

The Enigmatic Father Sylvan

by: Douglas Lockhart

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see Is my Visions Greatest Enemy . . . Thine is the Friend of all Mankind, Mine speaks in parables to the Blind

William Blake

The Energy of Attention

Something that has fascinated me for years, many years, is how complicated religious matters are. Why is that the case, I wonder? Why are religious experiences so... how can I say it without causing offence, *oddball*? Why, for instance, is meditative experience in India so radically different from, say, the English contemplative tradition? Why are the results so different? And why, oh why, does the Virgin Mary keep turning up for Catholics but not for Protestants of equal faith and sincerity? We have to assume, surely, that many Protestant Christians are of equal faith to their Catholic counterparts, and no less deserving in the eyes of God in relation to observances dutifully kept and prayers routinely offered. Particularly for and by the sick. Which is to ask why Lourdes is Catholic and a Pentecostalist laying on of hands is Protestant? Is it all just a matter of culture, of which part of the world we were born into, which family setting we happen to have, indeed, which side of the street the stork chose to visit? Or is something much deeper going on, something intrinsic to our being human that we have yet to identify?

But what of God's role is in all of this? It stands to reason, if you are religious, that it is God who decides these things. If the Virgin Mary turns up or does not turn up in your faith tradition, then it must mean something, mustn't it? And as that is surely the case, then why doesn't the Christian God keep, for the sake of all Christians of good faith, a level playing field in relation to the two principal Christian traditions? He is after all GOD; he can do whatever he wants. So why allow Mary to appear to one and not the other? Is it favoritism? Is he saying in a not-so-subtle way that one of these groups has the "truth" and the other has not, and that all other religious traditions are mistaken? Is it as blatantly simple and straightforward as that, or is something else going on?

Then there's the route you take to contact whichever version of God you worship. Why are these routes so diverse? Why is it that in the Indian sense of religious practice it is necessary to learn, as yogins do, complicated breathing techniques and attempt to bend the body into extraordinary shapes? Or if you are a Catholic, or Anglican monk, recite fixed prayers, scrub your way to God on an empty stomach and avoid the Eastern notion that direct union with God is possible? Or if you are an evangelical or fundamentalist Protestant Christian, sidestep all this mystical stuff and believe that everything, absolutely everything, depends on articulating the formula that Jesus is your personal savior? What is this all about? Is only one of those belief-sets the correct set, or is some vital ingredient missing in our overall comprehension of what it means to be religious?

I should say immediately that the above questions are not an exercise in flippancy; they are an attempt to focus attention on the more important question of what religion might be in its heart of hearts. Is it only about who has the "truth" and who has not? Is there really some grand religious truth or design that we all have to bow to, or is the very idea of such a grandiose truth a mask for an ingrained ignorance we are unwilling, or unable, to shed? Is religion's innate tendency towards claims of superior insight reflective of some Grand Truth, or have we simply exported our cultural and tribal inadequacies into the heavens? Whatever our religious persuasion, these are just some of the questions we have to ask ourselves, for they reveal cracks and fissures and the odd chasm or two in our disparate notions of religious truth that cannot any longer be avoided. Why? Because religion, whatever its variety, has become a bit of a headache for the world's developed and fledgling democracies. Problems arise when we take our particular religious persuasion to be undiluted truth, when the only truth worth bothering with, perhaps, is our need for truth.

The Framing of Questions

This is particularly so in the sense that those who adhere strongly to a religious tradition are generally unwilling to question that tradition's claims and promises with any rigor. Alert to how mythology and wishful thinking operate in other religions, they find it all but impossible to identify the same underlying mythological themes in their own tradition. They have the "truth", everyone else has either lies or a distorted version of their truth. This fact is so obvious, so blatant that they blink in real surprise when it is suggested that they are in the same boat as everyone else. Suggest "conceptual blindness" and hackles will rise.

Our ability to evaluate ideas and experiences depends on our ability to question ideas and experiences. We have to be able to conceive and frame questions before they can be asked, and, luckily for us, that capacity seems to be innate. We have a built-in curiosity that drives us to question just about everything, and in answering

most questions we develop and mature as human beings. This does not mean that we come to understand everything we question; some questions are too difficult to immediately break open into answers. They instead lie around in our systems as “needs”, to use the psychologist William James’s terminology, and in that role they add a dimension of “not knowing” to our knowing that tempers our tendency to always expect neat answers. Not everything is “certain” in life, some things remain forever hidden. It is perhaps this very fact that makes us seek truth in religious form, for through religious truth our deepest “not knowings” can be turned into manageable semblances of “knowing”, our insecurity back into what appears to be factually based certainty.

So what to do? Religion has obviously a part to play in life, so the question is: to what extent should we rely on its idiosyncratic formulations of reality? Do these formulations in some sense make sense even when they seem to make no sense at all? Is that their sensed attraction? Or are they no more than a form of mental subterfuge, an excuse to escape the task of sorting out our deepest needs? Or, there again, is there perhaps an inner core of reasoning to religious truths that resonates with our own inner core, a core identified in the Christian tradition as the “soul”, an indefinable “something” that links us to realms of experience and knowledge not available to our factually driven minds. Is it perhaps that that stops us from questioning what in so many instances demands the asking of questions?

Another reason for the suspicion that questioning religious ideas and values might lead to their undoing is that questions, even apparently innocent ones, have a bad habit of generating other questions of more serious import. Question some innocuous aspect of faith, and before you know it the whole edifice is under threat. For it stands to reason that reason will demand further and further adjustments to our cherished beliefs, and that these adjustments will, in the end, deal a fatal blow to our faith. But is that really the case? Does using “reason” automatically lead to a diminution of trust in what we once trusted? Is reason the natural enemy of faith? In the limited sense of reason being no more than an extension of raw “logic”, the answer is yes, it is dangerous, but in the more expansive sense of reason being a tool *in the service of our experience of being alive*, it is not true. There are two different kinds of questioning at work here, and we should be aware of their weaknesses and their strengths.

Writing with his usual flair in the sphere of language, poetics and history, George Steiner captures this more advanced interpretation of questioning when he says: “To question truly is to enter into harmonic concordance with that which is being questioned.”¹ The idea that we should be “initiator and sole master” in the mechanistic sense should be swapped for a laying open of the self to what is being questioned. Here is the heart of the matter, the heart of what the historian Morris

Berman is getting at when he suggests that we lacked “real presence, real bodily engagement with the world.” We have to become, in Steiner’s terms, “the vulnerable locus, the permeable space of its (the question’s) disclosure.” For him that has in turn its parallel in “the risk of nakedness in the dialectic of prayer.”² Suddenly, unexpectedly, questioning turns into something else, an opening up of the self to the self through the asking of authentic questions.

The question of “authentic” and “unauthentic questions” is of course a difficult one; being faced with the further question of whether our questions are worthwhile can try our patience. Steiner comes to our rescue with a handy yardstick. There are, he says, two discernibly different types of questions that can be asked, the “questionable” (we are asked to note the pejorative inflection) where facts constitute terminal, settled and therefore inert answers, and “worthy of being asked questions” in the sense of questions that are *inexhaustible*. The meaning of human existence is such a question; it cannot be answered in the same fashion as, say, “How far is the Earth from the Sun?” In this sense the question and the questioner can be “dignified” by the mode of questioning chosen. Knowing how far the Earth is from the Sun is a useful fact; confronting the question of meaning in relation to human existence is altogether different in caliber.

This is to say that questioning is an activity vital to our growth and development as human beings; without it we atrophy for want of depth and substance. Greater depth is always possible; there is no such thing as a spiritual bottoming out in the sense of having accomplished everything in one hit. If a Christian, then the meaning of “Christ” should be pursued into the depths of our being, not merely held up in the mind like a sports trophy. Enter Father Sylvan (see my essay 'The Enigmatic Father Sylvan'), Jacob Needleman’s spiritual mentor with this directive: “Not until you reach the heart should you permit yourself to speak the ancient language. Until then, even Christ must be chased out of your mind. You have made Him into a monster through your emotions and conditioning.” And then an equally remarkable statement: “I have suffered because of my clinging to the old language. But one day I began to see that the seed of love is the desire to know, to understand.”³ Father Sylvan’s directives will disconcert many Christians, but for my money he has his finger firmly on the pulse of what it means to be Christian.

So who is Father Sylvan? What are his credentials? To what order did he belong? As it turns out, these are difficult questions to answer. In the introduction to his book *Lost Christianity*, Jacob Needleman tells us that he first came across Father Sylvan (a Westerner with a strong, unidentifiable accent) while attending a conference in the Middle East. Seated in the audience, at the rear, this priest had asked some pointed questions of the panel, and later turned up in the same airport queue as Needleman. Due to a delay, they had repaired to the airport dining room

for coffee and passed the time chatting. A second delay of three hours had, however, changed “chat” into a discussion that left Needleman the philosopher “full to overflowing with more ideas and information about the Christian tradition than (he) could possibly manage.” So extraordinary was Father Sylvan’s thinking that he later found himself “revising almost everything (he) had ever thought about Christianity.”

This was a life-changing moment for Jacob Needleman; he was not the same man afterwards. His book *Lost Christianity* spells out why; he had stumbled into the presence of a Christian monk whose “interpretation of Scripture, morality, mysticism, metaphysics, the soul, the place of the Church... was, to say the least, extremely unorthodox.” So much so that Needleman had difficulty relating what he heard to the kind of Christianity he was familiar with. And not once did he demand proof for what was being said, or argue back, or even ask the man’s name, for there was, Needleman recalls, a quality in the man’s presence that made all such inquiry redundant. So imagine his surprise when about a year later a tattered manuscript written by Father Sylvan arrived on his desk, a manuscript within which his unique interpretation of Christianity was further enlarged upon. Father Sylvan was dead, but his researches were about to turn Needleman’s life upside down and inside out.

What we make of this meeting with Father Sylvan is our own affair, but as I read *Lost Christianity* I began to appreciate Needleman’s excitement, for with every sentence a whole new vision of Christianity’s core purpose began to surface, and it was one I in part recognized from other sources, one of those sources being the philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff. Whoever Father Sylvan was, he was in himself a formidable example of Gurdjieff’s term “real presence”, and it was this that had stopped Needleman in his tracks.

Knowing and Not Knowing

As noted elsewhere, our “not knowing” is as important as our “knowing”; it tempers our need for overly neat and tidy answers. All knowing is embedded in our not knowing. To not know something is to know that we do not know it, and that is the springboard of our future knowing. Conversely, all knowing is a form of not knowing, for there is always more to know. And so we come to the question of knowing or not knowing God, and to what that might mean. But first we have to understand something about our past and present conception of God. In classical terms, God had no objective existence in time or space, and as such was beyond definition. The ancient fathers did not waste their time contemplating what God was; they admitted straight up that they did not know and listed instead what he was not. And yet God was/is the guarded subject of Christian contemplation. Why guarded? Because to contemplate God directly is to face not only the “unknown”,

but also the “unknowable”, and as a result be emptied of everything we “think” we know.⁴ Dangerous stuff. And so Jesus was by necessity theologically sandwiched between us and God to safeguard our sanity, and from this a secondary problem arose that we’re still in the throes of dealing with: Jesus as cultic figure.

The nature of this secondary problem is that Jesus does not inspire contemplative emptying; he inspires instead “emotional identification” and the “filling up” process that goes along with that. This is what Father Sylvan is getting at when he says that we have made Christ into a monster through our emotions and our conditioning and has to be chased him out of our minds. We’ve reduced him to a utilitarian formula and replaced the springboard of our creative “not knowing” with a “knowing” that must by its very nature collapse into historical and psychological absurdity. Why? Because the idea of sandwiching Jesus between ourselves and God, clever as it is in theological terms, produces a state of dependence on an *affectively charged* idea that can, in some instances, permanently undermine our ability to sensibly question our own religious framework.

Tackling this problem, Father Sylvan refers to “men of Salvation” who have “drawn the energy of attention away from the body (and) walk the earth like explosive devices ready to be set off at random.”⁵ Now there’s an image to conjure with, and it was penned decades before 9/11! But there’s more, and it’s devastating. In Sylvan’s terminology, to draw “the energy of attention away from the body” is to “abort the soul a thousand times a day.” The soul does not exist in finished form, he tells us, it is an energy that has to be activated and accumulated. What Christianity has lost is its teaching on how this energy can be extracted from ordinary experience – it has been turned into the rambling demands of belief and moral rectitude. Powerful experiences such as the threat of death or deep disappointment can and do drive us into a “present tenseness” that we find unsettling, but the same energy is available to us from ordinary events, happenings and interactions if we know how to go about it. We can decide, if we know how, to *fully occupy the space in which we exist*, but fail to do so because we haven’t the foggiest idea what that means in practical terms.

We have become creatures of the surface with little experience of our own unfathomable depths. We surf the energy stream of our emotions and hope (or pray?) that our decisions, fed as they are by ideas influenced by the same unpredictable energy stream, will keep us on track both intellectually and morally. But it hasn’t worked; we are as unpredictable and as dangerous as we’ve ever been.

Jacob Needleman develops Father Sylvan’s meaning in relation to our misuse of

emotional energy to include the possibility of our “serving as a channel for the force that can alter the whole of the self.”⁶ Now that is quite a claim, and he isn’t using “force” in a *Star Wars* sense. He is suggesting not an external, independent force that can affect change in our lives (God, or Jesus as God), but a force or energy fundamental to our own psychophysical makeup capable of short-circuiting us out of our emotionally driven naivety. As “intrinsic change” is the crux of regular Christianity’s failed hope for the world, the crux of psychological, philosophical and psychiatric explorations into the human psyche, and the crux of the evangelical/fundamentalist vision, then this highly unusual view of our creative (spiritual?) capacities is worth considering. Change in the sense of an updating of ideas, or in the more dramatic sense of paradigm shift, will undoubtedly play an important role in our immediate future, but as Morris Berman suspects, and I concur, it will take much more than that if we humans are to survive our own dark brilliance.

Soul-Making

But lets get back to Father Sylvan’s definition of “soul” as *an energy that is constantly aborted*, for within that clearly stated definition lies the clue as to how the whole crumbling spiritual edifice of Christianity can be rebuilt. And as the bitter arguments and in-fighting between liberal, conservative and evangelical camps plainly show, it is crumbling. To believe otherwise is to ignore the looming threat of schism in the Anglican communion, the equally serious challenges to Rome’s authority from within its priestly ranks, or be so immersed in the evangelical/fundamentalist dream that questioning ceases altogether. Enter Father Sylvan with a definition of “soul” that rocks the barque of Christ, a definition that resets the whole complex mechanism of Christianity and offers it the chance to rediscover its own lost soul. And how is this to be done? Through the “activation of attention” and the “accumulation of energy”, a two-pronged experimental process that requires our full, conscious participation, and not just a blind acceptance of pre-packaged beliefs. That’s pretty specific, I think. It tells us that we have to do something to kick-start the process of “soul making”, and that we must then persist with this process or the energy of which soul is composed will be lost.

Before tackling what this means in practical terms, we must first take a detour via the surprisingly modern writings of the 2nd century Church Father Irenaeus, the philosopher John Hick whose present-day challenge to conservative Christian thought calls for a “soul-making” theology based on the Irenaeian tradition, and the critical writings of R. Douglas Geivett, a fellow philosopher to whom Hick’s thinking is untenable for the very reason that it raises the specter of soul-making as an alternative to salvation through Christ. But there’s a problem here, for although

Hick seems to be advocating what Father Sylvan advocates, he is in fact serving up a soul-making process based solely on what we learn as we live out our lives daily, and that, in spite of it having to do with how we react to everyday events and happenings, is far short of what Father Sylvan has in mind when speaking of the potentially transformative “energy” that all situations, events and encounters secretly harbor.

It was around 130 CE that Irenaeus began to frame systematic expositions of Church thinking in the East. One such exposition shows him to have been ultra-modern in how he approached the Adam and Eve story. With a few strokes of his pen he tells us that if the serpent had truly tempted Eve, then God was Himself the author of sin. And blaming the serpent’s ability to speak was equally unacceptable, for if that had been the case then demons would never have ceased using it in their deception of humankind. This and other rational criticisms of the Fall story reveal a mind fully aware of the story’s allegorical sense. The existence of Adam and Eve, the first human beings, is treated as a literal event, but not so the language of the text. Irenaeus reads between the lines. He is so clear and rational in his approach that in his 1924 Bampton Lectures, Norman Williams is forced to admit that his Adam belongs, “in respect to his moral status, to the category of *hominidae* or “sub-men” rather than to that of *homo sapiens*.” Williams adds for good measure:

If this primitive... conception of man’s primeval state had never been overlaid by the rabbinical imagination as to Adam’s supernatural perfection and splendor, later Christianity might have been spared even the appearance of a conflict with Darwinism.

The point of mentioning all of this is that the idea of salvation through Christ’s death on the cross rests on how the Adam and Eve story is viewed. Accept it as a cosmic drama that spread evil throughout humanity and you set up the situation where the “men of Salvation” can rule the spiritual roost until the end of time. That, in essence, is what traditional Christianity is all about; it is about saving us from the generic stain of our First Parents’ sin (their disobeying God’s command to not eat of the Tree of Good and Evil) plus our own lifetime of accumulated misdemeanors. So there is no doubting what Father Sylvan is getting at when he talks of these “men of Salvation” in such derogatory terms; he is saying loud and clear that it is time to ditch St Augustine’s dour interpretation of sin’s origin and replace it with a “soul-making” conception of human life based, not on the quality of our actions, but on the quality of the perceptions that set these actions in motion. But much more than that even, for he is not advocating Hick’s boot strap morality plus Christ, but what may have lain behind Irenaeus’s rejection of the Fall story: soul as an accumulation of psychic energy that can be squandered like

the Prodigal Son's "substance" in a far country.

We don't know for certain what inspired Irenaeus to interpret the Adam and Eve story in the way he did, but as a principal player in the framing of Christian thought in the second century, we can legitimately suspect that his radically different interpretation of that event resulted in other theological curiosities that in the West have undergone a process of adjustment. And it isn't as if Irenaeus was the only Church Father to think of the Fall as a lapse due to weakness and immaturity alone.⁷ Clement of Alexandria, Methodius and St. Gregory of Nazianzus were of much the same opinion, and in conjunction with Tertullian, Chrysostom, Origen, Basil and Cyril he is known to have argued that the Virgin Mary was not only conceived in sin, but that she had also committed sin. Irenaeus may be held up today as a staunch supporter of orthodoxy, but his own writings are more than a little worrying when compared with the Church's later evaluation of Christ and his mission.

So where does this leave us? Well, it shows that Father Sylvan's conception of what it means to be a "soul-maker" is quite different from that of John Hick, and that although this philosopher of religion comes close to this unusual idea, he in the end loses his way and finds himself in deep theological waters where Geivett's language games equal his own at every turn. It becomes a matter of words, and then more words, and the heart of what "soul-making" may have meant to Irenaeus turns into no more than an exercise in moral rectitude with the added fantasy of Christ's vicarious sacrifice spliced into it.

In his intriguing novel *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, Morris West captures the essence of this problem when he says:

It cost so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage to pay the price... One has to abandon altogether the search for security and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the whole world like a lover, and yet demand no easy return of love. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing.

Compare such a stance with those who believe that everything is tied up with a theological bow. How can we abandon the search for security and reach out to the risk of living if we believe that the Christian God has already worked out a set formula for our spiritual existence? How can we embrace the whole world like a lover if we believe that world to harbor a contagion of evil that is passed on generation by generation? How can we accept pain as a condition of existence if we are convinced pain is sent from God to test us? How can we court doubt and

darkness if we believe that knowing with certainty is the name of the game? And if we happen to be a contemplative, or have leanings in that direction, how can we develop a genuine spirituality if we are carrying a suitcase of theology in each hand?

Enter the philosopher Jacob Needleman with the observation that “it is not the experience of God that is drawing Christians to contemplative practices, but the experience of existing as such.”⁸ That throws us in at the deep end of questioning and returns us to Father Sylvan’s claim that we *abort our soul a thousand times each day*. It’s not just another wrinkle of theology that’s missing, or another word battle between Hick and Geivett that we have to digest; it’s a matter of finding out what “to exist as such” means in terms of our day-to-day existence.

References and Notes:

- 1) Steiner, George, *Heidegger*, Fontana Press, London, 1992. p 55.
- 2) Ibid. In this sense “questioning” is a religious experience; it introduces us to mental spaces and physical sensations that are often unfamiliar and challenging. To ask a “real” question necessitates that we ourselves become real.
- 3) Needleman, Jacob, *Lost Christianity*, Element Books, Wiltshire, England, 1990, p 212. This extraordinary outburst by Father Sylvan alerts us to the dangers inherent in losing the ability to formulate proper questions because of fixed patterns of belief. Beliefs of a fixed nature undermine somatic-based sensitivity and replace it with conditioned emotional responses.
- 4) Roberts, Bernadette, *What is Self? A Study of the Spiritual Journey in Terms of Consciousness*, Sentient Publications, LLC edition, 2005, pp 99 & 101. Here Bernadette Roberts speaks of “grasping not-knowing as a way-of- knowing”, as something Carl Jung never fathomed. She adds for good measure that “Psychological and spiritual freedom is the ability to live with not-knowing.”
- 5) Needleman, Jacob, *Lost Christianity*, (as above), p 193.
- 6) Ibid, p 177.
- 7) Hick, John, *Evil and the God of Love*, Macmillan, London, 1985, p 215.
- 8) Needleman, Jacob, *Lost Christianity*, (as above) p 117.