

Leaving the Temple

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Abstract: *With the ongoing demise of religion in our secular world, with its gods, demons and need to sacrifice victims, the reality of God breaks through, experienced in faith, hope and love.*

Key Words: religious decline; secularism; apocalypticism

"God is dead; and we have killed him," opined Nietzsche's madman. Actually, as the latter half of the 20th century has shown, and the dawn of the 21st is confirming, it may be more accurate to say that religion is dying – and the question is, who is responsible? Could it be God?

According to the cultural anthropologist, Rene Girard, generic religion – the age-old core of culture – is humanity's organised solution to the threat of violence, chaos, and death (as social disintegration) through the triple agency of ritual, myth and law. The sacrificial system ritualises, myth justifies and the law legislates the scapegoating that unites a divided society, bringing peace where violence had just reigned around the dead body of the victim. Remove this heart from religion and it is as dead and peaceful as any of its own victims – which is what secularism is doing.

But, in sacrificing the sacrificial system – in getting rid of religion – we leave ourselves vulnerable to a crisis that can have no happy resolution, no peace such as the world can give itself. We live in an age of terror; indeed, in an age of terror *institutionalised*, turned into an "ism" – *terrorism* – threatening to engulf us in the one thing all societies fear most: the war of all against all.

The current world conflict – the so-called "war on terrorism" – was lost the moment it was declared. It is lost in the very act of declaring it: as a result, we all live in ever greater terror of terrorism. Have you ever wondered, how can satan cast out satan? Easy: precisely *by* being divided – *dia-bolos* – against itself! For what is more terrifying than war? Instituting war on terrorism is terror institutionalised, justified, legislated: it is satan casting out satan.

Throughout the Gospel of John, and very specifically in chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel – the so-called "little apocalypse" – Jesus is clear that the Temple is finished. And his detachment from this "heart of religion" and, more importantly, his indifference to its inevitable, even immanent, demise is what the Gospels are at pains to emphasise. He simply does not care – at least not in the sense of being fascinated and appalled and shocked at the possibility.¹

And his reasons are far more momentous than a rather sectarian mindset, still locked into the violence it both serves and serves to contain, is capable of perceiving. Jesus is not replacing one religious sect (Judaism) with another (Christianity) when he urges his hearers to "destroy this Temple" and promises to "raise it up on the third day" (Jn 2:19).

¹ I am indebted to James Alison for this insight in an article as yet unpublished, *Ecclesiology and Indifference*.

When the fourth evangelist explains, “but he spoke of the Temple of his body,” he is not presupposing (or anticipating) a “Model of the Church” that would emerge centuries later (on the basis of Paul’s metaphor for the body of believers as the Body of Christ). John is speaking of the body of the victim, “the lamb of God” (Jn 1:29,36), the *sacrificial* victim whose body lays the foundations and maintains the structure of the Temple, its sacrificial system. The whole purpose of the Temple is to offer sacrifice – of *every* temple, of “the Temple” as living metaphor of religion.

Re-ligare is to “bind back/again” – to reunite by re-membering. “Re-ligion” does this precisely by *dis*-membering (*sparagmos*) the sacrificial victim. Religion as sacrificial system is *the* cultural mechanism by which societies, threatened with violent disintegration, re-integrate. And for millennia, this worked. It no longer does. It has been in steady decline all along – as all mechanisms are – but only in recent centuries has it been in *obvious* and *irremediable* decline. Indeed, in our own times it is grinding to a halt almost everywhere – hence religious fundamentalism, a sure sign of rigor mortis setting in.

Australia, for example, has never been a religious culture.² To call this nation “The Great Southern Land of the Holy Spirit” – to give it its full European name – is not so much ironic as it is paradoxically apposite. Precisely because it is “of the Holy Spirit,” Australia has never and cannot be a “religious culture” – at least, not in the strict sense of conventional human religiosity and generic cultural religion. The “supernatural” has never been a strong – much less all-pervading – presence in our cultural consciousness, our political, social, and economic structures and systems; or even in our interpersonal relationships. We are essentially a secular people. We primarily and all-but exclusively look to *this* world, *this* age, and *this* life. If individually we believe (or wish we believed) in some “other” world, age or life, we keep that largely to ourselves or in private associations of like-minded *individuals*.

But that is *not* what makes us irreligious in the sense of “religionless.” That just makes us collectively irreligious in the sense of “spiritually impoverished,” unimaginative, prosaic and more than a little boring – to say nothing of bored, listless, and at its worst, hopeless. No, what makes us collectively religionless is that we no longer believe or practice religion as a culture, a nation, a people. Most of us still say that *individually* we believe in “God” – or “spirituality” or “life” or whatever word we use to speak of the ultimate source of meaning and purpose. But none of us – and perhaps least of all the “spiritual” – *collectively* sacrifice victims, human or animal, in acts of organised mass violence covered up and justified by stories of divine visitation and necessity which we believe unquestionably as true, just, and indeed obligatory and necessary. Ritual violence, myth and law are what make religion the world over – not “faith” or “spirituality.” Jesus subverted religion from within and paved the way for being “in and of the Holy Spirit” – and he did it precisely by undoing ritual sacrifice, unveiling myth and liberating the law. How? To use St Paul’s overused (and little understood?) shorthand: with faith, hope and love.

If it is by faith, hope and love that we are “redeemed, sanctified, and saved” – set free to live towards the fullness of our humanity as *imago Dei* – than we don’t need to kill anyone to appease those gods who are angry with us miserable sinners, those very gods who have sown division, conflict and violence among us to punish us in the first place. Nor do we need to see our *own* violence as visited upon us by “the gods” or the “demons.” Nor,

² NB: I am aware that this land was home to the aboriginal nations that predate European settlement, and that they were deeply “religious.” However, they did not invent or harbour the concept of this land as “Australia,” i.e. a single nation, of which I am speaking here.

finally, do we have to use the threat of violence to curb violence or to punish it. That is, we don't need any of this if, and only if, we are set free to live towards the fullness of our humanity as "one with God." In short, if we receive and accept the Spirit of Christ, we don't need religion and its "gods" and "demons."

What we do need is meaning and purpose – and will never find it without a relationship with the "twin other": the absolutely *transcendent* Other who is closer to me than I am to myself, that is, in fact, my True Self; as well as the *near* other, my "neighbour," who is anyone that shows me loving-kindness, even the Samaritan/Nazi that conventional religion/culture tells me to fear, hate, kill.

"As he was leaving the Temple, one of his disciples says to him, Teacher, look! What great stones! And what great buildings!" (13:1) How impressed we are, how fascinated by the building blocks of culture! These stones, piled one on top of the other in a sacred mound over the sacred corpse, become stumbling blocks, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinatum* ("that great and enthralling mystery") we simply can't get past, gawping in horrified awe. And what is Jesus' response – as he is *leaving the temple* – to this outpouring of religious fervour and triumphalism? "See these great buildings? Not a single stone will remain on another but all will be overthrown" (13:2).

Only by "leaving the temple" are we able to see what otherwise blinds us while we remain buried inside its dark, smoke – and incense – filled sacrificial interior. The *mysterium tremendum et fascinatum* leaves Jesus cold. His blithe indifference to religious power renders it powerless over him. Indeed, his freedom from its fascination gives him an insight into its true nature and inevitable end. How? "And seating himself" – like the teacher he is – "*on the Mount of Olives*" – the place of his immanent agony and arrest – "*opposite the temple...*" – the better to see, and not just the Temple – "Peter, James, John and Andrew question him privately: Tell us! When will these things happen? And what sign will be given when they are about to happen?" (13:3-4) Though the disciple don't know it – and all too often ignore or forget it – their religious fascination with the "apocalyptic" and the "secret" is received by Jesus among them in the very place of his own suffering and betrayal by one of his own and abandonment by the rest – including these favoured four.

Christ does not stand over and above the cosmic agony we titillate ourselves with by speculating about it. Nor is there anything substitutionary or supersessionist about the act. Only a sectarian mindset that cannot occupy the same "epistemological privilege" that belongs to the victim, could misunderstand it as such. No, the vantage point that give Jesus his advantage is the place of the victim: "opposite the temple" as the temple's mirror image. It is out of his own coming agony that he perceives the unseen – indeed, hidden and repressed – contours of the world's final feared end.

Knowing their ignorance and propensity for hypocritical diversion with "cataclysmic pornography" that so much of doomsday apocalypticism is, he begins with a timely warning; "Take care that no one misleads you!" (13:5) Humanity is, indeed, so easily misled – and not least by those who "come in my name, saying: I am! – leading many astray" (13:6). The contagion of violence, working through fear, anxiety, indignation, anger, resentment, vengeance, etc., infects all who are not immunised against it: "But when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be terrorised (*throeisthe*); this must happen, but the end is not yet" (13:7). Maintaining peaceful balance in a storm of contagious violence is Christ's gift: the victim surrounded by the expulsive tempest of the sacrificial system bestows peace on all who seek him as he "sleeps" undisturbed, untouched by

terror, free from fear. Freedom from fear is the freedom that the contagion of violence cannot touch.

That kind of mimetic frenzy is the *modus operandi* of nations built on violence and maintained by containing the threat of violence (terrorism) with violence (war): “For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be upheavals (*seismoi*) in various places; and there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the *birth-pangs*” (13:8). Far from being “the (apocalyptic) end” of life, these “seismic shifts” toppling the great stone-built structures of the sacrificial system – not into more “heaps” but “not a single stone remaining on another” – is but the *beginning*, and of *life*: “birth-pangs,” rather than its opposite, “death-throws.”

Hope is the undistorting, liberating power of life in the midst of death; of freedom in the midst of violence and persecution: “But see for (or ‘look to’) yourselves: for they will hand you over (or ‘betray you’) to councils and assemblies (or ‘courts and parliaments’); you will be tortured; and you will stand before rulers and kings for my sake, in witness to them” (13:9). In witness to what? To the *evangelion*, the “good news of victory” that must first be proclaimed to all nations (13:10): the unprecedented good news that the end to war is upon us. Not an end to any particular war, but to war and violence as such – for in one way or another we are at constant war, and constantly losing.

For this there is no precedent and no preparation: “And as they lead you, handing you over (or ‘betraying’), do not anticipate what you should say, but say whatever is given you *in that moment*, for it is not you but the Holy Spirit that speaks” (13:11) – *in that moment*. The “moment of truth” is the moment we find ourselves sharing the same “place” with the victim *knowingly*. For there is certainly nothing “privileged” about being victimised per se! Only as “in witness” and “for my name’s sake” do we *know* we are one with the Victim; and knowing that, we know how to speak, since his own holy breath/spirit gives voice to our words.

Then, speaking to two pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John, whom he first called, and called as pairs (cf. Mk 1:16-20), Jesus adds: “Brother will betray (or ‘hand over’) brother, and father child; and children will rise up against parents and kill them. And you will be hated by all for the sake of my name; but the one who endures to the end will be saved” (13:12-13). As our culture continues to disintegrate, as “brother betrays brother,” the disciples of Jesus can gage their own fidelity to their teacher and example to the extent that they can quietly accept the violent hatred of their own kith and kin as he did: without retaliating, without imitating the violence, but rather with compassionate mercy praying for forgiveness. That’s the price of “leaving the Temple,” of leaving the sacrificial system that has to have someone to blame, someone to scapegoat, someone to sacrifice to the gods that rule and define our world.

“Do you suppose that I have come to bring peace on earth?” asks Jesus. “No, I tell you, but rather division.” And unless we take him seriously we will insist on how he bestows peace on us in the age-old way of that ol’ time religion: by being sacrificed to appease an angry god. But that “god” is us and our religion. And that “god” is all but dead – at least in its incarnation as religion. Christ, however, is Risen! Happy Easter – a Peace the world *cannot* give.

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