

Franciscan Ecumenism

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There is a long history of constructive interaction in Britain between Catholic Franciscan writers and the other Christian bodies. Already in the seventeenth century, Christopher Davenport published a conciliatory reflection on how the Anglican Thirty Nine Articles could be a starting point for beneficial dialogue. By the late nineteenth century, Anglican projects for communal religious life were taking shape that focussed on St. Francis of Assisi. In 1927, this led to a formal initiative, the Society of St. Francis, explicitly adopting some of the language and community outlook which Catholic Friars Minor and Capuchins had already brought back into existence in the country. But some of the most imaginative writing from a Franciscan perspective has come from both Anglicans and Catholics since the nineteen sixties. Members of other churches, the Methodists and Lutherans, for example, have also discovered the attractiveness of the movement that St. Francis set on its varied course to include modern expressions of faith. We can concentrate on some articulations of this charism in the later twentieth century. One Catholic friar, John Baptist Walker, in *Christianity - an End to Magic*, spoke of Christian revelation bringing not comfort but a challenge to probe life's depths of meaning. He pointed out that the Holy Spirit should not be regarded "as possessing the biblical author[s] like a divine hypnosis."¹ A few years later, the former Anglican friar Emmanuel Sullivan, in *Baptized into Hope*, referred to the sincere contemporary search for new forms of community, adding that members of religious communities "will have to be ruthlessly honest with themselves." Religion as a purely functional routine will no longer impress or convince inquirers. Community should be able to "break the polarity" of progressives and conservatives which can render Church conversations empty of love.

Celebrating Renewal Ecumenically.

Both friars composed careful responses to documents from the Vatican Council. Walker welcomed the council's "clear implication" that religious orders as a way of living were "but one way of living out the vocation given to every Christian at baptism," such that any "grading of the People of God into first- and second-class citizens is no longer tenable." While some "psychological experiences" resemble those of mystical writers in other religions, Christianity explains these in a different way. "It sees them, not as ways of leaving behind this unreal world of matter nor as guarantees of union with the divine, but as productive of a kind of God-consciousness that will remind us most intensely of what we are about in a world that, through us, the Lord wishes to transform." Sullivan observed that we respect "signs and wonders of the universe," but in the midst of these "faith too often remains infantile, folksy, immature." Christians can actually have "renewed sensitivity to the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit," as a "renewing breath" whereby intensity will include "authenticity." The Council left the Catholic Church looking at itself in a mirror to discover the image of Christ, consciously present in all members. We face Christian interactions "on the horizon of the world, on the horizon of time as well as eternity." These two understandings overlap and complement one another in many

¹ J.B. Walker, *Christianity - An End to Magic*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972) p. 70, 58-9, 39-40. E. Sullivan, *Baptized into Hope*, (London: SPCK 1980) p.201, 206, 177, 180, 40-1, 165. J.B. Dockery, *Christopher Davenport*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1960) pp. 64-7, 84-93, 146-9.

details. Walker unfolds a Scriptural view of the “mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” evident in the New Testament theme of Jesus having “fulfilled Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles.” The Last Times “have truly arrived; yet they will not find their completion until this Spirit flows through the heart of every human being.” Or as Sullivan puts it, the Pentecostal experience “is the beginning of mature involvement with the Church in society.”

Although effective preaching is a central concern of Franciscan theologies, it is wrong to assume that friars have given no thought to surrounding liturgical circumstances. Moreover, an ecumenical language of worship has become increasingly significant in our days. Thus, on the Catholic side, Mark Searle, a Franciscan liturgist, wrote on the grace of “the mysteries of [God’s] love” in a book, *One at the Table*, with the subtitle ‘the reception of baptized Christians.’ This contained an article on improving mutual understanding for couples from separate Christian traditions, and the need for appropriate pastoral dynamics. Searle points out that to speak of baptism as “celebrating faith” might amount to nothing more than a ritual similar to the university “celebration of graduation.” A shared faith language must not “domesticate God to being one who turns on... Grace” as if from a tap, whenever the right words are spoken. But this teaching, that God “offers a personal and social relationship,”² because *he* initiates the participation, puts the Church into a quandary. “The rites signify something that the Church cannot guarantee: the gift of the Spirit.” And this offer or gift has also to be accepted. The credibility of the sacramental liturgy “depends on the openness of all the participants to the divine life that seeks an epiphany in them.” Liturgies are similarly important to Anglican friars, such as Brother Ramon, who reflects on the process of arranging a para-liturgical and active meditation, known as an “Emmaus walk.” Through such events, we might move from suffering, like that of Margaret of Cortona, through disillusionment, to transformation. Ramon explains that for Franciscans, a believer “moves out in compassion towards a needy world” in response to the divine initiative: very much the same belief as was held by Mark Searle.³ They agree that the call of God cannot remain purely subjective. We bring God’s gifts to the world for which they are destined. Great energies can be released, as they happened among later followers of St. Francis like Jacopone da Todi. A “community of love” should also “plumb the dark side of the human condition.”

The path recommended in *Franciscan Spirituality* is described as both “evangelical conversion” and “missionary fervour,” using a range of early biographical accounts of responses to St. Francis, to illustrate the “trembling and protestation” with which even Francis himself learned to “lead God’s people into redemptive freedom.” For Searle, this journey (or *transitus*) aspect of liturgical symbolism expands our consciousness of trends in society. He draws on writers such as Hauerwas, Jung, Fowler and Andrew Thompson to take account of a testing self-commitment, crucial for rearing children. His family focus considered parents to be acquiring a new “way of leaning into life.”⁴ He referred to “spurious faith” which can be faced with ambivalence in day by day relationships.

² M. Searle, ‘The Effects of Baptism’ in R. A. Oakham et al, eds., *One at the Table* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995) pp. 65, 68.

³ Brother Ramon, *Franciscan Spirituality*, (London: SPCK, 1994) pp. 46, 56, 36-7.

⁴ M. Searle, ‘Infant Baptism Reconsidered’ in M. Searle ed., *Alternative Futures for Worship*, vol. 2, (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1987) p. 44. In ‘Sunday: the Heart of the Liturgical Year’, in L. J. Johnson ed., *The Church Gives Thanks and Remembers* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1984) p. 29, where Sunday is when “Christians emerge from the camouflage of lives lived quietly in an unbelieving world and are seen for what they are: firstfruits of the age to come, the beginning of a new humanity set free from anonymous processes.”

Ambivalence typifies the consumer mentality of our society. It may be observable at church events when they are “riddled with cliques” and take social “competitiveness” as the norm.⁵ Liturgical worship should “teach our bodies to house the presence of God” and guide people to “listen to the voice of God in the voice of others.” Searle has more to say about barriers to these benefits, caused by the commodification we impose on God’s material creation. “What was meant to speak to us of God and to further our ties with one another now becomes a matter of personal possession, arbitrary exploitation.”⁶ Integrity, in contrast to this, is not simply personal taste.

It is God’s justice, and that is seen in “events that embody and fulfil his will.” If we watch a film like *The Godfather*, we can realise how people “draw each other into the vortex of evil,” and hence we learn to value more our capacity for mutual support.

Shared Imagining.

Imagining social and communal alternatives, as a feature of conversion can, moreover, enable healing to achieve a profound presence. Scripture and the spiritual experiences of key Christian figures both make good starting points for developing imaginations that are more generous. Thus, amongst the Anglican friars, Terry Tastard compared four spiritual figures, placing St. Francis alongside Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton and Evelyn Underhill.⁷ Social justice is an area of shared consciousness, aiming at communities of “resistance” to divisive social norms, as when St. Francis “befriended... the criminal underworld of the forests.” Tastard’s fellow Anglican Franciscan, Barnabas Lindars took a more academic approach, training as a Scripture exegete. He has written, for instance, on six Son of Man sayings in Mark’s gospel and the hypothetical Q text. What Jesus understood as symbolism about facing the future well, with the sign of Jonah given to “this generation,” he explores in terms of the resurrection and “a sign... of the display of divine power yet to come.”⁸ The figurative thinking in eschatology, which prepares our imaginations to face the future, is also important to American Catholic Franciscan theologian Zachary Hayes. Traditions must be “critically examined,” to contribute to questions of “the final destiny of the human race and of the world.” Any merging of, or creative interplay between traditions, has to ask outside of biblical frameworks what agreement can be reached in faith and hope about a compassionate future.

Lindars shapes his theology not purely within exegetical parameters. One of his articles, on “perils” of biblical preaching, observes that generally sermons “should contain as little as possible,” rather than being crammed with all sorts of speculations.⁹ The preacher should therefore “maintain a certain reserve,” learning to ease various tensions, even choosing for the community’s sake “a possibility which he himself does not prefer.” Biblical categories are “not impersonal,” but involve ideas of “promise and fulfilment,”

⁵ M. Searle, *Liturgy Made Simple*, (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1981) pp. 20, 26, 27. For fellow friar Regis Duffy, participation means “active and fruitful,” in ways that bypass clerical models. M. Searle ed., *Parish: A Place for Worship*, (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1980) pp. 113, 115.

⁶ M. Searle ed., *Liturgy and Social Justice*, (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1980) p. 26-7, 16. M. Searle et al., *Three Talks on Penance*, (London: St. Thomas More Centre for Pastoral Liturgy, 1972) p. 9 on *The Godfather*.

⁷ T. Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989) p. 118.

⁸ B. Lindars, *Jesus, Son of Man*, (London: SPCK, 1983) p. 40. Z. Hayes, *What are they saying about the end of the world?*, (New York, Paulist Press, 1983) pp. 16, 11.

⁹ B. Lindars, ‘The Perils of Biblical Preaching’, ‘Professors, Priests and People’, in *Church without Walls*, (London: SPCK, 1968) pp. 88, 89, 90-91, 67.

and the “personal immediacy” of Jesus’ message. There must be vitality and inner meaning being brought to the fore. Theology, he observes, must be a real calling, not a “*substitute* for commitment.” But as a real calling, it has to ask people to make some adjustments to many customary blends of imagination and piety. The Catholic writer J.S. Kselman indicates specific areas such as “limitations of Jesus’ knowledge about himself” and “the historicity of the infancy narratives,” which Lindars quotes as “sensitive problems,” in a collection of articles relevant to ARCIC, the dialogue process for better understanding between Catholics and Anglicans.¹⁰ We could mention Catholic Franciscan exegetes, such as the American Leslie Hoppe, working on Joshua and Judges, to provide ideas relating to charismatic leadership. It is also relevant to quote the view of the Baptist Harvey Cox that we no longer have a medieval institution which “somehow made St. Francis understandable to the emperor,” while allowing peasants, monks and knights “to see some sense in the calling of the other.” Our imaginations are in danger of becoming symbolically out of touch with one another. New story language has become essential. But Cox somewhat overlooks the varied contributions to this that can derive from St. Francis.

One way of recovering shared imagining is to focus on how we create communities which are capable of stories of healing, forgiveness and mercy. Hayes places this prospect on a profoundly theological footing by quoting Rahner: “any salvation from a sinful situation can ultimately take place only when man stands as an utterly free agent before the Mystery encountered at the limits of life and experiences the depths of creature-hood and finitude.” The English Catholic Franciscan theologian Eric Doyle would agree. Not only was he a friend of Zachary Hayes, he also upheld similar academic sympathies through the topics of creation, incarnational community, Christology, the roles of women in the Church, eschatology and ecumenism.

Vision and Healing.

Eric was an active contributor to the ARCIC debates on improved interaction between Catholic and Protestant churches in general. He would not limit the discussion to ecclesiastical debates about hierarchy and structures. He draws on the idioms of peace-making and reconciliation which play a large part in letters and writings of Francis and Clare, and in the substantial biographical narratives of the early Franciscan communities. The theological profundity of St. Bonaventure is also significant, in several respects. Doyle linked Bonaventure to Paul Tillich’s statement that removing mysticism from Christianity would be fatal, would reduce it to “intellectualised faith and a moralised love.”¹¹ With this goes willingness to dialogue with people who live in a pluralistic world, having “no common philosophical basis.” If anyone finds deeper meaning in Christ’s life, death and resurrection, it occurs, however, in terms of communities which avoid “flagrant injustice.” Ecumenical theologies are now what affirm this view, theologies “for which authenticity not validity is a primary category.” Prayer can be the path by which we learn this. For there we realise that “we exist because God wants us, as ourselves, to exist.” God “cannot grow hot or cold in our regard” so we must not project our changeability onto him. “He gazes at us in his sovereign holiness... and by this gaze conserves us in being.” If

¹⁰ B. Lindars, ‘Bible and Church’ in M. Santer ed., *Their Lord and Ours*, (SPCK, 1982) p. 18. H. Cox, *The Feast of Fools*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) p. 93. Z. Hayes, *To whom shall we go? (Christ and the mystery of man)*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1975) p. 50.

¹¹ E. Doyle, ‘On St. Bonaventure’, ‘Pluralism in Theology and Search for Meaning’, ‘On Praying and Being Human’ in J. Raischl and A. Cirino eds, *My Heart’s Quest*, (Canterbury: Franciscan International Study Centre, 2005/ Tau Press) pp. 209, 465-6, 485.

we find ourselves to be counterfeit, Hayes will prompt us to allow the gift of being to “develop into ever deeper, richer realizations,” into fuller love.¹²

Published in September/October 2017 Vol. 13, Issue 5 of *The Pastoral Review*, pp. 37-41.

¹² Z. Hayes, *The Gift of Being*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001) p. 123,