

Diana Goss Essay 2007

Liberating both Theological Reflection and Pastoral Care

John McAlpine

Supervision and Theology

I have been a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) Supervisor twenty one years, and have had the privilege of accompanying two hundred and eighty eight CPE students during that time. A consistent challenge that I face as supervisor is to get students to engage in robust theological reflection regarding their personal selves and their pastoral relationships. Typical responses from CPE students when invited to reflect theologically range from: 'I've never been to theological college; I don't do theological reflection', to 'I have a theological degree and this is what the experts say'. Other students understand theological reflection to mean: 'have a pastoral experience, then search a biblical concordance to find a scripture verse that supports, or at least echoes, what happened in that pastoral experience'. Happily (for me?) there are also students who have a wider appreciation of theological reflection (e.g. those who have experienced *Education for Ministry (EFM)*, or the like) and who relish Liam Walsh's description of theology:

*Theology is the human taking hold of the Word of God, the kneading of it, the shaping of it into human words and images, and the baking of it in the fire of critical thought, so that it can be received as the bread of life by God's people... theology needs to have the full range of human experience in it.*¹

I delight in the memory of a CPE student discovering something of Walsh's vision of theology. She was a Catholic Sister who had spent much of her ministry with sleeves rolled up, scrubbing floors, preparing meals, visiting the sick, assisting struggling parents and children, ministering in prisons etc. She balked at the idea of 'theological reflection': "Never been to theological college, don't do big words, don't do theology!" I pointed out to her that, since the Second Vatican Council, she and her Sisters had consistently and courageously tackled change, re-visited the unique charisma and call of their founding forebears, attended innumerable scripture seminars and the like. Surely she 'did theology'? She remained unconvinced and unsure that she had anything 'theological' to offer within the CPE group. One day the group had been discussing a particular topic and this Sister, having listened for some while, interjected: "I see it differently!" She began to express her alternative viewpoint, struggled to find the right words, looked to me with 'OK to use the white-board?', stood up before the group and with white-board pen in hand, proceeded to 'mind-map' her emerging ideas on the white-board, all the while waving her hands around to emphasise her point. Ten minutes later, white-board filled with words, circles, arrows, and pictures she concluded: "That's what I think - I think!" The group broke into spontaneous applause, exclaiming: "Behold the theologian!" Her face said it all: "Oh that's theological reflection; why, I've been doing this all my life!" There was no holding her back thereafter.

I don't believe that it is my task (or right) as a CPE supervisor to change a student's theology. I do believe, however, that one of my supervisory tasks is to assist students to understand how their theology shapes and informs their pastoral practice e.g. put crudely: if you think the world is basically corrupt and that Jesus has come to save us from this corruption to take us to a better world, then you will approach people in a particular way; if you believe that the world is basically good and that Jesus has come to invite us to a fuller appreciation and participation in this (God's) world, then you will approach people in another way. The way we think about *Jesus* (Christology), *Church* (Ecclesiology), and *Mission* (Missiology) shapes our pastoral practice. The way we think about *Scripture* and *Revelation* shapes our pastoral practice. Our *imago dei* indeed shapes our pastoral practice.

Obviously in the relatively brief period of a CPE course it is not possible to review all one's theological thought and belief. However, I have found that some simple constructs can invite CPE students into using more than one theological lens. One such construct I have used of late is taken from the work of Marcus Borg, specifically from his book '*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*'.² He suggests three theological lenses, based on three scriptural macro-stories.

¹ Walsh, Liam op in *Building Bridges: Dominicans Doing Theology Together*, edited by Margaret Ormond op, Marco Salvati op, Joao Xerri op, Dublin, Dominican Publications/Manila, UST Publishing House, 2005, p.202.

² Borg, Marcus J: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: the Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*. Harper Collins, New York, 1994. Paperback Edition 1995, pp.119-140.

The Centrality of Story

Story is central to our human lives: central in the Scriptures of the Jewish people, central in the Scriptures of the early Christian movement, central in our own journey of life, and in the life journey of our 'clients', as we, and they, discover and write our own scriptures i.e. our stories of our journey towards and into God and God's journey with and into us.

Three Macro-Stories

Borg names three macro-stories as at the heart of Scripture:

- **The Exodus Story**
- **The Exile and Return Story**
- **The Priestly Story**

These three stories are central to the Bible. They shape the Bible as a whole, influencing the religious imagination and understanding of both ancient Israel and the early Christian movement. Each story images the us-God relationship in a particular way.

William James in his work *'The Varieties of Religious Experience'* (1902) argued that all the religious traditions of our world make two claims:

- that there is something wrong with our lives as we commonly live them (the 'human condition')
- that there is a solution to the 'problem / human-condition'

Borg invites us to consider how each of these three scriptural macro-stories:

- images the 'human condition'
- images the 'solution'
- images us and our lives in relationship to God, (the us-God relationship)

The Exodus Story

Here we have a story:

- grounded in an historical event
- foundational for the people of ancient Israel
- to be told by all parents to their children
- remembered and celebrated liturgically, again and again, especially at the annual Passover festival
- about the past, and about the present (not just about ancient Israel, but also about us now)
- that images the us-God relationship in a particular way

This story is about:

- **bondage**: physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and political etc.
- **liberation**
- a **journey**
- and a **destination**

Borg believes that the feeling of being in bondage (slavery) and longing for liberation runs deep within us. So, if our problem is bondage, what is the solution? **A journey of liberation** involving:

- **letting go** and **passing through**
- a long **journey** through the wilderness where God is encountered
- discovering that the **destination** of the journey is **life in the presence of God**

Seen through the lens of the Exodus macro-story (metaphor), our us-God relationship becomes a journey from a life of bondage into the deep liberating presence of God.

The Exile and Return Story

Here we have a story:

- grounded in an historical event
 - seared into the consciousness of Israel and shaping their life and religious imagination
-

- about the past, and about the present (not just about ancient Israel, but also about us now)
- that images the us-God relationship in a particular way

This story is about:

- **separation** (being cut off) from all that is familiar and dear, from that to which we belong
- **grief, anger, powerlessness** and **marginality**, and often **oppression** and **victimization**
- separation with **physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual** and **political** dimensions

Borg believes that the feeling of being separated from home and longing for home runs deep within us. So, if our problem is exile, what is the solution? **A journey of return.**

Seen through the lens of the Exile and Return macro-story (metaphor), our us-God relationship becomes a journey with God to where God is present, or to a deeper presence of God, a homecoming, a return. This story speaks of God aiding and assisting those who undertake the journey.

The Priestly Story

Here we have a story:

- not grounded in an historical experience, but rather in an institution of ancient Israel - that of temple, priesthood and sacrifice
- of sin, guilt, sacrifice, and a search for forgiveness
- with central notions of: impurity, defilement, uncleanness and cleansing, washing, covering-over
- of the priest being the one who makes us right with God by offering sacrifice on our behalf

This story is about:

- being **sinners who having broken God's laws**
- standing **guilty before God**, the law-giver and judge
- being **out of right relationship with God**

Borg believes that the feeling of being out of right relationship with God runs deep within us. So, if our problem is 'out of right-relationship', what is the solution? **A journey to discover acceptance and forgiveness.**

Seen through the lens of the Priestly macro-story (metaphor), our us-God relationship becomes a story of being out of right-relationship with God and seeking / finding acceptance and forgiveness in God (only to discover that God has already been seeking for us).

Jesus and the Three Macro-Stories

I concur with Borg in believing that Jesus was profoundly influenced by these three macro-stories. I see Jesus as the 'sacrament' (visible sign) of God liberating, welcoming home, accepting and fore-giving. I also understand that as Church we are called to be 'sacraments' of Jesus who is the 'sacrament' (visible sign) of God liberating, welcoming home, accepting and fore-giving.

The New Testament authors present the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection with images drawn from these three macro-stories, and these stories have also shaped Christian theology about Jesus (Christology) over the centuries e.g. Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen (1879-1978) in his classic work '*Christus Victor*' (1931) identified three main understandings of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the history of the Christian theology:

- Jesus Christ as **Victor** over the powers that hold human beings in bondage i.e. as '**Liberator**'
- Jesus Christ as **Revelation** or **Disclosure** revealing that which is 'true' including disclosing what God is like: loving, compassionate etc; as **Light** who calls us out of darkness i.e. as '**Living Way home to God**'
- Jesus Christ as **Dying Saviour** i.e. as '**Sacrifice for sin**'

My experience is that too many CPE students look only through the lens of the Priestly story, thus fixating on only one of these understandings of Jesus - i.e. Jesus as *Dying Saviour / Sacrifice / Priest* - with the result that they see their 'clients' only as in need of saving and forgiving. Viewing everything through one lens reminds me of two sayings:

- *if you think of yourself as a hammer, then everything looks like a nail*
- *where you stand is what you see*

However, when introduced to the three scriptural macro-stories many students begin to see both themselves and their 'clients' through new lenses, and are thus enabled to more keenly and accurately assess both pastoral needs and appropriate pastoral responses. Also, more often than not, students discern their own needs more accurately when they view themselves and their stories through these three macro-story lenses.

Marcus Borg describes these three macro-stories as constituting a **pastoral 'tool-kit'** each one addressing a different dimension of the human condition. Some of us (and our 'clients') hunger for **liberation**; others of us (and our 'clients') hunger for **homecoming**; and others of us (and our 'clients') hunger for **acceptance** and **forgiveness**. Beneath their differences, all three stories image the Christian life as a **journey** whose central quality is a **deepening and transforming relationship with God**.

Application

I now offer five pastoral scenarios and ask: which lens would help us to sensitively and accurately understand these 'clients' and then pastorally meet them where they are?

1. Maria lived her first fifty years as a man; married and fathered children. As a man she struggled with issues of sexual identity, sought help from professionals, including church pastors who consistently told her that she was in the wrong and needed to seek God's help and forgiveness. Eventually she left the marriage, claimed her real identity, and now lives as a woman. She is at peace within herself. As a result of Maria claiming her true identity, both her family and her church rejected her. She seeks a new church home. Through which lens did her former church colleagues view her? Which macro-story/stories would help us understand and meet Maria appropriately?
2. Bill has been married for fifty five years; his wife Eva dies after a long illness during which Bill nursed her with tender love. Now widowed, Bill is desperately lonely, contemplates and eventually unsuccessfully attempts suicide. He confesses. Which set of spectacles (which lens) will we be wearing as Bill 'confesses'?
3. A dozen people, all working in a helping profession, attend a workshop on the subject of loss and grief related to people approaching death. The group is invited to engage with their issues of grief, ritual, culture and spirituality. Most voice degrees of resistance to the notion of spirituality, and in particular to Christianity as an expression of religion / spirituality. Fortunately the two group facilitators are both secure in their own sense of 'spiritual' self and are able to expand their participants' vision. What macro-story/stories would be relevant to these participants, both personally and professionally?
4. George's parents died when he was very young. He was fostered by a 'God-fearing' couple, who whilst offering George a place they called his 'home', treated him very inhumanely - all in the name of God ('who must be obeyed to the letter'). George, in his first weeks of CPE, fashioned his learning goals and presented them to the CPE group, inviting us to support him in their achievement. The group readily gave their assent, except for me, the supervisor. "George," I said, "You have some excellent goals here; but I will not agree to support you in your third goal." George looked startled, even shocked: "Why not?" "Read that goal aloud" I gently invited. George read: "I want you (i.e. the group) to *hoe into me* when you think I have made a mistake." I responded gently: "I will affirm you George, I will challenge you, but I will not *hoe into you*, nor will I let anyone else in this group *hoe into you!*" George was stunned. I invited him to stay with his feelings. He went inside himself, and didn't really emerge back into the group for the rest of the session. Later, in one-to-one supervision, I invited him to describe what had happened. He told me that *being hoed into* was his only experience with his foster parents. He told me, with considerable distress, how they had *hoed into him*, year after year. His story was shocking; indeed he had been *hoed into*, often with a physical hoe. Affirmation was never given, only harsh correction. A new goal emerged: *to receive and to give affirmation*. By the end of the course George had made significant shifts both within himself and in his pastoral practice. Which macro-story/stories influenced my pastoral supervision of George?

5. Susan, during the early stages of CPE, senses that she needs to do something different about her prayer life. She has allowed ministry to crowd out dedicated time for prayer. She feels depleted, disheartened and disconnected. Which macro-story is likely to make sense to Susan?

Robert L. Kinast writes:

Christianity began with an experience, the experience of Jesus – his teachings and his deeds, the impact he had on people, the feeling for life he communicated. People talked about this experience, formed opinions about him, and even took sides. Some of those who were attracted to him became regular followers and some were selected by him as his intimate companions.

The culmination of this experience was his death, a shocking and traumatic event, followed by a completely unprecedented experience which his followers could barely describe, much less understand. Convinced that he was uniquely alive after his death, they struggled for an adequate way to express their experience. The language of exaltation and resurrection served as well as it could, but the language and descriptions were meant to carry people into the experience itself.

This remains the goal of theological reflection. The starting point is experience – a full, deep, meaningful embrace of life. Reflection as a method involves recognising what is an event, naming it, relating it to other experiences and reflections, letting it shape the future.

The challenge of theological reflection is to keep theology in the service of experience – not just any experience, however, but the authentic experience of God's presence in our midst.³

Anton Boisen, one of the founders of CPE, encouraged his students to pay careful attention to both their own self and the people in their care. He urged his students to 'read these living human documents' as first-hand living source materials about us and God, in contrast to second-hand statements found in textbooks. I believe that the three scriptural macro-stories that I refer to in this article can help us to better understand our own human condition and our own authentic experience of God in our midst.

³ Kinast, Robert L. *Let Ministry Teach. A Guide to Theological Reflection*. Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1996, pp.xii-xiii.