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Sean O Conaill

Redemption as Freedom Now

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Americans recognised
in the Cross what
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– *How African Americans recognised in the Cross what European Imperialism had forgotten*

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“The cross stands at the centre of the Christian faith of African-Americans because Jesus’ suffering was similar to their American experience. Just as Jesus Christ was crucified, so were blacks lynched. In the American experience, the cross is the lynching tree.” James H. Cone

REDEMPTION AS FREEDOM IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Nothing is clearer in the New Testament than that its authors passionately believed that they had been ‘set free’ in their own time by the Easter events – and that the same freedom would be experienced – in the present – by all who believed.

How else could Paul say of the resurrected Jesus: “Now this Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Cor 3: 17) To recognise Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah was – for Paul and those who listened to him – to see him as a liberator in the fullest sense of that word, even under the ever-dangerous Pax Romana.

Since to ‘redeem’ was literally to pay the full cost of the freeing of a Roman slave, to call Jesus ‘redeemer’ was to proclaim him as one who had bought self-respect for all who believed in him, whatever ‘the world’ – the ever-violent Roman World – might think. It was also therefore to claim that he had freed them from the delusion that this world had any final power of judgement over them. *And that this world was passing away.*

Given that this is what redemption originally meant – the conviction that through belief in the Resurrection the Christian had *already* been raised from death to life with Christ Jesus (*Eph 2: 6*) – can we truly say we understand Christian Redemption today

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if we see ‘freedom’ as something achievable only via politics and ‘armed struggle’, and Redemption as a mere possibility of life after death?

When we say at Mass “by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free” do we make time to reflect on what we mean by that? What does it mean to call Jesus ‘Redeemer’ – Liberator – in our own time and place? Not much, it seems, if we compare youthful Irish enthusiasm for the 2016 commemorations of the 1916 Easter Rising with levels of attendance by the same generation at Christian Easter ceremonies in the same year. Two millennia of Church and secular history have kicked the proposed benefits of Christian redemption way down the road – literally into eternity.

And yet increasingly those same generations are *imprisoned* by fears for their own future in this life – fears that the unexpected onset of a viral pandemic in early 2020 and then tales of tundra on fire and permafrost melting in the Siberian Arctic by July will do nothing to allay. Even if the educational ‘normality’ of 2019 could be restored, that too was imposing a straitjacket that was overburdening Ireland’s mental health services for young people in the same year. Oppression is experienced electronically by too many young people these times – as ‘trolling’ 24/7. A fiercely competitive achievement culture in the workplace, and in academia, adds yet another layer of pressure to the vast uncertainties of the moment.

As for reliance upon politics alone to deliver freedom, the killing of George Floyd, an African American, in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020 reminded all of us that in the world’s supposedly most politically liberated society the starkest oppression still threatens too many. Unexpectedly in early June 2020 the US Black civil rights movement of my own early adulthood took on another dimension when I was sent photos of the three white children of a close friend – not yet out of grade (i.e. primary) school – holding up their own posters for Black Lives Matter on a street in the Boston conurbation.

How, I asked myself, could that have happened if Martin Luther King had not risked sudden death every day and night of a solid twelve years (1956-1968) – as the stand-out target for US white supremacist hatred? And how could he have done that if the most sacred book of the white enslavers of his ancestors had not conveyed to his own people a message those same captors had neither seen nor expected: that the uplifted Christian cross offers wordless reassurance and constant support to the most oppressed of the earth – even if the figure on it is usually depicted as white?

As explained marvellously by James Cone in *The Cross and the*

Lynching Tree,¹ for African Americans traumatised by the worst lynching era in the USA (c.1865-1945) – when an estimated 5,000-7,000 of their people were murdered in the most contemptuous way² – the Christian cross had nevertheless birthed for many an enduring hope. Martin Luther King’s own father had witnessed such a lynching – and yet had taught his son that it is always those who do the lynching who are on the wrong side of history.

Surely that invites a different ‘take’ on the meaning of the Cross from the one still blessed by the Catholic Catechism? The late eleventh century teaching of St Anselm of Canterbury – that Jesus suffered crucifixion to repay to his Father a debt of honour on our behalf, a debt incurred by our sins that our own sufferings cannot satisfy – has totally lost traction as ‘Good News’ for younger generations today. Is that surprising when the same understanding does not inspire convinced evangelical preaching from their clergy?

The reason the word ‘honour’ is itself theologically problematic should be especially obvious just now. Honour is the opposite of shame, and in every era, in all contexts, it is always the power-seekers who claim the right to shame others. Daily the US Trump administration wields this weapon mercilessly, by word and action. Just as ‘the Donald’ is always right and perfect and admirable – busy from the early hours on Twitter in the proving of his superiority – *the vindication of his honour* – anyone who challenges that claim is always ‘dumb’ and asking to be insulted.

That in this very purpose of self-aggrandisement President Trump (on June 1st, 2020) would flaunt a Christian bible outside a Christian church – as a means of identifying supporters of Black Lives Matter with enemies of ‘law and order’, and of Christianity – raises an important question about the origins of that mindset. What theology – what understanding of the Christian message – *underlies* the alignment of so many self-identifying Christians with the cause of a person so clearly self-infatuated and so visibly indifferent to the grossest injustice and suffering?

Could it be that in retaining the notion that God is tied inexorably to the necessity of vindicating his own honour, and in thinking of Redemption as merely rescue from Hell after death, we make ourselves blind to the fact that we thereby theologically licence egotism – biblical pride – the tendency to hunger after glory or celebrity in this very same unjust world?

Given that on the contrary Jesus identified with the slave – the one least glorified – and was called liberator of the poor-in-spirit

1 *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James H Cone, Orbis Books, 2013

2 ‘At least 2,000 more black people were lynched by white mobs than previously reported, new research finds’, Washington Post, USA, June 15th, 2020

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(i.e. those we now call depressed) by his own closest followers – was there no downside to extolling the Trinity as some kind of cosmic debt-collection agency, and to explaining the Crucifixion as the means by which one member of that Trinity pays off the balance of a debt of honour to another?

Is it not the meaning of the Cross and the Creed that on the contrary God's love dismisses human misconceptions of honour, to prove that it is the least regarded – those who carry most of the oppressive burden of human ambition – who are always most deserving of respect? And that no one's dignity can in fact be enhanced by shaming another to win attention – or lost in the suffering of an act intended to shame? Was it not above all to convey this teaching that the Gospel events took place – to relativise all human judgement and to help us to be reliant instead, in the very worst experiences of human misjudgement, upon the judgement of the Father?

Was that not the far more liberating teaching that Martin Luther King received, correctly, from the Cross and the Gospel – a teaching not received by the white European adventurers and colonial landowners who had enslaved and lynched his own people?

And could it be that through the descendants of those enslaved by Europeans who had lost the full meaning of Redemption our theology – our understanding – is being re-attuned to the ever-liberating message of the Cross – that God is never on the side of vanity and oppression, and always with those who, like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and John Lewis, risk their lives in the cause of a world in which everyone is respected as truly equal in dignity, and therefore also truly free?

Have white people who flaunt the Bible, and who yet still fearfully bid for white supremacy, pondered yet on why the African American people that white men enslaved could find in the same book the wellspring of their firmest conviction: that God, and therefore the future too, were on their side?

Or ever pondered on the most important lesson we can learn from the past: that supremacy never delivers freedom?

WHY SUPREMACY NEVER DELIVERS FREEDOM

This person's life does not matter: that, surely, was the message that Rome had always intended to convey by crucifixion. Empires built on military conquest are always also pyramids of honour and shame in which the least honourable must always be kept in their place. This, surely – the imperative to avoid shame – was why Peter had taken his master aside to remonstrate when warned of what was to happen in Jerusalem.

And this was also why news of the Resurrection became the foundation of the church: for believers this news destroyed utterly the most intimidating power of Rome – the power to make anyone *feel* ashamed simply by brutalising them. For the first Christian generation that world was truly ‘passing away’ – because Jesus had indeed ‘overcome’ a world that attached honour to conquest and cruelty rather than to compassion, to self-giving and to mutual service (*John 16: 33*).

That this world did not pass away with the speed originally expected, and generations of Christians suffered under later Roman persecution, helps to explain why, after the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE, Christian bishops approved the tale told by the victors: that their Caesarian leader, Constantine, had received before battle a heavenly sign of the favour of the God of the Christians, in a vision of the Chi Ro symbol and the legend ‘In hoc signo vinces’. (*In this sign you will conquer*).

Tragically it is also clear why this new alliance of *cross* and *sword* would leave the church reliant upon a military elite – and lead in time to a European imperialism that would attach greater honour to militarily successful Europeans. Henry II’s Anglo-Norman perception of the Irish as culturally and spiritually backward by the twelfth century was apparently shared by the popes of his era – so the European perception of dark-skinned Africans as in even greater need of ‘Christian civilisation’ followed easily in later centuries. Horrifically, their enslavement could all too easily be excused by their captors in the name of ‘Christendom’ and the bogus cause of ‘saving savages from Hell’.

Quite obviously by then the ancient Roman pyramid of esteem had been replaced by one that was *nominally* Christian yet was also awarding shame and honour differentially – in complete contradiction to the letter attributed to James the apostle (*James 2: 1-7*). The feudal pyramid of the middle ages was also a shaming pyramid of dignity and deference, with greatest honour accorded to kings – to whom any erring subject owed satisfaction for any insult, especially any hint of rebellion. In that context, the Anselmian reframing of the Crucifixion as a redemption of the human sin-debt to the Father added divine sanction to that same pyramid and to that understanding of honour and shame. The God described as ever-forgiving father in the parable of the Prodigal Son had been re-made in the image of a medieval monarch, ever-jealous of his impugned honour.

The implications of this for the meaning of *baptism* are obvious. Born into a society that taught them, as Julius Caesar had been taught, that honour was to be acquired from the world, how were Christians now to understand that equality of dignity – i.e. of

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honour – had already been received through Baptism? Necessarily that sacrament now had trivial significance in comparison with Ordination, the gateway to the church's own aristocratic pyramid of dignity. That this left the *merely* baptised in pursuit of honour via military, or later, mercantile effort, was to place less militarily advanced societies outside Europe in the greatest possible danger. When Christendom came to Africa the cross and the bible were all too often accompanied by the sword, the gun and the shackle – a clear betrayal of the Lord who had died rather than kill or imprison and had summarised the Gospel in a single great commandment of love. Africans were seen by the greediest as 'black gold' – valuable merely as a commodity.

And yet, although far too many considered themselves free to behave in this way, the elusiveness of 'freedom' for Europeans themselves, even for the most 'successful', was grimly obvious to some by the mid-1800s – the century of greatest European global power. Nowhere is this more brilliantly illustrated than in Charles Dickens's serial novel *Little Dorrit* (1855-57).³ Set mostly in London (then the world's busiest commercial hub) the novel illustrates especially the paradox of the Victorian empire 'on which the sun never set' – an empire resting squarely on the wealth acquired in the slaving era.

In this story Amy Dorrit, the daughter of William Dorrit, has been born in the Marshalsea prison, London, for debtors – where her 'ruined' genteel father has languished for decades in the waning hope of release by a relative. She has no personal sense of shame over this circumstance, but this is not true of William. Amy sadly watches her father delude himself with the fantasy that he has somehow become a 'somebody' again as he is paraded to visitors as 'Father of the Marshalsea' the prison's longest serving and most venerable resident. From these he looks for small 'testimonials' of esteem – money gifts – much in the manner of Queen Victoria graciously receiving jewels or perfumes from distant parts of the empire.

When it is discovered by one of those visitors that William Dorrit is in truth heir to a vast fortune, trapped until then in the London legal labyrinth, the Dorrits are all released to a life of splendour – and soon they undertake a continental tour in the most genteel fashion of the era. Eventually, in a rented Venetian villa, William Dorrit is eager to know who else from England may be in the city – so that he can receive them as witnesses to his newly proven grandeur. Suddenly, already wearied by her father's attempts to ensure that she is properly 'polished' for the role known these times as that of the 'socialite', Amy awakens to this insight:

3 *Little Dorrit*, Charles Dickens, 1855-57 – (Book II, Chapter VII)

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A perfect fury for making acquaintances on whom to impress their riches and importance has seized the House of Dorrit... It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they now lived greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea.

TRUE FREEDOM

In this short passage the reason for the elusiveness of *true* freedom in any modern society is unveiled. If we can only become ‘somebodies’ in our own eyes via the attention shown to us by others, we must always be at the mercy of those others, never finally free of the fear that we are nobodies – the fear of shame.⁴ It is this, Dickens suggests, that is our true prison, the true root of all evil – for the wealth that William Dorrit thinks he needs to establish his own importance is obviously the wealth that had come to London from an empire that had enslaved millions.

Donald Trump and too many others in our time are all too clearly bound hand and foot by the very same mistake. At the root of all money addiction and attention-seeking lies the mistake of supposing there is no other route to self-respect than the winning of the approval and admiration – or at least the servility and fear – of others. As Trump’s own daily routine attests, that admiration must constantly be kept ‘topped up’ by the claiming of yet further achievement and the denial of all fault or failure – even while the toll of Covid-19 is falling heaviest on the same African American community, disproportionately exposed to infection (often without any health insurance cover) in the most vulnerable sectors of society.

Those who think celebrity and domination the only safe route to freedom need to ask themselves what Ancient Rome accomplished by crucifying 6,000 enslaved followers of Spartacus, along the Appian Way, c.71 BCE – and how within a century that means of winning freedom from fear was to be overthrown by an entirely different understanding of the Kingdom of God. And if in our own era and context our young people are telling us that Christian faith and practice are ‘irrelevant to their lives’, what then is it that our Christian schools are teaching?

HARD QUESTIONS

If those younger generations are truly at the mercy of the Internet – in desperate pursuit of ‘likes’ or ‘viral recognition’ or the ‘killer app’

4 See, for example, *imposter syndrome* - the fear of exposure as frauds that many ‘successful’ people are subject to, without due cause.

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– or heading toward depression through fear of academic failure – or troubled by trolling or bullying (i.e. shaming) or ‘ransom porn’ – what reason have we to suppose that we have conveyed to them what the earliest uneducated Christians understood from the very shortest version of the Creed – that by our Baptism the shaming power of the world has been broken, and that it is to retain that sense of our own inherent and equal dignity – entirely irrespective of our economic status – that we share and practise a Christian faith?

If we cannot be sure of the answer to this question – and are apparently afraid to find out through systematic research⁵ – what reason do we in Ireland have to believe that our faith schools are in truth still governed by a Catholic or Christian ethos rather than by the dominant ethos of the unredeemed secular and Trumpian world – the mindset in which by default we start out as ‘nobodies’, ever-worried that our lives will be ‘ruined’ if we are somehow cheated of media-confirmed ‘success’?

And if, in some Christian schools, any racial or other minority is being insulted and bullied, is that not a further reason for questioning whether those who have mentored the bullies have themselves fully understood ‘Redemption’? Given that the cause of Black Lives Matter has justly found welcome among so many young white people everywhere, including Ireland, is it not time for older generations to reflect on the extraordinary power of the Gospel to sustain and uplift an oppressed people, despite the very worst that we white Christians have done?

CONCLUSION

The arc of history will indeed bend again towards justice if Christians everywhere can in that way rediscover the earliest understanding of the Cross and the Creed. A world that awards dignity unequally to ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ is always also a shaming world and therefore mistaken, unredeemed and passing away – even if it calls itself Christendom. Our adventure is always to affirm and realise together the equal and infinite dignity of all. Why else would the Creed insist that it is the living Lord who judges us, not the world that calls us ‘losers’ until we have jostled our way to the top of something, or ‘gone viral’, to prove otherwise?

So much is to be gained from an hour or so of pondering the miracle of African American trust in, and restoration by, the Cross – and then from further time spent on deepening our understanding of that story! It will always be the oppressed who read the Bible

5 *Faith Formation and Fear of Shame*, S O’Conaill, The Furrow, July/August 2017 (also at <https://seanoconaill.com>)

correctly. Those who flaunt it without reading it, in pursuit of supremacy, are always the most foolish, for the *future* lies with the opposing spirit of humility and service - that Spirit that is too rich in consciousness of God's equal regard for everyone to ever be in need of global media acclaim.

The Life-giving Word. The apostolic exhortation issued by Pope Benedict XVI after the synod on the Word of God in 2010 states that 'the liturgy is the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives: he speaks today to his people, who hear and respond' (*Verbum Domini*, 52), and it goes on to state that Christ, truly present under the species of bread and wine, is analogously present in the word proclaimed in the liturgy' (VD, 56). At every Mass we are fed from the table of the word and the table of the Eucharist. Prayerful reflection on the readings to be proclaimed at Mass disposes us to receive the word as bread of life more fruitfully when it is offering to us in the liturgy.

- Martin Hogan, *You Have the Words of Eternal Life*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.3.