

Context and Spiritual Direction

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“CONTEXT AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION”

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I am deeply honoured to-day to deliver this Inaugural Address on this important occasion of the Inauguration of the Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction. My topic is “Context and Spiritual Direction”.

The contemporary reality of many parts of the world, is one of deep unease. The irony of the ending of the Cold War is that it has coincided with the unleashing of uncontrollable violence in many parts of the world. The combination of high technology and seemingly medieval tribal conflict has become the pattern of our times. Behind all of this lies the development of a new ideology which “legitimatizes a culture of violence by invoking God arbitrarily to suit a particular agenda for aggression. As a result, insecurity, fear and anxiety characterize the lives of many people” [2] throughout the world.

This culture of unease manifests itself in many different ways.

There is the negative impact of economic globalisation, which continues to widen the gap between the haves and the have nots. There is also the structural violence of domineering or negligent governments in relation to their populations. Corruption and the abuse of power often manifest themselves in violence. In addition, there are often structural forms of traditional violence, mainly based in patriarchal societies. These result in gender discrimination, forced labour migration, discrimination against young people and those with disabilities, and discrimination based on race, caste, and class. Surrounding our very life is the violence against the environment.

Against this rather gloomy picture, positive signs must also be noted. There is a yearning among young people for true manifestations of peace and of peaceful communities. In the aftermath of the Tsunami we have observed remarkable efforts to create communities of peace and harmony in various places. Again, the speed of reconciliation after ethnic and communal violence often has been very rapid. Despite violence, there is evidence of a vast amount of resilience among populations who have been deeply wounded.

In 2001 and 2002, I visited Halmahera in the North Moluccas , where I had served for 13 years in the 1970s and 1980s, and saw the results of the Christian – Muslim violence. Events too terrible for words had occurred. Both Muslims and Christians were involved in violence. Let me just give one example. Six of my former students in Indonesia , all ordained ministers, were killed. One of them was the Rev Albert Lahi. He was in the vestry of his parish church when terrorists arrived. He knew that his case was hopeless. He asked to be allowed to pray. His wish was granted. He put on his preaching gown and knelt by the communion table. He prayed for his church, for his nation, for his congregation and for those about to kill him. The Sunday School children who observed the whole incident told me what happened. Then he stretched his head forward and was beheaded. His head was carried on a pole around the village. His body was dragged by the feet for all to see. Yet in this same village, and in this whole area, reconciliation has come about. Since 2002 both the Muslim and the Christian populations have been slowly but surely slowly working their futures out together, in a quite remarkable display of creating peaceful communities.

Against the situation in which we find ourselves, how do we engage in spiritual direction? How do we listen to the voice of God? How do we hear the Holy Spirit? It is not our task primarily to invoke God for our particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to sit and listen as that divine voice comes to us.

Let us first go to the very heart of our existence as Christians, and as the church. The inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world. Equally, God's inexplicable will to be God with, and for, humanity implies that we should always understand our life as Christians theologically. These simple, yet profound, facts derive from the mystery of the Triune God not to be God apart from, or separate from, humanity, but rather to make God's very life intersect with the unity of the Son of God with us. Our theological basis as Christians and as the church is in the wonder of God's condescension, in the intentionality of God's solidarity with sinners, that is, with those who find their self-identity solely within themselves, and find their self-justification and sole solace in themselves alone, without any reference to the Triune God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God, by Christ going to the extremes of alienation for humanity, so that humanity might through Him come close to God. At the heart of our faith is expressed the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder of God's inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly Body of His Son who is its heavenly Head, in order that humanity may responsively rejoice with God in the harmony and peace which God has established for creation.

If the being of the church and its life is predicated upon the grace of Jesus Christ as itself defining God's action in the world for the reconciliation of creation, including humanity, then its life of peace is that which it receives from Him, Who is its life. The church's very existence will be shaped by the manner in which it confesses this truth to be its very life.

Let us now look through one particular lens at the processes of the spread and development of world Christianity and its varying contexts. Let us look at the varying ways in which Christianity developed, and how those varying ways influenced spirituality and spiritual direction. Christianity was born within an immediate Jewish cultural environment, surrounded by an Aramaic and Hebrew vocabulary, and Semitic expectations. However, this integrated Judaism in its strict and official vesture, rejected Jesus of Nazareth and later turned against Paul as he championed freedom from the Law through Jesus Christ. As the New Testament and second and third century C E writings demonstrate, Christianity penetrated much more easily into Hellenistic culture, including Hellenistic Judaism, than into the culture of Judaism itself. From Hellenism Christianity developed into the wider Graeco-Roman culture, and subsequently moved into Northern and Eastern Europe, in addition to its movements into Asia. Why was it that it found its movement into Hellenism much easier than its movement into Judaism? It was because Hellenism was more of a culture in the original sense of that word than Judaism. Hellenism was much more related to primarily agricultural societies whose deepest concern was with being in harmony with nature. The Christ Event spoke of birth, growth, development, maturity, death, resurrection, and new life. This was a cycle. It fitted the cyclic world of agricultural life. It was a cyclic culture. That world spoke of planting, development, maturity, harvest (or death), new life, renewed fertility of the soil, and new growth. The Jesus story fitted the pattern of agricultural life. It had also been similar to the Old Testament dramas of the Prophets and Psalms, where they had spoken of destruction and rebirth.

However, in first and second century C E Judaism, a different world had emerged. There was no longer the drama of the Old Testament Prophets and Psalms. Now first and second century C E Judaism tended to stress the precise following of particular divinely-inspired words, which had been uttered up until the time of Ezra and the "Men of the Great Synagogue" and thereafter had ceased. [3]

So the gospel lived and flourished in a cyclic and agricultural mode as it was interwoven into agricultural societies. In this way, on the whole, the gospel moved north and west, in addition to its movement east. However, it did not enter the world of Judaism to any large degree. As it moved west and north and east, the transfiguration of agricultural society meant that the gospel was totally interwoven into the fabric of the culture. It also began to mould and to direct the cyclic impulses of the culture. Wholeness, harmony, rhythm, and ritual (in water, and around a thanksgiving meal) were the means by which the gospel was expressed. Baptism was the water ritual; Holy Communion was the thanksgiving ritual. Both were central means of expressing the faith. Many parts of central, northern and western Europe were evangelised in this way. The movement was slow and halting. Yet the interweaving continued. Celtic Christianity developed in this way — deeply cyclic, and deeply agricultural. There were movements also into western Asia, to India and to areas further east where Christianity developed in this way in the first millennium.

There was, of course, from time to time, resistance to the gospel, but on the whole the development of Christianity was communal. Christianity thrived in this cyclic world, and expressed itself communally. However, another world existed in

which Christianity had not been able to develop so well. This was the world of a trading- and word-culture. It was the world of first and second century C E Judaism into which Christianity had not been able to develop in the first millennium. However, with the rise of travel and trade, Christianity began to develop into a trading- and word-culture, that is, into a culture in which wholeness, community, harmony, and ritual received less attention, and more attention was given to common standards to guide diverse peoples as they sought to live together. The development of trading- and word-cultures occurred largely in the period from the fourteenth century C E, often referred to as the Modern Period, taking in as it did the European expansion in trade and commerce, the Renaissance and the Reformation, and industrial modernisation.

This was a world quite different from that of the agricultural world. Journeying individuals and communities needed clear-cut ordinances in warding off their dangers and temptations, far from the cyclic life of the soil which they had left behind. That cyclic world had been so clearly transfigured by the Christ Event, and celebrated in ritual as a means of expression and teaching. The trade- and word-culture was different. Guidelines were needed to bind communities together. Doctrine, ethics, church polity, and management were all important. The emphasis was to be on the Book (the Bible), the Guide to the Book (Confessions and Catechisms), and the Interpreter of the Book (the Preacher).

Parallel cultural emphases occurred in other trade and word religions, specifically Judaism and Islam. In Christianity, in this word and trade form, there is emphasis on the Bible, the Confession and Catechism, and the Preacher. In Judaism, there is a parallel emphasis on the Torah, the Mishnah and Talmud, and the Rabbi. In Islam, there is a parallel emphasis on the Koran (Qoran), the Shar'ah, and the Faqih.

So now Christianity succeeded in operating in two cultural modes, the cyclic- and agricultural-mode on the one hand, and the word- and trade-mode on the other. However, the critical issue arose during the period of evangelisation, from the late 18th century C E onwards. Could Christianity, which largely existed in a word and trade cultural mode in the mission-active nations, translate itself again into the cyclic and agricultural cultural modes of the receptor cultures? If the mission-active cultures had been those that were still in the original cyclic and agricultural mode moving into new cyclic and agricultural receptor cultures, then the spread of the gospel would have been relatively simple. However, mainly they were not. They were trade- and word-cultures. In the process of evangelisation a variety of reactions occurred. In some situations, the spread of the gospel was highly successful, as, for example, in many parts of the Outer Islands of Indonesia, in North-East India, in much of the Pacific, and in parts of the African continent. In other situations, it was extremely difficult, as, for example, in Japan, in parts of India, and in parts of China.

In the development of Christianity in the cyclic and agricultural mode, great emphasis was placed on the baptising of communities and cultures into the faith. Once whole Christian communities had been established, then there tended to be harmony and peace both within those communities and in relation to the surrounding societies. However, although trade- and word-culture communities encouraged peace within their community, they did not necessarily encourage community with those outside the faith-group. Often colonial Protestant communities were internally cohesive, but aggressive towards the world around them, including toward indigenous religions. So in the West Indies and in the Southern States of the United States, the local population was enslaved, or slaves imported, and the slaves simply acquiesced in the colonists' religion. There was little attempt to translate the gospel into the indigenous community. In Australia, minimal attempt was made to translate the gospel into indigenous cultural terms. In China, Japan, and India, parts of the population was antagonised by Christianity. [4]

Now we come again to the issues of spirituality and of spiritual direction. In theological terms, we need the gospel in both cyclic and word cultures. Where the church has been primarily related to an agricultural- or cyclic-culture, it needs the struggle with the divine graceful criticism of that transfiguration in order to be *semper reformanda*. It needs to hear the voice in word form to be constantly reformed. Equally, a church which is primarily related to the gospel in a word- or trade-culture, needs always the struggle with the divine fact of incarnation, that God has placed God's church in the world.

Therefore, in spiritual direction, a number of things are incumbent upon us.

First, we need to be aware that Christianity needs both its cyclic- or agricultural-culture forms on the one hand, and its word- and trade-culture forms on the other. Spirituality and spiritual direction need to interact with these two Christian forms. We need carefully to work through what that means in terms of how we exercise spiritual direction.

Second, contextual theology, therefore, is not simply a matter of engaging in word-culture exercises (in, for example,

doctrine, ethics and polity). It is as much an expression of faith through liturgy, drama, dance, music, and communal living.

Third, this way of communal harmony is necessary in the ways in which the Churches live their lives. Consensus decision-making and mutual celebration are important in spirituality and in spiritual direction.

We in our time live in a deeply ambivalent age, an age of high technology and of medieval conflict, and an age as strangely confident of the saving powers of the market-place as a previous age was strangely confident of the saving powers of collectivism. In this age, Christians are called to follow Jesus Christ in speaking of, and living out, the wonder of God's mercy, peaceful harmony and reconciliation with humanity. Christians are thus called to a life of praise, which embraces all of our personal and social life, in all its practical, ethical, religious, political and intellectual aspects. That praise will be both culture-transforming and culture-renewing, over against the self-worship of individuals and nations in our time

This vision of Christian community is eschatological in nature. It pictures the end of time as now already beginning to be operative. One of the great leaders of the ecumenical movement, Archbishop William Temple, served as Archbishop of Canterbury for only two years from 1942 to 1944. When he arrived in Canterbury, he was already ill. One of his lasting images to the ecumenical movement was that of the Christian with bi-focal lenses. In his writing he says that we should look through the top part of our glasses to see the church as God intends it to be. With the bottom of our lenses we see the church as it actually is. Although we look at the church day by day with the bottom part of our spectacles, we should also always live as if the top part were reality, as if the church was already completely pure, loving and united.

So it is with ourselves and with our communities. With the top part of our spectacles, as it were, we see a world as God intends it. With the lower part of our spectacles, we observe the world as it is. Although we daily look at reality through the lower part, we must live as if the upper part is reality too. In the church, we have to model that. For Christians, it is not just what we do, but how we do what we do that is important. Let us take peacefulness as an example. Just for a moment think of the violence of language structures and procedures in our churches. How can we speak of peace unless we model it? The ways in which we express theology, the ways in which we preach, the ways in which we engage in the worship of God, the ways in which we engage in our communities, the ways we live need to express this shalom.

One Saturday afternoon in the city of Belfast, a bank was robbed by a terrorist group. During a car chase, the car in which the terrorists were involved and the police car following were both engaged in an accident. A mother was pushing a pram along the road, holding her toddler in her hand, with her baby in the pram. One of the cars slammed into them, and the two children were killed instantly. The mother's name was Betty Williams, and she had a friend, a social worker named Miréad Corrigan. The two of them, as a result of this appalling accident, formed a group called the Peace People. Subsequently both of them went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

I was involved on my leave from Indonesia with this group, trying to build a community of peace in Ireland. Although within Christianity, it tragically represented all the elements of inter-faith and ethnic violence. To overcome this, we sought to live out a single community of peace. When a Protestant was killed, Catholic clergymen would carry the person's coffin into the Protestant church for the funeral service. When a Catholic was killed, Protestant clergy would carry that person's coffin into the Catholic Church for the funeral service. One Saturday afternoon we were engaged in the regular marches which became a pattern of those times, walking through Protestant and Catholic areas, so as to show our unity in Christ. I had a friend who had been teaching Scholastic Philosophy at the University in Belfast and had recently become a Bishop. His name was Cahal Daly. He subsequently became Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of the Catholic Church in Ireland. He was not a natural hero. He was a small, scholarly, introverted man, a large leprechaun, as he once referred to himself. On that Saturday afternoon we locked arms and walked at the head of a procession through a joint Catholic / Protestant area. Protestant young people were jeering at me because I dared to walk with a friend, now a Catholic bishop. We were at that time both doing a bit of teaching at the university.

A person came charging out of a Catholic church, flailing a great crucifix above her head. The person hit Cahal on the back of the head with it, at the same time questioning whether his parents had been married at the time of his birth. She was able to express this idea with a single word. Cahal fell to the ground, blood coming from the back of his head. I asked him if he would like to sit in a shop doorway until we sorted things out. He looked at me with steely eyes, which I shall never forget, and he said "James, put your hand into my pocket, get out a handkerchief, wipe the back of my head, clean me up, and up we get and on we go." He was over seventy at the time. He said to me, "If at this point we fail, if at this point we do not go on, than all those words that we spout from the pulpit will be shown up for the hypocrisy that they are. True spirituality and living spiritual direction will be seen by what we do now";

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[2] KOBIA, S, quoted in World Council of Churches News Release entitled "Restating the Ecumenical Vision demands Conversion, says Kobia", Geneva, 15/02/2005. Cf. BURTON, J. Conflict: Resolution and Prevention. London: Macmillan Press, 1990, 1 – 2; 13 – 24.

[3] As in the first words of the Pirqê Abôth. See DANBY, H. The Mishnah (translated from the Hebrew by H. Danby), "The Fathers" ("Pirqê Abôth"). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933, 446 – 461.

[4] See, for example, BOYD, R. H. S. India and the Latin Captivity of the Church: The Cultural Context of the Gospel (Monograph Supplement to the Scottish Journal of Theology, No. 3). London: Cambridge University Press, 1974, 117 - 119; HAIRE, J. The Character and Theological Struggle of the Church in Halmahera, Indonesia, 1941 – 1979 (Studien zur interkulturellen Geschichte des Christentums, Band 26). Frankfurt am Main und Bern: Lang, 1981, 322 - 323.