

UNACKNOWLEDGED CONFLICTS

Prayer and Morality

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Introduction

IN THE CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS spiritual climate there is a very strong tendency for ethics and spirituality to mirror the split some people make between religion and spirituality. In this view, spirituality represents one's personal religious experience, a felt sense of connection to God; and religion represents a system of traditions, teachings and moral norms which may even have functioned as an obstacle to an individual's discovering spirituality. In primarily secular societies such as the United Kingdom, in which participation in any formal church may be nominal, this distinction between spirituality and religion offers a linguistic strategy for honouring the spiritual dimension of human experience which can occur apart from any connection to organized religion. While this tendency to create a split between spirituality and moral behaviour is understandable and often appealing, maintaining such a dichotomy may in the end retard full, human spiritual and moral development. It is the integration of personal moral agency into individual spiritual development which enables persons to embody and express their religious vision fully through their commitments and actions in the world.

Adult faith

One way of reflecting on this dichotomy in the experience of an individual is to understand it as a failure to achieve adult faith in the realms both of prayer and personal religious experience and of morality. Achieving such an adult faith is no easy matter, since ethics is itself often distinguished from faith when it emphasizes reason alone as a way of arriving at moral decisions. Thus ethical or moral choices may appear to be unrelated to one's religious or spiritual vision. The technical discussion continues in the field of ethics about the difference faith or belief in Jesus makes in one's ethical perspective.

Further, for those who pray and make moral decisions within the context of Catholic Christianity, the Catholic moral tradition is complex and often difficult to interpret for non-specialists. The transmission of this tradition to the ordinary lay person is often incomplete, leaving the impression that the only available moral choice is to assimilate the officially approved moral norms and to obey the judgements, taught with uncompromising certitude, about the morality of specific actions. Little attention is given to the process of adult moral development, including the obligation to follow one's conscience, to make one's own moral decisions based on an informed conscience, to make an accurate and adequate assessment of the particular situation in question, and to take into consideration one's intentions and motivations, feelings and relationships.¹

Superego and conscience

Only too frequently the moral teaching of the Church has been received in such an unnuanced way that it takes up permanent residence as an inner voice in a person's psyche, indistinguishable from that of the superego. Too often, the claims of conscience, 'the whole person's commitment to values and the judgment one must make in light of the commitment to apply those values'² is hopelessly confused with the tyranny of the superego. This powerful force is based on the internalized 'shoulds' of parents and other authorities (including God) whose approval we fear losing. Transgressions against these 'shoulds' result in guilt or fear often disproportionate to the action contemplated or done.

By contrast, authentic conscience responds to love, committing our freedom to that which we want to do and be. Conscience partners with God who is enabling us or calling us to become more fully ourselves, more free, loving, responsible. Superego confines us to the judgement of external 'authorities' whose wisdom we borrow when we have not yet ourselves become the centre of our own valuing, deciding and judging.³ The process of adult moral development is neither simple nor easy: we have to learn to move from reliance on external authority to a more internal, self-directing process of choosing to do what we perceive to be right, and so wanting to do it ourselves. The voices of external authority remain constant and uncompromising in the public life of the Church. In contrast, very little public teaching or preaching articulates a vision of adult Christians who are competent to make their own moral assessments and choices by taking into account their own particular circumstances, their lived experience of faith and discipleship and the teaching-learning church community. The result, even in

adults who are maturing in their prayer and faith lives, is an often enduring and unrecognized conflict between the superego God they encounter when faced with moral choices and the God they experience in other circumstances: in contemplative prayer, in meditation on the gospel, and as companion in their various callings.

Images of God and personal development

Psychological theories of development suggest that our images of God change in relationship to our psychological development.⁴ These images of God emerge from complex layers of personal experience: parental experiences, religious instruction, worship, and entirely personal elements. At any one time, God's image is that of an internal voice, an expectation, or a picture, both in the realm of prayer and in the realm of behaviour and moral decision-making. One sister I interviewed described her image of God about twenty years prior to the conversation in this way:

Well for me, and I'm not saying that the transition is total, but I stand on that threshold between the pre-Vatican and post-Vatican [church] and my images of God growing up are very different from the images of God now. Those previous images really shaped my own spirituality and my sense of myself and my sense of God.

They were in line with qualities I gave to God in terms of sternness, you know, a disciplinarian. Someone who was very exacting. Almost like someone that I had to prove to, that I had to be on my toes about. And I realize too that much of my images came out of my childhood and my own early experience. My parents, they were models of those images. And religious life didn't help any.

She then went on to talk about experiences of God which altered that image dramatically. The most significant one was her getting angry with God and knowing 'it didn't matter to God'.

I just remember talking out loud to God and saying what I felt and being very relieved that what I expected back from this stern and demanding God isn't what came back. And I remember bursting out laughing. I started to laugh because it surprised me that I did what I did, that I said what I said and that I wasn't struck dead. And it was the beginning of being comfortable.

This incident marked the beginning for her of a more personal and intimate relationship with God which gradually unfolded in her prayer experience during the next twenty years.

I think it was the beginning of seeing God as human. You know. Compassionate . . . Not the stern figure that I had . . . maybe God having a sense of humour. Once that happened, it just gave me a different sense of God. God was somebody now that I could be myself with and that God would accept who this self was. I've gone through a period where, I want to say . . . I've let out this anger toward God. I mean after a while I started to blame him for everything. I mean I really was able to let it all out. And anything that happened I'd scream at God and I'd say I want to punch you out . . . I think even that has gone through a shift. God is not the one who's doing these things. It's more like God is the one who walks with me and to whom these things happen. God is the one . . . who's present and who's with me and supporting me and being sympathetic . . . so that's a whole other shift that has happened. I'll find myself, you know, shaking my fist at God or, I want to say God, you know, give me a break but . . .

This description exemplifies the beginning of this woman's shift from a God image which is almost entirely superego material to an entirely different sense of her self and sense of God. After discovering that getting angry with God did not matter to God, she gradually discovers a God who is both personal and responsive. God might even have a sense of humour. From there she begins to experience a God who is with her, supporting her. No longer is God demanding and stern.

The superego God and the God beyond

John Shea characterizes the divide between adult religious experiencing and adolescent or earlier religious experiencing as the difference between 'the Superego God' and 'the God Beyond'.⁵ In his psychological analysis of this phenomenon, Shea describes a self-and-God phenomenon in which, in the case of the superego God, the self is an incomplete, partially adolescent self relating to its God-image through fettered imaging. This particular God-image has a set of recognizable characteristics, as does the relationship to it. Because the self is partial and the God-image inadequate for an adult sense of self, this image and the self's dependence on it seem to require the sacrifice of some part of the self in order to feel secure. This version of the self-and-God process is confining and requires obedience and conformity.

The experience of the 'God Beyond' is also a self-and-God phenomenon but one in which the self is now an adult self, relating to its God-image in unfettered imaging. Now liberated from the tyranny of the

superego God, the self is free to be itself and to be in relationship with a God in which it can be both fully itself and relate to this sense of God in empathy and love. I cannot in this brief essay fully describe the nuances of both the self and the feeling of the God image in each of these forms of experiencing. I will simply cite Shea's two contrasting lists of characteristics of the 'Superego God' and the 'God Beyond' to demonstrate the internal conflict I observe in many, otherwise adult Christians.

Shea's five characteristics of the 'Superego God' are:

- The Superego God is an Object-Person God;
- The Superego God is a God of Law;
- The Superego God is a God of Belief;
- The Superego God is a God of Dependency and Control;
- The Superego God is a God of the Group.⁶

By contrast the five characteristics of the 'God Beyond' are:

- The God Beyond is a God as Thou;
- The God Beyond is a God of Love;
- The God Beyond is a God of Mystery;
- The God Beyond is a God of Freedom;
- The God Beyond is a God of Community.⁷

The experience of the sister I have described above illustrates how someone may move from the image of the Superego God to the God Beyond. The sister shows how she now feels comfortable being herself, all of her feelings being acceptable in relationship to a God whom she experiences as a personal other and in whose love she trusts and finds freedom.

Faith and moral conflicts

It may also be fairly common that people who have begun to experience God differently in some form of personal prayer or even in a form of nature mysticism may fail to integrate this more adequate image and experience of God with their processes of moral choice. Sin-saturated Christian traditions too easily evoke the superego and its tyrannical God, overwhelming more mature experiences. In other words, the God I experience in prayer may not be at all the same God I experience when I am in the midst of a particular moral conflict.

Persons of faith handle these conflicts in a variety of ways. Often they take the line of least resistance and follow the group norms

whether these are mainstream or counter-cultural. These group norms may be familial, may be the norms taught by one's religious tradition, or may be unconsciously assimilated cultural norms which determine a wide range of behaviour. When an occasion arises in which conflict occurs between the requirements of a specific situation, the values held by the person as reflected in their affective responses, and the assimilated norms themselves, then the person faces the responsibility of becoming a moral agent. Some try to sort through these discordant voices in a purely rational way. Some abort the decision-making process by silencing one or another of the voices, following either cultural norms or moral norms from their religious traditions about particular actions. Others maintain the seeming split between faith – a whole version of life rooted in a particular story of grace and salvation – and the process of moral or ethical choice. In these ways, moral conflicts may not become directly engaged in the process of prayer as they are in the processes of deliberation and reflection. When the process of moral deliberation occurs in a separate compartment from prayer, worship and personal and communal discipleship, the development of a fully adult self and the corresponding experience of the God Beyond in moral issues, as well as in faith and prayer, may not occur appropriately.

In my experience a good example of this failure to achieve a fully adult stance *vis-à-vis* moral choices and one's experience of God in prayer is the persistent 'guilt' and fear many women experienced after making decisions about birth control. In consultations for the US Bishops' pastoral on women, many women admitted that the tension they experienced over these decisions led to their leaving the Church during their child-bearing years while their husbands continued to go to church. Counselling within the sacrament of reconciliation left them confused when confessors tried to help them reflect on their particular situations and seemed to approve the use of contraceptives. Some thought the confessors were erroneous or not good Catholics. The women found it impossible to resolve the conflict between the public voice of the Church asserting a universal moral norm against the use of contraceptives and the assistance confessors tried to offer, because they insufficiently understood the ultimate requirement to follow their own consciences. At the time when they chose to control their pregnancies, these particular women were unable to continue to consider themselves as part of the Church and in a loving relationship with God. Yet they were faith-filled women who returned to church and to full participation in parish life and spiritual renewal once they were relieved of this ongoing moral conflict.

The achievement of personal moral authority by women may be extraordinarily difficult because women have been restricted from exercising authority and power under the conditions of patriarchy, and the moral traditions themselves have failed to take women's experience and moral judgements seriously in their formulations. As their own voices and authentic desires may be the weakest of all competing voices, women may need even more assistance in the process of integration or until they find themselves in a conflict situation in which their own judgement compels them to disobey one or more significant external authorities.⁸ When this is the case, many women frequently find there is no one else or no other authority who agrees with them or who mirrors their assessment of the values involved, because of the androcentric bias of the moral tradition. Even when women achieve moral agency, they are often left feeling unconfirmed and their decisions judged morally inadequate. This is the case because nothing confirms their particular emphases in moral reasoning or their moral agency as a positive development of adult faith and responsibility. This is particularly true in areas related to sexual morality and to medical moral decisions, areas which intimately affect women and which disproportionately affect women in the consequences of these choices. It is noteworthy that the Catholic moral tradition appears to allow less room for differing decisions in the application of moral principles in these matters than in areas of moral decision-making related to economics, social justice or the conduct of war.⁹

The will of God and moral decisions

When women and men of faith do try to engage their moral deliberations in a fully discerning way by integrating their prayer, faith reflection and decision-making, a corollary of their image of God is their image or understanding of the will of God. This sense of God's will may, for many, again simply evoke remnants of the superego God. When a person prays to live and make choices in harmony with God's will (a common procedure in discernment process), God's will may either feel as if it will be in harmony with one's adult will or inherently contradictory to it.

Inadequate images of God remain part of our ongoing experience of preaching and spiritual teaching. Donald Capps points out that in many forms of Christianity there is an assumption that our human wills are inherently in conflict with God's will. The model for this conflict is a child's rebellion against its parents.¹⁰ The resolution of this rebellion is often one of punishment, resulting in the child's will being brought into

submission to the parental will through force. Capps asserts that Jesus' prayers in the 'Our Father' and in the Garden of Gethsemane are often interpreted along the lines of this model, ignoring the intimacy of these prayer scenes and the presence of the strengthening angel of consolation. He finally argues there is an 'inverse relationship between the conflict of wills and intimate conversation between parent and child'.¹¹ If such conversation does occur, it is only after the child's will has been broken. The context of Capps' analysis is the difficulty some people experience with intercessory prayer for healing. If one views intercessory prayer as attempting to change God's will, then people who are ill may feel it is fruitless to attempt to change the parental will in a contest of wills where the inevitable end is in breaking the will of the one who prays.

Quite a different view of God's will is offered by the theologian John Wright, and the psychologist Wilki Au. Wright talks about prayer in harmony with God's will, not so much as an experience of conversion in each instance, but as an ongoing opportunity to deepen one's personal intimacy with God.¹² In other words, each time we turn to God in prayer we are expressing our relationship with God and deepening that relationship. For Wright, 'the will of God is dynamic, personal love urging me along the path that leads to him'.¹³ Further, he says, we can assume that in conflict situations in which none of our available choices can avoid causing pain or hurt to someone, there is potentially no one specific choice that is 'God's will'. Wright's view suggests that we discover God's will through our intimacy with God and the exercise of our creative freedom in hard choices. He says when we pray to know and follow God's will in this manner, we are 'praying about an orientation to be followed, and direction to be taken' which goes beyond the specific choice in question.¹⁴

Wilki Au asserts that our image of God and of God's will must support an adult personality and 'not trivialize our human freedom and responsibility'.¹⁵ He suggests it is more helpful to image God not as a rival, 'but as a benevolent presence working in us and with us'.¹⁶ He redescribes God's will, following Ron DelBene and Herb Montgomery, as meaning, in both its Hebrew and Greek roots, God's yearning. Such reinterpretations of God's will are more theologically adequate and may help serve to free the 'fettered' imaging associated with the adolescent self and to assist in ushering in an adult moral self as well as an adult praying self.

Freedom and moral agency

Once a person works through this process of moving from the 'Superego God' to the 'God Beyond', they enter a realm of freedom

and moral agency instead of remaining within the constraints of coerced compliance. It is at this point that two other major themes from ethics or moral theology are important: firstly, creating the self I want to be in partnership with God and community (ethics of character or virtue); secondly, assuming moral agency through informing and following my conscience, deliberating and reasoning about my choices, and choosing by discernment whenever possible (ethics of doing).¹⁷

It seems to me that when the tyranny of the superego is recognized and gradually overcome, moral agency actually becomes possible. Individuals experience an increased measure of freedom in which patterns of moral reasoning and patterns of behaviour which relieved them of personal choice and responsibility can no longer be taken for granted. Some of those same patterns may be chosen freely because the moral norms and judgements of value upon which the norms were based are appropriated by such adults in their new freedom. Other patterns may be rejected on certain occasions because such adults recognize the complexity of human life and the complexity of the situations in which they make moral choices. These adults are able to distinguish authentic moral conscience from 'dictates of conscience' which were solely group norms, and which become relativized when they encounter other groups who adopt completely contrary group norms. In these cases, there may well be a genuine process of individuation taking place in which these persons have gained the freedom to stand alone or against a particular 'culture'. In a work place, for example, the culture may condition employees towards compliance in unethical practices because 'everyone else here does such and such'. As this capacity for moral agency increases, persons may also become capable of making applications different from those taught by external authorities without feeling excessive guilt because they can now trust themselves as moral agents. They recognize that although the application of their values may diverge, the decisions are, nonetheless, based within the same community of shared values as their ecclesial tradition.

In the process and outcomes described above, individuals are assuming responsibility for the persons they are becoming. They are gaining the freedom and courage to shape their own characters, to choose to be the persons they want to become. This becomes possible as decision-making increasingly originates primarily from internal authority, accompanied by a moral vision which harmonizes with people's own deepest desires. When in prayerful intimacy with God, they experience these desires as consonant with God's desires for them,

they become free both to assume moral agency and to stay in relationship with God, even when they may have erred in their choices. Thus, they habitually re-evaluate their choices, taking into account decisions which prove to be obvious mistakes, resulting either from faulty or inadequate reasoning or from self-centredness. They experience themselves as loved enough by God to be able to make mistakes without risking that love, which is now distinguished from approval of a particular action.

Conclusion

When adults begin to assume proper responsibility for their experience in relationship to the 'God Beyond', they also are able to be critical of the received tradition. Just as they understand that individually they can make mistakes and correct them, they can imagine, too, that the collective tradition may be biased in particular ways and itself needs to continue to grow as they do, into a fullness of harmony with the gospel and with changing cultural contexts. With such realizations they are able to live in an imperfect world without an absolute guarantee of total moral certitude on every question. Such adults are not only able to be critically self-reflective: even more importantly, they are able to become increasingly creative in their recognition and accomplishment of the moral good. They begin to recognize situations which might be taken for granted by others, but which make them feel compelled to make alternative choices. Frequently, these choices are in the area of social justice.

At the present time, skilful pastoral practice is required to encourage adult Christians to confront and resolve this often unacknowledged conflict between the God of love and compassion they experience in their contemplative prayer and the sometimes implacable, judgemental, and law-centred God they experience when they deliberate about a concrete moral choice. Spiritual directors, pastoral counsellors, adult religious educators, confessors and preachers would serve this development far better were they able to confront these conflicts within themselves, and imaginatively and accurately convey some sense of the authentic freedom and moral agency to which the gospel invites us.

NOTES

¹ For an excellent and readable treatment of these issues from the perspective of Catholic moral theology see Richard M. Gula, *Reason informed by faith: foundations of Catholic morality* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1989).

² *Ibid.*, p 131.

³ See Gula, 'Conscience', pp 123–162 in *Reason informed by faith*, for a very helpful description of superego elements in moral decisions contrasted with genuine conscience. John W. Glaser's important article, 'Conscience and Superego: a key distinction' in *Theological Studies* 32 (1971), pp 30–47, remains extremely valuable.

⁴ See Paul J. Philibert, 'Diabolic and symbolic images of God' in *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 6 (February 1985), pp 87–101, for one version of these correlative images. For women's feminist images of God, see Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the well: feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1988), pp 53–74.

⁵ John J. Shea, 'The Superego God' in *Pastoral Psychology* 43 (1995), pp 331–351, and 'The God Beyond' in *Pastoral Psychology* 43 (1995), pp 411–431.

⁶ 'The God Beyond', p 412.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 421.

⁸ Carol Gilligan, *In a different voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) did the ground-breaking work in demonstrating many of these differences. See also Denise Lardner Carmody, *Virtuous woman: reflections on Christian feminist ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), for a Catholic assessment of feminist ethics in the ten years since Gilligan's book.

⁹ Gula, p 237.

¹⁰ Donald Capps, 'Praying in our own behalf: toward the revitalization of petitionary prayer' in *Second Opinion* 19 (July 1993), pp 21–39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 30.

¹² John H. Wright, *A theology of Christian prayer* (New York: Pueblo, 1979), p 80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Wilki Au, *By way of the heart* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1989), p 66.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 67.

¹⁷ See Tad Dunne, 'The praxis of deliberation' in *Spiritual mentoring: guiding people through the Spiritual Exercises to life decisions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), pp 147–176, for a helpful way of describing this process for either pastoral care or spiritual direction situations.