

THE RELIGIOUS VOWS AND THE REIGN OF GOD

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EVERY GOD other than Yahweh—the state, the capital or even the Church—is tyrannical by nature. When such gods usurp Yahweh's throne, the obligation to restore the *humanum* to the centre of the world falls on the 'little ones of God' who dare to proclaim: 'we have no king but Yahweh'. They would do this not by mere words but by a life-style which discloses their inner surrender to God's will (evangelical obedience) as well as their open rejection of riches, which compete with God to win human allegiance (evangelical poverty). In Yahweh's communities, therefore, chastity—conjugal or celibate—is the sheer joy of being totally open to God; it is the aesthetic experience of being unconditionally obedient and absolutely poor. In that sense alone is chastity prophetic. The nascent Church was one such community. In it, God who is Love was the sole rule of life. So the slaves of other gods declared in wonder: 'Look how these Christians love one another!'

If indeed the option for God is necessarily an option against Mammon, as Jesus emphatically declared (Mt 6, 24), then *obedience* to God who calls us to be poor and religious *poverty*, which makes us free to obey God, are mutually inclusive. As a matter of fact, initially, they were two inseparable and even indistinguishable dimensions of the Kingdom spirituality so clearly set forth in the Sermon on the Mount and demanded in the call narratives of the gospels. It is much later that they branched into two distinct vows which, together with celibacy as the third, have now entered our definition of religious life.

Going along with John Chrysostom's well-known animadversion that the renunciation of family life was about the only thing that set the monks and nuns apart from other Christians, I shall treat poverty and obedience as the *basic* Christian commitment (part one) and celibacy as a *specific* feature of religious life (part two).

Note, however, that in base communities both Christian and transdenominational, conjugal spirituality has become a respectable alternative to celibacy. Furthermore, in these 'contrast societies', as we shall call them, chastity—conjugal or celibate—seems to derive its authenticity and prophetic character solely from an opted poverty capable of challenging the prevailing order of Mammon where the consumerism of a minority maintains millions in misery, and from a radical orientation (obedience?) towards an Ultimate Concern identified as the *humanum* which clamours for attention in the poor and the oppressed.

The religious who wish to rediscover their mission as contrast societies on the fringes of Church and society should be made to realize that they risk being superseded or even displaced by these new communities if they do not realign their specific vow to the prophetically dangerous implications of the two basic vows. This concern remains the theological mood in which I propose to spell out in these pages the general principle already enunciated in the very first paragraph of this article.

PART ONE: POVERTY AND OBEDIENCE: THE PROPHETIC VOWS

The seed-idea which germinates into various species of monastic and religious life at the critical periods of the Church's growth goes further back into history than we are willing to concede. The hermits and wandering ascetics who protested against Rome's imperialized Christianity were only a particular form which this seminal idea assumed in history. The idea of religious life did not originate with them. This is equally true of the circles of virgins and ascetics that appeared even earlier. They can distort our perception of religious life if the seed-idea which they incarnated is not recognized and named.

Not even Jesus, I dare say, was the originator of this idea. He did certainly envisage a community which would embody the Kingdom which he preached and epitomized in his own person. In fact, several Kingdom Communities of Jesus People began to mushroom immediately after his resurrection and served as the vital nucleus of the local Churches that grew out of them, although the way they practised the Kingdom spirituality is not as clearly documented as we would like it to be. The point I wish to make here is that such communities were not so much an innovation on the part of Jesus as they were the fulfillment of his life-long effort

to revive Yahweh's ancient dream of a *contrast society*, a society where only Yahweh and no other god would reign, a human community governed by love. This is what the phrase 'Kingdom of God' meant for Jesus. The *humanum* that Jesus embodied could continue as a palpable reality only when his followers could proclaim to the world in word and deed: 'we might have no king but Yahweh!'

When Yahweh's sovereignty is allowed to be challenged by other gods, human rulers emerge as a 'powerful' class. Now, *power*, unlike 'authority', is appropriated only by accumulating *riches*. Authority, on the other hand, is rooted in one's willingness to renounce power, a refusal to count on riches. By riches one does not mean only material possessions and money; various spiritual acquisitions such as knowledge and education, political acumen and resourcefulness, prestige and the right connections are as capable of generating power as do material possessions and money. In other words, there is a subversive *conspiracy between power and riches*; Jesus names it Mammon.

Mammon is the source and sustenance of social structures in which the powerful control the beliefs and behaviour of their fellows. They either dethrone God, as in atheistic states with totalitarian governments; or divinize money as in antitheistic systems such as capitalism; or invoke God as the 'authority' behind their 'power', as it often happens in the Church. This last mentioned theo-ideology used to be known as the 'divine right theory of kingship' and was invoked by medieval kings and popes against each other in their struggle for power. Many religious institutes have tried to create alternative models of obedience and government as a corrective to these feudal structures of the Church.

Ignatius of Loyola, for instance, wished to enrich the Church with a contrast society where Yahweh would reign unchallenged, or as he would have put it, a religious order where God's greater glory was the only thing that mattered. He would therefore, have sounded naive to his contemporaries when he declared right at the beginning of the Jesuit *Constitutions* that 'discerning love' had to be the sole guiding principle in such a society! But to serve the Church with his new vision, that is Christ's vision, he had to acquire a little space within the pyramidally structured governmental system of the Roman Communion. In doing so, he did incorporate the monarchical ideology but with two revolutionary modifications. First, he had presented a new concept of kingship, that of a leader

who derives his authority from powerlessness, whose leadership consists of service even unto death. This ideal King is obviously the Jesus of the *Spiritual Exercises*, i.e. the Jesus of the gospels. Secondly, he tamed the monarchical form of government by introducing the structure known as *congregatio generalis*, one form of which was in vogue among the Benedictines. Ignatius may not have been aware that its remote ancestor was conciliarism, the antimonarchical movement which opposed papal absolutism of the Middle Ages. The fact, however, is that in this manner, the elective principle was made to control the monarchical so that God's greater glory would not succumb to human ambition.

In such a community, leadership amounts to mediating the entire group's constant submission to God's will (obedience) by creating an atmosphere of honest detachment (poverty) so that no ideology ('corruption of reason by interest'—Marx) would compromise God's liberating and humanizing presence in that community. This is what the much worn-out word 'discernment' really means: *obedience through poverty*. It means communal listening to God and recognizing God's voice in a chaos of conflicting messages.

In fact, obedience literally means 'listening', from Latin *obaudire*. The word *hypakoe* in the Greek spiritual tradition conveyed the same sense: listening to (the word of) God. Since, however, God's word is not merely an expression of God's will but also its execution (Isai 55, 11), listening includes doing; the word is not heard if it is not executed (Lk 6, 46-47; 11, 28).

Such is the obedience that constitutes Christian discipleship and guarantees almost a blood-relationship with Jesus (Mt 12, 48-49). This is the origin of Jesus People among whom Yahweh alone reigns and Yahweh alone is obeyed.

Regrettably, we have invented another concept of obedience which is at variance with Yahweh's sovereignty: *hypotage* or submission, that is, the ascetical practice of bending one's will to the 'authority' (but in reality, to the 'power') of a human ruler, for example a religious superior, a bishop or a pope, who claims to have a privileged contact with God by virtue of the institutional position he or she holds. But, as Lozano reminds us, the New Testament always understands obedience as *hypakoe* (listening) and never as *hypotage* (ascetical submission).¹ Even the so-called 'evangelical counsel of obedience', believed to differentiate the religious from other Christians by means of a special vow of submission to a human superior, finds apparently no support in

the New Testament.² Is it again a case of humans encroaching on Yahweh's domain?

How then is authority to be exercised in Yahweh's community? Let us make a brief survey of the experiment Yahweh tried out in the second millennium before Christ. It all began when the God of Israel lodged a protest, through Moses, against Egypt, a super-power that thrived on slave labour. The conspiracy between riches and power had allowed the few to turn the many into beasts of burden. Yahweh wished to prove to the whole of humankind that equality, freedom and fellowship, in short, the *humanum*, can reappear in the world only where Yahweh and no other god is allowed to reign.

And so God called a people. But even before the people heard God's call, she heard theirs (Ex 2, 23-25). God is not only the supreme Caller, *ho Kalon* as the Greek Church named her; she is eminently a listener, a God inclined to obey the summons of an oppressed people. But listening implies execution of the other's wish; God did not merely hear their cry for help, but also opted to make their cry his own. He would not only deliver them from the inhuman, that is the antitheistic system, but would partner them in founding a contrast society which would serve all generations as a *memory of the future*, a future to be realized by the whole of humankind!³ This was a vow, a covenant, a public agreement between God and the Poor. Thus was sown the seed-idea of religious life, perhaps for the first time in known history.

If this is the prototype of religious life, as indeed it is, then a few dangerous conclusions have to be drawn before we proceed any further. First we note that the rich and the powerful are hard of hearing. Only the *poor* and the powerless are able to *obey* God. Consequently, it is only the little ones and not the big people who can found communities of Yahweh. Finally it is those who are oppressed and those who have rendered themselves powerless in solidarity with the oppressed that are qualified to speak in God's name, and prophetically announce to the whole of humankind what kind of future God is planning for them. If they speak with God's authority it is not because they have usurped God's place through riches and power, but because their powerlessness and poverty have put them into a *covenantal intimacy* with God. They alone *know* Yahweh.

That is why Yahweh began his experiment in the hilly region which, not without significance, lay between Egypt and Babylon,

two superpowers which needed lessons in politics and economics! For Yahweh inspired her covenantal partners to impose legal barriers against any accumulation of riches lest it lead to a concentration of power in the hands of the few. Precautions such as periodic cancellation of debts (Deut 15) were political and economic options taken to ensure 'that there would be no poor among (them)' (Lev 15, 4-5), which is to say, that there would be no rich among them!

The sharing of all resources in a spirit of religious poverty and the consequent distribution of responsibility which facilitated collective obedience to God are truly humanizing features conspicuously absent where Yahweh is not free to rule. That is why these little ones of God could boast that they had no human ruler above them (Jg 19, 1), for every one seemed to have acted with discretion (Jg 17, 6), or should we say, with 'discerning love'? It is not surprising that this society was able to produce so many charismatic leaders, the so-called 'judges', who distinguished themselves as the servants of God's people. They refused to be treated as kings because they dared to believe that Yahweh alone was their King (Jg 8, 22-23). Even death came easy for a leader who had vowed to be the people's slave so that God alone would reign among them (Jg 16, 27-30). This new concept of leadership as service would be taken up afresh, centuries later, by Jesus the 'servant-king' washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13, 1-20).⁵

Yahweh's experiment, not totally unsuccessful, was indeed a rebuke to the two superpowers. But how long would it last? Will her people once more look back to Egypt with nostalgia? Will the developed nations around be a source of temptation for them? Indeed they knew that slavery was more convenient than freedom! Why not choose a human ruler to act as God's vicar on earth, just as once earlier they allowed a golden calf to be their god?

Alas, the people who were chosen to teach the rich nations the ways of Yahweh soon began to ape the ways of those very nations! With Solomon's gigantic building programme (I Kg 9, 15-28) and extensive militarization (I Kg 10, 26), the Babylonian/Egyptian model began to replace that of Yahweh. The rulers swam in wealth and had slaves to work for them (I Kg 10, 14-29)! They would not listen to the prophets, who only irritated them. The leadership of service that characterized Yahweh's community during the period of Judges gave way to a power-structure that so assimilated

the Babylonian ideology that Yahweh allowed her adulterous people to experience it in Babylon itself!

When Jesus arrived on the scene, Rome had become the new Babylon. The aristocracy (the rich sadducees) and the high priests (who were accountable to Rome which appointed them, rather than to the people) collaborated with the colonizers in an inhuman system of taxation which reduced the colonized people's currency to sheer dirt. It was this symbol of Roman despotism that Jesus ridiculed when he looked at a coin bearing Caesar's image—with the inscription 'Supreme Pontiff' to indicate the emperor's connection with the divinity—and tossed it back to where it belonged: the dustbin of Caesar's treasury. And he fearlessly explained his action at the risk of being crucified for treason, that human beings, by virtue of the image of God they bear, are totally God's, and Caesar has no power over them (Mt 22, 15-21)! Jesus thus reminded them of the old credal formula: 'we have no king but Yahweh'; it was this proclamation of freedom that God's people, now Rome's slaves, countered by shouting: 'we have no king but Caesar' (Jn 19, 15)!

In fact, many times before his death Jesus warned his little flock that they should never be slaves of the Roman model, they should not copy that system of government; 'it shall not be so among you', he pleaded with his finger obviously pointing to the Roman representatives in Palestine (Mt 20, 23-28). This warning does not seem to have had any effect except on the first few generations of Christians!

It was certainly in reaction to the Roman captivity of the Church that some of the early monastic forms of religious life evolved. It was a movement of men and women who abandoned Rome and fled to the desert 'to seek a society where all are equal, where the *only authority comes from God* through wisdom, experience and love' as Merton is said to have explained.⁶ Religious life, according to the seed-idea we have discovered in revelation, is not a churchy form of existence with vows serving only as means of personal holiness. It is *also* a protest against any social order, civil or ecclesiastical, which serves other gods. It is a contrast society which, through opted poverty and evangelical obedience, partakes in Yahweh's vow to struggle with the oppressed against the principalities and powers that oppress them. In short, the obedience we vow is obedience to a God who calls us *in the poor* and calls us *to be poor*; a God who calls us to speak *for the poor* and struggle *with the poor*.

Religious congregations that fail to respond to this call must suffer the fate of salt that has lost its flavour (Mt 5, 13) and of being replaced by other contrast societies.

PART TWO: WHEN CELIBACY IS NOT PROPHETIC

Obedience and poverty as practised by the religious, as we have indicated, were originally two indispensable means, the one positive and the other negative, of proclaiming the supremacy of God and the inviolable dignity of every man and woman. By the first we confess our faith in the only God who can make us human; by the second we openly renounce every form of slavery to all other gods and idols. Obedience and poverty, in other words, are kerygmatic vows to be practised by the whole Church and in an eminent manner by the religious.

But celibacy, the vow that is specific to the religious, as its own history both in Christian and other monastic traditions demonstrates, is endowed with an innate potentiality to make itself a god, an idol, a cult of a kind. It can neutralize the prophetic thrust of the two kerygmatic vows and, consequently, turn the religious into counter-witnesses to Yahweh's reign. There is therefore a great need to be vigilant.

This is why I warned at the beginning of this discussion that the circles of virgins and ascetics of the early Church should not be taken as the origin of religious life. We should, rather, look for the seed-idea of religious life which gave birth to that institution of virginity. The inspiration for it could not have come directly from the gospels which make no issue of virginity, even of Jesus's virginity; for the *leitmotif* of the gospel narratives is Jesus's obedience to God and his continuous confrontation with Mammon.⁷

Even Paul's teaching and personal example do not appear to have converted celibacy into a specifically Christian institution in the apostolic Church. For the Jewish scriptures held virginity sacred only in terms of marriage and not for its own sake (Deut 22, 13-18). Notwithstanding exceptions like Jeremiah, John the Baptist and perhaps a few others, the general trend was to celebrate sexuality and its enjoyment as a gift of God. The New Testament does not go out of its way to annul this teaching but it certainly repudiates the cult of sex that prevailed at that time.

This brings us to the conclusion that the idea of ascetical virgins or at least the occasion for that idea could have emanated from the Greco-Roman culture in which the Church had to live its core

message of obedience and poverty. In that non-Christian milieu not only a practice but a veritable *cult* of virginity seemed to have served as a sociological antidote against the contagion of sexual licentiousness which heralded the imminent downfall of that civilization. Employing the gnostic idiom of hellenism in a creative manner, the Church announced the good news by presenting a Christian version of virginity not only as a *protest* against the promiscuity of that society, but also as an *anticipation* of the end-time of God's reign when marriage will not be necessary (Mk 12, 25). Thus imitating Jesus *also* in his virginity, they expressed their hope in God's new order of love, by means of a Christic appropriation of an evangelical value which had been practised by non-Christians for less praiseworthy motives. It was an excellent example of inculturation in that the Church discovered a way of being prophetically present in and through a 'kingdom value' of another culture.

Let me sum up. The protest against the order of sin (here, the sexual exploitation of the weak) and the immediate realization of the ultimate future are the context which made virginity and celibacy prophetic. In other words, the asceticism of virginity was the historical form by which the seed-idea of religious life, namely, a contrast society contesting the present by anticipating the future, came to be sociologically registered in the Church. It is when this seed-idea is eclipsed by its own historical manifestations that religious life and, in this case, virginity and celibacy, cease to be prophetic by becoming values in themselves, a god of a sort. Let me indicate four examples of such deviations.

1 Spiritual pride

The clearest instance is the elevation of virgins into a privileged class in the Hellenistic Churches. Virginity had soon become a spiritual form of riches capable of generating power. Once dead, the virgins were mentioned immediately after the martyrs; while yet alive, they occupied places of honour in the Sunday liturgy. It is hardly surprising that the spiritual pride of some virgins in this period drew many letters of warning from their pastors. About seventeen centuries later we meet their successors in the Jansenists who, according to the verdict of their contemporaries, were 'pure as angels and proud as devils'!

The link between virginity and aristocracy in the Roman Catholic tradition must never be overlooked. Many famous virgins who

began the tradition were noble ladies bored with Rome and seeking the company of saints and scholars—as Paula and Melania did with St Jerome.⁸ We are informed that a very high infant mortality rate and the consequent need to produce many children to ensure continuity in the family lineage, coupled with the absence of a reliable birth control method, had often created a surplus of female children. Given the expenses involved in the initiation of girls into adulthood, by way of dowries etc., consecrated virginity often became a money-saving device. Later, as in St Ambrose's order of virgins, infants began to be consecrated almost at birth, took their vow of chastity at puberty and continued to live in the parental home.⁹

Though one cannot generalize, one must reckon with the fact that the aristocratic origins of the Roman tradition of the order of virgins could have turned this institution into a means of social mobility for the commoners. This danger certainly exists in the Third World even to-day. Virginity and celibacy can serve as a status symbol for the poor who are not attracted to poverty and obedience which are practised as harsh realities in the world they must abandon in order to join religious communities. The vocation boom in the Third World must, therefore, be critically assessed in order to make sure that the two kerygmatic vows continue to serve as the prophetic basis of celibacy. One must also note with regret that the Church's overemphasis on clerical celibacy with scant reference to obedience and poverty of the gospels is the root cause of ecclesiastical careerism, the most vulgar manifestation of Mammon in the ministerial Church.

2 *Misogyny*

We must, however, concede that in a Church dominated by a male clergy, virginity could have been the only way open for talented women to rise to public recognition. Thus Paula who studied Hebrew scriptures and her sister Melania who was involved in getting Origenism condemned, could rub shoulders with Church leaders. But this tendency, far from challenging the androcratic Church order, helped only to reinforce its misogynic foundations. For the Eve-Mary polarity which has infected the Christian view of woman was given a further boost by this form of virginal asceticism: woman by nature is Eve, the temptress; she is safe only as Mary, the virgin! This notion of the woman as intrinsically

prone to sexual sin and meriting compassion has deep roots in the canonical tradition of the Roman Church.

Unfortunately, the comparison between Mary and Eve was made to revolve round sexual purity, with no biblical foundation for it, rather than in terms of obedience and disobedience, poverty and ambition. I suspect that the artists and poets of the modern period of European history who took up the theme of Mary Magdelene (prostitute turned mystic) were perhaps groping for an alternative model of womanhood, a blend of Mary and Eve, *eros* and *agape*, a symbol of saintly sensuality and affective maturity—chastity glowing with the ardour of charity.

3 *Two-tiered spirituality*

Celibacy uprooted from the basic vows normally tends to create a two-tiered spirituality; an elite class of 'asexual' beings imitating the angels are at the top and the married commoners or the sexual beings are at the bottom. When this happens a need is felt to maintain a social balance by imposing a puritanical discipline at the higher level of celibate life and an ethos of permissiveness at the lower. The reciprocity between the cult of virginity and the cult of sex in the gnostic milieu in which the Church lived her early centuries reflects this social balance. It is observed even today in some gnostic cultures in Asia.¹¹

This tradition still continues in the Church despite the Second Vatican Council. Religious tend to turn their specific vow into a symbol of a spiritual aristocracy, relegating the laity to a lower rung in the ladder of perfection. We have not yet fully realized the implications of the conciliar teaching on the universal call to holiness, namely, that the commandments of God, far from being a minimalist spirituality for 'ordinary' Christians, are the very foundation of Yahweh's community of love, freedom and justice; celibacy, an evangelical counsel, not a status symbol, is prophetic only in the context of such a society, not outside it, and not above it.

4 *Eschatological illusion*

Finally, we must record here the most ridiculous outcome of not allowing celibacy to grow in a community founded on obedience and poverty. For want of a better term, I call it 'the eschatological illusion'. Many monks and nuns began to interpret the end-time purely in terms of an asexual existence similar to that of angels.

Instead of anticipating Yahweh's Kingdom through the basic vows, they tested their eschatological freedom by trying to live as if they were discarnate spirits. Monks and virgins lived together, bathed together, as Evagrius boasted, and even slept together.¹²

Misreading I Cor 7, 36-38, where only those who 'burn' are advised to marry, these men and women tried to live as if they did not burn! They did not honestly come to terms with their own sexuality. St Jerome is indignant about the *virgines subintroductae* whom he refers to as the 'darlings' or *agapetae* (Ep 22, 14) for they have betrayed virginity 'by swelling wombs' (Ep 22, 13-14)! Referring to the scandal of the Valentinians, Iraeneus (Ad. H., 1.6.3.) speaks of religious brothers and sisters living together until the sisters become mothers!¹³

If, indeed, the Kingdom of God is interpreted only in terms of sexuality and its absence, and not in terms of radical obedience which involves Yahweh's reign of love and radical poverty which incarnates that love as human solidarity, then celibacy becomes the object of a cult. This species of idolatry is known in history as *encretism*, an obsession with chastity, which in reality is only a disguised form of an obsession with sex. Thus celibacy and sex enthrone each other as gods in the lives of those who fail to base their spirituality on allegiance to God alone and on the renunciation of Mammon.

Let me conclude by insisting that allegiance to God alone (*obedience*) is not primarily a renunciation of marriage or sex (*celibacy*) but a renunciation of power and riches (*poverty*). Hence, with no intention to make direct allusions to recent happenings in the Church, I wish to recall that the great scandal among the disciples of Jesus was not failure in celibacy, as most of them were married, but that the man who controlled the finances of the Apostolic College found it so easy to exchange Christ for money.

NOTES

¹ Lozano, J. M.: *Discipleship. Towards an understanding of religious life*, (Claretian Centre for Research in Spirituality, Chicago, 1980), pp 226-227.

² *Ibid.*, pp 242-243.

³ The liberative core of any religion is a memory of a future, as I have explained in 'Faith communities and communalism', a paper read at the Vidajyoti Golden Jubilee Seminar on Communalism, November 1987, and now in the press.

⁴ For an insightful analysis for the economics of Yahweh's contrast society, see Lohfink, N.: *Das Jüdische im Christentum. Die verlorene Dimension*, (Herder, Freiburg, 1987), pp 107-115.

⁵ The observations made on the period of Judges, substantially, and the reflections on the Contrast Society of Yahweh in Palestine, partly, I owe to the Sri Lankan biblical scholar, Shirley Wijesingha whom I assisted in conducting a study session on this theme in March 1989.

⁶ Thurston, Bonnie: 'Thomas Merton on the contemplative life, an analysis', *Contemplative review*, 17 (1984), 2.

⁷ See Pieris, Aloysius: 'To be poor as Jesus was poor?', *The Way*, 24 (1984), pp 186-197.

⁸ Yarbrough, Anne: 'Christianization in the fourth century: the example of Roman women', *Church History*, 45 (June 1976) 2, pp 158-159.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 160-161.

¹⁰ Brundage, J. A.: 'Prostitution in the medieval Canon Law', *Signs, journal of women and society*, University of Chicago, 1 (4) Summer 1976, pp 835.

¹¹ See, e.g. 'Buddhism in a permissive society', *Ching feng* IV (4), pp 153 ff.

¹² See Clark, E. A.: 'John Chrysostom and the *subintroductae*', *Church History*, 46 (2), June 1977, pp 171-185.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp 172-173.