

# DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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at Aquinas Academy

## UNIT FOUR SESSION ONE: Moralism versus mysticism



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*Many Christians and Jews in contemporary America will say they have little use for the properly religious contents of their respective traditions, but that they greatly value the ethical teachings – which is why they send their children to be instructed in churches and synagogues.<sup>1</sup>*



*Our faith invites living in hope rather than by any ethical doctrine; for any such doctrine would involve some notion of the good life, whether for myself, for others or for all. All such notions live only by a systematic repression of awareness of personal and cosmic death. ... The way of Jesus is the way of life through death.<sup>2</sup>*



*The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he/she will not exist at all.<sup>3</sup>*



*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.<sup>4</sup>*



*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then, in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field.<sup>5</sup>*



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<sup>1</sup> Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, Doubleday, 1979, 114.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Peter Harvey, *Morals and the Meaning of Jesus: Reflections on the Hard Sayings*, The Pilgrim Press, 1991/1993, 51. See the same source: “‘If your sanity offends you, let go of it!’ might epitomise what this chapter is trying to say. If holiness is too readily equated with particular images of wholeness or integration, this suggestion will be thought shocking. But I believe it to be wholly in the spirit of the ‘hard sayings,’ which invite us into the real world where neither psychological wholeness nor moral integrity are at the centre, where there is only and always God. It is at best unwise to encourage someone, yourself or another, to pull themselves together at a moment when what he or she is being drawn to do is fall apart” (45).

<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Volume XX: Concern for the Church*, Darton Longman and Todd, 1981, 149.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 13:44.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES<sup>6</sup>

*\* The Good News of Jesus Christ is found ultimately in the Paschal Mystery – the Passover of Jesus – symbolised by the Cross and the empty tomb.*

*\* In Jesus, God gives us a new existence, not a particular moral code, though the new existence implies a radical, moral vision and demands a radical moral commitment.*

*\* As we live more and more in and through the Paschal Mystery, our behaviour will be increasingly free and freeing, transformed and transforming – that is, profoundly moral..*



### Mrs Turpin's vision

The main character in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation," is a certain Mrs Turpin. She is a simple, bossy, big, deep-South, evangelical Christian, country woman; she and her husband Claud have a small hog farm; she has a contrived confidence in her social standing – such as it might be – and her Christian faith – such as that might be. We meet Mrs Turpin in the doctor's surgery where she has taken her husband Claud. Much of the story is a private and very judgmental commentary by Mrs Turpin, on everyone and everything. A particular object of her judgment is a truculent young girl in the surgery, who ends up attacking her, saying as she does so, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." With the kind of insight that is reserved for the very simple and the very disturbed, the girl has seen through Mrs Turpin and insulted her in the worst way possible. Mrs Turpin is utterly devastated, more bruised in her psyche than her body.

After she has returned home to the hog farm, the humiliated Mrs Turpin is standing on the rails of the hog pen and she has a vision. The vision emerges from the earthy realism of the old hog feeding her young. It is as if an utterly mundane experience of nature lifts the fog of socialisation from Mrs Turpin's consciousness and she sees life as she has never seen it before. For Mrs Turpin, that ordinary moment in "the pig parlor" is truly a revelation:

*... like a monumental statue coming to life, she bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor at the*

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<sup>6</sup> "Moralism," as we shall discuss it here, is peculiar to Christianity. We will, therefore, not follow the normal structure of beginning with the universal human dimension. No doubt other religious traditions have their versions of "moralism." There are no doubt secular equivalents also in other human systems. We will confine ourselves to the peculiar phenomenon that hangs around Christianity like golden staph hangs around hospitals.

*hogs. They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was grunting softly. A red glow suffused them. They appeared to pant with a secret life.*

*Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls was rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.<sup>7</sup>*

Whatever else we might say of it, this story is about moralism. Flannery O'Connor suggests how destructive moralism is; how utterly respectable it is, how easily it is passed off as "Christianity." We preachers and teachers of the Gospel are probably far more prone to it than we care to admit.

### **What is moralism?**

Let us note a very important point at the outset, lest there be any misunderstanding. Moralism, as we will describe it here, is the very antithesis of genuine morality. When we dismiss moralism, therefore, we are not dismissing morality as such. Far from it. It will become obvious as we proceed that, naming moralism for the fraud that it is – an extremely subtle and resilient and common fraud at that – allows us to discover the enriching and liberating and profoundly challenging moral vision of the Gospels. Moralism, for all its rhetoric and superficial appearances to the

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<sup>7</sup> "Revelation" in *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980, 508-9. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins, June 19 1957, Flannery O'Connor wrote: "It's not a matter in these stories of Do Unto Others. That can be found in any ethical culture series. It is the fact of the Word made flesh." (In Sally Fitzgerald, editor, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979, 227.)

contrary, is the enemy of the Good News in general and authentic Christian morality in particular.

We will use the following as a working description of moralism:

- Moralism is an ideology<sup>8</sup>
- whose central tenet is the belief/assumption that Jesus is primarily a moral teacher,
- and the Bible – especially the Gospel – is primarily a moral code or moral map for human behaviour.

In a word, moralism is the ideology that identifies the Good News with “right behaviour” and doing the “right thing.”

### **Moralism is reductionistic**

The essential flaw in moralism is that it is reductionistic. In fact, it is reductionistic in many ways.<sup>9</sup> For example, moralism reduces the focus of the Christian life to *doing*. The ultimate thrust of moralism is towards a program of behaviour, considered to be ideal or at least appropriate, with Jesus as the model. Moralism sees Jesus primarily as an example to be imitated. Based on this ideology, the Christian life is reduced to the moral life; Christian teaching is reduced to moral teaching; the parables of Jesus are reduced to moral fables; the way Jesus treated people is reduced to a paradigm for the way we should treat people.<sup>10</sup> Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is then reduced to the example of ultimate commitment and obedience that we should imitate, and Jesus is reduced primarily to an inspiration

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<sup>8</sup> An ideology is a more or less coherent system of ideas and principles which, in its most positive form, carries the intent of enabling an efficient engagement with the social reality or, in its more negative form, seeks to alter the social reality to fit that system of ideas. Ideologies may, therefore, be more or less benign, more or less malign. In this fundamental sense, we all take on and leave behind many ideologies in a lifetime. They tend to be more or less helpful and constructive in our efforts to engage people, events and things well, more or less unhelpful and destructive. The 20<sup>th</sup> century has become notorious for its destructive ideologies, especially communism and fascism. Christianity, as such, can never be reduced to an ideology, though it will give birth to many ideologies. Those ideologies born of Christianity may also be more or less benign, more or less malign. As will become obvious in what follows, moralism is a malign ideology. It should be noted that the Good News does intend a transformation of society. In fact, the Good News is about a new creation. Christians pray for the coming of the Kingdom! The difference between Christianity and an ideology however is that, in the former, the transformation comes through the work of God in human beings, while in the latter the change comes merely through human effort.

<sup>9</sup> The reductionism tends also to expand into other areas of life. Thus, moralism is typically accompanied by legalism, dogmatism, authoritarianism and institutionalism – all processes by which we reduce life to manageable and controllable proportions.

<sup>10</sup> If we wanted to be crude, we could say that moralism is summed up as follows: “See Jesus; see Jesus run; run like Jesus”.

and guide for our behaviour with the Gospel reduced to nothing more than a code of behaviour.

### **Moralism is egocentric**

For all its talk about God, grace, the Good News, Jesus, truth, goodness and virtue, the centrepiece of moralism is actually not God but *the human subject as moral agent*.

In practice, moralism begins and ends there, with the human subject. Having lost its focus on God's action in and through the Paschal Mystery, moralism has no effective means for getting beyond merely human effort. Moralism stresses what *we* can and must do. It emphasises "right behaviour," "projects," "rules" and "injunctions." Moralism inevitably develops various rituals and instruments of "exclusion" and "inclusion."

In the lived reality, moralism is a thinly disguised ego-project. The ideology of moralism, may in fact produce people who are dutiful and law abiding, people who are respectable, perhaps even "exemplary" in their conformity to the prevailing social and/or religious expectations. It may thus be a very effective instrument of public order. But it is no substitute for the Christ life.

Moralism, because it asks ego to pursue an end that is essentially beyond ego, actually leads towards despair.<sup>11</sup> Put more bluntly, having failed to incorporate the power of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus effectively and concretely, moralism must resort to "will power" to achieve what can only be achieved, in the end, by the grace of God. Moralism has people attempting their own salvation and the salvation of the world by merely human means, by "behaving well".

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<sup>11</sup> I believe Thomas Merton is speaking about this sort of thing when he discusses the moral life according to Chuang Tzu. See Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, New Directions, 1965 – especially 21-23. Meerton notes: "Chuang Tzu's concern with the problem that the very goodness of the good and the nobility of the great may contain the hidden seed of ruin is analogous to the concern that Sophocles or Aeschylus felt a little earlier, in the west. ... the hero of virtue and duty ultimately lands himself in the same ambiguities as the hedonist and the utilitarian. Why? Because he aims at achieving 'the good' as object. He engages in a self-conscious and deliberate campaign to 'do his duty' in the belief that this is right and therefore productive of happiness. He sees 'happiness' and 'the good' as 'something to be attained,' and thus he places them outside himself in the world of objects. In so doing he becomes involved in a division from which there is no escape: between the present, in which he is not yet in possession of what he seeks, and the future in which he thinks he will have what he desires: between the wrong and the evil, the absence of what he seeks, and the good that he hopes to make present by his efforts to eliminate the evils; between his own idea of right and wrong, and the contrary idea of right and wrong held by some other philosophical school. And so on." (22) Merton goes on to refer to this as "organized despair: the good that is preached and exacted by the moralist thus finally becomes an evil, and all the more so since the hopeless pursuit of it distracts one from the real good which one already possesses and which one now despises or ignores" (23).

## Moralism is the enemy of the Christ life

At its worst, moralism is a fraudulent and destructive presentation of the person and teaching of Jesus and the Christ life to which we are called in and through baptism. Moralism is not an expression of the Paschal Mystery, which is in fact the heart and soul of the Good News. It is first and foremost, the work of God in the Paschal Mystery that makes Christianity and Christians Christian. Moralism does not know the power and the wisdom of the Cross.<sup>12</sup> Moralism is not “good news” and it is all too common to hear moralism proclaimed as if it was *the* Good News.

Moralism is all the more dangerous if it is disguised by rhetoric about the saving power of God at work in Jesus Christ. The issue is not whether we *speak* of the Cross or *talk* about “atonement” or “the power of the blood of the Lamb” or *profess* that there is no other name than Jesus by which we can be “saved.” Christians have become adept at disguising moralism – albeit unconsciously – in the words of the Bible. Moralism, no matter how it is presented, is still moralism.

Christianity purports to bring the world the Good News, the stunning proclamation that the tomb is empty, the Cross is a victory! When we reduce Christianity to a moral program we obscure this Good News. The project might be disguised in the language of grace and by appeals to “prayer” and talk of “imitating Christ.” But, in the end, in the absence of a thoroughgoing embrace of the death of Jesus and its liberating efficacy, what are we left with but our own efforts to live out an ethical program that is supposed to win us redemption? And what are our own efforts in the face of that task?<sup>13</sup>

Our human efforts – “to be good people like Jesus was a good person” – are fraught with the oppression that we seek to overcome by those very efforts. Moralism, in the end, becomes an oppressor. Reinhold Niebuhr’s critique of American Protestantism is enlightening:

*The real difficulty with a simple moralism is precisely its inability to understand that all life is involved in a contradiction to the will of God .... It is because Christian moralism regards the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount as simple moral possibilities that it never becomes conscious of the elements in all human existence which contradict the will of God until they break forth in overt conflict ....*

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<sup>12</sup> Cf 1Corinthians 1:20-25.

<sup>13</sup> Again, Thomas Merton speaks with wisdom: “The transformation through which the world must pass will not be merely political. It is indeed an illusion to think that the forces which are at work in our modern society are, above all, political. The great political movements of our time, so complex and so often apparently so meaningless, are the smoke screen behind which are developing the evolutions of a spiritual war too great for men to wage by any human plan. This is something that is going on in the whole of mankind, and it would go on even if there were no political movements. The politicians are only the instruments of forces which they themselves ignore. These forces are more powerful and more spiritual than man.” (Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977, 36-37.)

*Long before a war breaks out we ought to ask ourselves the question whether we are not involved in life and actions which are "incompatible with the example and teachings of Christ." There is the word: "Whoso loveth father and mother more than me is not worthy of me." Are any of us good enough to maintain that the particular love which we have for our own does not come in conflict with the love which we owe God and our fellowmen? And is not this narrow love, this alteregoism, the very root of all human conflict? Or, again, Jesus declares: "Be not anxious for your life." This commandment is just as ultimate and relevant as the commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Anxiety is the basis of all undue self-assertion. We are anxious about our life, and we seek to make it secure; and invariably we interfere with the security of our fellowmen in trying to make our life secure. There is no question about the validity of this law of Christ. But also there is no question that every life, even the life of the best of us, is involved in a contradiction of this commandment.*

*Our whole difficulty in American Protestantism is in having so long regarded Christianity as synonymous with the simple command to love God and our fellowmen, that we have forgotten that the Christian religion is really a great deal more than this. The Christian faith really begins in the cry of despair of St. Paul: "For the good that I would do I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do .... Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death?" In answer to this cry it declares that the divine mercy revealed in Christ is on the one hand a power which overcomes the contradiction between what we are and what we ought to be, and on the other hand a pledge of forgiveness for this sinful element which is never completely overcome short of the ultimate culmination of history .... Most religion is an effort to obscure the actual situation in which we stand for the simple reason that, without an answer for this situation, we should be driven to despair by what is revealed .... We do anything and everything to hide the fact that every man stands under judgment because every man is involved in contradicting the law of Christ, there being a law in his members which wars against the law that is in his mind.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Moralism in America," *Radical Religion*, 5 (1940), 18-19. Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was born in Missouri, USA, son of a German pastor in the evangelical tradition. He became one of the outstanding Christian theologians of the twentieth century. Niebuhr was strongly influenced by his association with the motor vehicle workers in Detroit during the 1920s. Thomas Merton's comment is also relevant: "The moral evil in the world is due to man's alienation from the deepest truth, from the springs of the spiritual life within himself, to his alienation from God." (Gordon C Zahn, ed, *Thomas Merton on Peace*, The McCall Publishing Company, 1971, 222) As a source of alienation and oppression I cannot bring the freedom from alienation and oppression that the world seeks. I myself seek it or at least need it! See also our discussion of "fallenness" in the earlier notes – Unit Two, Session Three, "The



Only a life lived in and from the Paschal Mystery can be called Christian in the ultimate sense of that word.<sup>15</sup> And the surest signs of a living faith grounded in and emerging from the Paschal Mystery might simply be freedom and grace. A person whose life is governed by the Paschal Mystery will live beyond moral rules and ethical norms – no matter how noble those rules and norms are. Such people will tend:

- to be more or less free and gracious in their presence and in their way of being in the world;
- to be more or less gripped by the overwhelming mystery of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ;
- to be as convinced of their need for God’s liberating mercy as they are confident that mercy is always on offer in prodigal abundance;
- to be overwhelmed by compassion for the world and not judgmental of it;
- to be focused on defending and healing and celebrating relationships everywhere, confident that violence and oppression and hatred and the lie have been defeated at their source in Jesus’ Passover;
- to be a place where God enters this world *as it is*, bringing a sense of possibility and hope;
- to be at once passionate about the common good and detached about the outcome of all human endeavours, confident that we and our world are in the hands of God;
- to be realistic about the possibilities of any human system in the face of human failure and corruption and evil, knowing that the ultimate victory we seek in this world does not lie within human powers;
- to be always praying and seeking and acting for the coming of the Kingdom!

### **Reasons to resist moralism**

One good reason for resisting moralism is found in the heart of revelation, the other is found in our own hearts, as Niebuhr argues above, The heart of divine revelation is the story of God’s overwhelming love for us and God’s infinite desire to embrace us and set us free in and through that love. The first and most important truth of divine revelation is that God invites us and draws us to be in Love, literally *to be in Love*. God holds out the real possibility of a Covenant of Love. God’s first and last word to us is an unmerited invitation not a moral injunction. Our task is to make ourselves available, to receive the incomparable gift that is on offer.

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Three Pillars”.

<sup>15</sup> A complex and critical theological question arises: Who is Christian? This is not the place to discuss that question. It is important here to simply note the essential place of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the Christian reality. The Christian reality – in which we participate in varying ways – is born of that saving death and resurrection, what tradition has come to call the Paschal Mystery.

Moralism tends to set up a terrible burden in the hearts of those who take it seriously because it makes God's love conditional. God's presence is experienced more as a threat than a promise. Implicitly at least, moralism says: "If you behave according to the rules, God will love you and you will be saved; if you do not behave according to the rules, God will not love you and you will not be saved". The truth of the matter is that there is absolutely nothing I can do that will make God love me more or less. God loves each and everyone of us infinitely and unconditionally. That is the nature of loved and the nature of God for "God is love."<sup>16</sup>

Those of us whose minds have been infected with the toxin of moralism are tempted to then ask: "So why be good?" The answer to that is simple: We endeavour to seek out the good and the true because that is what is best for us, that is how we will thrive as human beings. We are made for union with the Good and the True, the One and the Beautiful, and we will be unsatisfied until or unless that radical natural need is satisfied. Another reason to sincerely and energetically seek the Good and the True and the One and the Beautiful is that it opens us to know by experience how much God loves us. If we are indifferent about this or actually behave in ways that are contrary to this, we will never be able to experience that overwhelming and unconditional love. God will never cease to love us but we may cease to believe in our bones that God loves us.

Niebuhr quite rightly points out that the brokenness of the human condition is the reason we cry out for God's saving love and also the reason why we, left to our own efforts, would fall into despair. It is the liberating power of God that drives the Christian project, not our will power. The triumph of the Christian life is not the triumph of human mastery but the triumph of the Cross.<sup>17</sup>

### **The ironic effects of moralism**

Moralism, as we have stressed above, reduces the Christian life to a functional project, one of personal effort and intended mastery. Ironically, at its worst, moralism produces wilful people who attain some sort of illusion of "success." That is, they do master the moral project, more or less and in their "success" many feel, secretly at least, satisfied and often judgmental. Often enough this leads them to be patronizing of others who are not so "successful."

Still others feel constantly inadequate, perhaps even moral failures, unable to summon the discipline and courage that is being asked of them. However, many quite simply – but perhaps not quite happily – walk away from this kind of double-binding ideology. There are perhaps many others who feel unable to walk away. They remain heavily burdened by a message that purports to be fulfilling and

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<sup>16</sup> See 1John 4:8.

<sup>17</sup> It is probably fair to say that much of what has been passed off as "Christian life" under the auspices of moralism has had more in common with the Greek philosophy of Stoicism than with the New Testament. It has been closer to the world view of Seneca or Marcus Aurelius than Jesus or St Paul.

liberating and redemptive and joyful but actually diminishes them as human beings.<sup>18</sup> Like any ego project, in the end the ideology of moralism does not liberate, it entraps.

The negative experience for many people of the kind of “moral” teaching they received within a religious context points to a further serious social effect of moralism. History tells us that:

- as we reduce religion more and more to morality,
- we actually embark on a journey that eventually detaches morality from religion altogether,
- and if thinkers like Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Sartre are correct in saying that “without God all things are lawful,” we might expect that, in time, the quest for a moral life, devoid of any connections with religion, will lead to moral confusion.

We can see this ironic progression emerging in the Western world from the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century onwards to the present day. The well-known Enlightenment thinker, François Voltaire (1691-1778), represented a common opinion of his time when he wrote:

*The institution of religion exists only to keep humankind in order, and to make people merit the goodness of God by their virtue. Everything in a religion which does not tend towards this goal must be considered alien or dangerous.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The foregoing suggests to us why moralism is favoured by many of the people who run our social institutions. Moralism serves the maintenance of good order. Moralism, when it “works well,” produces very dutiful citizens, capable people who are able to maintain, run and even expand institutions. Perhaps more insidiously, it also generates a significant population of people who can be controlled. Once the ideology of moralism, in a particular format (eg Catholic) has found its way into our psyches, it can be very difficult to break free of it. We may thus remain vulnerable to manipulation and control through fear and guilt. See also our earlier discussion of obedience – Unit Three, Session Seven. Moralism is not likely to generate authentic obedience though it may generate conformity, a pseudo-obedience in which people simply do as they are told.

<sup>19</sup> From his *Philosophical Dictionary* – published in 1774 – as reproduced in Isaac Kramnick, ed, *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, Penguin Books, 1995, 117-18. One scholar who has understood the Enlightenment thinkers very well is Peter Gay and he notes the emphasis on the moral dimension over any other: “I call the Enlightenment’s realism *moral* because whatever channel of expression it used ... its vital center was a moral vision of the world. ‘The truth I love,’ wrote Rousseau, in 1761, in harmony on this point with all the other philosophes, ‘is not so much metaphysical as moral.’ ... As Diderot put it in one of his moments of moral ecstasy, if there is a God, ‘he cares a great deal more for the purity of our souls than for the truth of our opinions.’ ... Their single-minded concern for morality was the source of most of their cant, anti-intellectualism, and intolerance of opposition. But it also gave their philosophizing vigor and point; they knew they were concentrating on what was important.” (Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, Alfred A Knopf, 1967, 179-80) Another commentator on the Enlightenment writes: “It was

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) put it more sharply and emphatically than anyone else when he said that morality was not the deepest level of religion but religion was the deepest level of morality. Kant – following Descartes – sought to outline a religion “within the limits of reason alone.”<sup>20</sup> For Kant, all of religion was reduced to a question of ethical duty, following the subjective “categorical imperative.” One commentator sums up Kant’s view well:

*“Religion is not the basis of morality, but itself rests on it. The two differ only in their formal structure and terminology, not in substance.”*<sup>21</sup>

Kant himself was expressing this principle when he said,

*“it must be inculcated painstakingly and repeatedly that true religion is to consist not in the knowing or considering of what God does or has done for our salvation, but in what we must do to become worthy of it.”*<sup>22</sup>

You could hardly find a clearer statement of moralism than that!

We now live in a society whose members are, in increasing numbers, leaving the institutionalised Christianity of their childhood – a Christianity that was in many instances the kind of moralism, more or less, that we have been describing. These same people profess a moral code (of some kind) and even a spirituality (of some kind). If religion has been reduced to morality, and morality is possible without religion, who needs religion anymore? Besides, religion is full of oppressive rules and injunctions and dogmas, none of which speaks concretely of community or relationship or spirituality or anything that intersects with the experience of people in this world at this time.<sup>23</sup>

## **Catholic moralism**

The Catholic story has always been – and hopefully will remain – a highly diverse, dynamic, colourful, grubby, ambiguous, passionate, tragic-comic, mysterious mix of people, institutions, customs, symbols, rituals, spiritualities and beliefs. It has never been the monolith that many outsiders – and some insiders – have believed it to be. It

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generally agreed that Christianity was simple and that its essence lay in providing divine sanctions for morality. Religion was very largely confined to the performing of one’s moral duties conceived of as divine commands.” (James C Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*, Macmillan, 1971, 35-36)

<sup>20</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Harper and Row, 1960, 139-178. Later the influential Protestant historian of theology, Adolf von Harnack, was to follow Kant’s thinking.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard M G Reardon, ed, *Liberal Protestantism*, Stanford University Press, 1968, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Harper, 1960, 123.

<sup>23</sup> For a useful attempt to deal with this in the context of religious education, see Craig R Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator’s Alternative to Kohlberg*, Paulist Press, 1981.

will never submit to this or that simple definition or criticism or accolade. The Catholic reality, like the Catholic consciousness, is typically *both/and* rather than *either/or*.

In this *mélange* of life we do, predictably enough, find significant strains of moralism. In fact, central to the Catholic story has been an odd and at times disturbing mixture of mysticism and moralism. At the risk of being simplistic, we could suggest that the mysticism tended to win out, more or less, during the first millennium, while moralism tended to gain the ascendancy in the second millennium.

As we noted earlier, moralism is a peculiar combination of a moral vision – which may indeed be an attractive and even noble one – which lacks the possibility of fulfilment. Wherever you find a presentation of the Christian life which lacks, more or less, a thoroughgoing and effective expression and appropriation of grace and the Paschal Mystery, you will inevitably have moralism in some form or other. Moralism:

- tends to displace the mercy of God with the judgment of God; so, instead of feeling joyfully drawn into the Life of the Trinity, we too often feel frightened, unworthy and even shunned;
- it projects a mean-mindedness onto God and forgets that God delights in our company;<sup>24</sup>
- it reduces the parables of Jesus to moral fables and fails to understand the totally profligate and mad and unbounded and unmerited love of God revealed in the Gospels;
- it puts human action before God's action and never quite gets to believe in the cosmos-shaking action of God on Calvary, caught as it is in the puny world of ego-performance and "right behaviour."

We can make note of two common expressions of moralism within the Catholic tradition – one old, the other new. The old expression of moralism is very familiar to anyone who grew up in the Catholic Church prior to 1962. There we find a *de facto* moralism evident in popular piety and much pastoral practice. Progressively, over roughly eight centuries from the twelfth century to the present, Catholic theology became increasingly dislocated from its primary ground of spirituality. Spirituality, in turn, became dislocated from its primary ground of human experience, being largely reduced to pious practices and devotions and a more or less wilful pursuit of virtue rationally presented on the basis of the writings of people like St Augustine, Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales and Thérèse of Lisieux.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Psalm 149:4.

<sup>25</sup> So pronounced had this dislocation become by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that spirituality was seen as a branch of theology rather than theology as a branch of spirituality. This misrepresentation of both theology and spirituality closed the circle, as it were, tying them both into a project that bore little or no relevance to the ordinary lives of Christians struggling to make sense of their experience in the world. This sorry situation is closely related to another – both as cause and effect. That other

This older expression is patently and tragically obvious in the standard Catholic moral theology manuals of the first half of the twentieth century, where there was an obsession with rules and law, a pre-occupation with minutiae that might separate an action that was worthy of eternal damnation from one that was not, and a thinly disguised Pelagianism.

It will suffice to exemplify this by reference to one of those manuals of that era – Gerald Kelly SJ, *Modern Youth and Chastity*, published in 1941. In Chapter X, Kelly speaks of “practical moral principles.” The first of these principles is: “Every directly venereal action is against the law of God, and a serious sin of impurity.” The second is: “Any action is a serious sin against chastity when it is performed with the intention of stimulating or promoting venereal pleasure.” And so it went. These texts and texts like them betray a very legalistic mindset, one focused on “getting it right.” Rules and right behaviour are paramount, not people and relationships.

This mindset generates a social world in which negative reinforcement predominates over positive affirmations. And beyond that, maintenance and control of an institutional reality is more important than care of people and relationships. Again, the human subject as moral agent is the focus, not God who saves, nor the God who delights in our company.<sup>26</sup>

The mind-set in which this moralism is born, has forgotten the origins of the Christian moral life. Under this kind of teaching, it would be hard not to believe that my salvation depended on my willingness and ability to obey these laws, that God’s love is somehow tied to – and measured in accordance with – my behavioural conformity. The wilful Christianity promoted by this moralism lacks the freedom and grace that are two of the outstanding signs that one has found “the treasure.”<sup>27</sup>

A new form of Catholic moralism has emerged in the last forty years or so. This new moralism is pre-occupied with “justice,” much the same as the old Catholic moralism seemed pre-occupied with “chastity.” This new expression of moralism is generally better disguised and less obvious to us, perhaps because we are right in the thick of it. Again, let us remind ourselves that the issue is not whether or not we promote either chastity or justice; the issue is *how* we approach these ideals.

Let us consider one well known author as a way to take this reflection a little further. Amidst all the very good things we read in Donal Dorr’s books,<sup>28</sup> we find a remarkable lack of focus on the Paschal Mystery. For example, in a section where

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regrettable situation is the perception of an institution “over against” the world, rather than a community that is intimately part of the world and “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age” (cf *Gaudium et spes*, 1). We are just beginning to move towards a new consciousness whereby we experience the Church as a community that is a sign in the world rather than a sanctuary from it.

<sup>26</sup> See Psalm 150.

<sup>27</sup> See Matthew 13:44.

<sup>28</sup> For example: Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, Orbis Books, 1983; *Spirituality and Justice*, Orbis Books, 1984; *Integral Spirituality: Resources for Community, Justice, Peace and the Earth*, Collins Dove, 1990; *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power and the Church*, Orbis Books, 1991.

Dorr reflects on the death and resurrection of Jesus, he emphasizes it as a *model* for following God's will. In referring to the self-sacrifice of Maxmillian Kolbe, Dorr concludes with a summary sentence:

*"The Christian who reflects on the death and resurrection of Christ finds there an explicit expression of that profound truth and model to follow in living it out."*<sup>29</sup>

Taken in itself, this might be accepted as a reasonable expression of the Christian life. However, taken in the overall context of a book which purports to be about "integral spirituality" and makes no acknowledgement of God's action in and through the death of Jesus, it is hard not to see it as moralism.

In chapter thirteen of *Spirituality and Justice* we find a further very practical example in his discussion of prayer. Dorr actually comes close to the Paschal Mystery but, in the end, veers away, referring again only to the *example* of Jesus:

*In this Agony prayer of Jesus we see an ideal example of what prayer is, and what it does for the person. Christ found himself in a situation so awful that it was destroying his humanity: he was 'troubled' and 'sorrowful even unto death'; 'his sweat came like drops of blood' (Mt 26:37-38; Lk 22:44). His prayer enabled him to triumph over this intolerable situation. It is an inadequate account of the Agony to present it simply as a struggle by Jesus to submit to the will of God and to do his duty. What was happening was a struggle for his own humanity, which was nearly submerged by the ordeal he faced. The hours of prayer restored his threatened humanity, his peace of soul, his freedom. His prayer left him free to be faithful to his values and his mission. He was now once again able to stand before God in full freedom of spirit. The words, 'not my will but yours be done' represent the transition from the prayer of desperation to the prayer of freedom.*<sup>30</sup>

The issue is not so much what he says but what he does not say. It is the Paschal vacuum that leads inevitably to moralism. Without the basis that Jesus' death and resurrection provide, we are not entitled to talk of Christian morality or the Christian life, for his death and resurrection are the essential *Christian* component.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, Christian self-giving and Christian prayer, however I name them or express them, are first and foremost expressions of that life which was born in me when I was "baptised into his death."<sup>32</sup> Which brings us to the edge of what may be

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<sup>29</sup> *Integral Spirituality*, 277.

<sup>30</sup> *Spirituality and Justice*, 229-30.

<sup>31</sup> Again, Hans Kung is insightful: "The cross ... is the element which radically distinguishes Christian faith and the Lord who is the object of this faith from other religions and their gods." (Hans Kung, "What is the Christian Message?" in *The Catholic Mind*, 68 (December 1970), 32.)

<sup>32</sup> Romans 6:3.

the greatest challenge for the Christian Churches of our generation: To begin the journey, *as a Church*, from moralism towards mysticism. This journey will, in some measure, be one of recovery and re-discovery; it will also be one of leaving our homeland, our kindred and our father's house for the land that God will show us.<sup>33</sup>

### **Jesus is much more than a teacher of morality**

The Incarnation is not about giving the world one more moral code, even if it is claimed to be the ultimate moral code. In fact, it could be argued that Jesus was not only *not* concerned to give any particular moral code, he was quite hostile to those who attempted to reduce the Covenant – and by implication, his message – to that.<sup>34</sup> New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, suggests that it is precisely the *moralism* of the Pharisees that caused Jesus – and subsequently Paul – to confront them so forcefully:

*“It is hardly news that there was a very profound clash between Jesus and the Pharisees and that Paul’s conversion instigated a dialectic no less violent. But later Christian animosity has badly distorted the true nature of this confrontation. Pharisees are described as hypocrites or as uncaring legalists and inhuman externalises who imposed on others burdens they themselves would not bear. Most of which is inaccurate, unhistorical, and purely polemical. If Pharisees were such, how is one to explain their tremendous power over people for whom they had only the authority of competence? In fact, the Pharisees were superb moral guides. But there precisely lay the problem which Jesus and Paul saw so clearly.”*<sup>35</sup>

Having pinpointed the moralism which he believes to be the essence of the dispute both Jesus and Paul had with the Pharisees, Crossan then goes on to note the unfortunate consequence of Christianity's failure to recognise what Jesus and Paul were actually condemning:

*“Apart from the damage such caricatures have done to Judaism and the relationship of Christianity to it, there is another very serious result within*

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<sup>33</sup> Cf Genesis 12:1.

<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that, in saying Jesus is not presenting Himself as another moral teacher with a another moral code, we are *not* saying there is no moral vision in the Gospels or that Jesus Himself had no moral vision. There is a profound moral vision in the life and teaching of Jesus. This moral vision will, however, only emerge if we get the primary reality of what God is doing through Jesus and in Jesus in our world. The primary reality is found in the New Covenant, forged in Jesus' blood. We are, as St Paul tells the community in Rome, baptized into His death. All else makes sense in the light of what God has accomplished through the Cross. We are called to *be* in that reality and out of that *being* will emerge a new way of *doing*.

<sup>35</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables - The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, Harper and Row, 1973, 80.



*Christianity itself. When Christianity is no longer aware of what Jesus and Paul were fighting against in Pharisaic Judaism, it can hardly be conscious of a similar presence within itself. The debate did not concern good law as over against bad law or even internal and sincere law as over against external and hypocritical law. The challenge of Jesus and Paul was this: obedience does not lead to God, but God leads one to obedience. The question is not God or law, covenant or commandment, faith or works, but, granting both, in which direction does the arrow fly from one to the other? It must be emphasized that this is not a debate between Judaism and Christianity but a conflict within them both, and a conflict ever ancient and ever new. So, according to Jesus and Paul, it was the gift of God's presence that made a good life possible, not a good life that made the reward of God's presence inevitable. .... as Ernst Käsemann has said so succinctly: "The righteousness of God does not presuppose our obedience; it creates it." The problem was not so much that one might not be able to obey the law's excellence but that one might actually do so to perfection and thereby be unable to tell one's own perfection from God. What exactly were Jesus and Paul fighting? In a final quotation from Käsemann: "the community of 'good' people which turns God's commandments into the instruments of self-sanctification." The enemy was neither stupidity nor hypocrisy but sincerity all too sincere and perfection all too perfect."*<sup>36</sup>

In other words, when we have reduced the Covenant faith to a set of rules and regulations or behavioural norms, and we are successful in measuring up to this regimen, we have missed the point entirely. Not only is the Covenant relationship not reducible to rules, regulations and behavioural norms, the focus on our success is alien to the spirit of the Covenant. Crossan goes on to speak of the parables as tools of instruction in opening the authentic Covenant vision to us, and our resistance to what is on offer through Jesus:

*"The parables of Jesus seek to draw one into the Kingdom, and they challenge us to act and to live from the gift which is experienced therein. But we do not want parables. We want precepts and we want programs. We want good precepts and we want sensible programs. We are frightened by the lonely silences within the parables."*<sup>37</sup>

Crossan then makes the crucial point that the teachings of Jesus in the parables actually subvert what we, in our moralism, would call ethics:

*"Maybe if we entered into them it would be only to find, like Pompey in the Holy of Holies, that they are completely empty. We want them to tell us*

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<sup>36</sup> John Dominic Crossan, op cit, 80-81.

<sup>37</sup> Dominic Crossan, op cit, 82.

*exactly what to do and they refuse to answer. They make us face the problem of the grounding of ethics and we want only to discuss the logic of ethics. There are very many ways in which an aphorism starting with "if any one strikes you on the right cheek" might have been finished: kill him, strike him, ignore him, forgive him, even love him. But when it is ended with "turn to him the other also" in Matt. 5:39, one is no longer giving helpful moral admonition or even radical pacifistic advice. One is deliberately overthrowing ethics ... This aphorism brings ethics also under the radical challenge of the Kingdom. It intends us to experience how the logic of ethics is undermined by the mystery of God and that, if one can but accept it, is the most crucial moral experience of all.*"<sup>38</sup>

Jesus was concerned with something far more fundamental, far more liberating, far more important than any moral code or ethical system. Jesus' life, death and resurrection addresses the very structure of reality itself in its oppression, beyond anything that could be accomplished by any other agency than the Divine. By his death, the structure of reality is irreversibly and essentially restructured. In this Jesus does not just deal with oppression but with the very *source* of all oppression. Through him, with him and in him, we share in the freedom he offers, we live the liberating life of baptism. Through him, with him and in him we can go to any manifestation of oppression and face it with the confidence that the One who raised Jesus will work through us unto liberation – even if, like him, we are done to death in the process.

In fact, the Great Liberator at work in us will, himself, actually lead us into the manifestations of oppression that through us he might bring his liberation. The Christian vocation is to be the human place through which God enters the world. And where God is, God does, and God's doing is always a loving, and God's loving is always liberating, and God's liberation is what the world awaits.

## **Christian mysticism**

Our humanity is constituted and fulfilled in and through relationships – firstly with God – however we name that One – and with ourselves, and the other people, events and things of our world in the context of that primary relationship. Mysticism is no more nor less than the expression of this most radical truth of our beings. Mysticism

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<sup>38</sup> Dominic Crossan, *ibid.* Dietrich Bonhoeffer is another insightful commentator on Christian ethics and what we might learn from Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees. For example: "Any distorted picture of the Pharisees robs Jesus' argument with them of its gravity and importance. The Pharisee is that extremely admirable man who subordinates his entire life to his knowledge of good and evil and is as severe a judge of himself as his neighbour to the honour of God, whom he humbly thanks for this knowledge." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, translated by Neville Horton Smith, Fontana, 1949/1970, 27.) Refer to the Index under "Pharisaism" for some excellent reading.

may be described as the experience of *being one with the One*. In that oneness – always coming to be – we find the fulfilment of all our relationships and, in that, the fulfilment of our beings. To be human is, in the end, to be a mystic. We are all called, believers and non-believers, to be mystics in this fundamental sense.

A specifically *Christian* mysticism enhances and expands this fundamental human urging and potential beyond measure. Christian mysticism brings the light of the Paschal Mystery to bear on the struggle for freedom from any and all forms of oppression, wherever they might be found throughout the cosmos. It is precisely in this confrontation – the liberating Cross confronting the roots of oppression in the world – that we discover specifically Christian mysticism. Merely human endeavour is hopelessly inadequate to this confrontation. We discover our own freedom and the freedom of the world in and through the Cross. In that discovery, we also discover that the heart of the Christian faith is a mystical heart. Without that heart the Christian faith is quite literally heartless – despite all its high sounding moral rhetoric.

For the same reason that spirituality is never a private affair, Christian mysticism is never a private affair. Because it is, of its very nature, the fulfilment of relationships, it is always a social affair, even if intensely personal and, in some way, utterly unique to each of us.<sup>39</sup>

Mysticism is, if you like, a foretaste of the reconciliation that lies at the heart of the fulfilment we seek as human beings. It is a sign that the homeward journey has begun, that the potential for union and communion that lies at the centre of our beings, is gradually emerging in actuality. This reaching out to and connecting with others that is the natural thrust of Christian mysticism, is not so much something we do as it is something we awaken to and cooperate with and facilitate.

As we journey home to ourselves in Christ we discover the “must” that is embedded deep in our beings. Awakening to that “must” is the beginning of vocation, a being called. It will also be an awakening of conscience and the difference between “liking” and “wanting” – the former being an expression of biology and psychology, the latter being an expression of the human spirit bearing united witness with the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup> What I “want” in life sometimes collides with what I “like”. A life focused on the Great Mystery revealed in and through Christ, a life of deepening intimacy with the Eternal Love Affair we call the Trinity, will live increasingly out of our deepest yearnings and the highest aspirations. Sooner or later we will know the experience expressed by the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul:

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<sup>39</sup> One author highlights this in talking of Thomas Merton: “What we do to one another, we do to Christ. Therefore the Christian is deeply and ultimately concerned with the way in which he actualizes his relationship with his brother. However, Merton avoided a Pelagian ‘bootstrap’ theology: the Christian is not primarily concerned with ethical perfection but with the ‘new being’ in Christ. Morality will necessarily fail us unless it is preceded by union with God in Christ. ... The *imago Dei* is the same for all. This, for Merton, was the basis of all ethical speculation. Contemplative prayer or mystical experience, if it is an authentic descent to the deepest level of one’s being, awakens persons to their ethical responsibility. (R Giannini, “Return: Thomas Merton’s Ethics,” *Cistercian Studies*, 16 (1981), 223-224.

<sup>40</sup> See Romans 8:16..

*You have seduced me Yahweh and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me: you were the stronger. I am a daily laughing stock, everybody's butt. Each time I speak the word I have to howl and proclaim: 'Violence and ruin!'. The word of Yahweh has meant for me insult, derision, all day long. I used to say, 'I will not think about him, I will not speak in his name anymore'. Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not bear it.*<sup>41</sup>

*Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; because I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*<sup>42</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Moralism has often led Christians to be wilful. It tends to lead one into a mastery mode. While we must readily acknowledge that much good has been done for others both because of and in spite of this moralistic approach, we are perhaps not so ready to acknowledge that much harm has also been done. Moralism, as such, is the very antithesis of what Jesus proclaimed. Moralism, because of its inbuilt potential for despair, tends to make of religion a burdensome and unlovely affair, despite all our efforts to appear joyful and peaceful and fulfilled and “Christian.” In the end, however, the Christian must reject moralism because it is contrary to the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.

It may be difficult to break free of moralism because it has become so much a taken for granted part of our religious commitment and consciousness. It may even lead us to deny what is going on. Sometimes we may need professional help to break free. Maybe, this is one of those demons that can only be cast out with much prayer and fasting.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Jeremiah 19:7-9.

<sup>42</sup> Philippians 3:8-14.

<sup>43</sup> See Mark 9:29.

Moralism also makes it impossible for us to enter public conversations about such things as abortion and euthanasia and stem cell research as genuine seekers for truth and goodness, unity and beauty. Under the influence of moralism, we tend to come, rather, as ideologues promoting our ideology: “Here is the answer!” Instead of speaking a liberating word in the market place of our culture, moralism speaks high-sounding words that tend to entrap or repel. Thus Christianity becomes more renowned for its judgmentalism than its wisdom and love.

A life genuinely based on and expressive of relationships, grounded in the primary relationship with God in Christ, can accept a spectrum of moral codes;<sup>44</sup> it can live compassionately and redemptively with the tragic truth that no human system – be it a moral system or a legal system or an economic system or any other kind of system – can say it all; it recognises that, frequently enough, there are no unequivocal moral answers to the questions life throws at us; it can stand amidst the ambiguity and confusion and provide a profound moral presence, not because it has the answers but because it humbly and effectively provides a place where God enters. There are times when answers would be fraudulent; the questions themselves – often requiring of us an honest manifestation of our doubts and uncertainties – in all their tormenting incompleteness, must be held up to God, for the world, for healing. This is a role of the true mystic in and for the world. Only the mystic can set aside the easy but superficial convictions and remain firm, stay there, without knowing the answer.<sup>45</sup>

We Westerners, caught as we are in rationalism and functionalism, want answers though, we want to “do something,” we love people who can “get the job done,” we compulsively and endlessly develop strategies, programs and packages of various kinds and attempt to contrive “outcomes.” We think of life fundamentally in terms of “problems” and “problems” always have “solutions.” “Solutions” are found by good thinking, disciplined effort and generally appropriate funding. In fact, there is no “solution” to life. Although there are many problems which do demand intelligence and effort and perhaps funding, life, in the end, is a mystery to be lived not a problem to be solved. To refuse this essential truth leads to madness, even if that madness remains undiagnosed, perhaps because the majority have succumbed to it and it seems utterly “normal.”

We Western Christians do the same with our faith life. That too is madness, even if it is passed off as “holiness.” The work of renewal in the Christian churches

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<sup>44</sup> It can also acknowledge that there is a difference between the morality of an act and the morality of a law about an act. For example, I might find abortion a morally unacceptable act but the law permitting others to do/have abortions morally acceptable.

<sup>45</sup> In a letter to Fr John McCown, December 2 2958, Flannery O’Connor makes an observation that is worth reflecting on: “I seem to have nothing but friends who have left the Church. They have all left because they have been shocked by the intellectual dishonesty of some Catholic or other – or so they say, frequently of priests. It is only partly that but it does account for a good deal. I wish we would hear more preaching about the harm we do from the things we do not face and from all the questions we give Instant Answers to. None of these poor children want Instant Answers and they are right.” (In Sally Fitzgerald, editor, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O’Connor*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979, 309.)

must address this as a matter of the utmost urgency – if we cannot make this journey from moralism towards mysticism we cannot begin to speak of renewal in the spirit of the Gospel as such. The Christian faith is essentially a mystical reality because the human journey is ultimately a mystical journey.



## Snippets for meditation

(1) *“It is sometimes in our very virtue that our doom lies.”*<sup>46</sup>



(2) *“It follows for the Christian churches that they must fulfil further their old task of employing the Word of the cross to destroy religious idolatry and personal fetishism and to spread the freedom of faith into the very hovels of the obscure. Its new task then will lie in struggling against not only religious superstition but also political idolatry, not only religious alienation of man but also his political, social and racial alienation in order to serve the liberation of man to his likeness to God in all areas where he suffers from inhumanity. In this sense, I think, it would also be the task of the churches today to develop “social critical freedom” in institutions. I say “also” because man is basically enslaved by anxiety, and liberation from anxiety happens in the first place through faith -- not through social improvements.”*<sup>47</sup>



(3) *“The living Truth, the great breaker of idols and destroyer of false gods, is easier to live with than the most comforting of lies. It is better to lose the God we found it easy to envisage, and the faith that was only a protection from our fears, and stand naked and unknowing in the presence of the One who can only really be known when he is lived with. At least with that God we can and, indeed, must begin from where we are. There can be no becoming that does not start from something that already is.”*<sup>48</sup>



(4) *“Yes, if we love mercy, we must consent to leading our lives and carrying our cross deplorably badly. Only then do we know we haven't been cheating, we know we've reached the light at last.”*<sup>49</sup>



(5) *“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all*

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<sup>46</sup> Nicholas Peter Harvey, *Morals and the Meaning of Jesus: Reflections on the Hard Sayings*, The Pilgrim Press, 1991/1993, 66.

<sup>47</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, “Political Theology”, *Theology Today*, 28 (1971), 20.

<sup>48</sup> Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, SPCK/Paulist, 1973, p.11. Moralism is a form of idol – it is a “strange god” and we have been asked not to have “strange gods”.

<sup>49</sup> St. Thérèse of Lisieux cited by B. Bro, *The Little Way*, The Christian Classics, 1980, 82.

*those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. .... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others. ...*

*"It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a common-place realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.*

*"This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them – and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not "they" but my own self. There are no strangers!"<sup>50</sup>*



(6) *"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."<sup>51</sup>*



(7) *"To experience conflicts knowingly, though it may be distressing, can be an invaluable asset. The more we face our own conflicts and seek out our own solutions, the more inner freedom and strength we will gain. Only when we are willing to bear the brunt can we approximate the ideal of being the captain of our ship. A spurious tranquillity rooted in inner dullness is anything but enviable. It is bound to make us weak and an easy prey to any kind of influence."<sup>52</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Doubleday, 1989, 156-158.

<sup>51</sup> Galatians 2:20.

<sup>52</sup> Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, W W Norton, 1945, 27.



(8) *“The point is not to attack particular groups or schools of thought, but rather to draw attention to the craving that is in us all for an all-embracing moral system to assuage our anxiety. It is only when the fruits of this craving are recognised as the destructive flight from reality that they really are, that the Gospel can begin to come into its own. Then the world of the child and the sight of the lilies of the field can begin to work their way in us. ... Jesus refuses to offer a morality, whether distinctively different from other moralities or confirmatory of ‘what all good men and women think’. To offer a morality would be a distraction from his vocation to life through death, into which he calls us. To suppose otherwise is wishful thinking.”*<sup>53</sup>



(9) *“When I discover that I am poor, that I am confused, that you call me by my name, that you love me, then there is the moment of transformation.”*<sup>54</sup>



(10) *“What is it really that stands ... between God and humanity? Paradoxically, it is humanity's own morality and piety: our ingeniously devised moralism and our selective technique of piety. It is not--as people at that time thought--the tax swindlers who find it most difficult to repent, not being able to remember all those whom they have cheated or how much they would have to restore. No: it is the devout who find it most difficult, being so sure of themselves that they have no need of conversion. They became Jesus' worst enemies. Most of the sayings on judgment in the Gospels apply to these, not to the great sinners. Those who finally sealed his fate were not murderers, cheats, swindlers and adulterers, but the highly moral people. They thought that in this way they were doing a service to God.”*<sup>55</sup>



(11) *“They lay quiet for a while in the hut. The priest thought the lieutenant was asleep until he spoke again. ‘You never talk straight. You say one thing to me -- but to another man, or a woman, you say, “God is love”. But you think that stuff won't go down with me so you say different things Things you'll know I'll agree with.’ ‘Oh,’ the priest said, ‘that's another thing altogether -- God is love. I don't say the heart doesn't feel a taste of it, but what a taste. The smallest glass of love mixed with a pint pot of ditch-water. We wouldn't recognize that love. It might even look like hate. It would be enough to scare us -- God's love. It set fire to a bus in the desert, didn't it,*

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<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Peter Harvey, *op cit*, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Jean Vanier, *Followers of Jesus*, Gill & MacMillan, 1976, 80.

<sup>55</sup> Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, Doubleday, 1974/1976, 211.

*and smashed open graves and set the dead to walking in the dark. Oh, a man like me would run a mile to get away if he felt that love around.”*<sup>56</sup>



(12) *“When you visualized a man or a woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity -- that was a quality God’s image carried with it. When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination.”*<sup>57</sup>



(13) *“We shall be in a position to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd only when we have stopped using the Christian religion to shield us from the realities of our lostness and our night. Jesus will become alive to us only as we are denied access to a Christ who functions as sanctuary from the world. The Lord who lives and speaks can only be met in the real world, in the 'swamp' of the fallen creation. This is where he came. This is where he is still to be found.”*<sup>58</sup>



(14) *“As I feel more and more the injustice, the inequalities and the exploitations of this world, I understand better why so many people throw themselves into political activity which aims to destroy the power-structure of our society. I understand better why people who are frightened of losing their possessions and power try to defend themselves and the structures which support them. Our world is moving towards universal conflict, pushed by the jealousies and hatred which come from fear. Jesus came to destroy hate and to lead all men into fraternity, universal love and peace. But this means that we must all reject our individual and group egoisms; we must all learn to die to ourselves and, reborn in the Spirit, to live for our brothers and for God our Father. I believe that the world will only change as people's hearts change and as people open themselves to love and tenderness. Our political and economic structures reflect our inner fears; they can only be changed as hearts change. This does not mean that we must not struggle against injustice on a political level, for we must. But above all we must become sources of love for others; we must become attentive to the little people, the wounded, the fragile and the lonely people. It is as this current of life grows stronger that structures will change.”*<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, Penguin, 1982, 199-200.

<sup>57</sup> Graham Green, *op cit*, 131.

<sup>58</sup> Douglas J. Hall, “Rethinking Christ: Theological Reflections on Shusaku Endo's *Silence*” in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, XXXIII (1979), 267.

<sup>59</sup> Jean Vanier, *Be Not Afraid*, Paulist Press, 1975, viii-ix.

(16) *“My God I love thee – though there were  
No heaven to win,  
No hell to punish those who dare  
Against thy love to sin.*

*Upon the cross, thy wide embrace  
Made me, dear Lord, thy own;  
The nails, the spear, the long disgrace  
For me should all atone.*

*That night of fear, those hours of pain,  
Those bitter griefs of thine,  
That death itself was born, to gain  
A sinner’s love – ’twas mine.*

*And shall the fear of hell below  
Or hope of heaven above  
Be all the reason heart can know  
This loving Lord to love?*

*The love that asks not anything,  
Love like thy own love free,  
Jesus, I give, who art my King,  
Who art my God, to thee.”<sup>60</sup>*



(17) *“I’m drawn to the view that modern unbelief is a product of the way in which Christianity tried to shape itself in the Early Modern period of 17th-18th Century. Then, in the context of the emergence of modern science and scepticism, we tried to develop a rational apologetic for God by considering God as what needs to be posited in order to explain the world. Michael Buckley has shown that contemporary atheism is tied to currents in early modern Christian apologetic which mounted proofs of the existence of God, independently of his action in Jesus and religious experience, as a hypothesis necessary to explain the existence of this kind of world. Atheism, it seems, flows from a neutral, religion-free theism, a flawed attempt to stand outside our actual (human and religious) situation and be panoptic in determining the character and relation of God and the world ( M.J.Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). I use Fergus Kerr's summary:*

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<sup>60</sup> Hymn from Evening Prayer, Holy Saturday in *Prayer of the Church*.

*Theology, itself, since the Enlightenment, has striven to construct an interpretation of Christianity acceptable to the exigencies of reason alone - as if human reason were somehow outside of the history of fallen and redeemed humanity - independently, then of moral and religious presuppositions...The 'death of God', as one might have expected, was an inside job, the result of two or three centuries of 'natural theology'. By shifting to supposedly neutral religion-free ground to mount proofs of the existence of God, these theologians inaugurated a whole tradition of philosophical theology which dialectically generated its own negation. Historically, atheism would thus be the product of a certain kind of theism. (Fergus Kerr, OP, "Aquinas After Marion," New Blackfriars Vol 76, no. 895 (1995), 354-64)*

*Pascal diagnosed the problem of this kind of theism at its inception:*

*I cannot forgive Descartes: in his whole philosophy he would like to do without God; but he could not help allowing him a flick of the fingers to set the world in motion; after that he had no more use for God. (Blaise Pascal, Pensées, trans. A.J.Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995), 330)*

*Contemporary unbelief arises from the self-alienation of religion in that Christianity marginalized from its core account of itself the dimension of spiritual experience and the person of Christ. We led people to think that the mystery of God could be addressed without primary reference to the action of Word and Spirit; we led people to act as though there could be a deductive knowledge of God separable from loving God. We dissolved the divine mystery by treating God as an object of thought. But God can only be known by participating in the movement of love and gift which God is: this is Athanasius' great teaching to the Church, but at a crucial stage in the formation of modern culture, we forgot it and tried to deliver neutral proofs for the reality of God, on the basis of which there could be 'knowledge' of God. Christianity, which professes to be concerned with the mystery of God, gave the impression that God can be conceptually determined and pinned down: it is hardly surprising that there has been resistance to worshipping this metaphysical idol.*

*When Cardinal Daneels talked about 'living the faith in small groups', when he talked about a 'Babylonian Exile' of the Church in Europe, when he emphasised not explaining too much to people (evangelium sine glossa), when he spoke about transparency of living ('we only believe witnesses'), when he referred to Islam's witness to divine transcendence, to God who is approached seriously in prayer, when he spoke about recovering the centrality of spiritual experience, he was pointing us back to those parts of our religion that generate witness and holiness. I think he was pointing to the things which, perhaps alone, enable witness to God to take place in this culture. I read the Renew programme as a way of re-centring the*

*Church, the whole Church, as a condition of effectively witnessing in a world that has decided that we are no more than a relic of Europe's cultural advance towards post-Christianity. We have to counter the pattern of 'residual believing without belonging' that we see so much around us by developing a Church that is strong at the centre of its identity. And that means spirituality.”<sup>61</sup>*



(18) *“Christianity is more than an ethical system .... Jesus not only teaches us the Christian life, He creates it in our souls by the action of the Spirit. Our life in him is not a matter of mere ethical goodwill. It is not a mere moral perfection. It is an entirely new spiritual reality, and inner transformation. .... When we speak of ‘life in Christ,’ according to the phrase of St Paul, ‘It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20), we are not speaking of self-alienation but the discovery of our true selves in Christ. In this discovery we participate spiritually in the mystery of His Resurrection. And this sharing of the death and Resurrection of Christ is the very heart of the Christian faith and of Christian mysticism. .... the discourse of the Last Supper contains the very heart of Christian mysticism, that is to say of Christianity itself: for Christianity and Christian mysticism were, originally, one and the same thing.”<sup>62</sup>*



(19) *“The greater part of what my neighbours call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behaviour. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well? You may say the wisest thing you can, old man, – you who have lived seventy years, not without honor of a kind, – I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that.”<sup>63</sup>*



(20) *“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us”. We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being*

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<sup>61</sup> From Fr John McDade SJ's address to Westminster clergy, November 13, 2002.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, Burns & Oates, 1961/1964, 116, 117 & 121. See the whole of this little essay, “Life in Christ,” for a development of this theme of finding our true identity in Christ.

<sup>63</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, The Modern Library, 1937/1950, 10..

*Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.*”<sup>64</sup>



(21) *“Christianity is more than an ethical system .... Jesus not only teaches us the Christian life, He creates it in our souls by the action of the Spirit. Our life in him is not a matter of mere ethical goodwill. It is not a mere moral perfection. It is an entirely new spiritual reality, and inner transformation. .... When we speak of ‘life in Christ,’ according to the phrase of St Paul, ‘It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20), we are not speaking of self-alienation but the discovery of our true selves in Christ. In this discovery we participate spiritually in the mystery of His Resurrection. And this sharing of the death and Resurrection of Christ is the very heart of the Christian faith and of Christian mysticism. .... the discourse of the Last Supper contains the very heart of Christian mysticism, that is to say of Christianity itself: for Christianity and Christian mysticism were, originally, one and the same thing.*”<sup>65</sup>



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<sup>64</sup> The opening words of Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical, *Deus caritas est*.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, Burns & Oates, 1961/1964, 116, 117 & 121. See the whole of this little essay, “Life in Christ,” for a development of this theme of finding our true identity in Christ.

## Suggestions for further study

- Cinema
- Best Boy* (1979 – Dir: Ira Wohl – documentary about Wohl’s 52-year old mentally retarded cousin.)  
*Man for All Seasons* (1966 – Dir: Fred Zimmerman with Paul Scofield and Wendy Hiller.)  
*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962 – Dir: Robert Mulligan with Gregory Peck, Mary Badham and Robert Duvall making his screen debut.)  
*Lantana* (2001 – Dir: Ray Lawrence with Anthony LaPaglia, Kerry Armstrong, Geoffrey Rush, Barbara Hershey. Superb Australian film!)
- Dreyer, Elizabeth, ed *The Cross in Christian Tradition: From Paul to Bonaventure*, Paulist Press, 2000
- Facey, A B, *A Fortunate Life*, Penguin Books, 1981/1985.
- Hall, Douglas John, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, Fortress Press, 2003
- Harvey, Nicholas Peter, *Morals and the Meaning of Jesus: Reflections on the Hard Sayings*, The Pilgrim Press, 1991/1993. (NOTE: This is a particularly fine book – highly recommended!)
- Herrigel, Eugen, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Vintage Books, 1971.
- Horney, Karen, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, W W Norton, 1950 – especially “The Tyranny of the Should” (64-85)
- Lee, Harper, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Lewis, Alan E, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, William B Eerdmans, 2001.
- Lewis, Larry, *The Misfit: Haunting the Human, Unveiling the Divine*, Orbis, 1997.
- Mahood, Kim, *Craft For a Dry Lake: A Memoir*, Anchor, 2000.
- O’Connor, Flannery, “Revelation”, *Readings for Christian Spirituality, Volume III*, 146-158.
- Smiley, Jane, *Thousand Acres*, Alfred Knopf, 1992.
- White, Patrick, *The Tree of Man*



## **Suggested exercises**

1. Next time you feel guilty, ashamed or just disappointed in yourself, pay gentle attention. Use the focusing technique. What is happening? Perhaps it is a healthy reaction; perhaps it is not. Just listen gently and compassionately. Finish with a quiet repetition of the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer can protect us against the onslaughts of false guilt as well as self-deceit, self-denigration as well as self-inflation, and self-hatred as well as narcissism. The Jesus Prayer helps us remain focussed on what is real and what matters.
2. Recall a favourite Gospel passage. Does it have any overlays of moralism for you? Reflect on that. Do you hear there the call to relationship and communion – in other words, the call of the mystic?
3. Next time you are with someone and are inclined to come up with an answer or a judgment or an opinion about this or that, hold your peace and gently listen to what is going on inside you. Call to mind the presence of Jesus Christ. Just be there in silence. Trust the silence. Pay attention. Listen.

