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Behind the Mask of Certainty

Is re-enchantment possible?

The ancient Hopi people of North America have a fascinating rite of passage for their children as they move into young adulthood. Throughout their life these children have been familiar with the Kachinas, the tribe's masked holy men, who bless the corn harvest and bring toys and gifts for the children, like Santa Claus. But one night as the children are brought to the sacred circle, something different occurs: on this occasion, instead of giving them gifts, the Kachinas simply remove their masks, revealing the fact that these figures whom the children thought were gods are actually their family and neighbours – people whom they see every day. It is a moment of sacred disenchantment, when childish naivety gives way to grown-up reality.

Sadly, the Church offers no equivalent of the Hopi ritual; there is no 'Service of Disenchantment' to help us figure out what are the 'childish things' about Christianity that should be left behind, and what are the things we need to hold on to. For churchgoers the process is much more messy and fraught – yet essential. Indeed, paradoxically, experiencing disenchantment with the Christian faith is actually fundamental to growing as a Christian. It is the reality check that brings into question all that we have simply taken for granted, the acid bath that purges naive assumptions, false religious pretensions and unthinking conformity.

But what lies beyond the disenchantment? What do we do when the mask is removed and we realize that things cannot be the way they were – or the way we thought they were? That



is what this book is about. One thing is clear: once the mask is removed it can never be put back in place – the original innocence is gone, never to be restored. Does this mean that we are damned to eternal cynicism, an everlasting cycle of doubt and suspicion? Or is there a second innocence: a means of re-enchantment? Can we still continue journeying confidently with the Christian faith while also entertaining serious doubts and questions?

When the young Hopi sees for the first time the face behind the mask, he or she must face a decision: to treat the whole world of religion as a charade, a sick joke, or to move forward to a more adult reality in the rituals and symbols of their people, a reality that points to a deeper mystery.

In 1 Corinthians 13, St Paul points to a deeper mystery within Christianity, which we cannot fully encounter in this life. What we experience now, he says, is like a poor reflection in a mirror, or an enigmatic riddle. To pursue this deeper mystery through the riddles and symbols of the Christian faith, knowing that they themselves are not that mystery, is to follow the path towards a second innocence, a point of re-enchantment.

Yet it is painfully clear that lots of people don't make it through to a second innocence of faith: we are surrounded by people who used to believe, who used to go to church, but no longer do. Often, it is because they are locked into interpretations of Christianity that they can no longer own or accept. This is very sad, since, in truth, Christian tradition is so wonderfully rich and diverse: there are always other interpretations, other ways of looking at issues, other spiritual paths to explore, if only we know how to find them.

The assumption is often made that those who struggle with doubts and questions, those who drift away from the Church or even from mainstream Christianity, are in some way spiritually substandard; that they lack the grit or piety to pursue the Christian faith. Yet the reality is quite often the reverse: it is the doubters, the people who have outgrown the hand-me-downs of religious certainty yet who continue to ask the questions, who are on a genuine faith journey.

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‘When I was a child,’ St Paul says, ‘I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways’ (1 Cor. 13.11). We are not meant to remain the same, to stick with the same outlook on life or to hang on to the same old beliefs and attitudes, come what may. We are meant to grow as people, and as that growth occurs all kinds of changes will come about in the way we go about interpreting and applying our Christian faith. This can be exciting and stimulating, but it can also be unnerving – both to ourselves and, more especially, to those around us.

For more than twenty years now, the phenomenon of the changing stages of faith has been recognized and studied in various ways. James Fowler, the most influential theorist in the field, has mapped out seven distinct stages that can occur in a person’s faith development. He suggests that, as this happens, significant changes are likely to occur in:

- 1 the way people think;
- 2 their ability to see another’s point of view;
- 3 the way they arrive at moral judgements;
- 4 the way and extent to which they draw boundaries around their faith community;
- 5 the way they relate to external ‘authorities’ and their truth-claims;
- 6 the way they form their world-view; and
- 7 the way they understand and respond to religious symbols.¹

Clearly, the content and form of a person’s faith will indeed change as he or she progresses through these changes of outlook – even, perhaps, to the point of seeming to disappear at times. Yet each stage of faith is, in its own right, fully part of the Christian experience.

The psychotherapist M. Scott Peck, who offers a simplified version of Fowler’s stages of faith, makes the fascinating observation that, if people who were religious came to him in pain and trouble, and if they became engaged in the therapeutic process, they frequently left therapy as sceptics, agnostics

or even atheists. On the other hand, if atheists, agnostics or sceptics came in similar circumstances and underwent therapy, they frequently left the process as deeply religious people. This puzzled Peck: 'Same therapy, same therapist, successful but utterly different outcomes from a religious point of view.' It didn't make sense, he says, until he realized that 'we are not all in the same place spiritually.'² Spiritual growth can mean quite different things to different people at different stages in their life.

There is a stage, perhaps many stages, in life when disenchantment, a process of deconstructing one's faith, is an essential element in spiritual growth. Far from being the end of faith, this simply signals one's need of a deeper and more real encounter with God born out of personal experience instead of unthinking conformity. Sadly, however, this is not the way the process is viewed in lots of churches, where spiritual growth and maturity are equated with ever more fervent affirmations of the Church's teachings, rather than with an honest quest for truth and spiritual reality.

This begs the question: are churches supposed to be gatherings of like-minded believers who all share the same views on the Holy Trinity, salvation, the priesthood, sexuality, the infallibility of scripture and the meaning of the ten-horned beast in Revelation? Or should they, as I believe, be communities of openness and diversity, where sceptics, doubters and dissenters are as welcome as those who appear perfectly settled with the tenets of their faith?

For many of us, the Christian faith is fraught with complex questions to which there cannot be one single, straightforward explanation: questions about the very nature of God, about the person of Jesus, about the Bible, the Church, social ethics, and many other issues. For sure, one does not need a PhD to be a Christian, but when people wake up to the realization that faith is not so simple as they were led to believe, they frequently end up walking away, disillusioned.

Over the past ten years or so I have had frequent visits from students studying theology, many of whom come from conser-

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vative churches. Each of their stories has a similar ring: nothing had prepared them for the onslaught their faith received in the first term at college or university. Like the Hopi who are suddenly exposed to what lies behind the masks, they realize that nothing can ever be the same again. One young man I talked with recently says that there is no way he can return to his home church, let alone pursue the ministry he once thought he would discover. He is leaving college with his degree later this year, but will now seek a very different path in life, which probably won't include going to church. And one young woman told me that her home group were praying against the spirit of liberalism in her college – a conservative evangelical Bible college!

The gap between critical approaches to Christianity and the simplistic spirituality promoted in lots of churches lies at the heart of so much disillusionment with Christianity today. Many long for an expression of the Christian faith that reconciles heart and head, that offers a positive, engaging spirituality which is also committed to grappling honestly with difficult and painful questions, and which longs to make the world a better place.

Is re-enchantment with Christianity possible? Having deconstructed our simplistic notions of faith, having committed ourselves to the critical path and seen behind the 'mask', can we discover a second innocence? I believe so. However, this re-enchantment is not a return to credulity, a recapturing of some previous *enchantment* with Christianity. Rather, it is the realization that, when the processes of doubt and deconstruction have run their course, a deeper mystery still waits to be explored and encountered. After wading through the mire of religious nonsense encountered in some churches, this realization can come as both a surprise and a great relief, as a letter I received in response to *The Post-Evangelical* colourfully illustrates:

A year ago I was in a state of rage bordering on church burning. I felt like Winston having escaped from Big Brother or

the savage in *Brave New World*, and wanted revenge for all those miserable-worm guilt feelings, and the ludicrous new-speak that had been my life for twenty years. There was no church I could go into without having a severe reaction and either walking out or putting my fingers in my ears and going ‘la la la la’ – which my wife found embarrassing and looked like demonization to those who are so wise about these things ... A copy of your book and a visit to Greenbelt were the first indications that I was not entirely alone. I am now completely free from that stifling kind of religion that slowly strangles the life out of you and from the susceptibility to completely flee reality. My spirituality is now my own, not an undigested mixture introjected from a thousand grim sermons and silly books. I can get in touch with the strength of it, deep inside. I can read the words of Jesus, but their meaning has now changed like rain into snowflakes. My mind is now open and not tight shut, and I feel an almost primitive sense of freedom and energy.

Re-enchantment involves discovering expressions of faith and spirituality that one can own for oneself. This doesn’t mean reinventing Christianity but finding ways to inhabit it that feel authentic and credible. Without this, the faith journey will be frustrating, and possibly short-lived.

This book is a primer in re-enchantment. It isn’t a systematic theology or a definitive statement of re-enchanting Christianity, but rather notes from a journey: thoughts and experiences from one who is still travelling the path of re-enchantment. The key is to remain both critical *and* receptive. All too frequently these are mutually exclusive attitudes in church circles, with receptivity resulting in an absence of critical factors, and criticism ruling out receptivity.

Madeleine L’Engle seems to get it about right when she writes:

If my religion is true, it will stand up to all my questioning; there is no need to fear. But if it is not true, if it is man’s



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imposing strictures on God (as did the men of the Christian establishment of Galileo's day) then I want to be open to God, not to what men say about God. I want to be open to revelation, to new life, to new birth, to new light.³

Notes

- 1 James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, New York: Harper & Row, 1981.
- 2 M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*, London: Arrow Books, 1990, p. 188.
- 3 Madeleine L'Engle, *Glimpses of Grace*, New York: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 28.