

SPIRITUALITY AND A NEW KIND OF HUMAN BEING

Reflections on the teaching of William Law

The “new man” is a term first used by St Paul to describe Jesus. Its evolutionary significance is made clear by the fact that he also uses the term “the new Adam” and sees Jesus as “the first born of a great new human family.” What makes Jesus new is essentially a type of consciousness which is described in the gospels in various ways, but mixed in with ethical pronouncements, parables, accounts of healing and miracles, so that its importance is rarely recognized. It may perhaps be summarized in his saying that he felt himself to be “one with the Father” (John 10:30), but two other of his sayings add important information to this. The first is when he talks about his desire to do the will of this heavenly father as a kind of hunger (John 4:34) and the second when he talks of the necessity of losing self (Mark 8:36) and elsewhere of dying to self. Bringing together these three things, it can be seen that Jesus had a distinctly different sense of the purpose of his existence and of his self-identity from that of a normal person.

This difference must have been so striking that those who encountered him were forced to ask, themselves, “What kind of human being is this?” and Jesus himself poses the question “Who do men say that I am?” Paul clearly considered him a one-off, but if he had been familiar with Hindu literature, especially the *Upanishads*, which had been written some centuries earlier, he would have found others who had experienced and taught the same sense of identity with the Ultimate Reality which they referred to as Brahman, as against the heavenly father metaphor used by Jesus.

Paul’s contribution to spiritual evolution was to define the purpose of religion as the quest to “have the mind that was in Christ”, but in a post-Christian age that goal has lost much of its force, for spirituality is now widely understood as a religion-free, and indeed God-free, experience. “New Age” spirituality tends towards nature worship, and this has consequences both good and bad. Insofar as the power traditionally called “God” is manifested in nature, developing a sense of oneness with nature and of responsibility for the planet must surely be a great help to spiritual development, but it carries no transformative imperative. It is the same old self, albeit with more aesthetic sensitivity, but now enjoying a deeper appreciation of nature, perhaps even a sense of oneness with it.

Paul’s Christianity had a fatal flaw, however, which is now opening up. While its purpose was *metanoia*, a change of consciousness that implied growth into Christ-consciousness, Paul also insisted on the necessity of belief in the literal resurrection of Jesus, thus giving two conflicting signals about what is the essential core of Christianity. Is it about self-transformation and the quest for oneness with God or about accepting as historical certain facts that are unbelievable to any normally educated adult today? Can anyone seriously believe that the resuscitated body of Jesus lives above the clouds?

To further weaken the thrust of the doctrine of *metanoia*, the Christian creed effectively declares that attaining Christ-consciousness, in the sense of experiencing oneness with the

divine like Jesus, is impossible, for it is an article of belief that Jesus was the “only begotten son of God” and only he shared in “the divine substance”. This is the great and crippling paradox at the heart of orthodox Christianity, and those individuals who have attained, or been given, a sense of oneness with the divine and have tried to communicate it to others have been treated with suspicion, persecuted and denounced as heretics. This should not surprise us, since St Mark’s gospel (3:21) says that Jesus himself was considered mad by some of his contemporaries, including apparently his own family, and even possessed by the devil (John 7:20, 8:48).

Because this state of habitual God-consciousness is rare, it is not surprising that there is no general term in the language to describe it, and scientific psychology would invariably write it off as a pathology, as would many of those who had heard Jesus speak about it. Rare though it may be, what Jesus demonstrated has been given to other individuals in different traditions, who try to describe it within their own cultural context. What in the West has been called Christ-consciousness, is called Krishna-consciousness in Hinduism, but more generally *advaita* – literally, not two-ness – and there are good reasons for using this as a generic term to describe the kind of God-centred and God-infused awareness that was manifested and preached by Jesus. Like the great spiritual teachers of all traditions, he insisted that our normal self-centredness must diminish to nothing if the new unitary consciousness is to grow, using the homely but rather frightening metaphor of the death of a grain of wheat to make his point.

In Judaism one can find faint echoes of advaitic consciousness in some of the psalms and in the Second Isaiah. It sounds more strongly in the word *theosis* used by the early Church fathers, which meant literally the process of becoming God, and is loud and clear in Sufi doctrine a few centuries later. This is at first surprising since “not-twoness” is totally in conflict with the unbending monotheism of its parent Islam. Judaism, it should be noted, was self-defined by belief in the unitary nature of God, and when Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he did not say, “Love God and neighbour”, as is usually assumed, but uttered the great Jewish prayer, the Shemah, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one”, at least in Mark’s gospel (12:30).

The Christian tradition has many examples of individuals who experienced and taught the doctrine of oneness with God in different ways and with different emphases. From a long list one might select Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Jan van Ruysbroeck, Nicholas of Cusa and Brother Lawrence whose orthodoxy was unquestioned, and the most adventurous theologian of them all, Meister Eckhart, whose teaching was formally condemned as heretical and his works put on the Roman Index of Forbidden Books. Three centuries after Eckhart George Fox’s preaching of “that of God within” was perceived as such a threat to Christian orthodoxy that it gave rise in England to the Blasphemy Acts, still on the statute books. Though Quakers preached their doctrine as only “a new nickname for old Christianity”, they were savagely persecuted as heretics for many years and a few were executed, such as Mary Dyer, who was “hanged like a flag for others to take example by.”

In the Anglican tradition William Law (1686-1761) stands out as one who preached advaitism single-mindedly, under the name of Christ-consciousness, and while he was not physically persecuted, he was ostracised by the Church authorities and reviled by some as a secret Quaker, which was in those times a term of abuse and condemnation. His best known work,

A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life (1728) is now regarded as a classic and is still in print in several editions. Law is notable because he went as far as any Christian teacher could go within being called anti-Christian by insisting that the essence of Christianity lay not in accepting a set of credal beliefs but in acquiring exactly the same kind of consciousness as Jesus. Like Eckhart and Jacob Boehme (or Behmen) before him, he expressed his spiritual intuition in terms of the birth of Christ in the soul, rather than the emergence of God-awareness, but the following quotations will illustrate how radical his doctrine is underneath the metaphor. They are taken from his mature but lesser known work *The Spirit of Prayer* (1749), with slight editing to bring out their significance more clearly.

As against the obvious statement in the Creed that Jesus was the only begotten son of God, he says quite explicitly,

We are all of us by birth the offspring of God – more nearly related to Him than we are to one another.

His understanding of salvation also differs critically from the common understanding that Jesus came to save the world from sin and hell. He returns continually to the necessity for change and the potential for change that all of good intent have within them.

Thou must be fully persuaded to believe and firmly to settle in thy mind this most certain truth, that all our salvation consists in the manifestation of the nature, life and Spirit of Jesus Christ in our inward new man From morning to night long for nothing, desire nothing, hope for nothing, but to have all that is within thee changed into the Spirit and temper of the holy Jesus.

For Law, as for all advaitics (to invent a much needed universal term), salvation is also a new kind of knowing which generates something deeper than logical or emotional intelligence. It is a spiritually transforming knowledge.

Behold the Word, which is the wisdom of God, is in thy heart to soften the fiery properties of thy nature and change them into humble meekness. As soon as thou art ready to hear this eternal speaking, the Word will speak wisdom and love in thy inward parts.

In various ways Law emphasizes that the core message of Christianity is not faith as such but the call which follows from the example of Jesus to acquire a new human nature. Thus salvation is equated with inward change, rather than the mechanical consequence of Jesus sacrificing his life for our sins, which has become central to Christian doctrine. Salvation comes to those who hear and are then moved to desire change, and without that desire, albeit at first feeble and fleeting, Christian salvation is meaningless. Referring to those who heard Jesus, but did not accept his message, he says:

It was because these learned rabbis willed and desired no such inward salvation as He offered to them, no change of their own nature, no inward destruction of their natural tempers, no deliverance from love of themselves and the enjoyments of their passions. They liked their state, the gratifications of their old man, their pride and self-love, covetousness and sensuality.

As well as the need for change, Law puts special emphasis on the term “inward destruction”, for, as Jesus himself said, the old has to go to make room for the new. Something of what seems to be the “real me” has to die before the transformation can happen. This death of the self is not a part of most popular preaching of spirituality, secular or religious, for we live now in a postmodern world, where individualism rules. Self-will, rather than God’s will, is in the ascendant.

The call to a new life of self-identification with God is seen by Law not just for an elite of mystics but is offered to all and will slowly create a new human identity in the degree to which one does not deliberately resist it.

When this seed of the Spirit, common to all men, is not resisted and quenched, but its inspirations suffered to grow and increase in us, to unite us with God and get power over the lusts of the flesh, then we are born again, the nature of Jesus Christ is opened in our souls and the Kingdom of God is found within us.

This very commonality, however, is an implicit threat to religious authority since, as the following quotation makes clear, it transfers responsibility for development squarely onto the individual and seems almost to make churches and priests redundant.

This pearl of eternity is the Church or Temple of God within thee, the consecrated place of divine worship, where alone thou canst worship God in spirit and in truth, where one finds the fountain of living water, where the mysteries of thy redemption are celebrated, or rather opened in life and power. Wherever thou goest, thou wilt have a priest, a church and an altar along with thee.

This goes not only against the concept and the reality of a hierarchical church but involves a new theory of redemption. As against the orthodox doctrine that we are redeemed through the sacrificial death of Jesus, Law offers a theory of redemption which would never be heard from the pulpit. The following teaching raises the most fundamental questions about standard doctrine and practice, which identify redemption with either acceptance of Jesus as God-come-down-from-heaven or with the act of baptism. Law says,

Our redemption is this new birth; if this is not done or doing in us we are still unredeemed.

Finally, he goes all the way and follows through the logic of his position to say that redemption is not exclusively Christian, but comes about in answering the call to a new kind of consciousness that is universal under all cultural forms, and open to all humans, whatever their religious faith.

There is but one possible way for man to attain this salvation or life of God in the soul. There is not one for the Jew, another for a Christian, and a third for the heathen. No; God is one, human nature is one, salvation is one, and the way to it is one; and that is, the desire of the soul turned to God.

How to attain this new life, other than following the normal Christian precepts, is a theme that Law does not develop in detail, but he does make the vitally important point that the one thing necessary to start on the path towards oneness is the desire to have it, however

feeble and confused that desire may be to begin with. The great mystics, one may presume, are born, like Jesus, with an exceptionally strong desire, but while one might say that a sense of oneness with God comes naturally to them, it is clear from many of their writings that they struggle to understand it and reconcile it with normal human consciousness and with their native religion. Mediaeval Christian mystics, such as Eckhart and Julian of Norwich, compared its emergence with the birth of Jesus in the soul, but this valuable metaphor is, of course, denied to mystics of other religious traditions. One finds a few universal metaphors, most notably perhaps the absorption of the individual drop of water in an ocean of divine consciousness. For the ordinary person, this kind of sensitivity to the divine and hunger for it is not at all natural, and the first steps towards it must necessarily be wobbly and uncertain. Nevertheless, as Law says,

No sooner is this desire arisen and in motion towards God, but the operation of God's spirit answers to it, cherishes and welcomes its first beginnings ... Thus does this desire do all, it brings the soul to God and God into the soul, it unites with God, it co-operates with God, and is one life with God.

Quoting from Jacob Boehme, he describes in a quite startling way the ultimate effect of the long journey that begins with this simple desire for the kind of oneness manifested in Jesus.

The Heaven wherein God dwells is opened in the soul, and there in the soul is the place where the Father begets His Son and where the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son. Christ, who says, "I am the light of the World," is generated and rises in us and shines in the darkness of our nature. Then a man knows, as he never knew before, that he is a stranger in a foreign land.

Within the context of modern science, this can only mean that the man or woman who has had the first experience of unitary consciousness has had the first experience of being a new kind of human and is, like Jesus, an evolutionary forerunner. Those who write of these things tell of its coming at unexpected moments, with a sense of being grasped, as one is grasped by the beauty of a sunset or a flower. Thanks to Paul and modern writers like Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry, we are able to put the experience in a wider context and see it not only as authentic spirituality, in a marketplace of false spiritualities, but as a signpost pointing to the future of the human family.

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