

NOVATE  
VOBIS  
NOVALE

# FURROW

*The*

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

*Michael A. Conway*

## Faith-life, Church, and Institution

September 2017

# Faith-life, Church, and Institution<sup>1</sup>

---

Michael A. Conway

Traditionally in European culture the institutional Church was a major presence in terms of the ordering of society. Apart from the explicit religious activity that was connected with the sacramental life of the Church, its presence was experienced in a whole series of areas, which included education, healthcare, community building, social cohesion, sport, and, indeed, a range of other social activities. The twentieth century, however, has witnessed a radical ‘secularisation’ of many of these sectors. This means that the institutional Church *per se* has witnessed a huge diminishing of its direct and explicit presence (and with this its power) in the various networks that constitute our culture. And this is an on-going process with healthcare and education being two embattled areas at present.

In this paper, I’d like to reflect on these changing dynamics and suggest some ideas that you might find helpful in terms of understanding our current situation. What is taking place is, undoubtedly, enormously complex, and it is important not to oversimplify this complexity. With that in mind, I’d like to reflect on just one aspect of this multi-faceted change in the dynamics of Church and culture; namely, *the institutional dimension* of Church to which priests are so closely connected and to which we are so readily identified. I am doing this in the spirit of an observation from H. A. Williams, who remarked that ‘Reality faced ... is life-enhancing even when, paradoxically, it threatens to destroy us.’<sup>2</sup> I read the insight simply: when you face things as best you can, no matter what you find, it is empowering and in itself life-giving.

## PRIESTHOOD AND THE INSTITUTION

We have inherited and we are part of a very powerful *institutional* structure of religion. The Church, in this sense, is, in so many

1 A version of this paper was presented at seminars organised by the Board of Clergy of the Dublin Diocese at the Green Isle Hotel, Naas Rd, 9 May 2017, and at the Regency Hotel, Swords Rd, on the 23 May 2017.

2 H. A. Williams, *True Resurrection* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1972), 86.

---

Michael A. Conway is a priest of the Diocese of Galway. He is Professor of Faith and Culture at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

## THE FURROW

ways, the place in which we belong; as priests we are more often than not identified with *the* institution. When people think of Church, they think of us in a particular way. And by and large in our culture 'Church' is understood first and foremost as an institution. This puts us in a most ambiguous place. For some we are the doorkeepers of a living tradition of faith-life that responds to the most powerful human commitment of all – namely, to the transcendent, to the absolute, to God. In this we might even be regarded as figures of holiness, generosity, paternal care, sanctity, virtue, benevolence, devotion, and so on. For others, however, we are viewed in an entirely different way: and we can be treated as power mongers, control freaks, and even parasites that belong to another time and to another world. I am, of course, exaggerating, but there is something of the truth in these caricatures (on both sides)! It is not easy to stand in a place that can evoke such diverse and powerful human reactions. There must be something visceral and, indeed, extraordinary about our lives, when others can see us through lenses of such polar opposition, and when they can project such powerful human sentiments onto us; it would not be amiss here to speak of life or death to characterize these extremes. In our culture we stand in the strangest of places, and we need, I believe, to understand this and our relationship to the institution that is the Church if we are to remain relatively at peace with who we are and in what we do in a world that is rapidly changing about us. We need, too, to understand how we are responding in terms of our own faith-life if we are to continue on in priesthood in a way that is life-giving for ourselves and, indeed, for others.

There is enormous change taking place in our culture vis-à-vis Church, religion, faith, and spirituality. In particular a significant disjunction continues to emerge between Church as institution and contemporary culture. We need to understand the disjunction as best we can in order to understand ourselves in our own situation, and, in order to know where best to invest our energies in terms of our ministry and in terms of taking some responsibility for the future.

### PATRIARCHAL ORDERING

To that end, I'd like to look briefly at hierarchical structures in both society and Church. And when I say 'hierarchy' (even in terms of Church) I do not mean it in that narrow sense that designates the bishops alone, but rather in the sense of the whole social order that was (and to some degree still is) structured along principles of hierarchy. The highpoint of the symbiosis of Church, culture, and society was achieved in the Late Middle Ages (the 'golden age' for Leo XIII). Here the Church as a visible *institutional* reality reached

its zenith, whereby almost every aspect of the social and cultural order was ruled and controlled directly or indirectly by Church leadership – be it in the form of bishops or kings invested by the Church. At its foundation was a patriarchal worldview that was taken to be absolute, natural, and to some degree beyond question. Importantly, the patriarchal structure was understood to be a kind of ‘natural law.’ After all you could find ‘correspondences’ in the natural order, where, for example, in the animal kingdom, the dominant male figure kept all others in their proper place. If you go into Dublin Zoo you’ll see this in operation in any number of animal social networks! Such correspondences in the natural world made it difficult in the past to question this very order, which could dictate social, cultural, and religious life.

I’d like to highlight a few features of this patriarchal ordering of society and of Church.

1. Clearly, it was based on a principle of *male* authority. Leadership was evidently male leadership, and it consisted, at times pretty explicitly, in the domination of others. The basic structure was hierarchical and the person or persons at the top of the hierarchy, the leaders, dictated how others lower down in the hierarchy ought to behave, even as regards the most intimate dimensions of personal life. Relatively recently, I know, for example, of a bishop, who said to a newly ordained priest that the Holy Spirit speaks through him (the bishop, that is, not the young priest!). What’s interesting is that this was verbalized; many leaders think along these lines (I know best!), without, however, expressing it explicitly. The underlying idea is very simple: power, insight, and direction come from above in the hierarchy and are to be received unilaterally on the lower levels.
2. It was *a social system*, and this means that *everyone*, to some degree, supported or colluded with the system in order for it to function. It is much too easy to isolate individuals with hindsight and hold them responsible for the system as a whole. Everyone had a place. There was a sort of vital co-operation at play, which ensured that the system functioned for the benefit and protection of all. Now, crucially, religion was an absolutely vital component in maintaining social cohesion so that you could say that religious leadership was necessary to the social order. It would seem to me that instances such as the Magdalen laundries can only really be understood when placed in a context of a total ordering of society, where a culture of containment belonged in the more comprehensive ordering.

## THE FURROW

3. It is obvious that in this patriarchal structuring of the social order, *women were on a second level*, when it came to leadership, power, authority, and decision-making. A woman's power was to be exercised in private, and it was *indirect* as opposed to the more direct male exercise of power. That does not mean that women were not very powerful in *tactical* ways in the system itself, but it was not direct, and it was not given due public recognition and acknowledgment. And even today, women are still often paid less for identical work or are not as readily promoted as their male colleagues (witness the relatively recent case in NUIG Galway).
4. This *social-cultural structure was pyramidal*. The higher up that one was in the hierarchy, the more exclusive was one's position, which, inevitably, created levels of elitism. It was, in other words, the exact antithesis of the *idea of equality* for everyone. It was *aristocratic* as opposed to being *egalitarian*. This meant that Society was stratified, and this was assumed to be normal and the way things ought to be. You could say that being able 'to look down on someone' was built into the social fabric. This basic pyramidal structure was replicated all over society and culture: in the family (father, mother, eldest, other children, youngest), in the local community, the school, in the parish, in religious communities, in the army, in hospitals, etc.
5. This system of social ordering placed *huge responsibility* on the shoulders of those on the upper level of the hierarchy. And this was, perhaps ironically, especially so when the various systems worked well. *Authority, power, and responsibility* were closely wedded together: and this for the sake of everyone. Group identity took priority over individual identity. Those in positions of leadership were (and often felt acutely) responsible for the welfare of those in their charge. The system was intrinsically paternalistic in its relationships, and, as such, displaced adult responsibility in an upward direction.
6. At the base level were the most disenfranchised in the system: they were often the most poorly educated; they had no real social status; they had very little freedom in the most ordinary sense of this term; they were inevitably the poorest level in society (even though the largest group); they were the instructed ones (told what to do, how to behave, how to live, etc.). In terms of the Church, they were ministered to; they 'received' the sacraments. In fact you still hear this: he or she received the sacrament of the sick. Those on this level were referred to as

‘the faithful’ – and understood to be a *passive* presence in the Church as opposed to the *active* presence of, say, priests and religious. By and large, they had no great sense of their freedom in taking responsibility for their own spiritual lives (or they could take very little). Religion was about conforming to what was set before them by others. They ‘obeyed’ and this ‘obeying of authority’ was inculcated in very powerful ways (particularly through an education system) as the only sure way of avoiding social anarchy!

7. The *values and the ideals* that guided human interaction and the structuring of the social order were set by an aristocratic class or by an ecclesiastical elite, who promulgated the ideals and values that were deemed normative for everyone in the social order. The average citizen or parishioner was simply to be schooled in the ideals and values. Importantly, everyone understood that values and moral guidance came from above and, to some degree, ought to come from above; that was the expectation in terms of social cohesion and communal well-being. There is a story told in Galway about one of our previous Bishops, which I have no doubt is apocryphal; but, therein, is what’s interesting about it. It reflects a powerful understanding that was operative in the social order that could simply be taken for granted. The claim is that one day the Bishop was walking the ‘prom’ in Salthill, when he spotted a lady on the beach wearing a bikini. He sent his priest-secretary down to her to point out that in his diocese only one-piece bathing costumes were allowed. The secretary went down to the lady in question and explained the ruling; she apologised profusely and asked the secretary if he might inquire from the Bishop which piece he would like her to remove!<sup>3</sup>

Now, it must be said that this was a very effective system of social order, particularly when huge sections of the population were poorly educated, and it explains why it survived for so many centuries (and is still operative in many non-Western cultures). And for various reasons, it continues to be very attractive for a good number of people in our culture. You still find significant segments of this patriarchal worldview (modified and tweaked here and there to suit changing circumstances) in the army, in hospitals, and in political parties, and, of course, it is still the dominant structure in the Church as *institution*.

3 This is in stark contrast, for example, to the modern public space in a democratic society, where ideals and values are thrashed out and established through public debate and discussion by citizens, who, in principle, enjoy equal access to the common conversation, that leads, in time, to common values.

## THE FURROW

### THE RISE OF MODERNITY

This foundational way of ordering society, however, came under extreme pressure with the rise of *modernity*, and, gradually, European culture is breaking free from the presuppositions and the limitations of patriarchal worldviews, structures, power dynamics, and principles of order.

The most significant blow to the patriarchal system came, no doubt, with the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Descartes for example, at the outset, looked *to the present time*, and to *the interiority of the self* as the only reliable source of knowledge as opposed to turning to *the past* and to external *authority*. Later, Kant would capture the central insight of the Enlightenment with his famous: ‘Dare to think for yourself’ (*Sapere aude*, dare to know).<sup>5</sup> For many, initially, this was frightening, but gradually, over time, more and more people in our European culture have found it liberating. It is at the heart of what has been termed *the subjective turn* in contemporary culture. Charles Taylor, for example, speaks of ‘the massive subjective turn of modern culture.’<sup>6</sup> And Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhouse observe that ‘the subjective turn has become the defining cultural development of modern western culture.’<sup>7</sup>

Modern Europeans have begun to think for themselves, make their own decisions, and demand the exercise of their autonomous freedoms as something that is inherent to their dignity. And this very dynamic is gradually deconstructing the patriarchal orderings in our society. As people became better educated, they would become more conscious of their freedoms, their rights, and would demand to have a say in the power structures from within which they were expected to live, work, and flourish. Women began to question their place in society and the role models that were presented to them (especially in the twentieth century, which is, it must be said, relatively recent).

4 Even before the Enlightenment, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were significant moments that challenged the patriarchal world order. The peasants’ revolts, for example, of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (that were brutally repressed) would send tremors through the socio-political order and can be read in this register. The Reformation would strike a deadly blow at the stability of the Feudal world, where Church and Civil society formed a single, all-encompassing order. There were also signs of the beginnings of the ‘faithful’ seeking a form of religious life that was relatively independent of the Church’s dispensation of the sacraments and that encouraged an exploration of an interior relationship with the person of Jesus (that was independent of institutional Church structures).

5 Kant is quoting the *First Book of Letters* from the Roman poet Horace (see Immanuel Kant, ‘What is Enlightenment? [1784],’ accessed May 25, 2017, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/kant-what-is.asp>).

6 See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), 26.

7 Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 5.

What this means is that we are witnessing a tectonic shift in our culture away from a social order that is hierarchical in its order, vertical in its structure, and deferential in its dynamics. Our culture is gradually putting in place an alternative order that is horizontal, egalitarian, functional, discourse based, person centred, communitarian, and so on. The institutional dynamics that resonate with this alternative social order are being nurtured, while those that operate from within the earlier order are being increasingly critiqued, rejected, and exposed (in terms of its shadow). Gradually, the older order is being rejected as being out of step with the times and with the culture.

Although this has been happening over the past three centuries, it has accelerated in the latter half of the twentieth century (particularly, in the post war period) due to a range of factors such as: better education, changing political structures, the powerful emergence of the media, better economic circumstances, greater mobility, and so on. It is, as I say, a complex development; but *the basic movement and the fundamental direction are very clear.*

#### CHURCH AND THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM

We are now moving from a form of order that was significantly indebted to the patriarchal system to a new form of order that is based on very different principles and values. This is having a major impact on how the Church as institution is being received and, indeed, rejected in our culture. At the level of culture, you could say that the logic has changed, thinking has changed, and practice has changed.

The one institution that has resisted most tenaciously the deconstruction of the patriarchal worldview in European culture is the *institutional* Church, with its structures, its procedures, its power dynamics, its modes of leadership, and its understanding of authority. It would seem to me that it is paying a heavy price for its resistance to acknowledging and appreciating various freedoms, to changing its own power structures, to recognizing the changing role of women, and to adapting to changing understandings of knowledge, of human psychology, of science, of social cohesion, to name just a few areas. This resistance from the Church as an institution is a major factor that has led to a serious collapse in the recognition, the role, and the reality of the Church in European lives. Indeed, as the French Jesuit, Joseph Moingt, remarks perceptively: 'A society that no longer produces priests is a society that no longer desires to replicate itself on the model of its religious past.'<sup>8</sup>

8 Joseph Moingt, *Faire Bouger l'Église Catholique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2012), 65.



## THE FURROW

It is, of course, ironic that the Second Vatican Council took significant steps in addressing the enormous gap that was emerging between the Church and its ambient culture in this regard, but in the wake of the Council much of what it had produced at the level of reflection was not translated into practical, lived day-to-day experience. *The Council has in so many ways yet to be implemented.* To some degree, you could say that Pope Francis is suspended between these two worldviews (an increasingly moribund patriarchal one, and an emerging egalitarian person-centred one); but even in his efforts to reach out to our culture there are – as, perhaps, one might expect – significant voices and actors of resistance from within the Church.

The Church *as institution* is gradually losing its place in our culture and in our society so that it can now be said that European societies are leaving the *institutional* form of Church behind as a vestige of an earlier world order that is no longer credible, or operable, or even desirable. In the past ‘religion’ and the ‘sacred’ necessarily undergirded the social, the political, and the cultural. From the perspective of contemporary culture, this undergirding is simply no longer required, tolerated, or even considered healthy. French social scientists speak of European societies gradually ‘exiting religion’ (*la sortie de la religion*). There is little evidence of any significant return to the earlier constellation. Not only that, but this phenomenon is itself a global one, visible, for example, in the Arab world with the so-called Arab Spring.<sup>9</sup>

### LOOKING TO A FUTURE

The life of faith is a response to a call that is heard in multiple ways and that is singular to each one of us. Responding to this ‘vocation’ brings with it not only deep interior satisfaction and connection to others, but also challenge, newness of life, and human growth. This growth, understood in the widest sense, includes growth of mind. And this is essential to the life of faith. Henri de Lubac, for example, observes that ‘preserving the *status quo* in theories and viewpoints has never been and can never be an adequate means of safeguarding the truth.’<sup>10</sup> We can think differently at different stages in our own faith journey, and, to some degree, *we must do so* in the journey of the life of the Church. Such growth and change are real signs of life, even if this is perplexing and against what we had once held to be a definitive achievement.

Responding to the call of faith in light of the Gospel is never a matter of possession, or status, or power over-the-other. Hierarchical

9 See *ibid.*, 84–88.

10 Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, trans. Gemma Simonds with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens (London: SCM Press, 2006), 258–59.

structures that perpetuate such dynamics are fundamentally at odds with the life of faith and will in time collapse because of this performative contradiction. The life of faith approaches the world from a fundamental poverty; namely, that of a service that enables the other. This poverty or powerlessness is not a naïve, sentimental capitulation in the face of life and its complexities, but, rather, a deeply reflective, critical presence that stands against decay, dysfunction, and death. In so much as it is reflective action, the life of faith does not wield power over the other, and, therein, is its strength. It listens, engages, enables, dialogues, critiques respectfully, counters courageously, and, at times, simply keeps its own counsel. It respects the time and the timing of the other.

For the foreseeable future the disjunction between the Church as institution and our ambient culture will most likely increase. This will, inevitably, be a *sort of purification* for ecclesial communal life and dynamics. And the very resistance to acting differently and responding will, ironically, accelerate what is already evident. The new freedom that has emerged in terms of belonging or not belonging to religion and a faith community has hardly been reflected on and taken seriously by Church leadership or theological reflection. This newfound freedom – which is grounded in the discovery and the validation of the subjective, the personal, and the singular – will require altogether new dynamics in terms of ecclesial community and Christian life in the future. Respect for, and interaction with, adult freedom will increasingly be the foundation on which is built healthy, ecclesial community life.

#### THE DUPLICITY OF INSTITUTIONS

All institutions are marked by ambiguity and duplicity. As social technology they can be the vehicle of great goodness, the source of tremendous generosity, integrity, and efficacy. We have a history here in Ireland, for example, in which the institutional Church has contributed significantly to education, healthcare, community life, and social cohesion. This is something that we can be proud of and that points directly to the power of the gospel when lived in its integral integrity. But, equally, institutions can be the source of injustice, alienation, tragedy, and the sheer waste of resources. *Every institution has the real capacity to be a source of benevolence and to be a source of violence.* It is always double-edged: it can be life-giving or death-dealing. The element of violence calls for particular vigilance as it can do great damage in the shadows of any institution. Critical reflection, checks and balances, and appropriate action must be part of what it is to constitute any institutional reality.

Let me repeat: this is true for all institutions. In the case of the

## THE FURROW

Church recent revelations unmasked one facet of this truth, or, better, made it impossible not to recognize and acknowledge it. Every institution harbours the possibility of injustice, of injury, and of violence. This is, perhaps, the most important learning to be had from recent experiences. We must not go forward without recognizing clearly and calmly the twofold character of institutional structures and dynamics. All institutions are marked by the contingencies of history and the all too human dynamics of power and its abuse. The most dangerous attitude in the face of this reality is that of scapegoating this violence as though it were an aberration caused by a few, and, in so doing, denying that it is intrinsic to the dynamics of the institution itself.

The life of faith and the Church as institution are never identical. There is always a gap, a breach, even uneasiness in the relationship, and it is vital not to confuse these. The institution as institution is never to be equated with the heart or the integrity of the life of faith. It is always secondary since it is itself an object of faith. And faith is antecedent to it and lives from the compelling power of the truth contained in God's revelation of himself in Christ.<sup>11</sup> The institution is a means, a vehicle, scaffolding (to use an image from Seamus Heaney); it is not the way, nor the truth, nor life. Although, indeed, connected, these are always rooted elsewhere and otherwise.

In its operation, structure, and composition the institution, any institution, is to be constantly critiqued, overseen, assessed, evaluated, and reformed. In *Lumen gentium* the Second Vatican Council spoke of the Church as *ecclesia sancta simul et semper purificanda* (at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, No. 8). We don't always pay attention to this. The critique that is necessary for Church life can and does come from many quarters and must be welcomed, taken seriously, and acted upon, when it is evident that something is amiss. *A spirit of openness and learning is essential for the healthy functioning of any institution.* When I say this in terms of the Church, I do not have at all in mind the extreme cases, where, for example, it is a matter of criminal inquiry and proceedings. I am thinking much more of the most ordinary of communal dynamics, when they run counter to the spirit and the demands of the gospel, the challenges of the life of faith, and, indeed, to the achievements of our culture in terms of its understanding of human interaction. When deficient institutional dynamics are left unchecked, it leads easily, for many, to a powerful counter witness to the Gospel and the life of faith. And ultimately this leads to decay and even the death of the institutional structures themselves. History is the most powerful judge of all. You might

---

11 See Karl Rahner, 'Authority,' in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 23 (London: DTL, 1992), Part I, 61-86.

even say that it is merciless in its judgement. It leaves in its wake the remains of what was once mighty, reducing it to a mere shadow of its former glory; *sic transit gloria mundi!*

#### THE IDEALIZATION OF THE INSTITUTION

In terms of the possibility of violence, a particular form of denial in this regard is the *idealization* of the institution, which is always a temptation for those in positions of leadership and power. It is a refusal to accept or acknowledge the destructive power that is intrinsic, as I say, to all institutions. In its wilful ignorance or even naivety it gives latitude or even cover to the violence that is subjacent to institutional dynamics.

When the Church as institution is idealized and taken to be an end in itself, it inevitably eludes not just critique but, more seriously, the prophetic dimension of faith-life, which is indispensable in terms of living by the Gospel. And no one is immune to this. The charism of the prophetic is particularly important to ecclesial life, as it is, so to speak, the doorway to the future. So often it is the first voice that sounds what will eventually with time, reflection, and action become common Christian self-understanding. The life of faith grows, develops, changes, bears new fruit, responds to the signs of the times; and the prophetic has a crucial role to play in all of this.

There is always the temptation for every institution to self-immunize against any recognition of the violence that it harbours and protects. Any hierarchically structured institution has the capacity to mobilize powerful forces to scapegoat or destroy those who do not act in accordance with the status quo or who raise a critical voice. This is true for all institutions and is independent of their *raison d'être*. The institution is always a temptation to power-over-the-other, and, therefore, requires, corresponding, potent statutes of limitation, if the inherent violence is not to be given free rein. In more secular institutions, these tend to take legal and juridical form, and, indeed, the recent concern with policies of protective disclosure and with the treatment of so-called 'whistle-blowers' is one facet of this reality. The public space of discourse has an important role to play here too. This is now a very important function of the media; even if, at times, it misconstrues the material that it investigates, and is itself in need of the same critical assessments as any other instance of social ordering. It, too, can hide from and mask the truth as it emerges, especially when this emergence has negative implications for the media itself. But that does not undermine its important role in terms of the ethical fabric of society. It is telling that one of the first steps in any totalitarian regime is to silence or take control of the media (which

## THE FURROW

amounts to the same thing). Specifically in regard to the Church, the idealization of the institution amounts to the identification of God's work with the very dynamics of the institution. This is an example of what the philosopher Robert Bellah calls 'religious pathology' and reflects what Paul Tillich terms the 'sin of religion,' namely, 'the identification of God's will with one's own.'<sup>12</sup> It is that manipulation that appropriates the divine in the name of a particular socio-historical constellation or project. This is often pleaded in the name of a 'realism' that seeks to justify an action in the face of opposition. What is evidently missing from such 'realism' is simple humility and respect for the other.

### REACTIONS TO CRITIQUE

The critical and perhaps, even, prophetic voice can come both from inside and outside, from within an institution and from without. *Its free flow is a sign of healthy communal life.* There ought to be critique, and it needs to be welcomed as necessary to the commitment of living by the truth. There are, it seems to me, a number of dysfunctional or unhealthy reactions to critique, depending on whether the critical voice comes from the outside or from the inside of any institution.

When it comes from the outside such reaction manifests itself as a *defensiveness*, which reflects a deafening incapacity and an unwillingness to hear the critical other. The most cynical and dangerous form of defensiveness is the one that reacts by simply setting a counter-narrative in motion that attempts to disempower or scramble the critique from the outside. This, undoubtedly, reached its nadir recently with the claims of so-called 'alternative facts'! It masks an inability to listen to, never mind welcome, the other. It is a sophisticated form of suppressing the truth as it might seek to emerge in a new form for a new time. To the perceptive, the defensive reaction itself belies the truth of any such counter-narrative. There is saying in German that captures this well: '*Getroffene Hunde bellen* (dogs that have been hit bark)!'

Turning to critique from the inside, we find an even more nefarious dynamic of suppression, namely, the alienation or silencing of the other. In terms of institutional power, 'silencing' is an enormously effective instrument of oppression. When the 'other' has something to say that is disturbing, its strategy is simply to obliterate the word. To forbid someone to speak in the public forum is to deliver a fatal blow to the other's voice, to slice through the other's vocal cords, to slit the other's throat. It is death inflicting: a *thanatopraxis*. It separates, and injures, and, possibly

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (London: Harper & Row, 1970), 197, where the author quotes Tillich.

destroys; it does not unite, and heal, and create. When executed in secret, without due process in transparent action, it is, undoubtedly, an act of aggression against the otherness of the other. It violates, in Levinas's sense, the fundamental ethical norm that precedes discourse, theory, thinking, and theology: namely, thou shalt not kill!

When played out in a hierarchical structure of power, this is not a mere metaphor or simple simile; it does serious damage to the other person in the most ordinary of ways. It cuts short conversation; it eschews discourse and dialogue; and it strives to erase the word spoken by the other. It is interesting that Freud remarks that 'The very emphasis laid on the commandment "thou shalt not kill" makes it certain that we spring from an endless series of generations of murderers, who have the lust for killing in their blood, as, perhaps, we ourselves have today.'<sup>13</sup> For the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur unless one takes into account, truly, the distance between the self and the other, there can be no real proximity, no conversation, and no love.<sup>14</sup> This strategy of silencing does not, and it cannot, love the *other* at heart. It deals in silence, the currency of death. It evades life that is manifested in dialogue, discourse, discernment, and, indeed, disagreement.

There is, if you like, a fundamental ethics of communal discourse that is prior to any engagement and that provides the parameters from within which discussion itself can operate in a wholesome fashion. And the capacity for dialogue implicitly acknowledges that no one has a monopoly on the truth and that everyone has something to contribute to our common faith and even more fundamentally to our common humanity. Such a capacity invests the present with an eschatological reserve that forbids the destruction of the other in the name of faith.

Another, somewhat more subtle form of silencing is the refusal to engage and to listen to the other. When those of us, who are in positions of leadership or authority, refuse to meet, and listen, and speak with the other from within our own community, we undermine community cohesion and, ironically, in so doing, undermine the very reality that is communion, the body of Christ. Such a refusal to enter into the communal space of discourse is an abusive appropriation of power-over-the-other.

This power has been attained and institutionalized and, as such, can shield a passive violence that is directed toward the other (isomorphic to passive anger). It alienates from within, and in

13 Sigmund Freud, 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 296.

14 See François Dosse, Paul Ricoeur: *Les sens d'une vie (1913-2005)*, éd. revue et augmentée (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 586.

## THE FURROW

the eyes of our wider culture can only be a counter witness to the fundamental truth of Christianity: namely, that we are to love one another.

### CONCLUSION

Looking to a possible future, I think that we can say that the once powerful, monolithic institution is slowly being disempowered, and what remains of it will now need to be re-shaped into a new, more culturally appropriate constellation. You can see something of this recognition in the direction taken by Pope Francis, who shows an acute awareness of our changing cultural matrix. It would appear to me that Christian life and community in the future will need to be much more faith-person-centred in its construction, in its decision making, and in its day-to-day activity, whereby each person is acknowledged and appreciated as a singular presence in the community. Christian community will be about building up proximity between fellow Christians, while acknowledging and respecting distance. And it will include a rhythm of coming and going that will itself be nourishing for the common life of faith. Such a dynamic cannot blossom or grow in hierarchical power-over structures, but will require an open space of interaction that is nourished by the gospel and common life. This is so because love is not just about proximity, conformity, totality, closure, monologue and identity; it is also about distance, diversity, infinity, freedom, dialogue and difference.

It seems to me that we are witnessing a massive purification of the institutional dimension of Church at present. In terms of our interaction with the wider culture, there is undoubtedly a dying taking place that is visible to all; but this is not just an end. And I have no doubt but that this is equally a new beginning. Hankering after that which is disappearing or, indeed, trying to resuscitate what is moribund, reflects an inability to see the possibility of new life and light. This is to have forgotten the promise made by Jesus, as relayed to us in Matthew's Gospel and echoing God's promise to Moses, who dilly-dallied about his own calling: 'I am with you always; yes, to the end of time' (Mt 28: 20).<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See Exodus 3:12.