It is easy to feel alienated or conscious of a certain bad faith in responding to such a command. Another person may command respect, perhaps, but love seems so much more dependent on the nature of our individual relationship with the person in question. At this individual level the command to love can seem absurd. With God, admittedly, the case is rather different: although we cannot adequately know God by means of theology, our relationship with God is nevertheless intimate and interior, and our dependence upon him is fundamental. If I can discover God as the 'ground of my being', and 'closer to me than myself'; if God is 'heart of my heart' and not just someone to whom I owe respect, then there is nothing strange in loving God with my whole heart and strength.

The command to love can seem absurd

But how are we, as citizens and members of a civic order, to fulfil the requirement to 'love our neighbour as ourselves'? Granted that we are already trying to practise the ordinary social virtues of courtesy,



Sculpture by Ryoji Goto

compassion, cheerfulness, hospitality—in fact all of what we used to call the ‘corporal and spiritual works of mercy’—what more is required of us? Here we cannot always depend upon a personal relationship as the basis for love.

One answer might be that we should recognise the context within which we practise the social virtues. This would have the effect of making them citizenly tasks rather than gratuitous, individually authored acts. To the libertarian individualist, the citizen has no obligations to the civic order other than abstaining from crime; to engage in socially beneficent actions is supererogatory. In a world where there was no injustice—a world, therefore, where justice made no demands upon the citizen—all our benevolent actions would indeed be gratuitous. But in the world we live in, a world which abounds in every kind of injustice, such actions are no more than a partial response to the demands of justice. But the fact that these ‘works of mercy’ are thus demanded of us does not diminish their value; it ennobles them.

Other Models of Christian Life

There are, of course, other ways of seeing the life and spirituality of Christian believers in the world, both from within and outside the Christian tradition. I would argue, however, that many of these are partial or superficial, and have serious limitations.

The Christian as Activist

The Christian considered as activist has two potential flaws. The first is that activity may occupy him or her to the exclusion of everything else. Action may even be seen as sufficient in itself, relieving the activist of the obligation to pray and to engage in the shared liturgical and other observances that are intrinsic to the practice of Christian faith. The second flaw is that the activity itself may become wholly devoted to a single cause, excluding other causes as well as other obligations. The activist is always in danger of focusing exclusively on the second great commandment, and in so doing failing to acknowledge the importance of the first.

The Christian as Contemplative

We all have obligations to our fellow men and women which cannot be fulfilled solely by praying for them. We are bound not merely to pray for the hungry, but to feed them. Consequently it is difficult to justify a model of Christian life which involves complete withdrawal from the world, unless we have a specific vocation or are affected by circumstances such as illness. As citizens, we may be able to discharge some of our obligations through the state, and so we pay taxes to underwrite this vicarious ministry. But there are always obligations that we must, as citizens and as Christians, fulfil for ourselves in the world.

The Christian as Loyal Member of a Church

Loyalty can be considered as valuable only the same sense that obedience is valuable. It is contingent upon the value of its object. Consequently, loyalty to ecclesiastical practices or doctrines that are contrary to justice or truth is to be condemned and not praised. A Christian should not be a literalist, a 'fundamentalist' or a triumphalist. The Christian's loyalty is to God, and to justice and truth, before any Church or precept.

The Christian as Doing No Harm

We have already noted that Christians have a positive obligation to practise the 'works of mercy', which are also the works of justice. So it is not enough to avoid causing harm: the Christian must actively do good.

The Christian as Clericalist

Clericalism is almost as old as the Church. Its effect is to invert the relationship between the people of God at large and those who are selected or ordained to perform ministries among them. Ministry is service. That is the tenor of all of Christ's teaching on the subject, exemplified by his washing his disciples' feet at the Last Supper. We are all God's people, and God has no favourites. But the freedom of the children of God, as Paul calls it (Romans 8:21), constitutes a challenge which some Christians are ill-prepared to accept. They prefer to concede their freedom, in the hope of conceding their responsibility with it, to leaders who will offer them a rule-book in return for their obedience and loyalty.

The Christian as Puritan

Christianity is, above all, concerned with incarnation. The Christ was born of a woman, flesh of her flesh. If Christians believe that Jesus had no human father, the point of that belief is to emphasize that he was the son of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, not to depreciate human sexual congress. But Christians have frequently confused a right and proper revulsion for debauchery, perversion, sexual exploitation, promiscuity and infidelity with an absolute rejection of the body and of physical love as such. Such puritanism has no part in authentic Christianity.

The Christian as Antiquarian

In a secular society, the Christian may often be seen as someone with an unusually strong enthusiasm for a special interest, or even a hobby. This enthusiasm might be reflected in a liking for Gothic architecture or in a study of one particular historical moment or movement. It might take the form of a generalised aesthetic attachment to the music, the 'decor', and the ritual of the major Churches which have participated in the formation of the national outlook. These interests and attachments, however enlightened, or even edifying they may be, are neither

separately necessary nor collectively sufficient to qualify a person as a Christian.

The Christian as Conscientious Objector

Some Christians express their faith through absolute personal moral objections to actions and phenomena that are widely accepted, or considered necessary or unavoidable, by society at large. A particular issue or decision—exemplarily whether a Christian should ever go to war—becomes the touchstone of individual morality, often justifiably. The problem is that objection, however justified, offers no positive vision. It treats the world as merely a background to individual moral judgment and action, rather than acknowledging the world as permeated with the presence of God.

The Stance of the Citizen Mystic

All of these views of the Christian, inadequate or misguided though they may sometimes be, bear some witness to the truth. The Christian must not be merely a quietist, nor merely an activist. He or she does owe loyalty to the gospel, and to the Church as sacrament of the Kingdom. The Christian is forbidden to do harm to others, and should respect those who are called to the pastoral duties of the ministry. And however perverse puritanism may be, it remains true that Christians should eschew debauchery, prurience and every sort of grossness. Though it is profoundly impoverished to treat Christianity as little more than an aesthetic, such an aesthetic remains preferable to philistinism, vulgarity and uncouthness. And the Christian should indeed be a person of moral principle.

But the mysticism of the citizen mystic takes all this into account. It is not only apophatic, admitting the incommensurability of our minds and our language to the transcendent mystery which is God, but also cataphatic, allowing us to say with conviction that God is Love and to see God everywhere. The citizen mystic, like Ignatius, finds God present in all things—that is, present not only in nature, but also in society. For Gerard Manley Hopkins the grandeur of God was revealed in a ‘nature’ that is ‘never spent’, but also in ‘landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow and plough; and all trades, their gear and tackle and trim’: in

nature sharing in the purposes of humanity.⁴ Finding God in the city, finding God in nature, finding God in history, the citizen mystic reveals God at work in the here and now, and says, in the words of Alice Meynell:

Thou art the way.
Hadst thou been nothing but the goal,
I cannot say
If thou hadst ever met my soul.⁵

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⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur' and 'Pied Beauty', in *Poems and Essays*, edited by W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), 27, 30.

⁵ Alice Meynell, 'If I am In the Way', in *Poems* (New York: Scribner, 1923), 64.