

Distorting Dualisms associated with the '*Either/Or*' theological paradigm

Versus

The creative paradoxes and tensions of the '*Both/And*' theological paradigm

Suggestive Quotations

"She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to *share* God, not find God."

(Alice Walker: The colour Purple, p.165)

"I must love the questions
themselves
as Rilke said
Like locked rooms
full of treasure
to which my blind
and groping key
does not yet fit.
and await the answers
as unsealed
letters
mailed with dubious intent
and written in a very foreign
tongue."

(Alice Walker :Reassurance)

"God is at work making his world whole. That, finally is what we gain from the rediscovery of the Celtic tradition. The interrelatedness and the interconnectedness of all things has been an underlying theme of this book. Everything, all those dualities of heart and mind, of time and eternity, of East and West, of pagan and Christian, of the inner and the outer all come under the sway of a creator God whose all inclusive love allows everything the freedom to be itself and yet also brings all together into one whole. A world made whole, a world in which the divides go down, and the barriers are crossed, becomes a world which integrates and heals. This is not a matter of

philosophical speculation: It is something which is lived out – for the most part totally unselfconsciously. The barriers between this world and the next simply fall away naturally....”

“The expanding horizon of divine belonging is the context in which revelation takes place: all creatures are invited to respond, to engage in the co creative task of being and becoming. All life forms have unique roles in this process, the primary focus of which is creation itself rather than formal religion.”

(Diarmuid O’Murchu: Quantum Theology p210)

“Such transformative metanoia is both personal and social. It cannot be fulfilled simply as an individual journey, although some individuals seem to accomplish a remarkable depth of soul, of inward tranquillity and kindness to others in the midst of hostile relationships. A sin is not a ‘Something’, a bad ‘part’ of ourselves, but distorted relationships, so metanoia or soul making is essentially a journey of transformed relationships, relationships to oneself, to one’s immediate community, of society and of culture, finally, a transformation of our relationships to all creation, to animals and plants, air soil and water. Reconciliation with God is within this whole process of transformation and reconciliation with others. It is what biblical tradition calls the ‘Reign of God’ “

(Rosemary R. Ruether: Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism p.75)

Reflections

1. The so called Gnostic documents, discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, and other literature from the first two millennia of the early Christian communities open us up to the variety and diversity of community responses – not to only to memories of the Jesus tradition but, among others, the question of God and the problem of transcendence/immanence. These responses related to the cultural context in which they were conceived and subsequently impinged on the social life and practice of the diverse communities.
2. It is said that it is the victors who write history – the same is true of theology. Much of the diversity and variety of response was subsequently lost as the ‘orthodox’ response became dominant. This is, perhaps, the first duality to be overcome – the anachronistic duality of ‘Orthodox/Heretical’. Since Vatican 11 we have become more aware of this dangerous duality in our dealings with other faith communities but it still hangs around.
3. Conflicting views abound on the question of Church, priesthood and ministry, the individuality of local churches, the role of the laity, hierarchical clericalism, the ordination of women and much more. Positions often become entrenched and, instead of dialogue, we have assertion and counter assertion, claim and counter claim. It would seem to be necessary to pursue the discussion at a much deeper level, looking at what has shaped the present status quo and at what is the basis for suggested changes and developments. The present insurmountable

crisis that faces the church as regards ministry is certainly a demand for action that cannot be denied but what should base and shape that action?

4. The opening quotations are intended to offer an insight into how such matters as the rediscovery of Celtic spirituality, the dialogue between theology and the new paradigms of science and the burgeoning output of feminist theologies are pushing us into new(?) ways of approaching the theological task. We are less confident of old certitudes, much readier to stay with and be challenged by the questions – not so desperate for answers. More importantly we are moved away from distorting dualisms which see everything in terms of ‘Either/Or’. Experience of life is our starting point where, consciously or unconsciously, we are aware of the ‘Whole’, of the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all of creation and our creative imaginations are challenged by the paradoxes and tensions which require a ‘Both/And’ approach.
5. In dealing with the God question there is a very basic paradox – ‘God is immanent, God is transcendent’. So called mainstream orthodox approaches, while not denying the immanence of God, have focussed on the side of transcendence – the images of God as Lord, Creator, King, all powerful, unchanging. No doubt the hierarchical, imperial cultures of the early centuries led to the development of and focus on such images. Thereafter, such an imaging of God would be the theological base that would reinforce compatible life style choices and ritual practices in the communities. A ‘Both/and’ approach, taken seriously, sends us looking for metaphors much more compatible with the culture and society of our age and may even be moving us, while not denying transcendence, to focus more on immanence. On analogy with the rejection of the soul(spirit)/body dualism in anthropological terms and our tendency to think of body and soul as two aspects of a unitary reality which is a human being some theologians have been led to explore the metaphor of the world as God’s body. The primary focus is now creation and creation in its being and becoming, along with the role of all creatures who are invited to cooperate in this co-creative task of being and becoming – that is the context in which revelation takes place.
6. Perhaps a list of some of the abounding dualisms might help us, in our discussions, to focus on those that impinge on the questions of church, ministries and priesthood which have been our main areas of searching over the years:

- Right and wrong – Good and evil. These are not two warring aspects but complementary aspects of life that must be dealt with.
- Earth and Heaven. Theology must start with our experience of the universe in which we live.
- God and humankind. All our theological thinking must be incarnational. Jesus may be a special manifestation of the immanence of God in creation but that is not a unique one off event.
- Spirit/Body – We have spiritualised our understanding of redemption, the kingdom of God and eschatologised it into a future out there.
- Human/Animal – We are all ‘Dust of the stars’, each evolutionary step being inclusive of all that went before (nothing is left behind). Our anthropocentric hierarchical approach has had and is having such disastrous consequences for our universe.
- Sacred/Secular – I am content with the statement of Shug in *The Colour Purple* that we come to church to *share* God, not to find God.
- Individual/Community – Certainly the hierarchical, clerical church has focussed too much on the priestly vocation of the individual and lost sight of the community basis of priesthood.
- Literal/Metaphorical – That dualism almost seems to say ‘Real/Unreal’ whereas every metaphor gives us some grasp on aspects of reality.
- Science/Religion – both search out truth and in both ultimate truth lies in the process of seeking, searching, experimenting and discovering. Both are born out of story which grips our imagination and invites us to imagine other possibilities beyond our simplistic dualisms.