

Projection and Regression in Urban Theology

[On Good Friday, 1984, John Vincent of the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield gave a broadcast talk on Radio Four, entitled "Were you there?" and subtitled, "The Passion of Jesus in the Contemporary City". UTU has subsequently published and circulated the text which forms the basis of these reflections, which probe beneath his words to the unconscious symbols and processes employed.]

The material, resonant and moving, speaks deeply to the predicament of modern urban man. It also appears to reflect the very heart of John Vincent's own religious experience, distilled and condensed over the years. It is these two poles of the personal and the social urban which converge to make this text significant.

John introduces the meditation with a poignant recollection of the time when, in 1949 as a National Serviceman in Northern Ireland, he heard Paul Robeson singing "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" John recounts,

"I remember trembling, tears rolling down my face, as I saw this colossal, noble figure of a black man identifying his suffering and the suffering of his people with the solitary suffering of Jesus Christ."

In that account Robeson himself was depersonalised into some kind of racial symbol. In the experience of the audience he was a colossus though idealisation was not limited to size but extended also to character. He was "noble". If Robeson is described as colossal, then his hearers felt very small in his presence. If Robeson is described as noble, his hearers felt guilty beside him. Robeson is elevated into some kind of massive, idealised, archetypal super-man, a corporate representation of black humanity. Then comes this note of dehumanising distance. Robeson is "a figure of a black man". The wording is full of ambivalence, torn between the attempt to sustain the individual identity of this black man in this body, and the powerful projection focussed into this particular performer as a corporate representative, a figure, a ground, a symbol, almost a work of art, a construct re-presenting the human, yet in itself somehow para-human. It is as if in that distancing, the actual distress and suffering could somehow be denied, sublimated, displaced, focussed onto another without actually being faced in the flesh and blood of the full person in the here-and-now. It is a common enough way of dealing with intolerable levels of anxiety, guilt, fear or retaliatory rage. It is fascinating to perceive this man subject to similar mechanisms of projection and displacement within the NAFFI canteen in Northern Ireland as those focussed much more painfully into the crucified flesh on Golgotha. It is in the crucible of such projected process that the gods are forged.

If we now turn our attention to the second level of projection and identification which was in process we find the "solitary suffering" figure of Jesus Christ being used as the carrier, the focus of the suffering of others. Robeson, individually identifies his own deepest experience of alienation and suffering with that of the lone Christ. At a corporate level, Robeson sums up and places the suffering of the black slave community on the same shoulders of the sinned against and crucified. The experience is fundamentally displaced, disowned, sublimated and distanced. There is that about Good Friday which facilitates precisely that neurotic defence

against the agony of owning the intolerable for ourselves. As John Vincent comments, the events of Good Friday, "have this power to draw people into them". There is an awareness of an experience, so deep, so alienating, so crucifying, so crushing, so unutterably unjust that it cannot be consciously owned. The crucified with the lacerated scalp, whipped back and spear wound, suffering in extremis, serves evocatively as a ground of resonance in relation to which there is that in every person which responds in projective identification. It is that power to act as a focus of common projection which gives to the events of Good Friday precisely the significance which we have come to place in them. So the deeply devastating experience of being and becoming human is denied and distanced, dealt with at arms length across millennia in a symbolic movement which makes the material tolerable in the here-and-now. Certainly John Vincent was caught up in the process. His recollection was of trembling and weeping, as defences against repressed emotion faltered, and those fundamental experiences of terror and loss welled up into consciousness. The old negro spiritual casts the hearer as a bystander at the crucifixion. Vincent's interpretation identifies the hearer with the crucified. Traditional theology has taken and owned corporate guilt for crucifixion. Responsibility here is denied. "They" crucified. Violence and responsibility are themselves disowned and projected into others. Only the experience of the victim, unjustly sinned against, surfaces within the projection. So Vincent comments,

"It is as if people needed somehow this bleak and terrible story of 2, 000 years ago as a way of interpreting their own experiences of bleakness and terror ."

The events of Good Friday, or rather the story of Good Friday as it has come to be told, do indeed meet this fundamental need for a "way of interpreting" the common experience of bleakness and terror. It provides a way of handling the unhandlable, of coping with the uncopable, reifying and distancing the deepest intra-personal traumatic memories. They are projected onto some cosmic screen greatly distanced, and manipulated without responsibility in the fate of another. The supremely archetypal scapegoat recapitulates the experience of abandonment, bleakness, terror and victimisation. The ritualisation of the story-telling limits acceptably the retaliatory rage of the victim against the irrational, unjust environment - the experience of which has become intolerable. The death of the victim and its subsequent reversal serve to focus and then suppress the overwhelming grief, pitched past pitch of grief, associated with this fundamental nucleus of separation anxiety, this heart of bleakness, this contrast between the abandonment of the here-and-now and the enfolded nurture of the dimly remembered there and then.

So it is that at its most evocative the crucifixion seduces projection of the impotently traumatised sufferer, rather than the helplessness of the innocent bystander or the guilt-ridden brutality of the crucifier.

GROUND OF PROJECTION

But what is this common experience of bleakness and terror which gives to Good Friday its power? What is this pressing need for distancing, projection and displacement which generates the irrational tenacity by which religious beliefs are preserved within a society? It was not just the experience of being black, for it is shared by whites. It is not just the experience of urban deprivation, it is shared by rural people. It is not simply a male experience; nor is it simply modern.

There are some clues within the remaining sections of John Vincent's text which can bring some light to bear on this common core of distress against whose conscious recall, authentic ownership and creative catharsis the world religions stand reified. Vincent calls on three sources of evidence. The first, a teenage boy, spoke representatively of what it is to be caught in the inner urban trap.

"Lots of kids today have lost hope. They have so many pressures from above that make them crack. An easy way out is to go on to drugs or alcohol or even violence, but inside they are just desolate, they are lost. They feel crucified by the system. Every day is a struggle which makes them feel everybody is against them. The future is pretty bleak and for some there isn't much to live for ."

The experience of inner city life creates for some people an environmental context, which acts in parallel to the events of Good Friday, as a symbolic carrier for the projection of those deep intrapersonal experiences of traumatic victimisation. It is not to say that the experience of living in the inner city is devastating only in fantasy, but that the experience is held in the collusional double bind between the environmental alienation of the here-and-now and the intrapersonal material denied, repressed, projected and vested in the urban environment. Feelings of acute hopelessness, despair, apathy, the impotence of the infinitesimal impinged within a context of an infinitely powerful system originating deep in the personal unconscious, are triggered by and consequently focussed onto the inner urban environment. It is apparently more tolerable to perpetuate the suffering situation of the inner city, provided it continues to serve its task, like Good Friday, as a projective carrier of material, than to own and cathart the distress which is so deeply repressed and denied.

So this first witness opens his testimony with the loss of hope. There is no exit. Within this futureless trap, pressure is massive and experienced as from above, vectored down on the head, pressing back into the ground. The pressure induces fragmentation, cracking, splits. It is shattering, like the crown of thorns rammed down over the cranium, or the crushing cervix constricting the neonatal skull. The myth is that here there is no way through. This is not birth, it is containment unto death. Defensive reactions are acted out in common as cultural norms: drug taking, alcoholism, anarchic destruction, compulsive diversion of entertainment, anything to deaden the conscious awareness both of the context in which life is being lived and also, and perhaps more fundamentally, of that deep intrapersonal material which living in this context continually evokes. When there is time to listen and to experience what it is to be in this crucible, the existential subjective evidence is of desolation, lostness, crucifixion, a constant life and death struggle in which the odds are pitched massively, unjustly and unevenly in favour of the opposition. If today is intolerable and the future consists of a succession of intolerable tomorrows, then death in some form becomes the preferable solution.

The second group brought to the witness stand by John Vincent is made up of Christian ministers and lay leaders drawn from a particularly deprived urban area. They were asked to "list some of the problems our people are facing". Almost unnoticed right in that first instruction is that stance of disidentification and distancing between "us" and "them". "We" list the problems "they" are facing. It is hardly surprising that the list reads like a set of sociological parameters. The observing "I" is divorced from the suffering "them". Here again, but at a different level, we observe the distancing and displacement of suffering into another. The inner city serves in today's society the same role as the events of Good Friday within the Christian religion. It is the scapegoat onto which the affluent, middle-class,

suburban culture projects its unwanted parts, distances itself from the results, denies all causal responsibility but finds a focus for its guilt-motivated "care". The inner cities are the 'homelands', generated by insidious policies of systemic apartheid within the multi-cultural complexity of post-industrial Britain. The inner cities live in despair that others may enjoy hope. They experience powerlessness while others exert power. Educational and health care deprivation are focussed here so that higher standards of living may be experienced elsewhere. Truly from the perspective of suburban man, by their wounds 'we' are well heeled. It is hard to see how a religion which employs the same fundamental dynamic to deal with the human condition can bring any creatively critical insight to bear on the performance of a social system which generates the inner city phenomena.

We appear to be facing a universal aspect of human being which knows in its depths an experience of terror, abandonment, bleakness, the management of which takes different forms at different points within the social context. So the myth and ritual of Christianity, distilled into its theology, is a cryptic mirror of the dis-ease demonstrated within the dynamic of the social system as a whole and it must be remembered that the inner cities of the British scene are themselves an analogue of those massive sinks of deprivation within the global village.

The third source of evidence which John Vincent brings to bear comes from David Moore of the Bow Mission in East London. David chooses the first person of identification rather than the third person of observation when he says :

"We live in a kind of earthquake zone. People's worlds are continually being shaken, dreams destroyed, hope obliterated."

John Vincent picks up the significant words from that description:

"Earthquake, worlds shaken, dreams destroyed, hope obliterated - all images from that first Good Friday."

Certainly the events of Good Friday contain all those themes and more and it is their presence within that story which makes it precisely the symbol of identification for all those parts of our experience in which we encounter stress, suffering and victimisation beyond bearing. The process appears to be that when we are in a context in which we experience what Frank Lake might well have called 'trans-marginal impingement' we begin unconsciously to act out those almost irretrievable experiences of pre-verbal, infantile helplessness and impingement which lie, buried by pain, in the nucleus of our perinatal experience. As we become caught up socially in regression to the position of a suffering and impotent foetus in the face of the social reality so there is a total abdication from power and responsibility, a loss of hope and an attitude of fundamental dependence for deliverance on the 'powers-that-be', perceived as massive but distant and other. There may be some hope that such powers will be benign and that deliverance might be possible. If experience proves to the contrary the mood shifts into one of counter-dependence in which the ground on which the sufferer depends is perceived as intentionally malign, manipulative, threatening and destructive.

FUNCTION OF FAITH

The role of religion would appear to be to provide an alternative focus for the projection of this regressive material, triggered within the social context, so removing from the realities of the here-and-now the neurotic phantasy projection of the infantile impingement. The religious behaviour does nothing to deal with the fundamental causal problems. There is a re-

distribution of pain, a re-arrangement of the deck-chairs with certain apparent gains in dealing with the present context and the ability to sustain creativity, hope and initiative under stress, but only at the expense of the intensification of the mechanisms of projection, denial and displacement of the fundamentally intolerable core of alienation into the religious field itself. Provided such mechanisms are sufficiently dominant within the culture to be corporately unconscious, they may serve the stability of the social system. If, however, the religious beliefs decay in intensity and the religious myths and rituals no longer serve as effective common carriers of projection, the material re-surfaces. It is little wonder that every move towards the recognition of the death of God is accompanied by fears and myths of moral anarchy and social breakdown. The scapegoating becomes unfocussed and valent, fixing its projection on that element of the immediately experienced world which resonates most deeply with the buried material. The task of the Urban Theology Unit would appear to be the reinforcement of mechanisms of projection and displacement around the person of Jesus and the events of Good Friday in such a way that the dysfunctional effects of this negative material are withdrawn from the experience of people in relation to the inner urban environment. So John Vincent proceeds to speak of "the Passion in people".

"The Passion of Jesus speaks to the city. It speaks also to the individual, wherever he or she is, who goes through the experience of persecution and personal desolation."

There are certain individuals experiencing certain contexts which make them identify with the passion of Jesus. The heartland of religion reaches deeper than that. It is not that the passion speaks to some people in some situations. There is that in every single one of us, buried deep behind complex defences, which identifies projectively with the experience through which Jesus passed on Good Friday. To describe the Gospel as the Gospel to the Poor and Oppressed only is to collude with that deep, common denial of the impoverished, oppressed, victimised parts of each of us.

FAILURE OF FLIGHT

With Vincent's concept of oppression and deprivation limited to the here-and-now context, he continues to make his selection of persons and situations for whom projective identification with the events of Good Friday is appropriate. Such a process appears to collude with the denial in everyone of precisely that alienated, victimised core, the manipulation of defences against which gives religion such dominant power within the social system. So Vincent writes,

"I suppose that now, all over the world, and doubtless for some who listen, life is a living hell, people are 'sore wounded'. They often can't tell anyone. They keep a brave face. But inside it's hell. It's crucifixion. It's Good Friday all over again. Have you ever lived with a living hell? Have you ever lived with a constant crucifixion? Have you known what it is to be eaten into by some utterly unacceptable calamity, some unsuspected wickedness, some hidden betrayal, some prolonged agony? Then you cry :

"Whither shall I go from its presence?
If I ascend into the heavens
it is there
If I descend into the depths
it is there ."

There are, of course, very real experiences of more or less living hell for some persons in some places at some times. These discrete experiences and contexts themselves act as foci of projection for the denied, victimised, cut-off parts of ourselves. Vincent appears to be operating on a level which is quite unconscious of the depths of psychological resonance which the events of Good Friday share in symbolic ground with precisely the conditions of environmental and contextual impingement and deprivation of the modern city.

At that point where reality is experienced as intolerable, Vincent brings in the second pole or focus of urban theology. If the first can be described as projective identification, the second is characterised by regressive retreat. Vincent rewords the parable of the Prodigal Son:

"Then it is that the mother base of us all is our only refuge.

"I will go unto my Mother
and I will say unto my Mother
Mother, I have been sinned against
in the sight of heaven
and in yours.
Make me as one of your children again.
Take me back into your womb."

It is as if there is a flash of unconscious insight in which John Vincent puts his finger fleetingly in the very heart-land of religion. Primitive archaic phantasies of the Earth-Mother are raised again. Cradled in the security of the under-girding, ever-lasting arms, hidden in the cleft rock, secure within the safe strong-hold, undisturbed within Plato's cave, comforted within the eternal womb, to remain psychologically forever unborn ... here is the ultimate defence against experiencing once again the intolerable trauma of perinatal impingement, that ending of all hope, that crushing pressure from above, that unjust victimisation of the impotent by a powerful, persecuting environment. The great religious heart-drive of every person is the unconscious retreat from this cervix, this point of crucifixion, back into some kind of placentally dependent dance, ritually enacted with all the symbolism of umbilical attachment in the eucharist, within the cavernous interior of Mother Church. The threatening eastern opening, closed by image of the crucified, carries for ever and for all, vicariously the pangs of birth in death.

So for Vincent God is precisely not "an agent for overcoming the intolerable" but "an agent for living with the intolerable". The fatalistic assumption is that the alienation can be neither tolerated nor altered. Nothing apparently can be done about the source of dereliction. It is therefore imperative to sustain its repression, to maintain the mechanisms of dissociative projection, disowning and distancing the experience of impingement. The condition of intrauterine regression must be maintained even though such a process of psychological defence is a fundamental retreat from reality. Like drug addiction, alcohol dependency or compulsive copulation, it makes the intolerable reality tolerable for a time.

Vincent's text demonstrates a certain amount of ambivalence about this mode of regression. To be taken back into the mother's womb is not simply to escape from the impingement of birth and the vicissitudes of life beyond. It is also to enter into company with a co-suffer, for the pressures impinging on the crushed skull of the new-born were precisely matched in the birth canal by the pressures experienced by the maternal tissue. Perhaps the only dynamic which mutes the retaliatory rage of the alienated neonate is the awareness of mutual suffering - mother and I were both caught up in this thing, it was not simply the impassive mother

doing it to me. She also suffered and therefore in spite of my retaliatory rage, can still love and be loved, for she has in fact borne my suffering, in my crushing she was seared, in my parturition she was bereft. So the unconscious awareness of the maternal co-sufferer emerges within the construct of Urban Theology in the doctrine of the compassionate deity. But what impoverishment it is to displace parts of the mother to the boundaries of the universe in order to maintain the myths of social denial of perinatal impingement and to sustain the defences against that archetypal experience of terror and bleakness for which we use the Christ-figure as a symbol of the self and the cosmic god as a reification of the mother's womb.

So Good Friday and New Testament religion, which are at the core of Urban Theology, maintain the processes of defensive denial and projection in the heart of society. They sustain the alienation of humanity from its own most profound experience. They institutionalise the role of the scapegoat and then stand aghast when scapegoating emerges as a common social process. They maintain the repression of memories of the intolerable, uncatharted in the human heart and therefore perpetuate their acting out within the dynamics of human society.

David Wasdell

June 1984

Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE

Hosted by: Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN)

(Charity Registration No: 284542)

Web-site: www.meridian.org.uk