

# IMITATING CHRIST

## Wesley's *Christian Pattern* and Spirituality for Today

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This lecture is dedicated to the memory of Gordon S Wakefield

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### INTRODUCTION

The last thing which Dietrich Bonhöffer did, before he entered the execution chamber, was to hand over to Colonel Payne Best his own heavily marked copy of *The Imitation of Christ*, to give to George Bell. It is now in the Bonhöffer Church in South London. He is just one example of a long line of people influenced by *The Imitation* since it was first published. In this lecture we shall examine parts of this tradition, and try to see how it relates to the contemporary search for a meaningful spirituality.

### PART ONE

*The Imitation of Christ* emerged out of the movement known as the *Devotio Moderna* in the fourteenth century. Popular religious devotion was at low ebb, and Europe was reeling from the effects of the Black Death. In this context there were several religious protest movements, not least in the Rhineland. John Tauler (1300 - 1361) developed groups of people called The Friends of God. They committed themselves to a regular pattern of prayer, but Church authorities thought such groups were dangerous. The chief influence on Tauler was Meister Eckhart (1260 -1328), who was condemned as a heretic. This leads us to Gerard Groote (1340 -1387), a Dutchman from Deventer, who, while studying in Paris, developed a life of prayer under the influence of his French confessor. After a time in a Carthusian monastery, he became a deacon and mission preacher, calling on people to hear the Word of God, and to live out the Gospel. He died of the Black Death in 1387. His attitude is summed up in his words. 'Whatever does not make you a better Christian is itself harmful.' The religious life and the active life should go together. The point of life was to search for the love of God, and to serve our neighbours. He was not advocating the formal religious life, but wanted people to live out their faith in their ordinary lives. In fact he was suspicious of the 'Religious'. He wrote:

There are many who are not protected by the name 'religious' and yet can be more religious than those whom the Church calls 'religious.'

He wanted people to enter into a voluntary life of prayer, and to support each other in informal communities. His first followers gathered together in private houses, after the manner of the early Christians. Under Groote's influence, these groups began to spread, mainly in the Diocese of Utrecht, but also around Münster and Cologne. The civil justices became suspicious of these private gatherings, and the Church authorities needed to be convinced that nothing was amiss. In 1402 the Bishop of Utrecht gave his formal approval for these groups, who became known as 'The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.'

According to Heiko Oberman, there are seven main features to this movement:

- 1 They were pious people who lived together and shared resources with each other. This ran counter to the accepted norms of the day. They lived self-sufficient lives, and were very critical of the wealth of the monasteries. Much of their self-supporting work consisted of copying books, and supplying lace and textiles. They took no vow of poverty, but had a simple lifestyle.
- 2 They did not cut themselves off from the local parish churches, but worshipped in them regularly. As a gathering of the devout, they became a testing ground for the religious life, and some joined the Augustinian Canons. Sometimes they added chapels to their houses, but still attended the parish churches for sacramental worship. It helped if they had supportive parish priests.
- 3 In an outward sense, they were not rebels against the institutional Church. They had no distinctive doctrinal stance. During the Papal schisms, they supported the Roman Pope. But there was public criticism of them, and sometimes this led them to move. This had the effect of extending their influence.
- 4 They lived in humility and love, and gave the impression of having a rather moralistic tone. Outsiders saw them as being judgmental. They were trying to live out the faith more seriously than others, and had their own priorities. (This is one of ways in which the Wesleys' 'Holy Club' followed the same path.)
- 5 They were committed to studying the Bible in the vernacular. Latin was the language of doctrine, worship, and canon law, but it was not forbidden to use the vernacular for Bible study, meditation, or private prayer. Groote translated a number of prayers into Middle Dutch for their use in prayer, private reading and for reading at meals.
- 6 They regularly held what they called 'collations.' These were discourses and sermons for the community, and any who joined them. Sometimes they were much more like discussion groups. They were not seen as substitutes for Church sermons, but as a way of sharing their convictions with others. The collation was a focal point of the week.
- 7 They practised 'fraternal correction.' This was a means of giving mutual aid and support to each other. It was not a substitute for the sacrament of penance.

The movement grew steadily and established a *modus vivendi* with the local churches and clergy. The Sisters of the Common Life began in Groote's own house around 1375. By 1460 there were 34 houses in the Netherlands. Some became Third Order Franciscans, others Augustinian. The groups varied in size between 8 and 150.

The Brothers of the Common Life began with groups of men and schoolboys coming together in Deventer, Zwolle and Amsterdam. At Deventer, a local priest called Florens opened up his own house. Later the group moved into purpose-built property. The Brethren grew from 6 groups in 1400 to 11 in 1420, and 39 by 1500. Among the schoolboys was Erasmus. The groups in Holland met together once a year. Another branch of the movement was the Windesheim Congregation of Canons Regular. Their four houses came together in 1385 and, with new statutes in 1402, took on the Rule of the Augustinian Canons. Thomas à Kempis was a member of this community.

The spirituality of the *Devotio Moderna* centred in the person of Jesus. They owed a lot to the sermons of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. This spirituality created an individual and affective identification with the person of Jesus, the events in his life

and, especially, a devotion to the Passion of Christ. The chief means of doing this was to read and reflect on gospel passages. They were encouraged to write down the passages that meant the most to them. Such reflections would be shared in the collations. This method becomes a precursor of the pattern of meditation in the Ignatian exercises. There is a direct link between the *Devotio Moderna* and the Catalan monks of Montserrat, who influenced Ignatius Loyola.

The *Devotio* had little emphasis on scholarly learning, and was more concerned with personal holiness. At its heart was 'inwardness' or 'interiority.' It was a form of contemplation, rather than a path of mystical union. The interior life was seen to be more important than outward expressions of faith, such as pilgrimages, mystery plays and devotion to holy relics. Oberman identifies seven key words that summarise this spirituality:

- a *Conversio*. Ever since Groote's conversion, this was a key idea. It is not concerned with a moment or a means of conversion, rather the essential turning to Christ, in which they sought to nourish each other.
- b *Resolutio / Intentio*. Conversion led to the making of resolutions to follow a holy pattern of life, submitting oneself to the will of God.
- c *Exercitium*. As precursors of the Jesuits, they saw need for proper spiritual training, centred in scriptural reading and meditation, leading to practising the virtues.
- d *Profectus virtutum*. So they had to progress in virtue. One member of the *Devotio*, Zerbolt, wrote a description of this called *The Spiritual Ascents*.
- e *Caritas*. Love was the goal of the whole of life. It is love that binds the disciple to God and reaches out in the service of others.
- f *Humilitas*. Humility is the central virtue. Pride is the greatest evil to be overcome.
- g *Obedientia*. Hence obedience matters. It was obedience to the way of life in the community. It also meant obedience to suffering, as a way of identifying with the passion of Christ.
- h *Cor*. The innermost part of the person is the heart, which inspires all love of God.
- / *Affectus*. The aim of the devout life is to cultivate the right kind of affection and desire for God. In this matter words like 'desire,' 'light,' and 'affection' are fundamental.
- j *Ardent*. The brothers need to be on fire with love for God. The *Devotio* looked for an inner radiance in its followers.
- k *Puritas Cordis*. So they seek to be pure in heart. This is the priority, to have a singleness of mind directed to God. The pure in heart would see God.

Among the surviving documents of the *Devotio* is a *Customary for the Brethren*. It spells out in detail the daily pattern of life. They rose at 3.30 am for prayers, and sought to have a daily Mass. There was time set apart for work. A mid-day meal was followed by a rest. At 8.00 pm everything stopped, and time given for meditation before bed.

Two main people in the Movement were Jean Gerson and Thomas à Kempis. (*The Imitation of Christ* is sometimes attributed to Gerson.)

Gerson lived between 1363 and 1429. At a very young age, he became the Chancellor of Paris University. He was an international figure, helping to resolve the Papal

Schism; he wrote a work entitled *The Mountain of Contemplation* and a treatise on Mystical Theology. He acted as Spiritual Director to many in the *Devotio Moderna*.

Thomas Hammerlein came from the Rhineland village of Kempen, near Cologne. He was born in 1329, and died, aged 92, in 1471. He followed his elder brother, John, into the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer, and became a disciple of Florens and was educated there. He was admitted into the Order of the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine at the monastery of Mount Saint Agnes in 1399, and took life vows in 1406. He was ordained to the priesthood at the age of 34, in 1414. In 1417, he started copying out his own personal missal, but also did copying for others. On several occasions he acted as Novice Master, and twice was Sub-Prior. Once, under political pressures, the monks had to leave Mount Saint Agnes. That was the only time he left the monastery. His writings are numerous. He was Chronicler of the Order, and wrote a detailed account of the life of every member. There are 32 books ascribed to him. As well as *The Imitation* they include *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, *Lessons to Novices*, *The Soliloquy of the Soul*, *The Garden of Roses* and *The Valley of the Lilies*.

As we now turn to the contents of *The Imitation of Christ* we should bear in mind the following remark of J Huizinga in his great book, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*.

Thomas à Kempis was no theologian and no humanist, no philosopher and no poet, and hardly even a true mystic. Yet he wrote the book which was to console the age. Perhaps here the abundant imagination of the medieval mind was conquered in the highest sense.

## PART TWO

*The Imitation* was first published in the Netherlands in 1420. By the end of the fifteenth century, there had been over 100 editions. It was first translated into English in 1470, published in 1503 and by 1520 there were four editions. The best-known English translation was made by Whitford in 1530. This had been through ten editions by 1585, and by 1640 there had been 46 English editions.

*The Imitation* consists of four books, put together in one volume. They do not directly relate to each other. It has no formal structure; you can pick it up at any point and read it. Its reliance on the Bible is very high, with 1,046 quotations, many from the Old Testament, especially from the Psalms. There are quotations from Saint Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart; and classical quotations from Ovid, Virgil, Horace, Pliny and Lucan. It has been suggested that its structure was conditioned by the work of Henry Suso (1295 - 1366). The chapters may well have emerged from meditations in the community. It is generally recognised that the book has been put together in the wrong order, and that Part 4, on the Eucharist, should come after Part 2.

Part 1 is called *The Way to the Spiritual Life*, and begins by establishing first principles. He quotes Saint John: 'He who follows me does not walk in darkness' (8.12) and goes on to say:

These are Christ's words of warning to us, that if we would be truly enlightened and freed from all blindness of heart, then we are to model our life and confidence on his.

Then follow chapters on humility, the need to read the Scriptures, controlling desires, learning from the Fathers, and ends with a reflection on human misery, and the

importance of reflecting on death. These are the principles of the *Devotio Moderna*. The final chapter contains the firm warning: ‘Be always mindful of the end, time lost never returns.’

Part 2 is entitled *The Inner Life* and begins with the assertion that the Kingdom of God is within you’ (*Luke 17.21*) and adds, ‘learn to despise the outward, submit to the inward, then you will see God’s kingdom within you.’

Here we see the *Devotio*’s commitment to the contemplative life. Chapters 7 and 8 focus on loving Jesus above all, and a close friendship with Jesus. The final chapter is on *The Royal Road of the Cross*. Chapter 11, on *The True Followers of Jesus*, explains the inner understanding of the *Devotio Moderna*:

Many now love his kingdom, few carry his cross. He has many devotees of consolation, few of affliction. He finds many to eat with him, few to fast with him. Everyone would rejoice with him; few would suffer with him. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread; few to the draught of his chalice of suffering. Many revere his miracles; few go to the shame of his Cross. Many love Jesus as long as they meet no adversity. Many praise and bless him as long as they get from him some comfort. But lest Jesus go into hiding and leave them awhile, they soon fall deep into peevishness and gloom.

Here is an attack on selfish Christianity and that sort of religion we see a lot of today, that might be called ‘Christian hedonism’ – become a Christian and be happy, rich and successful! That is far from the Gospel.

Part 4 is about the Eucharist. From that point of view, it makes sense to follow the consideration of the cross. This has 18 sections and is a meditation on the text, ‘Come unto me all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest’ (*Matthew 11.28*). Regular communion is essential for keeping close to Jesus. This part is significant for two particular reasons:

- 1 At no point does it define any specific Eucharistic doctrine, or the real presence. Thus it became equally acceptable to Catholics and Protestants.
- 2 It affirms the need for frequent communion, at a time when this was rare. Most people attended the Mass, and adored Jesus in the elevation of the host. The idea of regular and frequent communion only came to the fore, in the Roman Catholic Church, in the nineteenth century.

This section uses as a form of meditation a dialogue between Jesus and the Disciple. Other writers have used this technique, from Ignatius Loyola to Father Benson of Cowley.

Part 3 is entitled *Inward Consolation*, and is by far the longest with 59 Chapters. It contains many prayers, which may have come from the *Devotio*. In Chapter 23 à Kempis lists four main things to bring peace to the soul:

- 1 Do the will of another rather than your own.
- 2 Choose to have less rather than more.
- 3 Look to the lowest place and submission to all.
- 4 Pray always that the will of God may be done in you.

*The Imitation* has been described by some as miserable, gloomy and world

renouncing. John Wesley said this in a letter to his mother. Thackeray was even more scathing:

What a history is in the Thomas à Kempis book. The scheme of that book carried out would make the world a most wretched, useless, dreary, dotting place of sojourn. A set of selfish beings crawling about avoiding one another and howling a perpetual miserere. We know that deductions of this kind have been drawn from the teachings of Jesus Christ, but please God the world prospers to overcome them.

Such criticism does not understand the context in which the book was written. In many ways it is a protest against the contemporary Church. It is a protest against nominal popular Christianity on one side, and the affluence of the monasteries on the other. Some have seen it as a precursor of the Reformation. It certainly influenced Erasmus and Martin Luther. Here are six examples of its elements of protest.

- a) Excessive sacerdotalism. It was the Victorian, Dean Farrer, who pointed out that implicit in the book is the assertion that everyone has direct access to God. It rejects the idea that the priest stands between the people and God. Rather, it is the function of the priest to point out God's direct accessibility. This was a revolutionary idea in a priest-ridden Church.
- b) Objection to Relics. The devotion to relics was big business in the mediaeval Church. But *The Imitation* is not keen on it. Gerson wanted to dampen down the devotion to relics, because he saw it led to division in the Church. He tried to get a panel of relics removed from the Abbey of Saint Denis because they were causing controversy. He tried to be moderate and argued:

... even if the object does not exist in absolute truth, still there is a sufficient probability of reasons for what is asserted. It thus becomes praiseworthy to defend the relic from lies and error, since error and falsehood in religious matters require the presence of guilt.

But *The Imitation* will have none of it; relics are a distraction from God:

So many men rush in every direction to visit the relics of the saints; they marvel at their feats and gaze on their grand and roomy shrines. They kiss holy bones that are wrapped in silk and cased in gold. And yet you my God, the holiest of all, creator of men and Lord of the Angels, here you are on the altar before my very eyes. When bones and shrines are in request, then human curiosity is at work, which ever seeks the strange and the sensational. Little amusement ensues and indeed still less when there is such tripping and trifling and no sorrow. But here in the sacrament of the altar you yourself are wholly present, my God and man, Christ Jesus. (*Part 4 Chapter 1*)

Here is the language of priorities.

- c) False intellectualism. The *Devotio Moderna* was criticised for its anti-intellectualism, but it does not take much to see that à Kempis was a learned man. What he objects to is people playing clever intellectual games, instead of putting God first. Here we see what Ronald Knox calls 'a reaction against the over subtle speculations of the later medieval theology; those masters who are more concerned to know than live well.'

À Kempis writes:

What use is it to argue loftily about the Trinity if by your lack of humility you are displeasing to the Trinity? For lofty words make no man holy or just; but a good life endears a man to God... If you knew the whole Bible scientifically, and the words of the Philosophers, what good would it be, that loveless and graceless knowledge? (*Part 1 Chapter 1*)

Here again it is priorities. God matters more than knowledge.

- d) Prayer as protest. À Kempis is commending the sort of prayer which keeps us close to God. He is looking at a pattern, developed through solitude, stillness and peace. This is often known as 'affective prayer.' This prayer stirs the emotions, and leads to a surrender of the whole self to God. It is not centred in words, or even in the imagination (as in Ignatian spirituality). It implies a longing in the heart for God, and God's longing for us. So it is a protest against vain repetition, formal outward prayer, or just going through the motions. (See *Matthew 6*). It is a protest against the values and priorities of the world. The very act of prayer sets other standards.
- e) Protest against an unbiblical spirituality. The *Devotio Moderna* used the vernacular. This made the Bible more accessible to many people and À Kempis knew the Scriptures well, partly through participation in the Daily Offices, and because he spent many years copying them out. Many people did not understand the Latin used in Church, and many clergy were ill educated. Much Church teaching related to the lives of the saints rather than the Bible. Public devotion centred on the Mass, mystery plays, the Stations of the Cross and pilgrimages. *The Imitation* encouraged a greater use of Scripture.
- f) Communities of protest. Much that has been seen in *The Imitation* as against the world is really protesting against that which devalues people and society. Often religious communities are established for that reason. It is much more a protest for God, rather than against the world. Once this is understood, much of the criticism fades away. We still need communities of protest. As one Anglican religious (Father Hugh Bishop) put it: 'If our religious communities are to fulfil their special vocation in the Church and world of today they must become more recognisably communities of protest and they must recruit more loyal rebels.'

*The Imitation* has been the subject of considerable criticism. The most serious is that the idea of 'Imitation' is not just a mistake but a blasphemy. It can be seen as expressing a way of life that is formal and lacking in spontaneity. The idea of mimicking Christ is a mistake; surely God has called us to be ourselves? Others are worried by a literal interpretation so that 'Imitation' might mean undergoing all that Christ did.

German theologians tend to use the word 'Nachfolge' ('following' rather than 'imitating') and there can be no objection to that. It is the word used by à Kempis. Bishop John Tinsley, in his book *The Imitation of God in Christ*, gets to the heart of the matter. He points out that, even in the Old Testament, Israel is called to follow the Way of God. In the New Testament, Jesus is the New Israel, and Christians are called to be followers of the Way. Jesus says, 'I am the Way' (*John 14.6*). The call 'Come and see' (*John 1.39*) is a call to imitate Christ, to be the new Israel, imitating God and following his way. Saint Paul expressly uses the phrase, 'be imitators of me as I am of Christ' (*1 Corinthians 11.1*). The first Epistle of John has a similar sentence. 'As he is so are we in this world' (*1 John 4.17*). We might also consider the words of the Psalmist. 'When I awake after your likeness, then shall I be satisfied with it (*Psalms*

17.16). John Tinsley sums up his argument:

The *imitatio Christi* for Saint Paul (and for New Testament writers in general) was not the attempt to copy a wholly external object, it was not the drawing of a still life. It was an active dynamic process, imitated, sustained and directed by the Spirit, involving a mutual, personal and reciprocal relationship between the *mystikos* (mystery) and the *eikon* (image). Through the Spirit of the Lord, Christ is a living active paradigm.

Thus, in *The Imitation*, we see six main aspects of the Christian faith:

- i) Faith has to be lived out in the whole of life.
- ii) The language of priorities, giving the disciple some stark choices. So M Miles comments:

Imitation of Christ as a model for Christian life inspires and demands strenuous engagement, hard work, rather than passivity. It raises questions; it does not provide answers. Yet its inspirational value is potentially great. Because twentieth century Christians live in a predominantly secular world, we frequently do not think of ourselves as purposely and continually engaged in the creation of Christian life. The metaphor of the imitation of Christ can both challenge us to do so and inspire us to begin to ask ourselves, 'How might I imitate Christ in this moment?'

- iii) It affirms affective and self-giving prayer and such prayer can have revolutionary consequences. As John de Gruchy put it in relation to Bonhöffer:

To be free is to be in love, is to be truth of God. The man who loves because he is made free by the truth of God is the most revolutionary person on earth. He is the upsetting of all values, the dynamite of the human society, he is the most dangerous man.

- iv) It demonstrates a close link between respect for Scripture and an authentic spirituality. The Bible becomes a prayer book full of prayer to God which we can make our own.
- v) It affirms the importance of the sacramental life, bringing with it an affirmation of the world. It involves the whole person and the community, and gives all matter spiritual significance.
- vi) It has a Kenotic Christology, focusing the integration of Christ's suffering into all human suffering. Imitation is a way of entering into the suffering of Christ, and Christ participating in the suffering of humanity. Such a theology is close to Latin American liberation theology. The Base Communities reflected on their own suffering in the light of Scripture, and so found new hope. Jon Sobrino points out that this has led to the path of martyrdom, as in the case of Archbishop Romero. As Ronald Knox comments, 'heaven help us if we find easy reading in *The Imitation of Christ*.'

### PART THREE

It is possible to trace the influence of *The Imitation* right through the centuries, and in passing we should note the work of Jeremy Taylor, whose massive work, *The Great Exemplar*, was written during the Commonwealth period, when Taylor was living in

seclusion at Golden Grove in Carmarthenshire. It is his version of *The Imitation*. Also *The Imitation* greatly influenced William Law, but we need to move to the Wesleys, whose mentors included Taylor and Law. John Wesley visited William Law at Kings Cliffe.

It was in the Holy Club that these works were read. In 1725 Betty Kirkham encouraged John Wesley to read *The Imitation*. Initially, he was not sure about it:

I cannot think that when God sent us into the world, he had irreversibly decreed that we should be perpetually miserable in it. If our taking up of the cross implies our bidding adieu to all joy and satisfaction how is it reconcilable with what Solomon affirms of religion; that her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.

His mother thinks that à Kempis is exaggerating to make his point, and has ‘more zeal than knowledge.’ She continues:

A single rule in such matters (e.g. pleasures) whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God or takes off the relish of spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind, that thing is sin for you, however innocent it may be in itself.

On further reflection John Wesley wrote:

When I met with it in 1725, the nature and extent of the inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw that giving even all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this, and go no further) would profit me nothing unless I give my heart yea all my heart to Him. I saw that simplicity of intention and purity of affection, one design in all we speak and do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed the wings of the soul without which she can never ascend to God. I sought after this from this hour.

This ‘first conversion’ has been attributed to his reading, not only of à Kempis, but also Jeremy Taylor. In 1735 he and Dr Heylin produced an edition of *The Imitation*, which was republished in 1750. He wrote an abridgement of the Latin text for Kingswood School in 1748. His edition came to be known as *The Christian Pattern*, and editions were issued between 1741 and 1788. Later, John Wesley required that a copy should be in every Methodist household. It was John Wesley’s lifelong desire that à Kempis, Taylor and Law should contribute a permanent element to the devotional life of Methodism. He further developed an interest in Roman Catholic Mysticism. About them he wrote:

As almost all of them lived in the Romish church they were lights whom God raised up to shine in a dark place. But they did not give a clear, steady, or a uniform light.

He had a heavily worn copy of De Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and also commended Francis of Assisi. His own subsequent itinerant ministry revealed something of the pattern of Saint Francis.

A major factor in his early development was contact with the Moravians. Zinzendorf had founded his movement in a not dissimilar way to the *Devotio Moderna*, beginning with meetings in his home. The *Devotio* was not a major influence on Zinzendorf, but he did write three hymns based on passages from *The Imitation*. In 1736 Wesley

records talking with the Moravian, Spangenberg, about *The Imitation*. Earlier, we find Wesley in Savannah planning to encourage the more serious Christians to form a society, to meet once or twice a week for mutual support and instruction. Then, out of this group, he selected an even smaller group to spend time on Sunday afternoons in singing, reading and conversation. They sang a psalm and Wesley read from Law's *Christian Perfection*. Whether he knew it or not, Wesley was following the methodology of the *Devotio Moderna*, both here and in his development of the class system.

Adrian Hastings has commented on the *Devotio Moderna*:

While diminishing the gap between clergy and laity, it rejected the need for vows, stressing the value of a continued freedom and practice of religious life. The modernity of the 'modern devotion' seems to have been centred in two things: an insistence on the interiority of religion and of personal freedom as against its institutional aspects – ceremonies, titles, public vows; large buildings which had come to seem so important to the established religious orders, secondly psychological realism, a reasoned distrust of religious extremism.

The same could be said of early Methodism. Wesley was disillusioned by the institutional Anglicanism of his day and wanted to give it new life.

Are we beginning to see a pattern here? Taylor wrote *The Great Exemplar* while in the wilderness, and the *Devotio Moderna* sat lightly to the institution. It is not unlike the Early Church in the Acts of the Apostles. In all of these – not least early Methodism – we see groups of people meeting together under the gospel to:

- 1 live out the faith in an antagonistic world,
- 2 assert the centrality of prayer and worship in a shared community,
- 3 find the meaning of faith in the light of Scripture.

All this is done on the edge of institutional religion. There is an element of becoming a community of protest, but the danger is that the movement becomes an institution. The question is, as John V Taylor put it, how to turn the institution into a movement.

## **PART FOUR**

We jump another 150 years, but in so doing must note the influence of *The Imitation* continuing in the Evangelical Revival, in the rediscovery of the religious life in Tractarian Anglicanism, and in people as diverse as Gladstone, George Eliot, Balzac, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Popes Pius XII and John XXIII. Thérèse, in her very down to earth manner, sums up its ethos in this phrase:

Our Lord does not come down from heaven just to wait there in a gold ciborium; he has found a much better heaven for his resting place – a Christian soul made in his own image.

New editions and translations of *The Imitation* have been made in every generation. The best in the twentieth century is that by Leo Shirley Price (Penguin) and the Ronald Knox version deserves a mention, not least for its powerful introduction. However, its influence carries on, and we find it in *The Life of Pi*, as being read alongside the sacred texts of other faiths.

One outsider, for whom it meant a lot, was Dag Hammarskjöld. He carried a copy

with him and refers to it several times in his famous *White Book* (though Auden, in his edition, wrongly ascribed the quotations to Thomas Aquinas!).

I began by mentioning *The Imitation*'s influence on Bonhöffer. This reveals itself in a pattern rather like the *Devotio Moderna*. When Bonhöffer was asked to set up the theological centre at Finkenwalde, George Bell arranged for him to pay visits to various theological establishments. These included Richmond Methodist College, Woodbrooke (the Quaker College at Selly Oak) and the Anglican Religious Communities at Cowley, Mirfield, and Kelham. These visits took place in March 1935. The application of what he learned is revealed in *Life Together*. Some people forget Bonhöffer's great emphasis on the *disciplina arcani*. He would have seen this inner life expressed in à Kempis, reading Scripture, especially the Psalms, as leading to righteous action in the world. Finkenwalde was most certainly a community of protest and was finally closed down by the Nazis. *The Cost of Discipleship* (*Nachfolge*) is Bonhöffer's own version of *The Imitation*. He rejects 'cheap grace,' and reveals the costliness of discipleship: 'When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.'

His very life put him on the edge of the institution. From his prison cell, where he reads the Bible and the Psalms every day, emerge Bonhöffer's deeply radical views about religionless Christianity and about a new form of Church, which will not be concerned for its self-preservation, but telling people that 'to live in Christ is to exist for others.'

Bonhöffer's thought has still not been taken seriously enough. It will, because we have witnessed what Callum Brown has called *The Death of Christian Britain*. From that death has emerged a great deal of non-institutional spirituality and New Age practices which need a response from the Church.

The Australian writer, David Tacey, has probed this situation. A lecturer at La Trobe University in Melbourne, he has examined the spirituality of his students, and developed an understanding of what is going on. The majority of the population have had some sort of 'religious experience,' but they do not relate that to institutional religion. The reaction of the institutional Church has been of two sorts. One has been to assert the Christian tradition against the new spirituality. The other has been fundamentalism, providing pre-packaged answers to the questions people were not asking. More than this, he predicts there will be 'more religious fanaticism and intolerance until we can bring our repressed religious life into the open and express the non-rational forces that underpin it.'

Neither traditionalism nor fundamentalism meet the situation. Whereas the Church has retained the *Form* into which to place the *Substance* of spirituality, it has lost the *Substance* because it has not properly engaged with the surrounding contemporary culture. This is because:

we have lost the ability to locate this (spiritual) feeling in the old theological forms. The old religious world view no longer resonates with the understandings of the young or the secular world in which they live... Western religion will have to recognise that we need to have much of our religion translated into modern terms and linked to everyday life situations. That is to say, faith will have to be based on a personal experience of spirituality.

Thus, as predicted by Bonhöffer, the church has become a society for its own self-

preservation. (Or, as Hollenweger put it, ‘There abideth faith, hope and charity, and the greatest of these is the status quo.’) So evangelism becomes an attempt to keep the institution going, rather than an engagement with God in the world. Tacey points out that the religious conservatives argue that they are conserving tradition; but by refusing to make way for the new, they are destroying the tradition they profess to love. Real tradition has to be open to the inwardness and spiritual meaning found outside the Church. He sums it up by quoting Pablo Picasso who said, ‘Tradition is having a baby, not wearing your grandfather’s hat.’

In a strange way this is not far from the call of Wesley for scriptural holiness, expressed in a secular culture.

One community, expressing something of the pattern of the *Devotio Moderna*, is the Iona Community. A paper of theirs on spiritual formation, published in 1989, lists the following marks of a meaningful spirituality:

- 1 It has to be reconciling and integrative with the world around.
- 2 It has to be incarnational, being sensitive to culture, language, symbolism and history.
- 3 It has to be rooted in scripture and nourished by prayer.
- 4 It has to be a costly and self-giving spirituality.
- 5 It has to be life-giving and liberating.
- 6 It has to be centred in community and rooted in the Eucharist.
- 7 It has to be expressed in service and witness.
- 8 It has to be open to God’s new initiatives.
- 9 It has to be seeking God’s love in today’s world.
- 10 It has to be open to the wider world and all sorts of diverse patterns of spirituality.

Here is a summary of a *Devotio Moderna* for today. Of necessity, such spirituality produces communities of protest against what is dehumanising in modern society.

How is this to come about? It will not come from an institutional base, but from groups of people seeking these ends; not by rejecting the institutional church, but not taking it too seriously either. Here we find a paradox, because there are parts of the institutional church which are well situated for a real engagement with the secular world, and the spirituality within it. These are people and places that are very open to the world around them, and are not trying to impose another culture on them. Groups like the Iona Community, the Third Order of the Franciscans, and the Jesuit Christian Life Communities are pioneering this approach. There has been the work of industrial mission, and those engaging with the arts. Cathedrals are often places working on the edge of the sacred and the secular. But we cannot expect this to be done by an institutional Church, which is self-obsessed, perpetually re-organising itself and living for self-preservation.

At the same time, enabling a group of people to establish new forms of spirituality is hard work. It was not easy for the *Devotio Moderna*, for Wesley or for Bonhöffer. We can see what a demanding task it is in the description of how the Society of Saint John the Evangelist in the USA rewrote their Rule. Father Martin Smith described how their old Rule was short but severe, giving the impression that they were to be

‘Trappists at home and Jesuits abroad.’ The Rule needed revising in the light of developments in psychiatry, sociology and modern biblical criticism. So they decided to start from scratch. They did not look at other rules. The process took eight years and involved the following steps:

- 1 A meeting with a representative of another Community, which had been through a process of revision.
- 2 Two teams in small groups reflecting on themes needed for a new Rule leading to 30 Headings.
- 3 A committee of four, working for 6 months on these headings, followed by one person writing draft chapters.
- 4 The whole community listened to a reading of the Chapters. This was then considered and criticised in groups.
- 5 The chapters were rewritten and used by the community leading to a realisation that parts needed extending and new material added.
- 6 For 3 years, every member of the community approved every sentence individually, enabling the Community to claim the Rule as its own.
- 7 The Rule, as agreed, was then sent to 12 consultants, including other Religious, theologians, psychologists, bishops, clergy and lay people. All their comments were considered by the Community and the Rule revised again.

The result, *The Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist*, is a remarkable document, which every Christian can use to their advantage. It relies heavily on insights from Saint John’s Gospel, but it is also very contemporary. So Martin Smith wrote:

Our discussions about the significance of the Gospel of John in our life led us to a new appreciation of the figure of the disciple whom Jesus loved, on whose witness the Gospel is firmly based.

This is the sort of hard work that will be required in re-integrating the sacred and the institution.

Does the church see this priority? We cannot expect a church, which is uncritical of the marketing culture (as seen in the church growth movement), adopting management styles (which are totally inappropriate to voluntary organisations) or engaging in accountancy driven appraisal systems, to protest creatively, when, by adopting these procedures, it is succumbing to the worst aspects of the market economy. It requires a radical re-orientation by congregations, moving away from seeing themselves as consumers of a religion purveyed by the clergy, into a people who think for themselves, and engage with the God in their midst. It requires groups working for simpler and more life-affirming patterns of living. It requires groups reaching out to all expressions of faith in love and understanding. It requires communities of protest against the dehumanising and debilitating forces in modern society. These will be groups who live for others. This has been well summed up by Father A Gittins who writes:

Institutions as such are inherently conservative. Individuals or small groups are much more likely to be on the edge, ‘cutting’ or otherwise. And individuals or small groups who follow Jesus are faithful and radical disciples first, and only incidentally members of institutions.

These will be followers of the Way, who will go with Jesus 'outside the camp' (*Hebrews 13.13 -14*). As we have seen, there have been those in every age who will take this risk. We need to join them.

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