



### **Fifty Years Of Diverse Peregrinations**

In fifty years of diverse peregrinations - which included forty years of practical involvement with various religions and spiritual ways, practical involvement with extremisms both political and religious, and some seven years of intense interior reflexion occasioned by a personal tragedy - I have come to appreciate and to admire what the various religions and the diverse spiritual ways have given to us over some three thousand years.

Thus have I sensed that our world is, and has been, a better place because of them and that we, as a sentient species, are en masse better because of them. Thus it is that I personally - even though I have developed my own non-religious weltanschauung - have a great respect for religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism; for spiritual ways such as Buddhism, Taoism; for older paganisms such as (i) θεοί and Μοῖραι τρίμορφοι μνήμονές τ' Ἐρινύες, and (ii) ἄγνωστος θεός [1], and for the slowly evolving more recent paganisms evident for instance in a spiritual concern for the welfare of our planet and for the suffering we have for so long inflicted on other humans and on the other life with which we share this planet.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, I disagree with those who, often intemperate in words or deeds - or both - disrespectfully fail to appreciate such religions and spiritual ways and the treasure, the culture, the *pathei-mathos*, that they offer, concentrating as such intemperate people so often do on what they perceive to be or feel to be are the flaws, the mistakes, of such religions and such spiritual ways while so often ignoring (as such people tend to do) their own personal flaws, their own mistakes, as well as

the reality that it is we humans beings - with our ὕβρις, with our lack of humility, our lack of appreciation for the numinous, and with our intolerance and our often arrogant and harsh interpretations of such religions - who have been the cause and who continue to be the cause of such suffering as has blighted and as still blights this world.

As Heraclitus mentioned over two thousand years ago:

ὑβριῦν χρεῖ σβεννύναι μᾶλλον ἢ πυρκαϊῆν [2]

Better to deal with your hubris before you confront that fire

As recounted of Jesus of Nazareth over two thousand years ago:

ὥς δὲ ἐπέμενον ἐρωτῶντες αὐτόν, ἀνέκυψεν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· ὁ ἀναμαρτητος ὑμῶν πρῶτος ἐπ' αὐτὴν βαλέτω λίθον. [3]

So, as they continued to ask [for an answer] he straightened himself, saying to them: Let he who has never made a mistake [ Ἀναμαρτητος ] throw the first stone at her.

One of the greatest gifts such religions and spiritual ways offer seems to me to be the gift of humility: the insight that we human beings are fallible and transient, and that there is some-thing 'out there' which is numinous, sacred, more vast and more powerful than us whether we call this some-thing God, or Allah, or θεοί or Nature, or δίκη or Wyrd, or Karma or ψυχή or simply the acausal. The insight that to disregard this some-thing, to disrespect what-is numinous, is unwise - ὕβρις - and perpetuates suffering or is the genesis of new suffering and which new suffering may well continue long after we, who brought it into being and who gave it life, are dead.

This insight of humility is evident, for instance and for me, in the sacred music of the Christian church; from the simplicity - the numinous purity - of plainchant to the polyphony of Byrd, Palestrina, and Vittoria to the counterpoint of JS Bach. For I find in this music an expression both of κάλος and of the numinous mystery that is at the heart of Christianity, manifest as this mystery is, for Christianity, in the allegory of the life, the betrayal, the crucifixion, of Jesus of Nazareth and by a belief in redemption through both love and suffering. And this is essentially the same, albeit unallegorical and often wordless, numinous mystery which we personally feel or we know or our touched by through that sadness born of our own pathei-mathos; by our acknowledgement of our mistakes, by our personal experience of suffering and grief, and by our heartfelt longing for, our hope for, the beautiful, for the redemption of innocence, for peace and love, manifest for example not only in the Christian allegory of Heaven, in the Muslim Jannah, in the Jewish Shamayim, but also in a very personal often private longing and hope for a better world and which longing and hope we so tearfully know is so often broken or forgotten or thrust aside by both our egoistical self and by other human beings: because of their, because of our, weakness, our failure to be the person we feel or we know we might be or perhaps could have been,

born as such knowing and such feelings so often are in the inner intimacy that follows a personal grief or being a witness to or an accomplice in some act or acts of harshness and suffering.

This inner intimacy with the stark reality of our own being and with the world of suffering is what has caused so many people over thousands of years to try and not only reform themselves but also to try, in whatever way, to alleviate or try to alleviate some of the suffering of others, an effort and a reform so often aided by religion [4] and thus a tribute to those positive qualities, those personal virtues, which religions have so often revealed or reminded us of. Which is why - as I mentioned recently to another correspondent [5] - I incline toward the view that on balance the good that religions such as Christianity have done over millennia outweighs the suffering that has been caused by those who adhered to or who believed in some harsh interpretation of that religion.

There has thus developed within me these past seven years an understanding of my past hubris, my past multitudinous mistakes, and of how a lack of humility on my part - my extremism, my certainty of knowing about myself, my certainty of knowing about some cause or ideology or harsh interpretation of some religion I accepted and adhered to - was probably one of the most significant factors in that hubris and those suffering-causing mistakes. Which personal understanding, together with a decades-long experience of others such as I, led me to hypothesize that one of the fundamental causes of extremism is a masculous certainty of knowing and that, therefore, religions and spiritual ways are and can be - when not interpreted in a harsh, hubriatic, way but rather via that personal humility and that appreciation of the numinous I believe are intrinsic to them - affective and effective answers to such extremism and to the harm that extremists cause.

In essence, therefore, my philosophy of pathei-mathos - my much revised 'numinous way' - is my own spiritual answer, born of fifty years of diverse peregrinations; my personal answer and response to the certitude of knowing, the harshness, that all extremisms (political, religious, and social) manifest, as well as also - perhaps, hopefully - being (as a spiritual way) in some small manner, and now sans a personal belief in *judicium divinum*, some expiation for all the suffering that I over decades caused or contributed to.

The numinous, the beautiful - the divine - remain, to remind us. As someone so beautifully expressed it:

Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel  
Ordnungen? und gesetzt selbst, es nähme  
einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem  
stärkeren Dasein. Denn das Schöne ist nichts  
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,  
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäh,  
uns zu zerstören. Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich. [6]

David Myatt  
2012

### Notes

[1] qv. Pausanius. Ἑλλάδος περιήγησις 1.1.4 -

ἐνταῦθα καὶ Σκιράδος Ἀθηναῖς ναός ἐστι καὶ Διὸς ἀπωτέρω, βωμοὶ δὲ θεῶν  
τε ὀνομαζομένων Ἄγνωστων καὶ ἥρώων καὶ παίδων τῶν Θησέως καὶ  
Φαληροῦ

Also here is a shrine [ ναός ] to Athena Skirados and, further afield, one to Zeus, and others to [the] un-named unknown gods, to the heroes, as well as to those children of Theseus and Phalerus

[2] Fragment 43

[3] John, 8.7

[4] For example, I well remember, decades ago, in the first month or so of my training to be a nurse doing some research into the history of nursing as preparation for my turn in giving a talk and presentation to our class as part of our nursing course; and finding just how entwined religion and the origins of organized nursing were, from the fourth century (CE) Roman lady Fabiola to the monastic infirmaries of medieval Europe to the al-Nuri al-Kabir bimaristan in Damascus [qv. Ahmad Isa: *Tarikh al-Bimaristanat fi al-Islam* [History of Hospitals in Islam]. Damascus, 1939] to the Hospitallers of St John to Florence Nightingale and beyond.

I also remember the hundreds of people met over some forty years whose faith inspired or aided them to endeavour, in social or political or legal or personal ways, to alleviate some of the suffering of others, and who each, in their own way - and whether Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, or Buddhist - helped make a positive difference.

[5] qv. *Just My Fallible Views, Again - Replies to Some Enquiries*. 2012

[6] Rilke, *Die erste Duineser Elegie*

Who, were I to sigh aloud, of those angelic beings might hear me?  
And even if one of them deigned to take me to his heart I would dissolve  
Into his very existence.  
For beauty is nothing if not the genesis of that numen  
Which we can only just survive  
And which we so admire because it can so calmly disdain to betake us.  
Every angel is numinous

A note on my interpretation

*wenn ich schrie*. 'Were I to sigh aloud' is far more poetically expressive, and more in tune with the metaphysical tone of the poem and the stress on *schrie*, than the simple, bland, 'if I cried out'. A sighing aloud - not a shout or a scream - of the sometimes involuntary kind sometimes experienced by those engaged in contemplative prayer or in deep, personal, metaphysical musings.

*der Engel Ordnungen*. The poetic emphasis is on Engel, and the usual translation here of 'orders' - or something equally abstract and harsh (such as hierarchies) - does not in my view express the poetic beauty (and the almost supernatural sense of strangeness) of the original; hence my suggestion 'angelic beings' - of such a species of beings, so different from we mortals, who by virtue of their numinosity have the ability to both awe us and overpower us.

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The above text is an extract from a letter, sent in 2012, to a personal correspondent  
(the translations, and the poetic interpretation of a poetic text, are mine)

Image credit: Botticelli - Madonna del Magnificat

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