

Poets, Artists and Prophets in Conversation

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Introduction

Poets, artists and prophets; what is it that they have in common? What is distinctive about the poetic voice, the artistic vision, and the prophetic call to action? It is, I believe, that these are manifestations of the outsider in the context of their time and social positioning. It often turns out, of course, that history confers upon outsiders marks of recognition or even success. However, in reality, this happens when popular consciousness catches up with the genius of the man or woman who has the ability to recalibrate the ordinary so that the rest of us can glimpse the extraordinary. Poets do this by coining metaphor and simile, compressing philosophical wisdom into the lightness of a haiku, the order of a sonnet or the insistence of rap. The painter, sculptor or architect frames the spatial features of our world, inviting us to hone in on the angle of light. The prophet reads the signs of the times, fusing the political, the ethical and the spiritual. Indeed, it is the prophet's gift to *tell forth* the existential truth that politics, ethics and spirituality are inextricable.¹

In terms of interfaith relations, the outsider I have in mind is the person who willingly gives up the strength and certitude associated with an insider position within prevailing systems of belief in any given era. I refer to those who choose to stand at the edges of inherited faith traditions: heretics, prophets, revisionists, or reformers who find themselves driven to think outside of the box which they have inherited or which they find themselves thrown into.

This is the outsider with whom I identify. There may be a sense of recognition in the reader at this point, since it is often the case that those who are involved in interfaith conversations are regarded as something of the outsider. There is a widespread fear that if we acknowledge the value and goodness in the beliefs and practices of those who are different from us, we might lose the distinctiveness of the traditions of our forefather and mothers. We might besmirch the purity of our own community's identity, losing a strong sense of self into the bargain. So, those committed to interfaith work within the contemporary context of

¹ Note that the noun, prophecy, and the verb, to prophesy, are commonly used reductively to signify the art of soothsaying. This raises an interesting connection since what the protester asserts in one age often becomes through time the blueprint for changes in law and policy that governments are persuaded to implement.

pluralism and diversity are tight-rope walkers, teetering across religious and cultural divides as we juggle with words; and there are so many words and phrases which have been wrenched from their awe-filled origins, employed to divide us into pure or impure; holy or impious; powerful or marginalised.

Three marks of interfaith exchange

Having introduced the idea of the outsider, let me outline the marks of fruitful interfaith exchange. The first is that interfaith projects should proceed on the assumption that we are engaged in a process, not headed for a pre-figured goal. There will be interim points of agreement in terms of justice and peace; but we ought not to foreclose what we mean by either justice or peace for future generations.

If interfaith dialogue and action are to be regarded as elements in a continuing process, then it follows that we should not see consensus as a good in itself. To strive for consensus often entails the subjugation of the other, especially in western methodology, where power is associated with visibility and the combative use of language. What is more important is to establish frameworks for continuing conversations in which more and more voices are included.

When the groundwork is laid in this way, what comes to the fore is the realisation that one of the most important outcomes of interfaith exchange is to engender compassion. In the acknowledgment of the beliefs and practices of others, what is drawn out of us is greater compassion, both for ourselves and for those with whom we share the planet. That is, compassion for the reality of flesh and blood persons; not as representatives of different clans, but as individuals who are embedded in their communities, shaped by a complex mixture of things that make up culture. So, in order to explicate the idea of compassion more deeply, I will set out three ideas: one put forward by a philosopher; the second expressed by a theologian; and the third in the words of a poet. I consider that all three speak with the power of the prophet. The philosopher is Richard Rorty, the theologian is Gianni Vattimo, and the poet is Seamus Heaney.

Secular terminology

First, however, let me state that I believe compassion to be secular in one of the root senses of that term. To be secular is to acknowledge our dependence on the condition of the planet, and to care accordingly. It is to understand ourselves as integral parts in a complex and interdependent eco-system, where each creature plays a necessary role in the functioning of

the whole. That leads me to say that a secular sensibility is a philosophical choice to live as if the *here and now* is all that we might ever fully understand. The secular imagination is a prod to our ethical selves to keep in the forefront of our minds, the planet in its physical contours, its animal life, all humans who are alive in our time, and the ones who will come after us. The secular imagination provides the best hope for religionists and non-religionists to learn from each other.²

Now, you might reasonably retort that the religious – as opposed to the secular imagination – also puts the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants at the centre of its ethic. To which my reply would be that, while this is verifiably so, there are aspects of religious rhetoric which involve concepts such as: final truth; ultimate authority; and a conviction that the explanation of origin and purpose has been revealed to particular groups at particular times. In other words,

Religion, regardless of whether it is analysed as a belief-system, as a marker of identity, or as a way of life, functions by invoking an authority which is considered to be final in the epistemological sense and transcendent in the ontological sense.³

The distinction I am making is not simply one of vocabulary. It is primarily a matter of epistemology: a question of where we look to have our knowing corroborated. In this regard, there is a depth to Rorty's seemingly flippant remark that, "Truth is a matter of what your contemporaries will let you get away with."⁴

A word is needed here about the distinction between types of secularity. Secularism is used to represent a number of different trajectories among contemporary patterns of belief. There is a normative secularism which aims, through social policy, educational establishments and public health institutions, to remove selected traces of religion from the public space. Seen clearly in aspects of the French model of *laïcité*, this model of secularism poses as an equivalent to neutrality.

On the other hand, it is possible to understand the process of secularisation as a thoroughly historical process; a shift in the popular imagination such that it is increasingly difficult to sustain a traditional faith in a world which lies beyond the existential frame of

²Writing from his position as a Muslim scholar and human rights activist, Abdullah Ahmed AnNa'im claims that "in order to be a Muslim by conviction and free choice...I need a secular state." Abdullah Ahmed An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1

³Celia G Kenny, "Law and the Art of Defining Religion" in *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*(January 2014)

⁴Richard Rorty, *Philosophy As Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11

human interaction. Secularisation, understood in this way is, to employ a musical metaphor, like a ground bass; a *basso ostinato* which signals the underlying structure against which we measure the tone of all major discourses. The work of Charles Taylor continues to be appealed to in order to invoke the contemporary landscape in which faith in a creator is one view among any others.⁵ The crucial point to keep in mind is that a secular sensibility is not necessarily antithetic to religion.⁶ At its most benign, the secular mind does not set out to denigrate religion, nor to banish it completely to a private space. When secularity is aligned to a pluralist politics, then the religions can be celebrated as positive additions among the diversity of frameworks through which human make sense of life and death. However, contemporary changes in the deep structure of human imagination have ushered in a powerful symbolic framework which renders the idea of a vertical or transcendent dimension difficult to sustain. The order of this-worldly activity is, for many people, a comprehensible realm quite capable of being understood on its own terms. Transcendent signifiers, within this secular landscape, are not banished; but they and the gods whom they serve have lost their *ultimate* authority.

Compassion in a secular key

With these things in mind, let me now turn to Richard Rorty to enlarge on the idea that compassion is an aspect of benign secularity and to emphasize my claim that compassion, as the highest form of human interaction, involves us at the level of imagination. Rorty links the enlargement of human imagination with language usage, so that, as we find new metaphors to describe the relationship between all things, we reconstruct our view of each other and alter our behaviour accordingly. His term for this is cultural politics.

One way to change instinctive emotional reactions is to provide new language...not just new words but also creative misuses...of familiar words...that initially sound crazy. Once it would have sounded crazy to describe homosexual sodomy as a touching expression of devotion or to describe a woman manipulating the elements of the Eucharist as a figuration of the Virgin to her Son.⁷

⁵Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁶ I presented much of the substance of this article at a conference of the World Congress of Faiths, held in Coventry in September 2019. I am grateful for comments made then by Jeremy Rodell. See Rodell on types of secularism at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/01/what-do-secularists-mean-by-secularism/>. The open secularism of which Rodell writes is close to what I call *benign* secularism.

⁷Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), 204.

Through our use of language, through our choice of how to describe ourselves in relation to the other, we construct, deconstruct and reconstruct our world. Compassion begins when we understand how our own values and practices either inhibit or enhance the freedom of others to live peacefully in the manner of their choosing.

Think of the vision behind Human Rights, which has moved our ideals from the mere toleration of difference to the positive evaluation of diversity. Human rights law promotes a value which transcends all religious exclusivity because it rests on the belief that each and every person is worthy of respect simply by virtue of being human, without reference to holiness or age or gender or sexual orientation.⁸

Compassion moves outward from the merely parochial, shaking us from the safety of inherited beliefs to the newness, or even the scandal, of the beliefs and practices of others. However, it is instructive to note what does not necessarily move us to compassion. You might think that ocean liners and jet planes open us up to empathy with our fellows because they open up the possibility of standing shoulder to shoulder with those who are different from us. You might equally think that the media might stir us to a hunger for justice because it juxtaposes images of the perpetrators of evil and their victims within the same ten minute news slot. But *it ain't necessarily so. They tell all the children the devil's the villain, but it ain't necessarily so.* In a world in which it is accepted that knowledge is power, the villain is anyone who touts certitude. It is certitude in matters of religion and ethics which is the enemy of compassion and in order to expand on this idea, I turn to the theology of Gianni Vattimo.

The 'weak thought' of Gianni Vattimo

Gianni Vattimo is an Italian philosopher, cultural commentator and political activist. His thinking has been influenced by Nietzsche, the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and expressed in conversations with Richard Rorty.⁹ For the purpose of this paper, the most interesting focus of Vattimo's work concerns what he calls 'weak thought' or, in his own language, '*pensierodebole*'.

Like Rorty, Vattimo came to believe that philosophy and theology have made historical claims which are too grandiose, assertions which are neither helpful nor sustainable in the contemporary context of pluralism and secularisation. In particular, Vattimo can be read to debunk the belief that history unfolds in a linear way, progressing towards a unified

⁸Ecologism extends this to the acknowledgment of the inherent worth of all creatures, whether human or not.

⁹For an introduction to Vattimo's thought, see Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William Mccuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

goal. That is a myth promulgated by self-appointed masters to contribute to the power of the victors. "...the view that truth is a matter of interpretation largely coincides with the overall modern critique of the social lie that has always propped up the power of the strong over the weak..."¹⁰

So far, so postmodern. However, Vattimo refuses to go fully down the route that we hear so often: the claim that the rise of the secular heralds the decline or the demise of religion. By contrast, Vattimo developed a highly distinctive theological analysis of the secularisation process in which he suggests a connection between secularity and the kenotic act which is depicted in the poetic narrative of the New Testament. In the Christian understanding of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, we are presented with the model of a self-emptying God who chooses to take the form of a slave in the ultimate renunciation of power and authority. According to Vattimo, the slave/man/Christ figure represents the renunciation of divine transcendence. In philosophical terms, this signifies the death of the moral/metaphysical God. "The secular is what Christianity has bequeathed to a world in process of globalization, and, just for that reason, rather than being exhausted by the death of God, it faces a new challenge."¹¹ This, then, can become the basis for our own calling to embrace the danger of doubt and uncertainty.

A theology which is based on the idea of kenosis is likely to elicit an ethical response in the renunciation of certitude and a radical turn to the world of here and now. This focus on immanence will entail a recalibration of *caritas*, as unmediated relationships between human beings. That is, a willingness to assume responsibility for all creatures of the earth without the spectre of divine command, and with no justification beyond fellow feeling (or solidarity as Rorty calls it).¹²

Vattimo's analysis need not be confined within a Christian framework, for in conversation with Rorty, he agreed that religion will survive to the extent it is presented "without masks or dogmatism", willing to take its place alongside science and politics without aspiring to be a purveyor of absolute truth.¹³

Without masks or dogmatism; so here we have it, a depiction of the outsider who willingly renounces certainty long enough to hear the voice of the other. Compassion will

¹⁰Vattimo, 2011, 6.

¹¹John D. Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, ed. Jeffrey Robbins, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 178.

¹² See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹³ Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty, ed. Santiago Zabala *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press), 7.

flow, I think, from the acknowledgment that what we most have in common is the weak thought that there is not one of us who knows where we have come from and where we are headed. What we do know is that history is a glorious tapestry of holy books, myths of origin, takes of heroism and stories of hope rising out of ashes. These are all examples of the human desire to interpret existential reality. As such, they require constant revision in light of a robust and continually updated hermeneutic, where the principle of interpretation is *caritas*: kindness. Among the most effective and affecting of human tales are those which speak of a faith which is capable of being sustained in the midst of doubt. Stories in which the consolation of the weak comes not through banishing doubt in order to embrace certitude, but through the acknowledgment that true consolation is found in the company of those who share their own vulnerability and accept ours. The weakness of knowing that I can never be certain about the meaning and purpose of life is, I believe, the most promising place from which to evaluate the lives of others. It is also the only truly ethical space from which to launch interfaith dialogue. You may well be asking how it is possible to stand alongside the other from a place of personal weakness. Then, I would direct you to Seamus Heaney.

The poet as prophet

It is well accepted that great art has the capacity to expand our imagination. Music, painting, architecture, poetry, the novel; through the transformative gift of the artist, we are sometimes allowed access to pain in all its rawness or into joy and the sublime. Such experiences are capable of refining our ethical sensibility. Much has been written about this, but few have said it with more brevity and grace than Seamus Heaney. “Whatever is given/can always be re-imagined/ However four-square/ Plank-thick/ Hull stupid/ Or out of its time it happens to be.”¹⁴ In *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney writes about the power of poetry to expand our capacity for solidarity and compassion. The poem, he claims, is like a broken drinking goblet which, even in its brokenness, can offer us “a temporary stay against confusion.”¹⁵ In this, Heaney has perfectly expressed, for our time, the idea that vulnerability has a unique eloquence. What if we were to imagine that each one of us is like that broken drinking goblet; not one of us whole, most of us almost not even fit for purpose. Might this, then, be the nature of compassion and the beginning of genuine conversation: that, knowing the depths of

¹⁴ See, Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London; Faber and Faber, 1995) and Heaney’s poem, *The Settle Bed*.

¹⁵ Heaney, 1995, xv.

our unknowing and despite the incompleteness in ourselves, we offer each other a temporary stay against confusion?

Concluding words

No man can step into the same river twice

He is not the same man

And it is not the same river

Heraclitus of Ephesus (6th century BCE)

At the outset, I spoke of poets, artists and prophets as outsiders. As such, these are the people who reside at the crossing points, the transitional spaces in human communication where, *literally*, anything is possible. It is at the crossing points that all religious narrative belongs, offering a bridge between our prosaic quotidian and the furthest reaches of human imagination. This is the liminal place, and each succeeding generation is obliged to negotiate its dangers. Our best hope is to do so in good company.

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Celia is outgoing co-chair of the *Irish Council of Christians and Jews*. She was on the steering committee of the *Dublin City Interfaith Forum*, and a founding member of *Scriptural Reasoning, Ireland*, which brought together Jewish, Christian and Muslim men and women to consider social and ethical issues in light of their own holy books. In 2018, she was appointed as *Interfaith Ministries Coordinator* for Christ Church, Rathgar, Dublin, as part of a project to widen the relevance of local church in the increasingly multicultural and multifaith context of Ireland. Celia is currently completing BSoM accreditation as a Meditation teacher, and is particularly interested in the role of meditation in the ageing process.