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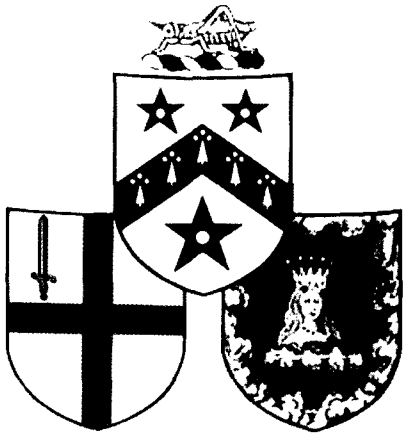

RELIGION ON THE LEVEL

Lecture 4

WHAT IS THE USE OF THE CHURCH?

by

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Religion on the Level

What is the Use of the Church?

Professor Richard Holloway

The title of this lecture is, "What is the use of the Church?" If we happen to be members of a particular Christian denomination we'll almost certainly apply the question to that body; so there will be as many answers as there are churches; and that brings us up against our first real issue. The Church, in spite of the claims that individual churches may make about themselves, is a plural reality, and was so from the beginning. The Church is not, and never really has been, a single identifiable system, with one set of distinguishing characteristics. One classic way of talking about this is to point out that, speaking sociologically, Church by definition means plurality and inclusiveness, whereas Sect means singularity and exclusiveness. It is an inescapable human fact that some people want only to belong to groups of the like-minded, or sects, however tiny. Indeed, the perfect sect is probably a solitary individual with no one around to disturb his absolute sense that he alone is right. Most people recognise that there are many, competing answers to the problems that obsess us and the issues that occupy us, so they instinctively organise themselves into larger groupings that allow diversity and the winnowing effect of controversy on their struggle with truth, and we call these systems churches or assemblies. So far I am not using the distinction in a particularly religious way. It fits many institutions. You will sometimes hear politicians describe their party as 'a broad church', because it represents a wide range of views in contrast with, for example, some of the tiny political sects on the edges of politics in this country. But the Church/Sect typology is a useful place to begin to think about the dynamics the Christian Church.

Until fairly recently, I used to live opposite a living example of the sect-dynamic. When I was a priest in Edinburgh in the Seventies, I lived a few yards from Princes Street. At the foot of the Mound, next to the Royal Scottish Academy, we have a sort of Speakers' Corner, and I used to spend a few minutes looking on and listening in during my Sunday afternoon walk, when most of the action took place. One man fascinated me. He was virulently anti-Roman Catholic, and spent his time proving that the Pope was the Anti-Christ. Like many soap-box obsessives, he was a brilliant debater. When handling hecklers he was quick with historic facts and illustrations, all proving how evil Rome was, and how unbiblical were its most characteristic doctrines. I used to wonder what kind of life he led, this man who was so clearly obsessed with the institution he hated. What did he do the rest of the week, I used to wonder? Did he spend all his time studying the material put out by those dismal Protestant Protection societies, with their endless conspiracy theories, or did he lead an otherwise normal life in the bosom of a happy family? I got the answer a few years ago, when I moved into the flat I live in now. I noticed that he lived with a large dog in a basement in the crescent opposite. Several times a day I would pass him in the street with his dog, walking swiftly, head down. He lived alone, spoke to no one, seemed to be visited by no one. On my way to the early morning eucharist at the Cathedral I would pass his lonely figure. It was a triumph when I got him to return my good morning greeting with a grunt, although there was never any eye contact. He has moved on now, I think. I certainly have not seen him for months. For me, he encapsulated the almost psychotic imperative of the sect mentality, ending up on his own, hidden away in an anonymous basement flat, nursing God knows what fantasies about the dangers that swarmed above his head.

The main characteristic of the sect and the sectarian mind is fear, whether of pollution or ultimate damnation. Most of us know that there are many weird people out there, with strange opinions, but we are usually undisturbed by their monomania, unless they manage to take over some institution that is important to us, and drive it in their own direction. It is, in Yeat's phrase, the worst who are filled with passionate intensity, while the rest of us are enjoying our ordinary lives. Many obsessive sectarians are probably also psychotic, but I do not want to trespass into the area of mental health tonight, except to point out that at the root of much religious sectarianism is a kind of ultimate fear. Religious anxiety goes back a very long way

and is probably behind the ancient sacrifice system, with its detailed placation of angry gods. I don't want to dig back as far as that. The sacrifice system itself is almost extinct, though William Dalrymple found remnants of it in Eastern Orthodoxy during his travels in the Middle East when researching his book, *"From the Holy Mount"*. The language of placation, however, is very much a part of the Christian tradition still. George Mackay Brown gives us an entertaining example in his book, *"An Orkney Tapestry"*.

"We'd do weel to pray", said a North Ronaldsay fisherman to his crew as another huge wave broke over them. It had been a fine day when they launched the boat. Then the sudden gale got up. Willag was a Kirk elder. The skipper told him to start praying. Spindrift lashed in and over.
'O Lord', said Willag, 'Thou art just, Thou art wonderful, Thou art merciful, great are thy works, Thou art mighty'.
Willag faltered in his litany of praise. The boat wallowed through a huge trough.
'Butter him up', cried the skipper, 'butter him up'". [1]

It is easy to figure out the connections between the sometimes overblown language of praise and worship in the Christian liturgy and ancient styles of address of the sort that is only now applied to the queen in Britain. The presence of sectarian anxiety has a less straightforward background, but I would like to suggest one possible explanation for its survival in Christianity. We'll encounter this anxiety increasingly as we get to the end of this, the last year of the second millennium, and the newspapers are already providing us with interesting examples. For instance, the Israeli government recently deported some members of a Christian sect that had gone to the Holy Land to wait for the end of the world. They are quite clear about the cataclysmic side-effects that will accompany the end, such as passenger planes plunging to earth, because some pilots, members of the elect, will be caught up by God into the Rapture that will precede the end, while the rejected passengers plunge to a fiery death below. You can see how the anxiety about the millennium bug in our computers plays right into this kind of religious paranoia. The Scottish newspapers published an article recently about a family from England that has moved to a house on a remote hilltop in the highlands to wait for the end of the world, because they want to be as far away as possible from Heathrow when all those planes start dropping from the sky.

Behind this anxiety there lies an ancient human response to oppression, called Apocalyptic. There is a lot of apocalyptic material in the bible, because the people of Palestine, existing as they did on a narrow corridor of land between opposing empires, experienced great oppression in their turbulent history. The social and economic system of biblical times was a complex domination system that required for its maintenance not only a peasant class, poised permanently between poverty and destitution, but an expendable class who were totally outside the system and lived in the margins and shadows of society. Apocalyptic is the projection onto the future of the longings of beaten people. God will come and smite their oppressors with a sword and establish a reign of peace and justice on earth. If you know the Old Testament, you will already be hearing some of these great passages of desire in your head. Apocalyptic was one of the great themes present in Israel in the days of Jesus, and its protagonists contributed an important strand to the complex religious situation of the time. John the Baptist probably belonged to this tradition. His baptism was an act of preparation for the great cleansing that was to come, when the land would be purified with fire. It is also pretty certain that Jesus went through an apocalyptic phase. We know that he was baptised by John in Jordan, but his work took a radically different turn. He moved from an eschatology of supernatural intervention to an eschatology of challenge and discovery. The longed-for dispensation would not come as a sudden visitation from above, as though the new society was to be magically substituted for the old one, but was already there, latent in human relationships of love and justice, and was to be realised by living intentionally in its presence. One of the best statements of this understanding is found in the Gospel of Thomas.

"His disciples said to him, 'When will the kingdom come?' Jesus said, 'It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying, "Here it is" or "There it is". Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it'". [2]

Jesus already lived in that kingdom of the father, and ignored the system of organised power on earth that divided and ruled. He crossed the taboos between different classes, between women and men, the clean and the unclean, Jews and Gentiles. And the most radical sign of this new reality was that he ate with anyone he chose to. This was one of the most potent charges against him: "This man receives sinners and eats with them", they said. But his earlier membership in the apocalyptic movement is still represented in the New Testament narratives, witnessing to the complexity of the time and the enduring power of these longings among oppressed people. A fascinating example of the same phenomenon can be found closer to our own time in the reaction of the American Indians to American imperialism. Here are the words of a scholar on the subject:

"The Indians suffered loss of independence, economic hardship, and the breakdown of their order of society, and they experienced nativistic revivals passively advocating continued belief in Indian culture by Indians, undertook militant wars of religion like that led by the Prophet and Tecumseh, believed in messianic movements emphasising high morality, like those in the Pacific Northwest, and even began proselytising among themselves as in the case of Indian Shakerism or the Peyote cult"[3]

The apocalyptic strain in religion inculcates in its adherents a sense of special election to the glories of the end time, as well as a conviction that their disciplined holiness will help to bring the time nearer, hence the movements into the purifying wilderness that characterise the phenomenon. More fatefully, perhaps, is the fear of being lost or rejected at the end time, by colluding with the enemy or being corrupted by their values. Again, if you know the Bible you can hear echoes of that voice sounding through its pages. The sectarian mind of today is captivated by the mysterious remnants of the apocalyptic tradition that are present in the scriptures and the Christian tradition. They have a tremendous sense of something of eternal importance being acted out, something that promises either eternal bliss or eternal torment, so getting it right, being among the elect, is vital. This probably accounts for the high anxiety that characterises these systems, their cruelty and dismissiveness. After all, if you are trying to fight your way into the fall-out shelter to escape from the coming nuclear winter, you can't afford to be too magnanimous.

I have placed most of the weight of this kind of anxiety upon sectarian Christians, but we have to admit that they have simply carried to an extreme an element that was in the consciousness of the Church from the beginning. The Church, until fairly recently, officially preached a message that might be described as delayed apocalyptic, in its teaching about hellfire. We'll look at that more closely next time, but I want to underline the fact that high-level anxiety infected the Christian mind early on, and it seems to have its root in the apocalyptic fervour that often characterises oppressed people everywhere.

If the sectarian impulse has its roots in anxiety over being on the wrong side at the end time, then the impulse behind the formation of the inclusivity of church is the human search for truth. In spite of our occasional irritation with the fact, it remains the case that truth is rarely simple and seldom obvious. This is why mature institutions recognise the importance of conflict and disagreement in their search for truth, or the compromises that are often as close as we get to it. The Christian movement was born in conflict, and it has been characterised by conflict ever since. The developed Church's obsession with heresy is negative witness to this fact. Heresy is a bit of the truth, a part of a complicated whole that is exaggerated at the expense of other perspectives. But what has been called the heretical imperative is very important in the testing of truth and the widening of its scope. The Church has wrestled for centuries with the meaning of Jesus and the movement that grew from his life. Jesus did not found the Church, nor did he appoint a set of office bearers with clearly defined job descriptions, nor did he codify and hand down a set of official teachings. What he did was to place himself and God on the side of those the official system defined as expendable outcasts, among whom he generated an excitement about this new understanding of God and one another. He did more than question the received order: he treated it as though it did not exist; he acted as if his own vision of the welcoming father were already a universal reality. He was executed by the system he stood against; he, too, was an expendable man, but the vision did not die with him. It lived on, mixed up with elements of the old system he had opposed, as well as with elements of apocalyptic longing and messianic hope.

In fact, the earliest disagreements among his followers were about the meaning of the strands of apocalyptic expectation that had once been present in his thinking; and whether the movement that gathered round his memory was to stay in Jerusalem, as a messianic sect waiting for his return, or whether his message was for all of humanity and could be taken to the ends of the earth. The struggles around these issues can be delineated in the pages of Paul's letters, and in The Acts of the Apostles. By the end of the 1st Century the Christian movement had separated itself from Judaism, in a way that was to have terrible consequences for the future of the Jewish people; had lost the edge of apocalyptic expectation, though it was to remain an unpredictable and volatile sub-theme throughout Christian history; and had finally settled the gentile question, and was poised to become a universal movement, a world-wide Church. But what did all of this have to do with Jesus? There is an obvious conflict between the spirit of Jesus and the dynamics of institutional power; so to be a follower of Jesus and a member of the Church, particularly if you are an official, creates a difficult tension. Let me try to explain that paradox.

Whenever any new vision or idea is born, whether in religion, art or politics, it requires a process to carry it through history. The process is invented to mediate the vision, to make it present in time. Weber called this process, "the routinisation of charisma". The great, gifted, given thing has to be embodied in a routine, a mechanism, whether it is a political party or a church. And two related and unavoidable things happen in this process. By definition, visions or charisms cannot be perfectly routinised or institutionalised, so the very process that gives them continuing life, also begins to kill them. That is bad enough; what amplifies this process of corruption is that the people who are brought in to direct the routine are usually more interested in, and are better at guarding, the process than the purpose or vision it is meant to serve. The process itself becomes fascinating, takes over, becomes Church for Church's sake; so that the protection and maintenance of the institution becomes the institution's primary purpose. And Caiaphas, who sent Jesus to his death to protect the community of which he was a leader, becomes the patron, because the ethic of institutions is always expedience. It is always expedient that one man should die, or that marginal and unpopular groups be kept outside, rather than that the whole people perish. Some echoes, some remnants of the original vision still get through, of course, so the dangerous memory is preserved; but the main impulse becomes the survival of the institution itself. There is even a kind of tragic grandeur in this necessary corruption, if it is honestly admitted. Part of Abraham Lincoln's greatness as a human being was that he understood how necessary these tragic compromises were to the survival of institutions. He wanted to preserve the Union, without slavery if possible; but if the price of saving the Union was the retention of slavery, he was prepared to pay that as well . In him, as in some other leaders, there is a sense of the tragic grandeur of these necessary compromises with truth and justice, and one can salute those who have to make them. In the legend of the Grand Inquisitor in "The Brothers Karamazov", it is this very dilemma the aged inquisitor describes to the imprisoned Jesus. Jesus says nothing, but he steps forward and kisses the Grant Inquisitor's "pale, bloodless lips". He understands. Even the cruelties of institutional logic are forgiven by the all-forgiving one.

But the paradox of the Church is deeper and more tragic than other institutional compromises, because the Church has the impossible task of developing an institution and its logic of power, in order to preserve the memory of one whose mission was to oppose the processes and sacrifices of power and its ethic of expedience, even at the cost of his own death. In a series of lectures delivered in London in 1998, just before he died, the great Catholic New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown pointed to this paradox. Jesus was only interested in the lost. He was prepared to leave the ninety nine in the wilderness in order to go after the one outsider. He forgave not seven times, but seventy times seven, or for ever. He expressed God's insane love for those outside the great institutional enclosures and their ethic of survival and power, and he went after them, lived among them, died as one of them. But, as Raymond Brown, pointed out, that is no way to run anything, not even the Church! The Church has to care more for the ninety nine in the sheepfold than for the one who is lost, not only because they pay the bills, but because of the utilitarian logic of institutional life that says losing one to save ninety nine makes mathematical sense. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that churches follow the Caiaphatic logic of expedience in order to keep themselves together; and how can we condemn them for their compromises, when our own lives are so cowardly? The difference between me and Jesus is that he paid no attention to relative cultural or institutional values. He always went after the lost, the ones outside; but, and this is one of the most heart-breakingly beautiful

things about him, he understood the corrupting compromises institutions and their leaders have to make; he had compassion on their need to follow the ethic of expediency, forgave them the necessity of his own crucifixion, smiled at Pilate and kissed the pale and bloodless lips of the Grand Inquisitor. It is the unconditionality of Jesus that is so breath-taking. The pain of being Church comes from recognising that we are supposed to mediate that divine unconditionality, and its promise of acceptance of all, while knowing that the mediation system we have invented to do the job will have to operate conditionally, and go on choosing the ninety nine, rather than the ones outside. So, in trying to embody the unconditionality of God's love, we have to contradict it. No wonder Paul said that the Church was an impostor through whom the truth was spoken. The truth of God's unconditional love does get through the Church, often in spite of its own efforts to prove the opposite. The thing that is most baffling about Christian history is the way the unconditionality of Jesus was, in time, converted not only into the conditionality of the Church, but into a cruel conditionality. Worldly institutions, operating the Caiaphatic ethic, throw people onto the human scrapheap of unemployment, in order that the company may not perish. The Church absolutised the same ethic and threw them into hell. Jesus opened up the heart of a God who comes running to meet us in our brokenness, and we ended up, in his name, proclaiming a God who seemed all too eager to get rid of us, unless we happened to stumble on the right salvation programme.

How did this happen? It clearly has something to do with the logic of institutions that we have already looked at; but there is something else going on as well, something that is intrinsic to religion itself. The curse of all religious systems is perfectionism and the guilt it induces. Religions seem to attract insecure personalities, who are so afraid of getting things wrong that they live in constant fear of sin or having the wrong ideas about God and reality, so they create these cruel systems that rule them, telling them how to act and how to think, how to qualify for God's approval. They are obsessed with that need to be right that kills the spirit, as the Israeli poet Amichai knows all too well.

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.

And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

All the competing religions try to persuade people that they alone have the right programme, are the place where, finally, we will be right: "join us and you'll be saved from the anger of God", they say. Two of the prophetic geniuses of this century recognised the fundamental irony of the nature of institutional Christianity and its claim to universality. Simone Weil had a mysterious, unconsummated love affair with Christianity. She was such a lover of Jesus, and was so identified with him, that she chose to stay outside with the eternal outsider, rather than be baptised and join the institution that both bore and contradicted his name. She wrote:

"...in my eyes Christianity is catholic by right but not in fact. So many things are outside it, so many things that I love and do not want to give up, so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence. All the immense stretches of past centuries, except the last twenty, are among them; all the countries inhabited by coloured races; all secular life in the white people's countries, in the history of these countries, all the traditions banned as heretical..."[4]

The other great soul I want to quote is Thomas Merton. He was writing much later and to someone else, but he might have been replying to Simone Weil herself in what he said:

"You don't know how well I understand what you say about not wanting to declare yourself a Catholic and wear the label, which is a political one more often than not, and which implies a certain stoical stand, and an attachment to certain institutional forms, with God far in the background. The only trouble is that this is not the meaning of the word Catholic. It is the complete evisceration of Catholicity, but one which has been expertly and thoroughly performed by Catholics themselves. Thus I feel a certain equanimity and even smugness at the thought of my own possible excommunication. I cannot be a Catholic unless it is made quite clear to the world that I am a Jew and a Moslem, unless I am execrated as a Buddhist and denounced for having undermined all that this comfortable social Catholicism stands for: this lining up of cassocks, this regimenting of birettas. I throw my biretta in the river".[5]

The paradox, of course, is that we could not hear these prophetic voices, could not be in touch with the spirit of Jesus, were it not for the institution that carries his memory and meaning through time, however much it obscures it in doing so. It is an excruciating tension for us all, particularly for those who represent the Church in some official capacity. That is why we have to go on forgiving one another, while we try to live the crucifying paradox of Christianity, which is an essentially compromised institution, driven by the logic of its own survival, yet one that embodies the absolutely unconditional love of the God who is always on the side of the lost and rejected. To be honest Christians, we have to allow ourselves to feel both ends of that tension. We have to meditate on and try to follow the way of unconditionality; yet we have to have compassion on the compromises our weak natures make, remembering that we are more likely to be clear about the compromises made by others than those we ourselves make. We have to remember the forgiveness of Jesus for the ethic of expediency that crucified him. But Jesus not only went after the lost; he challenged those who thought they had been found. So we must also remember that we are not here to preserve the Church from conflict and challenge, not even those of us who are bishops, because we should always be trying, imperfectly and through compromised institutions, to express the absolute unconditionality of God. One of the ways that gets expressed in Christian history is by prophetic minorities who find themselves in the Church as signs of contradiction. One of the heartening things about our own day is that there is an increasing army of Christians whose love of Jesus and the outcasts he celebrated places them on the critical edge of the Church, neither comfortably in nor comfortably out. It's not a bad place to be, and sometimes, right at the back of the crowd, it's possible to see Jesus himself, smiling.

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[1] George Mackay Brown. *An Orkney Tapestry. Page 11.*
[2] John Dominic Crossan. *The historical Jesus.* Harper Collins. 1992. cited on page 229.
[3] ibid. page 105.
[4] Simone Weil. *Waiting on God.* Page 30.
[5] Thomas Merton. *The Courage for Truth. Pages 78, 79.*