

Cosmic Gratitude

Tony Windross describes his approach to liturgy.

I can't live with it, and I can't live without it.' Such is the verdict of many people upon traditional religious belief. These are the opening words of *Taking Leave of God*, published 40 years ago this year, which marked the end of Don Cupitt's career in the Church of England, and sowed the seeds for the eventual development of the *Sea of Faith* (SOF) network. Exactly 10 years later, in 1990, Nicky Gumbel took over the running of the *Alpha Course* that had been part of the life of the parish church of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) since 1977, and developed it into a global brand. Gumbel's books fly off the shelves in vast quantities (with his *Questions of Life* notching up over a million copies), whilst Don Cupitt's book sales are a few thousand at most.

In numerical terms, SOF and *Alpha* are light years apart. One struggles for members. The other is a booming, slick, multi-million pound operation. *Alpha* is at the very heart of the Church of England (two thirds of parishes run *Alpha* courses), with many bishops (including the current Archbishop of Canterbury) being themselves graduates of the course, and enthusiastic proponents of it. One is eminently respectable (even *de rigeur*, in populist church circles), the other not to be spoken of in polite ecclesiastical society. And because the theology of each is diametrically opposed to the other, it's no surprise that the members of one are rarely neutral about the ideas of the other. On a personal level I have to confess to an almost visceral hatred of *Alpha* – despite (maybe because of?) its undoubted success. All that confident teaching, all those pre-packaged answers to life's difficult questions, all those certainties (and all against a background of such perfect dentistry).

Is this sour grapes? Is it sheer envy? Is it because their approach to religion is in demand, and the one I'm involved in most certainly isn't? It's never possible to be entirely free of personal agendas and prejudices, but this is surely about something more. With that 'something more' getting to the very heart of the non-realist project that burst (or maybe tiptoed?) onto the scene 40 years ago. And perhaps finding clearest expression in different understandings of (and approaches to) worship.

Lots of people claim to be '*spiritual but not religious*', and whilst that can mean a whole host of things, it often seems to amount to something along

the lines of 'I'm sensitive, but don't go to church'. How much (and what sort of) spiritual activity people who self-describe in this way actually engage in, is a matter of conjecture. But there are also plenty (albeit diminishing numbers) of people who don't have such an apparent aversion to churches, and regularly attend one – because to them/us, being both spiritual *and* religious really *matters*. *Why* and *how* it matters is hard (maybe impossible?) to say – in the same way that it's hard (maybe impossible?) to say why a sonnet or a symphony or a sunset 'matters'. But matter it does – which is why we keep turning up on a Sunday.

And of course, when we go to church – we worship. We confess, we praise, we give thanks. And we do all that through the medium of liturgy, which is what gives the different kinds of collective worship their particular character. Public worship needs liturgy, in the same way that games need rules. Liturgy is what provides structure to such occasions, and whilst it can range from very tight to very loose, it's got to be there, somehow, in some form or another.

It would be astonishing if the kind of liturgy that appealed to HTB enthusiasts also appealed to SOF types – given that each group has such a radically different understanding of God (with the SOF group itself being far more heterogeneous than homogeneous). And what mystifies (or appals) many church members who wouldn't necessarily identify with the HTB movement, is the way that members of SOF are also sometimes active members of congregations (even, on occasion, their vicars!)

What do they/we think they're/we're doing, when it comes to worship? What (or who) are they/we worshipping? How can worship amount to anything other than a charade – if it's not addressed to a personal God? It's a fair question – and any answers are bound to be stumbingly hesitant. And that's because every attempt to describe the (purported) encounter with the divine is (in Val Webb's memorable phrase) '*like catching water in a net*'.

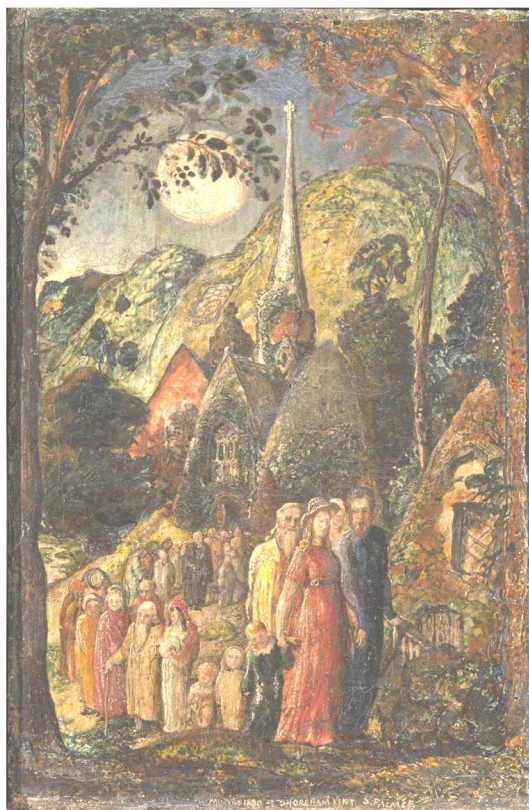
At the beginning of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously observed '*what can be said ... can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence*' (and the book ends with almost identical words). So given the way religion is jam-packed with words (E M Forster's '*poor little talkative Christianity*') the implication is that its subject matter is readily accessible. And this is where the HTB and

SOF understandings of/ approaches to God, come most obviously into conflict.

Those for whom God-talk is relatively unproblematic must find it impossible to understand why others retreat into parables, poetry and silence, in the face of the divine/the sacred. Or that many find it not just banal but positively *offensive* to personify and objectify God. It's why we need recourse to metaphorical notions such as 'feeling something in my heart' (for which I was taken to task in a recent letter in *Sofia*, and about which I remain entirely unrepentant). Such language is obviously not intended to be taken literally – and is an attempt to express something which seems self-evident, but which itself cannot be 'grounded'. It's a *bottom-line moment*, when we *feel* something, and cannot prove or justify it with reference to anything else. Which means, it's where I'm pitching my personal tent.

Worship is of this character – in that it's grappling with/groping towards 'stuff' of the very deepest kind. Unless one is prepared to adopt the breezily-confident dismissal of religion of old-style Logical Positivism (or its New Atheism contemporary equivalent), any attempted engagement with ultimate reality (whatever that might amount to) is bound to be impossibly problematic. Liturgy involves just such an attempt, and whilst much of it does seem to be trying to say the unsayable, if approached in the way we might approach an opera or theatrical performance, it has the potential to transcend the limits of language. Not by giving information otherwise inaccessible to us, but by engaging and enriching us in the way any kind of art has the potential to do.

Worship can be seen as an expression of *Cosmic Gratitude*, and involves steeping ourselves in all sorts of symbols and scriptural stories, so as to allow them to shape our lives. It can never be a spectator sport, demands our entire attention, and depends on a sense of awe and wonder, a sense of our own finitude and transience, together with ongoing amazement that we exist at all. *Cosmic Gratitude* is our response to the sheer delight of being alive. A vivid awareness that it could so easily have been so different – such that we



Coming from Evening Church by Samuel Palmer.
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would not have come into being at all. And if we feel that – we're bound to express it. Which is why Praise is at the heart of so many of the Psalms, finding liturgical form in the *Venite*, the *Te Deum*, the *Benedicite* and the *Jubilate*, which are the canticles of Anglican Morning Prayer.

But honesty demands that we also need to acknowledge the sheer elusiveness of the object of our worship, and unless we're simply going to lapse into 'reverent silence' (the silence of what Kierkegaard called 'the deeply kneeling man') we need the insights of someone like R S Thomas, whose brutal reticence about the rigours of the religious journey make the gurning certainties of aggressive evangelicalism

appear ever more shallow and ridiculous:

*Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left'... '*

In his study of R S Thomas (*Poet of the Hidden God*), D Z Phillips wrote '“God” is nearer “No one” than to “another person far more powerful than ourselves”'. Which finds a ready echo in the words of the Romanian poet Paul Celan:

*No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.*

*Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake
we shall flower.
Towards
you.'*

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