

Oracles, prophets, and dwellers in silence: hints of the “pati divina” in the theology that is being birthed

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Thank you for inviting me to offer you a meditation on the vocation of the theologian. I have dedicated myself to an essentially classical, almost pre-modern style of theology, as I have followed the thought of the French theoretician of desire, René Girard. Let us start, as of course we should, from where the Sacred Page apparently speaks of our vocation.

It is easy to glide over the first part of 1 Peter 4, 11, “whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God”, without having our attention tweaked. In fact, this, from the RSV is a good rendition of the Greek words εἴ τις λαλεῖ, ὡς λόγια θεοῦ. But the word λόγια, very exactly “oracles”, points to a properly mysterious world. Typically we imagine oracles from their pagan sources, like that of Delphos, where the priestess would make mysterious utterances concerning the future. However, in fact, in the Hebrew world also the words of the prophets are called “oracles”, by which something very special is understood. Of Moses it is said¹: ὃς ἐδέξατο λόγια ζῶντα δοῦναι ἡμῖν - “he received living oracles so as to give them to us”. And of the Jews in general it is said that²: ἐπίστεύθησαν τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ - “to them were entrusted the oracles of God”.

All of which is to say that we are being exhorted, in the Epistle of St Peter, to something rather more mysterious than right-speaking, or to frequent quotes from the Bible. It is being demanded of us that we dwell within an act of communication that emanates from the Almighty “in person”.

¹ Acts 7,38

² Romans 3,2

This is where I would like to begin in thinking about the vocation of the theologian in emerging circumstances. By referring to “whoever speaks”, the Epistle has in mind those who have received a certain sort of gift. And it is, if you like, the form taken by receiving this gift in our current context, which interests me.

For indeed, every word is situated, comes from somewhere, emanates from some human situation. And if God were one of the gods, we could easily understand that God’s voice would possess those who might enter into an mystical trance: they would pronounce oracles from out of their ecstasy. After all, in animist religions the spirit “comes down” upon the initiates, and “moves” them to speak in voices not their own, and to say things which apparently do not come from them. The problem is that the gods are projections, functions of the group dynamic. And even though this not be in the initiates’ intention, the voice which speaks through them is a voice moved by the tensions, desires, rivalries and envies of the group.

God, however, is not one of the gods, and one of the ways by which we may understand that it is the Almighty who speaks is that the voice does not emanate from any place within the group dynamic, is not a participant in, or partisan towards, the tensions of those present, but is authentically from elsewhere. However, for it to be authentically from elsewhere, there has to be at least some anthropological basis by which we may detect that it is not part of the group’s dynamic, that a word is being addressed to us which does not come, in the last instance, from ourselves. That is to say, the word emanating from God who is not one of the gods has to proffer itself to us, in addition, as a criterion for our own words. To allow this, it has to have something in common with our world formed by words of self-deception and flattery, but without being rooted in the terrain of our mendacity and convenience.

It is from here, it seems to me, that we understand something of the basic scenario from which theology flows. In this basic scenario, there are two contrasting sorts of ground. One, which is stable rock, and the other, which is quicksand. The scenario is that of the Passion, and in terms of structure, it is easy to understand. We’re dealing with the more or less accelerated movement of a crowd and of religious and political leaders that we call a lynching. That is to say, where the expulsion of someone held to be a dangerous evildoer is orchestrated,

little by little, and without any one person being responsible for it. This act tends to produce a certain peace and unanimity among the participants, who are normally not allies, but, in many cases, have previously been rivals and enemies.

Well, it is not only in the Gospel accounts of the Passion that we find this basic scenario, described with a plethora of details, but also in many other texts, both ancient and modern. Moreover, it is a scenario which, in one form or another, is known to us all, from Incidents (with a capital I) in the political and social life of our respective countries. From Incidents of genocide, of wars, of social and political movements, to incidents (with a small i) in the playgrounds and courtyards of all our schools, convents, seminaries, and so forth. There where the process of the socialization of adolescents typically advances through learning how to prevent the group finger, which picks out the class fairy, or the group weakling, falling on me.

Now, in this scenario, it is typical for the participants to contrast the solid rock of group-belonging with the quicksand within which the cast out-du-jour is sinking. Solidity is constructed by the majority opinion, the shared perception, of who the “good guys” are, and who is the “bad guy”, and why. And insecurity consists in the rapid loss of reputation, of being, of belonging, and in some cases of life itself, undergone by the one upon whom the group finger alights.

Please note that in this scenario there are two voices, two “words”, one might say – two versions. One is waxing strong: the account emanating from the group dynamic as it moves to unanimity against the “evildoer”. And the other, which is on the wane, emanating, with ever greater weakness and loss of credibility, from the one who is on their way out of being, out of existence. The two voices are absolutely incompatible, for one of them says, with every conceivable social and cultural variant: “we have a law, and by that law this one must die”. Which is to say: “All of our movement towards unanimity, and towards the cleansing of our group from whatever contaminates it, comes from God”. And the other voice says: “they hate me without cause”. Which is to say, “The whole dynamic which is leading them to expel me is but a lie, and that which seems so stable now is but a fleeting convenience”.

I would like to note here that the sole condition of possibility of Christian theology is the return, three days after this scenario, of the silenced, dead victim. He reveals himself, with no trace of rancour, and

with all the power of one who forgives those who were accomplices to his lynching, to have been the true protagonist of the scene. So, there begins to irrupt into our midst the strange sensation that that which had seemed to us to be most solid and dependably from God was nothing more than quicksand, and that all the strength and solidity of the immovable rock has been made present to us in the vulnerability of the despised one.

Now please notice something. For this suggests that there are two ways of being a theologian. One is to summon up, from the sacred texts and the laws and customs of any of our groups, religious justifications for the movement towards group unanimity, by contrast with some evildoer. For this, the only gift that is necessary is that of party spirit. The other way of being a theologian is through the long process of becoming aware that we have been wrong, that I was wrong to make myself an accomplice to the group in my desire to survive the fatal violence that was threatening.

The starting point of Christian theology is that the weak and vulnerable presence of that man who allowed himself to be despised and executed was a dense, powerful, and deliberate act of communication, flowing not from some sense of party spirit, but from the Creator of everything that is. That is to say, the voice that authentically comes from elsewhere takes in our midst a very specific form which is both recognisably human, and at the same time, impossible as merely human. This is the act of communication from our victim who has come back among us and is letting us off our participation in the lynching. And this act of communication is not simply a reactive "pardon". It reveals itself as the deliberate creative act of one who entered with knowledge aforethought into our midst, and into that place of shame and humiliation. However, not so as to show us how wicked we are. Rather because he knew that we have such fear of that place of shame, that only by his occupying it, and demonstrating that that place is inhabitable, and not toxic, might we begin to be redirected towards other sorts of social construction. Ones that are, in fact, more favourable to our growth, our becoming, and our flourishing as human beings.

The starting place of theology, then, is not only the fact of the basic scenario, but the process of our tumbling into awareness that behind the one who occupied the place of the victim with the waning voice, the implausible account, and the weak presence, there was a power

and a benevolence that were reaching out to us *before we could even begin to imagine them*. The act of communication consisted in occupying that place, which is, in our terms, a non-place, so as to be able, starting from there, to be able to reveal the whole loving-kindness and firmness of the creative power of God.

Well then, if this is true, then the process by which we come to be theologians – those who speak oracles of God – is much more subtle than it might seem. Because our place with relation to the divine voice is not something neutral, objective, and clear; detectable by our mere intelligence and fine education. Our place is, if you will, the highly precarious place of those who are beginning to become aware of quite how much we are bound to what seemed strong, but is in fact only fleeting mendacity. It means that the voice which possesses us and allows us to speak is a voice to which we do not have access except in so far as we allow ourselves to be forgiven, deconstructed, and recreated. No theological discourse is Christian if it doesn't show its foundation in a process of breaking of heart made possible by the generosity of the forgiving victim. In other words, the touchstone of all Christian theological discourse is that it is underpinned by the process of repentance of the one who speaks. In exactly the same way that we are only Church in the degree to which we are learning to leave behind a certain victimary social formation, so as to enter into a gratuitous one which is born of the generosity of a victim not ourselves.

If, then the form which is taken by our coming to be oracles is the process of being brought to speech as we begin to receive the identity and the voice which emanate from the crucified one, that is, from the “non-place” within the quicksand of the violent forms of human togetherness, then something similar is true with respect to the possibility that we might become prophets.

It is very traditional to affirm that theology forms part of the spiritual gift of prophecy to which there are several references in the New Testament. And I do not wish in any way at all to diminish that truth. It seems to me, rather, that there are two ways to falsify it: one sins by an excess of modesty, for it considers that the hard reality of institutional classes, Greek grammar tests, examinations in canon law, and extensive knowledge of the philosophical tendencies of the German Enlightenment of yesteryear, sit ill beside the notion that we are doing theology so as to receive with greater rigour the gift of prophecy. This voice says: “let us be content with small truths, and not

aspire too high". The other sins by an excess of romanticism, for it imagines that the content of prophecy can be given by current patterns of thought, both ideological and combative, more or less easy to digest, which will allow me to be converted into a hero in the eyes of my contemporaries as I seek the martyrial position of being another "good guy" misunderstood and disdained by the world. This voice says: "the great truth which I understand gives me permission olympically to ignore the small truths with which the mediocre busy themselves".

Both excessive modesty and romanticism mislead with respect to the gift of prophecy within which theology is written, for both miss out on what is at its centre: learning to tell the truth. The act of communication that emanates, as we have seen, from the forgiving victim – the gift of prophecy, or speaking from God, has everything to do with telling the truth. It presupposes that the human tendency that affects us all inclines us to convenience, survival and self-flattery rather than to truth. And it offers us a new way of telling the truth: the truth that comes from the victim who is on the way out of the world. Which is to say: starting from its innocence, and its refusal to believe in the reasons which its persecutors give for their hostility to it, starting from its refusal to lay hold of the potential lifebelts thrown in its direction so that it can get on board with them in their analysis of the situation, there is born the possibility of unmasking the lies which abound in the context in which the victim lives.

Now please notice some of the special characteristics of the gift of prophecy born of Christ and of his Spirit. In the first place it suggests that the prophet is not a legislator who dictates the word of God from above, from a position of power disguised as one of neutrality; nor are they a prophet whose ability to foresee the future comes from phantasmagorical supernatural sources. No, the gift of prophecy emanates very strictly from passing slowly and patiently through the process of undergoing potential loss of reputation, of power, of the means of making a living, and even of life itself, for it is better to be dead than to be complicit in the murderous lie. And this process of being stripped of things that are in themselves good, like reputation, ability to make a living, and even life itself, does not happen because I am looking for it, so as to turn me into a hero. It is because I am learning how to love even those who are destroying me, and for that reason, it is worth my while offering them the possibility of recognizing the truth, even if I am not around to see them twig to it, and to witness their change of heart. Starting from this patient process,

it is indeed given to the prophet to point towards things that are to come, because the prophet knows the victimary mechanism and its collateral effects from within.

It is here that I would like to insist on something little taught in our theological (and even less in our clerical) formation programmes. Coming to learn to tell the truth in little things is what will allow us one day to remain standing when there comes upon us the temptation to make ourselves accomplices of the lie in something big. If we despise the little steps in learning to tell the truth, telling ourselves “these are insignificant white lies, of no comparison with what really matters, the grand heroic truth”, then the moment of the grand heroic truth will arrive, and we will not even be aware that we are on the other side, persecuting the one who is speaking it. On the contrary, this text is of lifelong importance³: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.”

I would like to propose a different model for learning to tell the truth than the one that is usual in our discipline, let alone our Church structures. What is normal in those contexts is a paradigm of truth telling coming from two main sources: philosophical thought of a Cartesian stripe seeking certainties held together within a logical system. This can be clearly seen in the neo-scholastic formation that was probably influential in the education of many of those here today. The second source is the mentality derived from a Salamantine legal education, one widely diffused through all the disciplines to be learnt throughout the Spanish-speaking world⁴. This latter puts enormous emphasis on learning big chunks of text, of theses, and of magisterial formulations by rote, so as to be able to repeat them verbatim whether in examinations, or in everyday life.

Well, I want to make it quite clear that I have nothing at all against either certainty, or logic, or formulations, or exercises of memory. However it seems to me that as prototypes of truth telling these paradigms are inadequate. From the seventeenth century up until the present, in the same period as the philosophical and notarial forms that I have mentioned were being forged, there was also being developed, but as if hidden from the gaze of theology, another

³ Luke 16, 10

⁴ From the 15th to the 18th Century the Law School of the University of Salamanca (along with that of Alcalá) provided the bureaucracy of the Spanish Empire.

discourse, another way of telling the truth. A discourse which has given many people magnificent resources for truth-telling. This discipline is that of the novel. Starting with Cervantes and Shakespeare, and moving through the great authors of the nineteenth and twentieth century like Stendhal, Proust and Dostoyevsky, and so to our contemporaries, another, very distinctive and important mode of truth telling has been brought to light. A mode which should not be despised by those who wish to be good exponents of sacred texts having much more in common with narratives than they do with philosophical or legal texts.

The pillars of this narrative tradition, whose peaks are Cervantes and Dostoyevsky, have, I would say, something in common. They allow there to be glimpsed, maybe over the course of various books, traces of penitent autobiography dressed in borrowed garments. Typically they are novels written by authors whose own exceedingly painful process of discovering themselves to have been living a lie, a lie built up by the desires of the group, and one to which they had considered themselves immune, leads them to a profound loss of being, and then to a re-discovery of their social group starting from a new "I", born from the ruins of their previous identity. The excellence of the novels in question is recognized in the capacity of their readers to discover that the story they are being told is their own story, told with a far greater scope and dimensions than they might have suspected, and taking them to an understanding of who they are that they hadn't imagined. In other words, they recognize that they are being told the truth about themselves, unflattering though that experience be.

This, at last, seems to me to be a properly prophetic dimension of the theology that is being birthed, and one we have to re-evaluate. If we are going to be truth tellers, who are learning to tell the truth through having discovered ourselves liars, people caught up in all sorts of mendacity and violence, then we have to learn not only the grammar of theology, which will indeed take us through well-defined institutional phases, ones which may well be clothed in elements of philosophy, of ancient languages, and of legal thinking. However we will also have to learn how to be revisionist autobiographical authors, constantly learning to leave behind those convenient stories of "hero" or "victim" that flatter our ego, so as to stumble into a loss of identity before the one who is our victim, but who is offering us the possibility of a new, and unending life story.

Now this process of the loss of group identity, and of the reception of a new identity that flows from the “non-place”, along with the possibility of beginning to speak in the voice of the one who suffered (and not in our own voice, feeling ourselves to be victims) is not a pleasant process. It is a very painful process, which is not to be sought-out, but to be received as it comes upon us. It means that, instead of talking from *our* truth, built on foundations of shifting sand, we are beginning to give voice to the Other whose love is communicated through us. And this is a process that doesn’t depend on us, but on the true rock, which is transforming this liar into a tiny particle of its own radiance.

Here I fear that I will have to say something rather unpopular, for we are inclined to become tireless parrots of chatty theological verborrea. But this process of letting go of being the bearers of group values and desires so as to become a theologian, is a process bathed in silence. The silence of one who does not know how to speak. The silence of one who has been caught out in an act of false witness, and who knows that their only way out is to go back over their story so as to learn to articulate the non-official version, the inconvenient one in which the wrinkles haven’t been ironed out, nor the shortcuts painted over. And for this I need a good chunk of time in which I don’t say anything, and in which I pray hard to receive the light of the truth concerning what was really going on in my life. Where I have to learn to prefer the truth that comes from the Other to every lure from a more comfortable truth.

The problem is this: no one rewards silence. Rapid response is prized; the one with sure-footed opinions or ready answers in a stormy situation is respected. But there is no reward for the months and years of silence necessary for us to give up lying and make headway in telling the truth. However, that silence, and the non-reactive capacity to tell the truth with no concern for convenience is worth much, much more than what any of us could earn by saying a lot with very little background silence. And this means that an essential part of the shape of how we receive a theologian’s vocation is learning to survive without immediate recognition. In other words, without a capacity for deferred recognition, there is no theology. And that means that without the poverty that goes along with being someone who doesn’t have anything immediately useful to offer, there is no theology.

The silence which births theology is the enormous spaciousness that comes from the One for whom death is not an enemy; the One who is giving us time to reconstruct true life stories, who does not seek to humiliate us, nor that we humiliate others. It is the spaciousness of the One for whom time floats peacefully and with unconcern on sparks of eternity. Let us learn to delight in it.

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