Religious Idealism by Brian Mountford 5 May 2024

In Acts 10.34-end, Peter is telling the Christian story of salvation in a very similar way to how we retell it in the Nicene Creed and Eucharistic Prayer. It leads potentially to an experience of the Holy Spirit and the Jewish (circumcised believers) who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. These divisions go back a long way.

In the Gospel Reading, John15.9-17, we have another of John’s essays, put into the mouth of Jesus, about love and morality – and a new special relationship: Christians are no longer servants, but friends. A new special relationship with God – the prime, motivating, and generative universal force. And this life force is often stated simply as ‘God is Love’. Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est – where there is charity and love, there is God. It is why St Paul in 1 Corinthians says, ‘And finally there remain these three: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.’ Love is the ultimate and foundational state of being, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end.

Is this a naïve romantic view of reality? In the contemporary world, there is a prevalent view that we are nothing but a combination of physical, measurable parts; and that the earth and universe itself is the consequence of physical, chemical, bio-chemical, reactions, that can be analysed by science, and contain no meaning or purpose – just a chance occurrence of ordered life in a vast universe. This is *reductionism* – it reduces ideas to a bare minimum – and leads to *determinism* a kind of mechanistic view of life, where one thing depends on another rather like a machine. It’s a bare-bones view of reality. Where in this view does imagination, paradox, love, honour, justice, compromise, trust, and wonder come into the equation?

In philosophy, the opposite of determinism is *Idealism*. I find this a deceptive and occasionally misleading word. For example, when someone is idealistic, we tend to think of their outlook as falsely optimistic. They say, ‘in an ideal world’ we would expect everything to be perfect. But we live in the real world. Is love part of the real world or not?

Within modern philosophy the principal meaning of *idealism* is that reality is dependent on the things of the mind, of the spirit, & of reason. Everything that we can know about reality is permeated by the creative, formative activities of the mind.

So religious people are likely to be idealists rather than determinists, because they believe in a personal God, who is love, known in Jesus Christ (which is exactly what Peter was preaching in the reading from Acts.)

Having said all that, I think we have something of the same issue in how Christians regard Holy Scripture. Biblical fundamentalists (who say the Bible is literally true and given directly by God) are reductionist in their approach – they opt for a tight, restricting interpretation, whereas those who take a more critical approach to scripture, recognising it as literature, as creative, and belonging to a particular culture and time, are idealists.

My latest guru, Iain McGilchrist says, ‘The literal is *not more real* than the metaphorical’. What does that mean? Well, take for example Shakespeare’s Macbeth. It is a report of the murder of a king, as it were the case for the prosecution, but it is not the report of a police witness, just trying to establish the facts; it’s full of the imagery of night: of secret, black, and midnight hags, and crows and ravens, dark birds.

Macbeth in Act 3, Scene 2

“*Light thickens, and the crow*

*Makes wing to the rocky wood;*

*Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,*

*Whiles night’s black agents to their preys do rouse.*”

It signifies evil and the opportunity for evil and how selfish ambition can lead to murder.

It’s true, but it’s not literal. So, when we interpret scripture and try to see how it best speaks to modern times, it is helpful, I think, to see that literal truth is not more real than metaphorical (poetic) truth. I think all of us use this kind of method when gleaning a picture of love from the NT. What is love like? Well, it’s like Jesus, not so much what he says but how he acts. Greater love hath no one than this, that a man lay down his life fro his friends John 15.13. St Paul gets nearest a definition in 1 Corinthians 13, when he says love is patient; kind; ‘not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.’

These are the values Christianity suggests lie at the heart of being itself; and we are free to tune in to them, or not.

This week, like many of us, I’ve been reflecting yet again on the polarised nature of the Russian/Ukraine conflict, British party politics, and the rough justice meted out by NYPD against the Columbia University students protesting against the disproportionate attack on the people of Gaza.

Polarisation is all reductionist, binary, lacking in nuance, dealing in black and white. War almost necessarily does this; it’s us or them. Or when did you ever hear one political party say that the opposition had got a policy right? And the cynical voter may be forgiven for thinking all politicians are tarred with the same brush. And why does a democracy that believes in free speech bring armoured vehicles onto the streets and arrest hundreds of young people tying their hands tied behind their backs with plastic/nylon zip ties so tight they cut into their wrists?

So ethics/morality too can be reductionist or more generously idealist. It’s one of the challenges Christians have to face.

(Like so many sermons, this piece ceases abruptly leaving the hearer/reader with questions to reflect on. In an way, the main thrust of this sermon was to get us thinking about the nature of reality in the contrast between determinism and idealism – how reality is not primarily about solid objects but about consciousness, the mind, and values. More about the process of becoming, than a kind of arrived at steady state.)