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MY FAITH IN PRACTICE

JOHN PUNSHON¹

I guess the most common—and accurate—metaphor for the religious life is that of a journey, and that is the word that lots of people use nowadays in giving an account of their religious development. Today, I want to choose a different word to express my theme, which is ‘fulfilment’. Throughout my life, rather than strike out adventurously into new and unknown seas, I have tried to sound the depths of the one I find myself in, and seek to possess as fully as possible the heritage of the Christian faith into which I was born.

I want to talk about three things, each of which is related to the other. They represent distinct stages in my life, but at the same time, they represent the unfolding of what was there at the beginning. Change there has certainly been, but it is of the nature of orderly development. I begin with a short account of my childhood religion which laid the foundations of my faith. I move on to the period between adolescence and parenthood, when I came to terms with certain fundamental questions raised by the Christian tradition. And, I close with an account of the faith that I have tried to practise in a consistent way for the past thirty years.

CHILDHOOD

In 1940, when I was five, I went to live in Devonshire with my grandparents because of the war. My grandfather, a retired London policeman, was working as a labourer on a farm on the edge of Dartmoor. It was an idyllic place to grow up, and I cannot imagine a happier childhood. I was sent to Sunday school at the Baptist church in the town under the protection of a slightly older child who lived in the next cottage over the hill. The Baptists shaped my outlook fundamentally, and I thank God for those good folks, all dead now, I am sure, who took care of us.

The superintendent was Mr. Smailes, who was the manager of the International Stores in the town, and he had the knack of talking to children about interesting subjects using lively images. We also had guest speakers, two of whom are memorable. I remember being given

a small piece of matzo one Easter. I knew what it was, but it wasn't a patch on Jacobs' cream crackers, I remember thinking. Then there was the China missionary, who showed us how to use chopsticks—keep the lower one rigid and use the upper one like a pen. When I first visited a Chinese restaurant perhaps twenty years after, I remembered what to do—and it worked.

One of Mr Smailes' homilies has stuck with me all my life. It was about the inside of a local factory we all knew. He explained to us that the machines were bolted down to the concrete floor, and if they weren't, they would fall on their sides with the vibration and be no use to anybody. He was actually talking about the Sermon on the Mount and telling us to make Jesus the foundation of our lives. Being told that once is neither here nor there. But having that message reinforced in talks and hymns and prayers and games and personal example and daily life, year in and year out creates habit, creates attitudes and creates vision. The point about the rock is that it withstands storms, and that is what adult life is full of. I was very well prepared by regular attendance at Sunday school.

Many other seeds were planted in me by Okehampton Baptist Church that bore rich fruit later in my life. There was a great spirit of community and mutual respect there. We were all accepted and loved, and we knew who we were. I knew what the body of Christ was long before I could put words to it. There was music, particularly at harvest festival and the Sunday school anniversary, and I learned that there are many things in the heart that only music can express, particularly in the worship of God. In later years, I began to realize how much of the western musical tradition was written for the church and not the concert hall, and that half the pictures in the National Gallery were intended to be displayed in churches to deepen our devotion and not to educate our aesthetic sensibility.

ADOLESCENCE

The second stage in my development came as the result of what appeared to be a tragedy, but was in fact an act of providence. At the age of fourteen, I contracted polio and was completely paralysed. I lost half a year from school, and though I made an exceptional recovery, I have been disabled all my life. It was goodbye to all the physical and outdoor activities I loved so much, and I had to accommodate myself to a sedentary life. I also had to improve my schoolwork sharply.

So my education began. I was taught to think (extremely well, in my unfashionable East End grammar school, I have to say) and being religiously inclined, and a 'practising Christian,' as they say, I began to think about my faith.

By the time I got to the sixth form, I perceived that there was a wholeness about my studies. Art, music, literature, architecture, and history seemed not self-explanatory but interdependent. Moreover, the whole appeared to be more than a sum of the parts. I found myself looking at a tradition with many aspects, the driving force of which, the spirit, the soul, if you like, was the Christian religion. I chose fulfilment as my theme today, because, since those days, my religious life has been dedicated to a sounding of the depths of that tradition. But it is from the inside. I have a basic commitment to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour, and I can say the Nicene Creed without equivocation. They were the keys that unlocked the door and admitted me to this world when I was still in my teens. It ultimately led me to become an evangelical Friend and to be recorded as a minister of the gospel in Indiana Yearly Meeting.

Now, to belong to a tradition is not just to accept the principles and practices that are handed down from the past. It is to enter into the wisdom that forms the basis of those principles and practices, which is something very different. Moreover, it is also to inherit the controversies that are inseparable from a tradition as it seeks to accommodate itself to changing circumstances. Christianity is not, and has never been monolithic. It has its own characteristic controversies that arise over and over again. It is an historical phenomenon that cannot avoid the challenges of history and the circumstances of its own origins.

The study of Church history and doctrine shows that Christianity is a tradition in this sense. First, for the first three centuries of its existence, it was a persecuted minority faith, and this is reflected in its uneasy relationship with the state and the impossibility of developing a generally acceptable Christian political philosophy. Then, second, its worship came to reflect two apparently opposite poles: the sacrificial worship of the Temple and the analytic and expository practice of the synagogue. Third, nearly all the inspired figures its scriptures hold out as exemplars are weak, inadequate, and disobedient. Not at all the sort of people we would want in our corner in times of trouble.

In what I have called the period between adolescence and parenthood, by which I simply mean, up to the age of about 30, I

came to a conclusion about each of these matters, and these decisions have determined the nature of my faith in practice.

First, there is the connection between church and state. I remember the shock I felt during a sixth form history lesson, when our teacher described John Keble's Assize Sermon of 1833, generally taken to mark the beginning of the Oxford Movement, which sought to move the Church of England in a Catholic direction, and which had a profound effect on the social history of the nineteenth century. The issue here was whether the state had a jurisdiction over the Church. The Tractarians said 'No,' and I found myself in agreement with them. I had never considered the matter before, but knew instinctively that God and Caesar make ultimately conflicting claims. I now realise I was moving towards an Anabaptist understanding of the Church, and I later came to interpret early Quakerism as the expression of Anabaptist principles in the English Reformation. I remain of that view, but my point is that the issue is one that Christianity can never really satisfactorily solve, and I continue to be exercised by it.

In many ways, my religious life has been an ongoing debate with Tractarianism, because John Henry Newman is by far and away the most important intellectual influence on my life. It is strange that I have been an admirer of Newman but never really tempted by Catholicism, which I have always conceived in terms of aesthetics and not authority. It was a close encounter, though. Early on, in my teens, I almost fell under the spell of ritual. I wanted to go to Oxford largely because it was a beautiful place, whispering from its towers, as everybody knows, the last enchantments of the Middle Ages. But the Baptist and Low Church influences of my childhood were sufficient to rise to the challenge. After my first meeting for worship, (which I describe in *Encounter with Silence*) I knew that what I really wanted in religion was simplicity. I sided with the synagogue against the Temple. Simplicity of worship and the vision of a church without earthly authority is what made me a Friend.

Perhaps that led logically to the third of the tensions within Christianity, which I have resolved in a way appropriate to my own circumstances—that between the thirst for perfection and the fact of human weakness. I was able to reach this resolution by being released from the idea that religion is about morality, and this is how it came about. One of my oldest friends is a retired German judge, the son of an eminent Prussian military family. He came to stay with us during the harsh winter of 1949, and we have been friends ever since. Now

you have to remember that for people of my age, the question of responsibility for Nazism was a burning issue. I have never accepted theories of collective guilt and prefer the biblical idea that God redeems through the righteous remnant. Thus, the soul of Germany was entrusted to those who did not bow the knee to National Socialism. They were from widely different backgrounds—from politics the Adenauers and Brandts, from entertainment the Berthold Brechts and the Marlene Dietriches—and from faith, the figure of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the neo-orthodox ‘Confessing Church’.

Bonhoeffer is known mainly for two ideas: ‘religionless Christianity’ and ‘cheap grace,’ which is the one that was important to me. The phrase occurs in his book (called in English) *The Cost of Discipleship*, which I read as an undergraduate. In it, Bonhoeffer contrasts two kinds of faith. One seeks comfort, and finds it in the familiar rituals of Christianity. The other also seeks comfort, but finds it in self-denial and not self-satisfaction. Hence, the distinction between cheap and costly grace. The cost lies in the conscious decision to follow Jesus, which inevitably involves hardship and maybe death, as he himself promised it might. The grace is a vision of the glory that is to come and the assurance that one belongs to the one who has overcome the world. There is nothing new in this because you can read it in the pages of every Christian moralist from Justin Martyr and Saint Augustine through Francis of Assisi, George Fox, and William Law down to C.S. Lewis and Billy Graham in our own day. William Penn’s masterpiece is called, deliberately, *No Cross, No Crown*.

What brought these ideas into sharp focus was my father’s death in 1973, something else I have described in *Encounter with Silence*. When I got back from the hospital the night he died, I read through the New Testament, and it was as if I had never read it before. It was full of Bonhoeffer’s words, what seem to me now to be the great realities of religion—sin, sacrifice, judgment, prayer, providence, salvation, glory, faith, hope, spirit—all those things. The theologians I had been accustomed to read were preoccupied with how to construct a faith out of inadequate and untrustworthy historical records and to remove miraculous events to a symbolic realm in which they exercised great power, but were not, literally, true. It struck me very forcibly that the theologians of the liberal tradition were in exactly the same position as the Puritans whom Fox condemned for seeking Christ in the pages of a book and not as a presence immanent in the world. I came to an experience similar to that of George Fox: “...and when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly

to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition’, and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy!”

So my faith emerged. John Henry Newman said that there is a difference between saying, ‘I believe that God exists’ and saying, ‘I believe in God.’ One is to accept a proposition; the other is to proclaim a faith, and these things are different. They are not unconnected, of course, and the second presupposes the first. But when one has read the instructions one can use the appliance; when one knows the rules, then one can play the game, when one can use the instruments, one can navigate. I cast off fore and aft, moved out into the stream, crossed the bar and met the swell. I began the process of sounding the deep. My Christian life began.

GROWN-UP FAITH

My notes have this section down as, ‘Grown-up Faith,’ and all I can do really is to describe something of what my practice is. In one sense, my reflective life has to do with trying to live imaginatively in the world of Jesus’ parables, to realise in my own life, citizenship in the Kingdom of God. The contemplative part of my life is to take part in the transformation of soul that comes from his. It is, simply, Christian discipleship as I understand it, and I would like to give you a flavour of it by describing how just two of the parables (among many others) have conditioned my understanding of God and what our relationship with Him is, or should, if we are faithful, be.

I begin with the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. You know the scene: publican and Pharisee praying. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other people. He fasts, obeys the law, gives to charity, and carries out his religious duties regularly. The tax collector won’t even raise his eyes in prayer but simply implores God for mercy. It is a very subtle story. The Pharisee actually *is* a very good man. So what was Jesus trying to point out? This, I think. The absolutely unacceptable claim that God is more interested in your attitude than your performance. The parable is saying that since we cannot live perfect lives; what matters is how we live our imperfect lives, and that is the first step to imitating the humility of Christ. It is also the first step to recognizing that we are all the same, and there are no exceptions to the rule. What was wrong with the Pharisee was that he

thought he was spiritually special. He was good—but proud. I need that parable, because I am engaged in a perpetual battle against pride

Then there are the labourers who contracted to work all day in the vineyard and those who worked half a day, and those who worked for the last hour of the day. No wonder those who had done most of the work were outraged when everybody got the same pay. Again, this is absolutely unacceptable. But look at it again. The owner of the vineyard, God, replies: “Well, you got what you bargained for. That’s fair. So why are you jealous when I am generous to other people?” It is the undeserved reward that is the key to the story. It is told from the Pharisee’s standpoint. But Jesus is saying that God’s love is not bargained for. It is freely given without measure to whoever is willing to accept it, regardless of their merits. That is why this kind of divine love has a special name: grace. This parable is important to me because it led me to understand that grace is the most important thing in the universe, because it is the nature of God to love us in this way, and that, in turn, it is our task to recognize the grace in our own lives, and to pass it on to others, freely and indiscriminately.

So my faith in practice finds its way out in attitudes rather than actions, because I reckon that if you get your attitudes right, the actions follow. That is what I hear Jesus teaching, and that is why the parables are so precious to me. But the last biblical passage I would like to mention is not from the parables, but Jesus’ words about himself to his disciples. “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” The life of Jesus is more than his teaching, because he personifies that teaching, and as Bonhoeffer pointed out, discipleship, ultimately, means being willing to carry the cross. We have to take the risk. When we look back at early Quakerism we find a deep understanding of this reality, and it is the rock upon which, historically at any rate, London Yearly Meeting was built, and this is where I try to stand.

I’ve covered a lot of ground very superficially, I am afraid, and I will close with the thoughts that came to me immediately when I was asked to give this talk, and I do not say this for dramatic effect. It is really very simple. I love God, I read my Bible, I say my prayers and I try to be good. That is my faith in practice.

ENDNOTES

1. This essay was delivered at Milton Keynes Friends Meeting on September 28th, 2003.