The Parish, the Bible and Everything Else: Scripture and Our Common Quest to Make Sense

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A metaphor is implied when one speaks of a person of "culture", a "cultivated" person. The word "culture" here derives from agriculture, the tilling and planting of the soil to yield a harvest of nourishing things.[1]

Culture in this broad sense means simply, as Jacques Barzun defines it, "the interests and abilities acquired by taking thought." Any thoughtful person is potentially a person of culture. Culture is not bookish or remote, not the province of the idle, the rich or the overeducated. On the contrary, it is essential to a meaningful life.

The Church clearly has a mission in the world of culture in the broad sense of 'taking thought' about things that matter. But such discussion often neglects the fact that most adult Mass-goers commonly relate to the Church through their parish. Since parish life is how most people experience the Church, one can legitimately ask what it is about parishes that touches culture. In what way do they carry on as communities, not only of the heart and spirit, but also of the mind?

How do laity work in the world, as *Gaudium et Spes* mandated them? How do parish priests "interpret the signs of the times" as the *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests* directs?[2] Paul VI said throughout *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that we must pay attention to the culture in which we immerse ourselves and not react to it passively but creatively.[3] How, at the broadest level?

Whatever the activity of the parish, whatever the spirituality of the laity and priests there, Scripture is a part of their experience. From the homily to the classroom, to sacramental preparation and celebration—in all those moments in which a parish is active and helping to form culture, Scripture is proclaimed.

Scripture provides a medium through which we can contribute to culture. Indeed, society needs the voice of Scripture, perhaps more now than ever. Its ancient view of things far from being outdated is a balance of what is unbalanced in our own patterns of modern thought and behaviour, a synthesis of elements of meaning that we do not easily hold

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two competing world-views but between two different ways of thinking, one of which is inimical to world-views of any kind. "There is not merely a clash of opposing convictions but a difference in how the two sides seek meaning."

It is perhaps a foolhardy suggestion that the Bible is exactly what can help us bridge this gap between the world view of faith and post-modern secularism. The Bible, this uncompromising theocentric vision of life from the beginning of creation by God to the end, the re-creation in Christ, can help us to dialogue respectfully and humbly with a society that knows less and less of even its most quoted passages.

So far I have referred to only one aspect of Scripture, its insistence on divine absolutes. The genius of the Bible, if one may so refer to an inspired document, is that it unites the oracular and the existential, the godly truth and the humanly concerned.[8] (The Bible is after all the only ancient document that speaks favourably of the poor.)

I suggest that in at least two polar relations or matrices of response the Bible proclaims God's sovereignty while also validating frail human experience. Its combination of the divine and human is where faith and culture can fruitfully meet.

The first pole is between endurance and change. In the range of its pages and books, the Bible embraces two very human desires in the face of suffering and injustice. The first is the Exodus model of change.

For Frye, the revelatory content of the Bible progresses dialectically, as the Christian Bible proceeds from the beginning to the end of its story. The first main phase is creation; the second is revolution or exodus. The suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt and Moses' encounter with the God of the burning bush introduce a revolutionary quality into the Biblical tradition, and its characteristics have persisted through Christianity, through Islam, and survived with little essential alteration in Marxism.[9] The divine mandate to overthrow the established order of Pharaoh's House brings into human affairs a space for change that honours justice as a virtue to be striven for. The last type of revelation is the apocalyptic, where what is symbolized as the destruction of the order of nature is the passing of the way of seeing that order that keeps humanity confined to the world of time and history as we know them. This 'final beginning' is what the Scripture is intended to achieve.

In this apocalyptic stage the creator-creature, divine-human antithetical tension has ceased to exist, and the sense of the transcendent person and the split of subject and object no longer limit our vision.

At the end of the Book of Revelation, with such phrases as "I make all things new (21:5) and the promise of a new heaven and earth, we reach the antitype of all antitypes, the real beginning of light and sound

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of which the first word of the Bible is the type: *bereshît*—"in the beginning".[10]

These types of revolutionary and cosmic change run however alongside another model of human experience: the endurance of what cannot be changed.

Scripture also knows the reality of powerlessness in a world without miracles. After the Return from the Exile of 586 BC, the Israelites suffered a loss of influence and in Ezra-Nehemiah sought to reconstitute the meaning of their community after a time of turmoil. Their return was an anti-Exodus, a coming out of enslavement but not to conquer a land. Rather they returned as a conquered people. Without heroic leaders like Moses or Joshua, with few prophets and they never vocal in the text, the people endured Persian occupation and gave new grounding to their faith.

The Wisdom tradition of Qohelet and Ben Sira also proclaims the possibility of endurance in faith where change is not just politically but existentially impossible. Whereas Ezra-Nehemiah centres life in the eternal temple and the law, for these sages nothing is certain or permanent in the world, nothing either real or unreal: "All is vanity" (Qo 1:2). Their secret is detachment without withdrawal.

Change or immutability, political overthrow or persistent quiet fidelity: the issue is not that the Church must present both or either of these models to the world through our parishes. It is that their coexistence shows Scripture to be diverse within itself, just as our culture is. The flexibility of the Bible is, however, the freedom of the Spirit not any ideology of infinite tolerance.

As another example, the Bible engages the imagination. The metaphors of the psalms, Ezekiel's exuberant description of the New Jerusalem, the symbolic gestures of the prophets, the parables of Jesus: all these call on the human imagination as the capacity we have to make the material an image of the immaterial or spiritual. Simone Weil wrote that the imagination works continually to stop up the gaps by which grace could slip away.

But counterbalanced with the Bible as an imaginative experience is its relentless materiality. The Bible refuses to relinquish its attention to the details of Israel's life. For all Israel's spiritual heritage, the land is always central: even in Ezekiel's renewed, mystical Israel, there are going to be tribal borders! The relentless stipulations of Israel's worship and law, and the long chapters in Exodus and Leviticus about these minutiae have long signalled to tired readers that Israel will not spiritualize its covenant with God out of all contact with the blood and dust of history, and the unyielding obsession to bring God into the details of day-to-day life. The covenant means Israel cooperates with

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God in sanctifying the everyday, the prose of reality, the laundry of life. Imagination and materiality will not be separated in Scripture.

Change and endurance; imagination and materiality. Other dynamic tensions in Scripture could have been chosen, like that between the individual and the nation, or Walter Brueggemann's vision of Israel's experience as a dynamic of both pain and hope. The point is the same: Scripture is absolute but not unilinear. Scripture need not conform to society and shed its authority to be understandable: it has already within it contrasting dynamics. Scripture is inspired but self-critiquing, insistent but accommodating. It is pluriform but it coheres. The strength of its worldview lies in its contrasts.

The church member who engages Scripture seriously has in it the medium to allow her or him to contribute to culture. Our world view is in many ways vastly different from the secular humanist's but Scripture shows us that the absolute can embrace diversity. Divine truth can be glimpsed through the poor limitations of our human experience.

Our parishes are places where people can be invited to let the Spirit put their fragmented lives together so that they see how their diverse jobs, education, family life, politics and entertainment can cohere into meaning. Scripture gives us a vision of how the parts can fit. It is not a programme, far less a manual of operations. But if we live Scripture seriously and continuously, on its own terms, it can become a habit of thought that eases dialogue, and a forum in which religious and nonreligious ideas can meet.

Scripture is a mirror of the Church's own plurality in the Spirit. It falls to us to cooperate with the Spirit to keep together the ancient association, now lost in our school system, between the love of the truth and the search for God.

About this matrix among truth, God, meaning, plurality and experience, I can find no better statement than that of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the rabbi, poet, inter-faith pioneer and social commentator:[12]

> The Bible is holiness in words.
> The Bible is primarily not man's vision of God
> but God's vision of man.
> The Bible is not man's theology
> but God's anthropology.

1 Jacques Barzun, "Culture High and Dry" in *The Culture We Deserve*, Arthur Krystal, ed. (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989) 3.

2 Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) §34.

3 See especially §20.

4 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York—London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981) 27–28.

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5 Frye 135.
6 Robert S. Boynton, "The Two Tonys", *The New Yorker* (6 October, 1996) 66–74.
7 John C. Gallagher, "Guerilla Warfare: How Shall We Survive the Collapse of Our Enemies?", *Canadian Catholic Review* (February 1996), 8–15.
8 I am simplifying Frye 29 who speaks of *kerygma* as an oracular oratory in two aspects, the metaphorical and the concerned.
9 Frye 114. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
10 Frye 138.
11 *Israel's Praise. Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia 1988).
12 *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology,* ed. S. H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 78.

Appeal for the African Missions

Glossy with the proteins
which the peasants have not got

the fat priests leave their new cars
to don rich robes for pompous ceremonials
before working in air-conditioned offices
resting in air-conditioned rooms

Thin peasants in dowdy rags
are being bullied from tradition's
rituals and dances scraping subsistence
in a good season enduring heat damp
in any season over-hot malarial damp

The few ageing white priests and nuns
stay in reach of the expected rules
of poverty chastity responsibility

The locals say as they lapse
in favour of agnosticism Protestantism
mohammedanism: make no mistake
the former church before our people
tribalism corruption took over

was a real church a good church.

Michael Kelly

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