Chapter 15

The Health of the Spirit

Rowan Williams

Readers of Iris Murdoch’s novels will be familiar with those moments when someone says, ‘God would live here if God existed’, or something like that. There are points of crisis, of the recognition of moral clarity and moral extremity, when characters perceive their situation as one that isn’t properly coped with in the usual framework of reasonable calculation about human actions. There are claims being made that cannot be managed simply by arguing about the balance sheet of hurt and help. Certain moments lay bare what is necessary for our spirit’s wholeness.

Where might God live? Speaking for faith in a generally secularised environment can be misconstrued in a variety of ways. It can appear as the defence of an enormous historic vested interest, the defence of ‘the Church’; it can appear as polemic on behalf of a set of highly questionable propositions, a move in an intellectual campaign. Increasingly in the contemporary UK, it has become entangled with the politics of controlling and conciliating ‘faith communities’ – in the eyes of many commentators, a bloc of rather worrying interest groups devoted to the subversion of liberal values and the reversal of the modern European and North Atlantic ‘settlement’. In the middle of all this, the position of the Church of England is more and more complicated. As the established church, it is vulnerable to accusations about the defence of historic interests; as the state’s partner in education, for example, it can be seen as another faith community threatening the secular consensus, and often allying itself with other religious groupings to pressurise government for special treatment; as a confessionally diverse body, its attempts at public apologetic are often thought to be compromised or undermined by the lack of a common theological framework. How does it speak credibly?

It is in this context that Richard Harries has worked and spoken; and the remarkable degree to which his voice has been credible has been the degree to which he has found a way between the stereotypes I have just outlined and returned us to something more like the Iris Murdoch question: if God existed, where would God now live? That is, what are the points at which the spirit’s wholeness is involved in the choices we face? The refusal to line up straight away with absolutists on various issues, from nuclear deterrence to abortion, is a risky strategy; and some would say that this is precisely a way of putting
off the question about the spirit's wholeness. But it is far more complex than that. To hesitate over such matters can be a recognition that the spirit's wholeness is not something which can be safeguarded in advance by a clear set of absolutes. Say that you are not convinced that the possession of nuclear armaments is intrinsically an evil of such an order that it vitiates the whole of your political or economic culture; that you are not convinced that it is an evil which can simply be assumed to outweigh the evil of not protecting the innocent. Wholeness of spirit is then something other than just witnessing to a clearly right or just course of action. It may be more like the maintaining of a humility, even an irony about oneself in the midst of complex challenges: the accepting that you do not have and cannot have a finished picture of your moral self. Beginning from here, you may well find that the tragic in art and literature is the natural vehicle for thinking and feeling your way through these issues around the nature and health of the spirit.

In other words, it cannot be assumed that the refusal of absolutism is simply a search for pragmatic solutions acceptable to an educated, liberal and rather detached public. It may be a way of saying that the place where God would live if God existed is close to the place where we recognise the limitations of our moral possibilities, or rather the limitation of our chances of sleeping well, of having a satisfactory self-image. God lives here because we sense not a divine 'well-done', but a simultaneous awareness of inevitable failure and finitude and of a perpetual 'reopening' of our possibilities. And the God who lives here is very clearly a God that R. S. Thomas would recognise: that which, or the one who, waits for us in darkness, whose waiting is both our frustration and our hope, never quite manifest, never quite invisible. To understand what it is like to be before the God who neither condemns nor endorses but forgivingly waits is to have a powerful place from which to speak to those who have little idea of whether God can be said to 'live' at all as yet, but who do have some sense of where God just might be.

What I am suggesting is that there is a line joining Richard Harries's literary sensibility with his political and ethical discernment, and that it is precisely this that has given him the weight he has had as (that rarity) a Christian public intellectual. Speaking of and from faith in this way is nothing to do with the institution's corporately self-interest or the defence of threatened doctrine. The point is that the possibility of Christian speaking is not here made to depend on a sort of 'territorial' claim, the definition of a space for religious language neatly marked off from others. Solidarity with the complex situation of human decision, the refusal to suggest that there is somewhere a spiritually safe space, all this helps to make a certain kind of Christian speaking audible. 'This is where God would live'; but this is not to point to a sacred and isolated space but to identify where certain things can (at last) be said. It is not a million miles away from the routine pastoral activity of the parish priest simply giving room in the face, felt and said that has

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Yet my own questions remain that you fail to recognise that you can apportion unequal Christian moral discourse, 'it scene, and the sophisticated welcome contribution. But perspective if it is deployed here of the challenges posed by Stanley Hauerwas. To say that the manufacture and acquire certain quality to them which remove is in one way to ques

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What I am trying to suggest is that it will not do to characterise the style of someone like Richard Harries as a matter of liberal accommodation to whatever cultural norms seem most potent at any given moment. Quite the contrary: when a culture is in fact stumbling and awkward about matters concerning the spirit’s health, it is not in the least a slavery to the culture if someone undertakes to name and confront these matters, and to do so without recourse to polished conceptual structures. It may well be asked how else we even open the questions of the soul’s good in our context; and the sympathetic hearing and profound respect that are generally accorded to Richard Harries testify to this.

So he is a challenge for those of us whose theological allegiances are not straightforwardly the same. What I have outlined is, I think, a genuinely attractive and important strategy for a church like the Church of England – a church with a high level of cultural embeddedness – as it seeks to answer the question of how to reintroduce the rumour of God in its environment. I find it persuasive in a good many ways, but I am left with questions. As it happens, on the two issues mentioned earlier – nuclear deterrence and abortion – I am nearer to being an absolutist than Richard Harries, and his sophisticated critiques of the arguments that have weighed with me have for many years been a constant stimulus, provoking me to ask how far I have succumbed to the temptation of seeking rhetorical short-cuts at the expense of analysis. He also, as I reflect on the issues discussed here, makes me ask how far what might be short-cuts lead back to a territorial and defensive appearance which silences rather than nurtures effective Christian witness.

Yet my own questions remain. To be ‘absolutist’ about certain issues need not mean that you fail to recognise the tragic element in certain choices, let alone that you can apportion unqualified blame. The general crudity of a good deal of Christian moral discourse, ‘left’ and ‘right’, is a depressing feature of the current scene, and the sophisticated appeal to realism and humility is a necessary and welcome contribution. But I suspect that there is a difficulty with the tragic perspective if it is deployed too freely as a vehicle for absolutism – and I think here of the challenges posed to ‘Niebuhrian realism’ by John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas. To say that certain actions – the termination of a human life, the manufacture and acquisition of weapons of mass destruction – have a certain quality to them which no consideration of complex motivation will remove is in one way to question the appeal to tragic necessity, and in another to

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push the tragic even further. It is to say that some acts objectively damage a society or a person, whatever the constraint or the motive. The instinct behind the language of ‘karma’ is not wholly misplaced, to the extent that it reminds us of the accumulated effect of decisions, taken in good faith or bad.

Of course we believe as Christians that we are forgiven, unconditionally; we are not required to believe that this simply removes the effect of sin and the need for growth and healing. To speak of an absolute wrong is not to speak of evil intent, let alone unforgivable sin, only to acknowledge that some acts diminish the spirit’s wholeness, not because they are acts of a free and corrupt will, but because they are what they are. I think that Richard Harries would agree in principle, but would be more economical in practice than some in identifying what they might be, because of his vivid sense of the obscurity of so much of our action and decision-making. For those of us who might be less reticent, though, the motive is not a desire to escape the actual complexities of human decision so much as an anxiety that these complexities should not blind us to the possibility of irreversible human damage – not merely making a wrong decision that merits censure, but making a difference to the moral and spiritual climate which endangers its quality or health.

There is a further point worth pondering. Recent developments in Christian ethics and theology of the sort I have mentioned (Milbank and Hauerwas) assume that the context of all Christian ethical reflection is the Church and its governing narratives. To put it in relation to the discussion in the last few paragraphs, those who are wary of overprivileging the tragic will argue that in a world where decisions, even made in good faith, may objectively hurt the soul or the city, the distinctively theological contribution is to point to the graciously given reality of a community in which such hurts may be healed as human relations are irreversibly altered. The chains of human connection which guarantee damage can be reworked by grace into chains of gift and mutual nurture: Christian ethics is about the Body of Christ. To the Murdochian question, this style of theology would answer that God is to be found not in moments of accentuated seriousness about one’s spiritual integrity but in the community of those who trust God and each other because of the recital of certain events which are believed to alter the possibilities of action. When all due homage has been paid to the fact that, for many, the moment when the question of the spirit’s wholeness is posed is the moment when language about God becomes intelligible and immediate, it remains the case that wholeness is learned and nourished through a set of shared practices and relationships, with a clear historical and social focus.

All this is beginning to sound like the stand-off between religion and spirituality which, we are regularly told, characterises our cultural situation: on the one hand, the unwelcome specifics of a story and a community; on the other, the sense of a depth in human awareness not catered for or contained by ordinary linear and functional there are some dangerously story has no point of enga experience; the awareness some kind to make it n community can in some ci native to the riches of hum divorced from hard ques between persons and withi

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Recent developments in mentioned (Milbank and in ethical reflection is the attention to the discussion in privileging the tragic will in good faith, may objectionable contribution is to in which such hurts may ed. The chains of humanized by grace into chains of the Body of Christ. To the answer that God is to be about one's spiritual and each other because to alter the possibilities of fact that, for many, the is posed is the moment immediate, it remains the a set of shared practices is central religion and spiritual our cultural situation: on and a community; on the hiered for or contained by ordinary linear and functional thinking. Put like that, it should be clear that there are some dangerously facile dichotomies lurking in the background. The story has no point of engagement if it fails to illuminate the depth of actual experience; the awareness of 'depth' needs a vocabulary and thus a culture of some kind to make it more than an inarticulate sensation. Story and community can in some circumstances become an arid and oppressive alternative to the riches of human imagination; imaginative intensity can become divorced from hard questions about just and sustainable relationships between persons and within a social order.

When I reflect on years of grateful wrestling with the insights and expertise of Richard Harries, I realize that some of the issues that we debate might be connected with this question of the role of ecclesiology in ethics. What is Richard's doctrine of the Church? He is anything but indifferent to it, to its sacramental theology and practice and its visible good order; does it, though, inform his ethics? Well, not in the way that a Milbank might require, certainly; and I should be grateful to see how he might open up this dimension of his thinking more explicitly. The model of engagement that I have been attributing to him here is one in which there is an inbuilt assumption that the boundaries of the visible church are not easily discernible; identifying dimensions of spiritual seriousness allows for a long series of gradations between commitment and agnosticism. And a large part of the Church of England's tradition has worked with this, and taken for granted that its own credibility lies not in the setting of strict conditions but in the degree of its understanding of and solidarity with the variety of contexts in which people come to recognize a distinctively spiritual challenge.

Yet the spiritual challenge (if we take the New Testament at face value) leads inexorably to issues about the nature and quality of the committed community as a vision and foretaste of God's purpose for humanity, and as a healing environment that begins to deal with the damage which we do to ourselves. A full account of Christian ethics would have a lot to say about this – some of it problematically 'absolutist' on certain matters, I suspect, more anxious than Richard has sometimes been about the stoical acceptance of lesser evils as a tragic feature of a fallible and fallen world.

And when all this has been granted to the narrative and communitarian strand in modern theology, what a thinker like Richard Harries still forces us to confront is that our language about the spiritual community and its eschatological promise may sound very empty set against the reality of a church (Anglican, Roman, or whatever) that is so often repressive of the complexity of human concern and emotion and so often protective of its territory and its teaching in ways that suggest profound underlying anxiety. Appeal to the integrity of the community called together by revelation is, I believe, an essential, a central aspect of witness, but it is a very high-risk strategy when
we look at the actuality of churches in our culture. If we are interested in being audible, let alone credible, we are not going to be able to do our ethics or our theology without some level of engagement with ‘where God would live’ in lives where God’s name and God’s history are utterly alien. Most particularly for a ‘culturally embedded’ church like the Church of England, these issues are not to be hastily and over-tidily resolved. Our church has tried to avoid being either a provider of religious glosses on cultural fashion or a rigorist holiness movement. It has often looked very much like the former; and when individuals or groups attempt something more like the latter, the moral credibility of the church in the eyes of society as a whole has not been helped. But in vigorously tracking the locations of those moments of wondering about the spirit’s wholeness, in a consistent recommendation of humility and self-questioning before God, and in a wholly professional mastery of the bewildering range of information that now surrounds our choices, Richard Harries has guaranteed that one necessary element in the Church’s witness has been maintained. I am very far from alone in wanting to acknowledge this gift with immense gratitude.

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compiled by Michael B.

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