

'Fellow-Believers' in a Catholic World

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What follows is an autobiography, and autobiography is an art form. It may poor art, but it attempts to elucidate “the true,” the one primary direction of all art. My paper falls into two parts: the first appears clearly autobiographical, the second does not, but I counsel the readers to beware – it too is autobiographical.

Some quarter of a century ago, caught between presumption and despair, I wrote about the broken shards of Christianity and noted that.

[...] the mere fact of the many broken shards posits a single grail. How can one speak of a single Christianity when historians testify only to christianities? The broken shards drive one to the grail. They shape the wilderness and form the despair as we seek a glimpse of the whole. There is no vision but despair, and the very quest is a presumption. Remaining Mennonite is a conscious act of affirming that denomination as one shard. To leave it is to shout “anathema,” but to stay is to live daily with the fear and final anxiety that one day one’s more honest, principled, and genuine “fellow-believers” will require one to raise the shout and depart. Whether one has a vision of the whole grail or not, to ride in quest of it is already to leave one’s local habitation. And to ride

in quest is already to choose a direction for the discovery of the whole outside of the local habitation. To search for a vision of the whole is to reject the proposed vision held by the part.¹

With this statement I am still fully in agreement, even with the seemingly harsh words about shouting “anathema” which are shaped by the passage: “honest, principled, and genuine ‘fellow-believers’.” Quotation marks are after all placed here for a reason; they carry pain and also hope. The shouting of “anathema” is always a shouting against one’s own, and although one must not leave aside the first of the terms, one must not particularly leave aside the second of these, “fellow-believers.” This term is meant to carry the emphasis in the sentence much as the famous adage of Paul does at Romans 6:23, which, unfortunately has often been quoted in its opening phrase, “the wages of sin is death,” completely unmindful of its culmination and central point: “but the gift [charisma] of God [is] eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord,” an eternal life marked above all by that “still more excellent way,” love.

Repeating, then, the proviso concerning a clear autobiography, I add a few notes about my “shouting and departing” from the Mennonites. I was born an Amish Mennonite² in a small Ontario village which was populated by Amish, Lutherans, Evangelical United Brethren, some members of the United Church of Canada, and one family of Roman Catholics. The Ontario Amish Mennonites were a very small body, numbering only about 2500 at their fullest. My parents pointed out as a simple description that there were “*unsa sat Leit und ane sat Leit*” (our type of people and other types of people), but this made little difference aside from church on Sunday mornings for the peculiar dialect of “Pennsylvania-Dutch” served decreasingly as inter-familial dialogue alongside English. As a child I was initiated into the tasks of harnessing horses and milking cows by hand on my grandparents’ farm, but these duties declined as electricity was accepted, just as it had been accepted by my father, an inside carpenter, and my mother, a seamstress. No theological principles denied them or their children a normal livelihood. That life was shaped only by “poverty,” a reality for my parents although I learned the term only many years later and never experienced it as “poverty.” This was but one of the many positive gifts my parents bequeathed to their family, chief among which was the hope that their sons could pursue whatever educational and vocational aims they wished.

I was baptized on May 25, 1959, promising, along with all the other males in the group, that if I were ever called to leadership in the local church I would accept. I did so some seven years later, newly married to Betty Schiedel of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Our congregation, which had split from the Amish and named "Amish Mennonite," had, by that time, been renamed "Western Ontario Mennonite." The last remnants of the Amish past remained only in the prayer covering for women, but thereafter it quickly and quietly faded from usage and disappeared. One year later I was accepted by the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies for its licentiate programme and Betty and I left along with the best wishes of the congregation.

How many of the congregation understood that "Pontifical" referred to the Roman Catholic Church, I do not know, but I am certain that a great many did and they did not concern themselves with the matter. I had been attracted to the classical and the medieval worlds since high school, and was strongly drawn to the Catholic Church in my undergraduate years. Why I did not worship fully as a Catholic from my earliest days at the Pontifical Institute, I am unable to say for certain. Thirty-three years later, to the day of my baptism in the Amish Mennonite church, I finally managed to make this change to Catholic worship.

I hesitate to describe my entrance into the Catholic Church as a conversion,³ for conversion is an on-going matter. At Pentecost, 2002, however, I was at last confirmed on the basis of my Amish baptism and participated for the first time as a fully Catholic Christian. I am quite willing to be defined as an intellectual convert, understanding that the intellect and the reason are assigned to different mental regions. A few weeks after my union with the Catholic Church I joined in the celebrations which marked the first Anglican exhibit at the Vatican Museum in Rome (Anglicanism, at least in its nineteenth century forms, remains a love of mine), completed some research on my ongoing Henry Edward Manning—William Ewart Gladstone project in the Vatican Archives and Library, and rejoiced with many others in the Corpus Christi Feast, celebrated by John Paul II at St. John Lateran and closing, after a short procession, at Santa Maria Maggiore.

But my faith journey did not stop here. Although most of my work was directed to the period before the death in 1892 of the once-Anglican priest, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Henry Edward Manning, there are few aspects of

human life after this time which do not fascinate me. For the past forty years or more atheism in particular has continued to attract me and to remain of importance in my life.⁴

John Henry Newman (a sort of hero of mine) had seen atheism as the diametric opposite of Catholicism.⁵ But must we understand it in only this way? Four hundred years ago, in August of 1609, Galileo Galilei gazed through his developed version of the telescope. I choose however not to focus on this occurrence in the usual way, that is, directing us outward into an ever-expanding universe and to that universe's beginnings. Rather, I wish to turn this image of Galileo around – not out into our “future,” but rather into our “present,” and to look, not at what his eye saw, but to his, and our own, eye, through which each of us sees the universe.

What Galileo proved in his focus on the stars was that the Ptolemaic view of the universe remained, that the sun still rose in the East and set in the West, that his eyeball was the centre of all he surveyed, and that however he deemed the structure and future of this universe, it was a human-centered universe, perhaps ours alone. It can expand, can include new creatures either equal, lesser, or greater than we are, but it is our universe, seen through our eye and focussed by our minds. By contrast, a Copernican universe presupposes a future, but has led inevitably into a past. The world of Ptolemy, however, forces us to reside fully in the present and opens into an eternal reality. This is the world not of the lunatic or the courtly lover, but of the poet.

We cannot pretend that the poet in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* achieves the future any more than does the lunatic or the lover, but if, as he states, the strong imagination “would but apprehend some joy, / It comprehends some bringer of that joy,” (Act V, Scene 1) and by so doing forces one from present comprehension into a “beyond.” All of this leads one inevitably into a central mystery of the Christian faith, the crossing between this world and the “next,” for whether or not that “local habitation and name” is one shaped and given “to airey nothing” by Shakespeare's character, there remains among the tricks of a “strong imagination,” the apprehension of joy and the comprehension of “some bringer of that joy.”

Thus, we are required to look primarily in our Ptolemaic universe not to the past and the future, but to the present, to the now, and to think in terms of that more ancient pattern of life, marked by the Greeks as the “practical” and the “theoretical” life and by their Latin followers as the “active” and the “contemplative,” the latter a form of life which is framed “within a temple” (*cum templum*).⁶ Whether or not the etymology of *theoria*

in Greek is based on the word for God, *theos*, is not the issue at this point. Such a question returns us to that “backward” approach to truth and misses the point. Human beings are led ever “beyond.” We apprehend and comprehend, we “grasp” (from the root *prehendo*) “to” (*ad* in *ad-prehendo*) and “with” (*cum* in *cum-prehendo*) what is about us. And even beyond this “grasping” there is our processing in faith, hope, and love.

Now all of this may appear to take us far distant from the autobiographical purpose of this paper and further yet from atheism. And yet, does it? If we turn again to Newman, we notice that in his treatment of atheism in *Apologia* the references abound to the first-person pronoun, “I,” and there is in this sense a turn in his study,⁷ from the interior to the exterior. And yet it is, in fact, the other way round – toward the interior. The change is supposedly toward an exterior, to the “scientific,” but it is in fact away from the “there” to an obsession with the “here,” until in time the “here” becomes the all of being, the “I” becomes the “brain,” and the all of life becomes an understanding of understanding itself, working on the principle that understanding is mine and mine alone. And herein lies the mystery: all our endeavours to turn from ourselves into the exterior lead us back to ourselves *and into* an object, an other. Ours is an active life, leaning ever towards the contemplative.

Action is the “I,” but that “I” continually directs us to think of the other. “I” apprehend some joy and in that apprehension my comprehension turns to a “bringer of that joy,” a source that comes not from myself, but from some place other than myself. As a modern or “post-modern” person, I may think of this “place” as within myself, as the brain, thus linking it as closely as I am able with myself, but at the same time I make this brain a universal, seeking its mysteries in all the other brains in the universe, fitting myself as one among all others. And in this way thus I begin to learn that chief of all the virtues, humility.

This virtue, humility, is the primary one I have attempted to learn from both my Amish past (setting aside the Pietist background⁸) and, I quite openly admit, from some atheists. It is with some hesitation that I make such a statement because of the inevitable negativity it seems to place on either or both of the subjects, but I insist that I am carrying not the least negation to either of these two. After all, alongside those “anathematizing” Mennonites, some atheists may be grouped as “fellow-believers.” (Lest you think that I have completely side-stepped Christianity at this point, I comment briefly that, considering the varying approaches to this issue in Catholicism, I hold more firmly to the

position of Hans Urs von Balthasar than I do to that of Karl Rahner.⁹) There is more than one brand of atheist, but perhaps, to overly simplify the matter, I may reduce them to two sorts: the humble and the arrogant. There are those willing to treat the matter of a beyond openly, and those who appear always interested in an attack. (I have left aside the term “Agnostic” as formally missing the point.) The title of “atheist,” as I am using the word here, rhetorically, can thus apply in some way to all of us who are forced by the structures of today’s thought to openly admit that not all answers are available to us. We are therefore required to think humbly.

It was in Julian of Norwich, perhaps, that I first recognized the role of humility and its practice by the very this-worldly guide to our faith, the Blessed Virgin, Mary: “The greatness and nobility of [Mary’s] contemplation of God,” writes Julian, “filled her full of reverent fear; and with this she saw herself so small and so humble, so simple and so poor in comparison with her God that this reverent fear filled her with humility.”¹⁰

In Mary “[t]he greatness and nobility of her contemplation,” and her humility come together. This is the point I attempted, with too great succinctness in the published version, in my lectures on the murder mystery in 2004. As I said in that study: “[I]n the humility of the confessional (the very opposite of the closure that it seems to imply), speaking into a dark unknown silence, the human voice recognises in the acknowledgement of its personal and corporate culpability, its ability to respond to the worst and best of what it is and can freely be.”¹¹

And thus, we come to a sort of ending: I have still not – it is extraneous to say that I never will—worked out the details concerning confession, and if I cannot do this, how much less will be my attempt to comprehend Catholicism. There is much more to be understood than can be learned in the few sparks of life available to any of us, and one must inevitably leave off at this point by simply accepting the statement of the Fourth Lateran Council: “‘Be perfect’ by the perfection of grace ‘as your heavenly Father is perfect’ by the perfection of nature, namely, each in his own way, because between the Creator and the creature there cannot be a likeness so great that the unlikeness is not greater.”¹² However greatly we may wish to press a popular psychology to our own making, we must remain knowing that,

Mary is the “daughter of her own dear son.” Unlike the pagan Greek [Oedipus] who endeavoured to be his own child, to make his own future again and again [in this there stands the final contrast of the play itself

with the much abused Freudian treatment of it], and thus visits a plague upon his city, Mary humbly accepts her fulfilment as a human person through the foreordained grace of her son, and thereby magnifying her origin and rejoicing in her future, she manifests the universality of a new city, the citizens of which no longer seek refuge as would-be gods, but dying to themselves, humbly love one another. Daughter of her own dear son, the mother (Mary, the Church) lives on after the son's murder, since she accepts the role of daughter (in small part the meaning of that much disputed dogma of the immaculate conception). There is here at last a future (eternal life) for the parent since the parent recognises the priority of the child, fully freeing the child into its own future, "letting it be" without origin so that the child might fully acknowledge the love of its own begetting.¹³

In that "dark unknown silence" (it is here, I will hope, that the most honourable atheists and those in the confessional and in their confession at the opening of the Mass, are united), one can go on, assured that in "the absolute silence there is a prospect of hope." For the Catholic Christian, however, that silence is no longer one experienced singularly as the silence of the individual alone. Rather,

[i]t is the silence of the Blessed Virgin who waits in absolute humility, in the nothingness of her own voice, allowing the Word to create new heavens and a new earth in her *ex nihilo*. The fiat that is required is that of Mary's words in Luke 1:38: *Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*, Let it be done to me according to your word, a *fiat* standing not alone (*sola*, the act of a god), but open to the action of another. If the silence is absolute, it may well, indeed, be that in the disintegration of [one]self, and [our] walk into the night, a redemptive word, might yet be heard.¹⁴

It is a Word heard by human beings, borne from the pure silence of the Virgin, a Word known to us here below in Jesus of Nazareth.

Notes

- ¹ Peter C. Erb, "Between Presumption and Despair: On Remaining Mennonite," in *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*, ed. Harry Loewen (Kitchener, ON and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 75.
- ² See "Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference (Mennonite Church)" in Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. www.gameo.org
- ³ For a sense of the manifold understandings of this term, particularly of its 11th and 12th century meaning, see Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville, VA.: University of Virginia Press, 1992).
- ⁴ Although not neglecting Jan N. Bremmer's "Atheism in Antiquity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. by Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11-26, I am using the term in this paper

- more in the way Gavin Hyman uses it in his “Atheism in Modern History” (ibid., 27-46) and his *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010). Perhaps the best historical work on atheism remains Michael J. Buckley, S. J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale, 1987).
- ⁵ John Henry Newman, *Newman’s Apologia pro vita sua. The Two Versions of 1864 & 1865 Preceded by Newman’s and Kingsley’s Pamphlets*, with an Introduction by Wilfrid Ward (Oxford: Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press, 1913), 291, 296, and 335-6.
 - ⁶ Compare the short study of the idea of the sacred and the “opposed” profane in Joseph Pieper, *In Search of the Sacred: Contributions to an Answer* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 7-50. I use the terms “contemplative” and “active” here in the same this-worldly way.
 - ⁷ “Consciousness” is a late seventeenth-century word as is the usage of “self” and self-hyphenated words, these in turn shaping the meaning of “I” in its modern usage. (See citations for “consciousness,” “self ,” and “self-,” and “I, pron. and n.” in *Oxford English Dictionary* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000-]).
 - ⁸ Humility, a pattern of life, is perhaps poorly transmitted by Pietistic terminology into “Mennonite” language and therefore rejected by our “Anabaptist” forefathers of the mid-twentieth century as upholding *Gottseligkeit* against the proper Anabaptist virtue, *Gottesfurcht*. For the shift see above all Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety through the Ages* (Goshen, Ind.: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949).
 - ⁹ On the complex question of the salvation of those not within the Christina fold and of atheists, I am most influenced by the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare we Hope “That All Men Be Saved,” with a Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. by David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).
 - ¹⁰ Edmund College and James Walsh, *A Book of the Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich* (2 vols.; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978).
 - ¹¹ Peter C. Erb, *Murder, Manners, Mystery: Reflections on Faith in Contemporary Detective Fiction* (London: SCM, 2007), 59.
 - ¹² “Fourth Lateran Council.” My translation, in *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, eds. Henricus Denzinger and Adolfus Schoenmetzer (Barcelona: Herder, 1965), 803.
 - ¹³ Erb, *Murder, Manners, Mystery*, 105-106.
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76-77.