27 February 2021

The Ground of Identity (Mark 8. 31-38)
© Sarah Bachelard

Last week, we embarked on our Lenten journey and I introduced the theme I'm proposing we explore over these weeks of preparation for Easter. It's to do with the shape and process of our collective 'recovery' from the Covid-19 pandemic. This inquiry was prompted for me by the book, *Upturn: A Better Normal After Covid-19*, edited by Tanya Plibersek of the Australian Labor Party and comprising contributions by leading practitioners from a range of fields. As I said last week, there's much in this volume's vision with which I agree. But what has struck me is the absence of any sense that there's a spiritual dimension to this work of recovery or that religious communities, faith-based world views, or spiritual practice may have a part to play in generating the 'better normal' to which the essays aspire. During this week Peter pointed out an irony in the fact that the proceeds of the book go the Reverend Bill Crews Foundation and the Wayside Chapel, as if, he said, 'those institutions can be endorsed for doing good works but apparently that's where their contribution to a post-Covid world ends'.

Yet having raised this issue, when I ask myself what actually is missing from the book, or what is the distinctive contribution of faith-based communities to this work of recovery, I don't find it easy to articulate. It has something to do with the values we hold and wish to see lived out, but by itself that's not enough. The authors of *Upturn* share a vision of justice and the common good to which many of us, I think, could commit. So there's something else I think we need to get at. And at the end of last week's reflection, I invited you to share with me in this work of inquiry. What does your practise of faith and prayer make available for your life and work? What goodness and grace does it enable, and what's missing when it's not active or

engaged? Already a number of you have been in touch to share your reflections – and I am looking forward to more of this dialogue as part of our series!

Tonight, I want to continue our exploration in relation to a key issue that confronts many societies at this time. It's the question of how we relate and respond to difference – differences of opinion and political allegiance, as well as differences of race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. It's the question of how, in a post-Covid world, the polarisation of discourse and dehumanisation of the other that is apparent in too much of our public life might be transformed for the good of all. This theme is explored in *Upturn*, particularly in relation to racism, by Professor Tim Soutphommasane.

Professor Soutphommasane was born of Chinese and Lao parents, refugees who fled Laos in 1975. He was formerly Race Discrimination Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission, and is currently a professor in sociology and political theory at Sydney University.[1] He begins his essay by noting that minorities 'rarely fare well during pandemics. During the bubonic plague of the 14th century in Europe, Jews were accused of poisoning wells and suffered pogroms in retaliation'. Outbreaks of cholera in the US in the 19th and 20th centuries were blamed respectively on Irish Catholics and Chinese people, and so it has been, he says with Covid-19. 'Given the pandemic's origin in Wuhan, China, there has been a predictable surge in anti-Asian racism in many countries', including in Australia.[2]

Soutphommasane then goes on to write of the dangers posed more generally by the ascendancy of 'populist nationalism' in various countries (think Trump and the alt-right, Brexit, fortress Australia). This is a nationalism that inevitably generates itself against 'foreigners and so-called globalism'. And he argues that combatting these tendencies in a multicultural society such as ours will require a more emphatic public stance against racism, especially at the political level, significantly increased racial diversity in the leadership of institutions, and appropriate pathways to

---

[1] Currently, Tim Soutphommasane is Professor of Practice (Sociology and Political Theory) and Director, Culture Strategy at the University of Sydney.
[2] In *Upturn: A Better Normal after Covid-19*, ed. Tanya Plibersek (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2020), p.165.

citizenship for migrants.[3] He speaks also of the significance of small acts of solidarity between citizens. 'The little things, the small gestures and exchanges between us, have taken on new meaning', he writes. 'For a multicultural nation such as ours, it has become all the more urgent to stamp out the racism, often insidious, creeping into the lives of many of our fellow Australians'.[4] And with all this I agree.

The question Soutphommasane doesn't ask, however, is what lies at the root of this terrible human pattern of weaponizing difference – whether racial, religious, sexual, political and so on. What is it that enables its exploitation and manipulation, especially in times of crisis and social stress, such that in our day whole media outlets can dedicate themselves to undermining the solidarity of citizens, fomenting anger, blame and misunderstanding? How is it that this polarising, aggressive, merciless way of seeing and being towards the other finds, all too often, such a receptive listening?

At heart, I suggest, it has to do with the sources of our identity. John Main wrote: 'What we discover in meditation is the power-source that enables us to live without the anxiety of having to protect ourselves; it is established right at the centre of our own being, in our own hearts, "God is the centre of my soul"'.[5] The human default, by contrast, is to establish ourselves at the centre of our souls. We seek – not consciously, but as a built-in feature of the human operating system – to possess and sustain our identity, our meaning, our value, out of our own resources.

This can be more or less problematic. Sometimes the identities we live from are intrinsically falsifying – based in stories about our worthlessness or weakness, for example, or about our racial, ethnic or religious superiority. At other times, the identities we live from can be rich and – at least to a point – true. And particularly when my humanity has been dishonoured and subjugated in a given culture (because I am black or gay, indigenous or female), it can be enormously liberating and empowering to come to know, honour and accept 'who I am'. Yet even here, the danger is that as long as my sense of self is wholly given by an identity I control or

[3] Soutphommasane, *Upturn*, pp.169-172.
[4] Soutphommasane, *Upturn*, p.173.
[5] John Main, *The Heart of Creation* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008).

need to assert, it also becomes something I need to defend against attack; something that can be threatened by the words and actions, even the being of others. Our ego-ic identity is always fragile, incipiently anxious, self-protecting, competing for acknowledgement and enlargement.

And this means that when I feel myself threatened *at this level*, I tend to react violently. Someone criticises and disvalues me, and my immediate instinct is to push back, find something to criticise or devalue in them. Someone blames me or calls me account, and I blame them right back – or at least energetically justify myself. I'm made to believe (by Sky News) that a group of people (migrant workers, transgender people or left-wing radicals) threaten my security or sense of my own goodness, and I want them wiped from the social or political landscape. Our ego-ic identity is intrinsically threatened by disagreement and difference, and prone to violence.

And this is why, said Howard Thurman, the African-American pastor and civil rights leader, the real transformation of such threatenedness and violence 'is possible … only on the basis of a transformative encounter with God. Only in that encounter does the soul open itself to a new way of living, [of being]. In the mystical encounter of prayer … people are driven to confront the core issue of violence – the self-righteous and egoistic self. The ego is thereby displaced from its throne, replaced by the desire for union with the beauty of God. Our false selves are undone, and we realize the dignity of every person'.[6]

This transformative encounter is what we practice in meditation, as we deliberately lay down the self-reinforcing story that keeps our ego-ic identity in place. This, I take it, is what Jesus is teaching. Peter has just rebuked him for not resisting the threat to his life. And Jesus says: 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. And he goes on: 'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves … For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake', and for the sake

---

[6] Myles Werntz, 'Howard Thurman's contemplative nonviolence' in *The Christian Century* (August 15, 2019), https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/howard-thurman-s-contemplative-nonviolence

of the good news of God's love for all – they will save it. This isn't about being a doormat; it's about letting go our threatened ego-ic identities so as to discover beyond them, a self infinitely more spacious and loving, a self that knows its communion with God and with all.

This shift in the ground of our identity doesn't magically remove fundamental disagreements we may have about the direction of a society or our means of realising it. There remain differences in culture and values, as well as injustices that need to be named and overcome. But it does shift how we relate to our differences and their meaning. For now they signify not the end, but the beginning of discourse and engagement. And the more we know ourselves sourced, beyond our ego-ic identity, in the One who makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, the more this same unreasoning love for all people somehow penetrates and transforms the quality of my own responsiveness.

Religion is often implicated in the weaponizing of difference. It's seen by many as more likely to be part of the problem than the solution, and often it is. But I am suggesting that contemplative practice, the practice of learning to leave our attachment to our ego-ic selves behind, is in fact our only real access to being-in-communion. Tim Soutphommasane writes: 'The kind of nation we rebuild – the kind of social contract we re-enact – will be determined not just by government, but by us as citizens'.[7] It encompasses, as he says, ordinary acts of kindness between us. And it seems to me that our capacity for these acts, ordinary and extraordinary, will reflect the extent to which we can be genuinely *with* each other, struck by the wonder and beauty of the other, and glad that we share a world. This isn't a matter just of sincere conviction and good intention. It involves the slow, painful, patient work of being displaced from my self-centredness and self-defendedness, being so yielded to God that the love of God grows within me. For this, as Martin Luther King said, 'is the only way to create the beloved community'.[8]

---

[7] Soutphommasane, *Upturn*, p.173.
[8] Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love* © 1963 by Martin Luther King Jr. (London: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1986), p.54.