

# ***Beyond Alienation: A Personal View***

*Sean O'Conaill*

## **Making Contact**

I would never have heard of OCN had I not chosen to respond to an article written by Canon Hilary Wakeman for the *Rite & Reason* column in the Irish Times in December 2003. Arguing that the Creed had become an impediment and source of alienation for many moderns, it summarised the theme of her book *'Saving Christianity'*, which I subsequently reviewed for *Doctrine and Life*, a Catholic journal published by the Irish Dominicans.

There I expressed the view that so much of what seemed to me to be foundational to the faith of so many Christians had seemingly been discarded by Hilary that I could not see that there was enough remaining to revitalise the Christian tradition in a recognisable form.

However, Hilary and I were already in contact, as her e-mail address had accompanied the *Rite and Reason* article – and that contact has been maintained. Recognising that OCN is not a 'Church' or even a movement with common aims, but (at this stage anyway) simply a 'conversation of the alienated', I have come to value greatly the experience of very different Christian perspectives.

## **Catholic Alienation**

As an Irish Catholic who came to intellectual maturity in the 1960s, the era of Vatican II, my preoccupations tend to be very different from those motivating Hilary and others in OCN. I feel far less threatened and oppressed by a Christian fundamentalism of the kind that wants to interpret Genesis literally than by a paternalistic Catholic clericalism that has not only denied to lay people the adult role envisaged by Vatican II – but had (as we all knew by 1994) knowingly endangered children. Even as a schoolboy I had been taught that evolutionary theory and Christian belief were compatible, so my general outlook has always been one of supposing that somehow the apparent incompatibilities of modern science and the Creed could be reconciled.

This outlook was undoubtedly strengthened by occasional encounters with good theology. These led me to a conviction that orthodoxy is less a straightjacket than a loose-fitting garment that does not bind us indissolubly to unsatisfactory answers to key questions. For example, it is simply not true that orthodoxy commits us to the 'satisfaction' theory of atonement (the mediaeval theory that - at its worst - holds that 'the Father' could not take his own advice on the importance of forgiveness and wanted Jesus to die to mollify his dissatisfaction with humankind). The Gospel of John and the writings of Abelard are enough to prove otherwise, stressing as they do the preeminence of divine love in the entire scheme of salvation. I am not impressed by oversimplifications that tend towards a caricature of traditional Christian faith (the more easily to demolish it) - because I know that Christian theologians within the framework of orthodoxy have always been in continuing conversation about issues of that kind.

I have also had a personal experience, within my own church, of the 'saving' power of the Gospels - an experience that has 'grounded' me ever since and set me upon a second career as a writer and commentator on the dual crisis of western Christianity and western

civilisation. Convinced that the faith (if not the cosmology) of evangelical Christianity - at its best - is vital for the resolution of both crises, I am wary of a reductionist approach to Christian reform. By that I mean an approach that begins and ends with disbelief in the 'Abba' that Jesus certainly believed in - an entity separate from our imaginings and capable of deep empathy and sympathy with, and transformation of, every human person – and therefore of the 'human condition' as well.

### **Clericalism**

Maybe the way to put this is to say that the Catholic fundamentalism I have experienced has more to do with maintaining the respective roles of clergy and people as defined by the Council of Trent and Pope Pius X than with maintaining a literalist approach to scripture or the satisfaction theory of atonement. A brief quote from Pius X may illustrate:

*This church is in essence an unequal society, that is to say a society comprising two categories of persons, the shepherd and the flock.... These categories are so distinct that the right and authority necessary for promoting and guiding all the members toward the goal of society reside only in the pastoral body; as to the multitude, its sole duty is that of allowing itself to be led and of following its pastors as a docile flock. ('Vehementer Nos', 1906)*

This was the model of church idealised by the leading Irish Catholic churchmen of my youth – most notably Archbishop John Charles McQuaid of Dublin. His influence, reinforced by that of Bishop Michael Brown of Galway, was sufficient to sabotage the application of the very different ecclesiology of Vatican II in Ireland, and to retard the development of the Catholic church here ever since. The 'turn to the right' that followed in the international Catholic Church after the birth control encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 has tended to perpetuate this inertia.

If I have a particular 'beef' then, this 'beef' is Catholic 'clericalism' as described above. Yet I have also an abiding interest also in the schism that developed in the modern world between the Christian tradition and the secular world-view. My conviction is that there is a very close connection between the rise of Irish (and European) secularism and the retention of a clericalist and elitist model of church – and that it is this phenomenon of clericalism that has been exposed as the Achilles' heel of Irish Catholicism by the clerical child sexual abuse scandals that began in 1994.

(To explain, the ideology of clericalism rested heavily upon the mystique of a supposedly impeccably celibate clerical elite. That mystique was hopelessly unable to survive the exposure of the fact that church leaders had sought to preserve it at the expense of abused Catholic children and their families - and secularism, as a 'walking away' from clergies of all kinds, has gathered momentum in Ireland as a result.)

These events weakened also, however, the very doctrinal positions on the sexual conduct of lay people that the 'turn to the right' in Catholicism in 1968 had sought to impose – so it is not going too far to say that Catholic alienation in Ireland has far less to do with biblical literalism than with a clerical emphasis upon a sexual code that has been exposed as deeply hypocritical and even dangerous – in that it prevented the clerical church from absorbing even the fact of the deep psychological and spiritual damage done to children by clerical child sexual abuse.

That is not to say there are no problems in explaining traditional Christian beliefs (e.g. in the 'saving' power of the life, teachings and death of Jesus of Nazareth) to young Irish people whose faith tradition and educational formation is Catholic. While Ireland has been experiencing the child abuse crisis it has also undergone the final stages of the experience known as modernisation, involving a deluge of information and attitudes inimical to traditional religious faith, as well as profound economic and cultural change. This means that the OCN emphasis upon updating Christian beliefs and attitudes to take account of the revelations of modern science and biblical scholarship is also very relevant to the needs of Irish Catholicism.

### **Where Next?**

So, after we have shared our various experiences of alienation, where should we go next? Mine will be far from the only voice on this, but others may find it helpful if I sketch a personal hope and outlook on this, and where exactly I am 'coming from'.

To explain my attitude to 'salvation', I came to a deep Christian faith by what may be an untypical route. As a teacher of secular history and current affairs in a Catholic grammar school I was, by the early 1990s, losing rapidly the optimism that a teacher of children needs to be upbeat about the future of the planet.

I had arrived in Northern Ireland in the mid 1960s in an extraordinarily optimistic frame of mind, and this was reflected back by the O'Neill/Lemass-led climate of rapprochement between the political tribes on this island. I needn't elaborate on the disappointment that followed from 1969 - the year I got married and moved to Coleraine.

Already in 1968 *Humanae Vitae* had also happened, polarising my church around the issue of contraception. During the 1970s and 1980s it gradually became clear that Catholic episcopal appointments in Ireland were confined to strict adherents of that encyclical - with the result that some of the most talented men in the Irish Catholic church were never to be considered for high office. This meant in turn that the reforms mooted in the Vatican II documents - which had always been unpopular with Irish Catholic conservatives - were never put into effect.

1989 was undoubtedly another euphoric year internationally, with the fall of the Berlin wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, the early failures of the free enterprise economic model in eastern Europe had created a very uncertain, and, to my eyes (remembering the 1930s) a very dangerous situation there. I remember vividly the fear that under demagogues like Zhirinovsky a new 'national socialism' might emerge, this time with a finger on the nuclear button.

By this time also, of course, teachers were well alerted to the gathering environmental crisis - while problems of global poverty and injustice - especially in Africa - were dominating the news. And Islamic fundamentalism was another problematic addition to the mix.

### **Personal Crisis**

By 1994, with the paramilitary war of attrition also grinding on in Northern Ireland, and the international situation becoming increasingly hard to read, I was under increasing personal



stress. My duties in school were heavily administrative, while my mind was increasingly taxed by the problem of reading the future of the young people I was teaching, as well as the future of my own children. The new curricular pressures imposed in the wake of the Thatcher era were an added frustration: every few years, it seemed, the political merry-go-round would produce yet another jargon-based solution to every educational problem under the sun.

And increasing that pressure since 1983 was my increasing use of computer media to gather information on all of these issues, and to file it away in retrievable form.

Then one day in 1994, my youngest son, aged 14, told me candidly "I don't believe in all this Jesus stuff, and most of my class don't either!"

It was great, of course, that he felt free to be honest. But his honesty faced me with my own inability to explain why exactly I felt that Christianity was somehow vital to the present and the future - a precious inheritance rather than an embarrassing relic of a prescientific culture. What was it exactly that was worth preserving?

My problem, I suppose, was that the Gospel world I could identify with in my best experiences of liturgy, bible reading and theology, was still dissociated from the late twentieth century world I was teaching about - and often these worlds even seemed to need different languages. What exactly did these worlds have in common?

Totally stuck, I tried prayer, of a very personal kind. I found as always that the emotional release this gave not did not seem to find any reciprocal response.

Yet within days I began to notice something about the various news stories I was processing. There seemed to be a pattern to most of the problems that interested me.

### **Pattern**

For example, global economic injustice had mostly to do with western over-expenditure on luxury consumer goods in an increasingly 'style' conscious society. The growing environmental crisis was clearly linked with this.

There also seemed to be a connection with the school shootings by then occurring in US high schools. As theatres of competition, schools were already familiar to me as potential dog-fighting pits - and all competition arises out of a struggle for status, a struggle to avoid shame.

And wasn't politics like that also? Wasn't it the incessant struggle for political status that turned education into a political football, the bane of every teacher's existence? And hadn't the *Cold War* been motivated by the same urge?

Teaching history of all eras I was also very familiar with the rise of Hitler and Nazism - and its origins in the deep humiliation experienced by Germany in the period 1918-24. The desire to avoid military humiliation can also initiate a contrary movement to avoid it at all costs - a tendency captured and led by a man whose early experiences of personal humiliation had begun with the indifference of his father, and had progressed to rejection as an Art student and the life of a down-and-out in Vienna.

And hadn't it been the long experience of humiliation of an underclass that had led to the explosion of 1969 in Northern Ireland. And wasn't the continuing paramilitary war also a struggle on both sides to avoid 'coming second' in a struggle for sociopolitical status? Isn't that what the present strange 'choreography' of Sinn Fein and the DPP is all about also?

Remembering that an obsession with 'style' has also to do with 'what others think of me' I began to frame a theory of what had always been wrong with the world. "Everybody climbs!" - that was my initial formulation. I progressed from there to interpreting the typical human success story as an 'upward journey' driven by a desire for admiration and acclaim, as well as by a desire to avoid the opposite of that - shame. And I concluded that all social hierarchies arise out of this also.

And it was as the antithesis of this that I began to interpret the story we read in the Gospels - a story that seemed from the beginning to court disaster and humiliation.

### **Christianity and Power**

I should also say at this point that another of the 'beefs' I had had with my church was its long historical association with abuses of power. Suspecting that the alliance that had begun with the Roman empire in the fourth century had been a disastrous mistake, and remembering that Jesus was the first to utter the possibility of a disjunction between God and Caesar, I asked myself one night if that couldn't have been a key component of the decision in Gethsemane - the rejection of the sword, and of the political power it symbolised.

Instantly I became totally convinced that this was so - and have never since doubted it. Since 1994 that has been the keystone of everything I have written. Involving me in a repudiation of the many centuries of 'Christendom' as a failure to grasp the Christian call to powerlessness and vulnerability, this has also meant that I have been a severe critic of the aristocratic culture that also seems to drive so many of the Catholic hierarchy, and to isolate most of our own bishops from the people of modern Ireland.

I have taken this long to get to this point, because it is against this background that I interpret the Creed. Knowing well that particular verbal formulations arise out of a vertical model of the physical universe that we can no longer suppose exists, I nevertheless accept the creeds - because they tell for me a story of ever enduring importance - of a human journey that reverses the normal 'flight from shame' - thereby undermining all of the pyramids of esteem that we humans nevertheless seek to build. To reject this story 'in toto' because of a fastidious fixation with physical cosmology would - it seems to me - be both foolish and an exercise in radical discontinuity with all that has been best in the Christian tradition.

### **A Moral Universe?**

This was what I meant when I once suggested to Hilary that we should look to the affirmations of the Creed as belonging not to the dimensions that science can easily study, but to another dimension that is none-the-less real: a moral dimension, a dimension in which there is indeed both good and evil, and a tension between the two. Our typical 'upward journey', which even clergy make, is constantly challenged and corrected by reflection upon a journey that went in the opposite direction.

Why it did so - even if it is a complete fiction - is very mysterious - because the whole canon of western literature sets out to define heroism in different terms - in terms, that is, of 'success'. Because it also reveals by stark contrast the 'upward journey' that is far more typical, it is profoundly revelatory of the sources of human folly. My own conviction is that this revelation originates with a creative and moral force or entity that is transcendent, existing independently of any human consciousness - but capable of communicating itself to human consciousness. It is this entity, I believe, that guided and 'inspired' the prophetic tradition of Israel, culminating in Jesus of Nazareth.

It follows from this that I do not see 'salvation' as something primarily to do with a future life, but as having everything to do with our communal and individual present. We are headed for environmental, climatic and geopolitical crises of a magnitude that may well test future generations more severely than any that have happened so far - but these will also reveal to us ever more clearly that our tendency toward vanity - a tendency to feel entitled to the admiration of others - lies at the root of most of those crises.

The root of our problems, it seems to me, is self-consciousness. To be self-conscious is also to be conscious of being observed - and this has a profound effect upon our 'being'. The 'Wannabes' of today - the adolescents who fixate on celebrities - are fascinated by those who have apparently escaped their own fate - a deep-seated shame or lack of self-esteem. The realisation that on the contrary they are lovable, and loved, is an experience I have noted far too often in the context of Christian evangelical events to doubt. It is the 'kingdom of God' experience - the experience that God does not condemn or shame us: we do this to one another.

The problem is that usually those who experience this do not know how to reinterpret 'the world' of competing desire - or perceive the danger that it can again envelope them in a different form. Evangelical Christianity - so often in competition (or so it supposes) with all other Christian communities - again becomes combative and even paranoid about the secular worldview. Seeing only part of what has been revealed - that God loves *them* - evangelicals can far too easily suppose that those who differ from them are necessarily damned.

However, if they continue to grow in insight, they may be more fortunate in the end than those who have never known any compelling need to pray or to intuit a supra-physical reality - and who cannot therefore trust to a power of goodness beyond themselves. The encounter with it is deeply mind-altering, involving as it does the discovery of one's own vanity and the pain it may have wrought on others. But the overwhelming experience is one of joyful surprise: at the fact that we never did succeed in exhausting the compassion and mercy of the one whom Jesus knew as 'Abba'.

For in the end, I believe, it is primarily God who 'atones' - for the burden s/he places upon us as mites encountering the vastness of creation - and the temptation this also exposes us to - to desire to be 'as Gods', sharing their invulnerability. We have no need to do that - for s/he is small enough now to be considered non-existent - and 'becoming small' is what life must now be all about.

### **The Need to Bind**

One last point. 'Religion' has always had to do with 'binding' a community - somehow involving everyone in a sense of shared responsibility and commitment. The modern critical

mind that finds 'organised religion' dubious is right to be critical - but needs to notice that by itself the critical mind cannot 'bind'. Indeed, it is often involved in a contrary process - a competition for ownership of the truth - and this typically leads to more dissonance, more conflict, than togetherness. It follows that we need above all to find a language that can bind - without depriving anyone of freedom. When Jesus told us, not to 'be right', but to love, I feel certain he was asking us not to prioritise the things we know, or think we know, but to love even those who differ from us. If we expand this injunction to all of the human family - including the fundamentalists and the atheists - we can't, I feel, be wrong - and we can help to bind a world that is so rapidly tending in the opposite direction.

I believe I experience that order of priorities in OCN, and so I am happy to belong.