On Understanding and Desire: A Reflection

Brian A Hardy

Context

Surprised and daunted by a request from the editor to write an article for *Theology in Scotland*, I am nevertheless grateful for the opportunity such a request gives me to share with a wider public the strange mixture of alarm and excitement which the experience of being alive at precisely this time arouses within me.

I write as a priest of the Scottish Episcopal Church, now seven years retired, enjoying the privilege of still being allowed to share to some extent in the pastoral and liturgical ministry of that Church and of other Churches. In exercising that ministry and in the living of my life I have become increasingly aware of the acute pressures experienced by those who seek to live fully within the present culture and at the same time to live by a faith which describes itself as Christian.

The effect of these pressures, as is well known and frequently discussed, is that within our culture the inherited understandings and reference points are seen as no longer fixed, immutable, and in that sense dependable. Mobility, not only in our social and geographical settings but also in the concepts within which we seek to locate ourselves inwardly, appears now to be the name of the game. Authority comes to be regarded with suspicion, and with it the institutions within which or through which it has been exercised. Recent polls seeking the public's attitude toward government bear this out. Institutions are seen as agencies through which particular groupings within society secure their own advantage and at least a measure of social control.

The Churches find themselves facing a like suspicion, at least on the part of those who notice them at all. But it is not only their structures

which are suspect. Their message is frequently regarded by those who hear it as defensive, or as assertively dogmatic, claiming fixity in an age in which nothing is seen any longer as fixed. Many within the churches judge these developments to be regrettable, but many welcome their offer of new freedoms to explore and to grow in understanding.

Dissatisfaction is also felt in relation to many of the assumptions which underlie our present culture – whether educational, economic or social–and which are being increasingly questioned. The idolising of the free market economy, of the self-sufficient nuclear family, of the private, of the freedom of the individual, are all being seen to demand an unacceptably high price. What is being lost through enslavement to these idols is an adequate evaluation of the human person.

Yearnings, wistful and energetic

Recognizable among current yearnings is a longing for *meaning*, people reacting against being treated as economic or social units, required to comply with the systems and demands of whatever organisational structures they find themselves caught up in or dependent upon. An associated yearning is for *belonging*. The structures described above as idols are perceived to have a message which comes across as "Go to, pal: that's your responsibility, not mine. Good luck and Good-bye!" Both these quests seem to be asking the question, "Where, then, do I find a resting-place, in which I may find recognition as the person I am, with all the richness, complexity and particularity that constitute my being, a resting-place in which I do not have to present myself as a suppliant seeking favours and who is required to be somewhere else in five minutes' time?"

The yearning to belong raises issues related to inclusion and exclusion. The ironic consequence of alleged openness, in which boundaries are removed in the interests of free access, is that people fear being 'swamped' - the word which slipped from the lips of the Home Secretary when he found himself reflecting, whether consciously or not, the fears

of so many. The fear of being squeezed out by strangers and aliens serves only to intensify huge efforts on the part of those who feel threatened to secure for themselves inclusion. The image of being taken over, or of having doors shut in one's face, though preferable to that of being beaten up and thrown out without ceremony, is profoundly frightening. "Not one of us" is a phrase which can render generosity virtually impossible.

Perhaps all these yearnings express in the end a longing for trust. Where suspicion rules and cohesion seems to have gone on holiday, the search focuses on communities or systems of belief which may be held to offer greater resilience, openness and energy than those which appear to have grown weary and run out of steam, however venerable their provenance. The search has a seriousness which makes it more than spiritual consumerism.

This seriousness is neither solemn nor humourless. While expressing a profound recognition of the complexity of the human person, it sees the human person as a totality reaching out with energy and commitment towards that which transcends it, lies beyond it. It witnesses also to a re-emerging sense of the creation, a recovery of the sacred, of the significance of the feminine. It has an adventurous quality which allows it to resist the dulling effect of inherited dualisms (male/female, body/spirit), preferring instead to emphasise the relatedness, the sacramentality, of all that exists. It has a creative thrust which is impatient of divisions, whether those found within or between the Churches or those found within or between the world faiths. It understands its quest for identity, meaning and purpose as a form of encounter with the divine. It therefore encapsulates a movement which could describe itself without embarrassment in Anselm of Canterbury's words as 'faith seeking understanding'. It combines passionate search with a more than superficial interest in theology, seeking dialogue with that discipline while remaining agnostic about doctrinal formulations. Both Marcus Borg in *The Heart of Christianity*[1] and Richard Harries in *God outside the Box*[2] draw attention to these developments.

The above description owes much to a recent open conversation on mapping the contemporary spiritual landscape held in Scottish Churches' House, Dunblane. It was led by Eley McAinsh, director of C.T.B.I's Living Spiritual Network, who among other things produces the Radio 4 programme, *Something Understood.* Her presentation and the lively response to it made abundantly clear that the currents described above represent something far more substantial than self-indulgent religiosity. They represent a rebirth of the sense of mystery, of that which is greater than ourselves. The energy of the search derives from desire, included within which is the desire for understanding. I believe that it is related also to a desire for trusting acceptance, companionable intimacy, which is seen as the resting-place referred to above. Running through my mind as the conversation proceeded were words from Psalms 73 and 119, both of which express a faith which knows itself to be under challenge:

> "Whom have I in heaven but you?
> and having you I desire nothing upon earth" (Psalm 73:24)
> "Grant me understanding, that I may live" (Psalm 119:144)

The search for the person

The cult of individualism has been driving many people into acute loneliness. The burgeoning of self-help groups over recent years surely witnesses to this. Only those who have had the same experiences can be expected to offer a degree of interest and a willingness to help. These groups have then to compete to gain a hearing among government agencies and the wider public. The number of letters from charities arriving daily in the post, asking us not only to give to them regularly but also to give ever more and more, testify to the economic assumption that the proper place for money – the means of exchange – is in private pockets. The emphasis is so often on the individual as differentiated from other individuals. To think of people as persons is to recognise that only in relationships of freedom and communion with one another are we able to become truly ourlseves.

Rowan Williams[3] comments:

> "The longing for individuality, the pressure to conform, the fascination with the will and the reduction of the will to choices in the market: these are some of the knottiest tangles in our contemporary world. And to understand them fully, perhaps we need a bit more theology than we usually think about." He goes on to quote Vladimir Lossky, who based his theology on "a clear distinction between the individual and the person, ... made what it is by the unique intersection of the relationships "in which it is involved, ...and the individual, who is just *this* rather than *that* example of human nature, ... one possible instance among others of the way general human capacities or desires or instincts operate". He notes that Lossky's description "is obviously grounded in what we believe about the 'persons' of the Holy Trinity, about the way God is personal".

The loss of trust in inherited public institutions referred to above means that individuals, whether within the 'nuclear family' or not, search for companionable intimacy while at the same time being afraid of its demands. Partnerships break up when one or other feels required to carry more than can be borne. Sexual intimacy can be affirming and fulfilling. It can also be exploitative and destructive. The deep ambiguities in attitudes to intimacy surface nowhere more clearly than in recently witnessed hysterical and punitive 'exposure' of alleged paedophiles by frightened, angry mobs. Buried deep within the legitimate concern to protect children lurks an unwilling awareness that the greater portion of child abuse occurs within the family rather than outside it. The Child Protection Act, laudable in its aims, bears witness to the profound risks necessarily carried in experiences of that intimacy which every human being craves. A culture of suspicion, fear and self-protection insists that distance be maintained at all costs. Peter Vardy, in *Being Human* (p.87)[4], quotes a poem in which an isolated child describes comfort and recognition received from a teacher who understands:

They laughed at me.
They laughed at me and called me names,
They wouldn't let me join their games,
I couldn't understand.
I spent most playtimes on my own,
Everywhere I was alone,
I couldn't understand.

Teachers told me I was rude
Bumptious, overbearing, shrewd,
Some of the things they said were crude,
I couldn't understand.
And so I built myself a wall,
Strong and solid, ten feet tall,
With bricks you couldn't see at all.

And then came Sir,
A jovial, beaming, kindly man,
Saw through my wall, and took my hand,
And the bricks came tumbling down,
For he could understand.

And now I laugh with them,
Not in any unkind way,
For they have yet to face their day,
And the lessons I have learned.
For eagles soar above all birds,
And scavengers need to hunt in herds,
But the lion walks alone,
And now I understand.

In a comment upon this poem by Adam Butlin and included in *The Hospice Book of Poetry*, Vardy writes: "It is a sad reflection on today's world that a number of those who read this poem immediately wonder whether the teacher might be a paedophile. Suspicion is becoming so ingrained today that the idea that teachers can simply be doing their job

out of a sense of vocation, dedication and a wish to help young people realise their potential becomes treated with scepticism." His book was published in 2003, and some may find his comment unduly nostalgic. It nevertheless expresses vividly the deep ambiguities associated with the search for intimacy.

But the desire for intimacy is part also of the religious quest, and to this the mystics bear particular witness. An essential part of their testimony is that self-abandonment to the divine, though difficult and dangerous and requiring dedication and discipline, is met by a divine graciousness which allows the learner to become friend. The account of Israel, the wayward 'child', at Mount Horeb is commented upon in the New Testament *Letter to Hebrews* in terms which vividly portray both the danger and the blessing involved in encounter with the 'living God': "a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death'. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.')" [Hebrews 12.18-21]. Yet Moses, summoned alone into the awesome divine presence, could be described in the tradition as one with whom "God spoke face to face, as one speaks to a friend'"(Exodus 33.11).

A fruitful dialogue appears to be taking place between theology and the natural sciences. A similar dialogue is taking place between theologians and those engaged in the study of human sexuality. This came to modest expression in a small working group of people from the disciplines of theology and of psychotherapy which I was invited to chair. The group came into being out of concern for a number of clergy from a variety of churches who were deeply afraid that their sexual orientation would lead to the termination of their appointments. The group quickly realized that the tasks pressing upon the churches were the pastoral care of clergy for whom personal sexual issues loom large, and finding ways, if possible, in which groups within the churches which embrace diametrically opposed views on sexual issues may be enabled to keep in some kind

of meaningful contact with one another. I am coming to feel that one way might be to explore the complex and subtle relationship between sexuality and the spiritual quest; and another might be to welcome invitations to 'do theology' in different ways.

Exploring the Tradition

Since at present the discussion of human sexuality and theology is dominated by the 'gay' issue, I will take it as a starting point for reflection. I can do no more in this article than point briefly and inadequately to the work of others. Elizabeth Stuart[5], in her illuminating and rigorous study, *Gay and Lesbian Studies – Repetitions with Critical Difference*, surveys the variety of theologies which have been invoked, including liberation theology and erotic theology. She joins Michael Vasey[6] in asserting that people on both sides of the debate have adopted too readily modern constructions of sexuality as something far more fixed than earlier ages have viewed it. She proposes a 'queer' theology[7] which refuses to see the human person as wholly defined in terms of gender and sexuality. Her suggestion that we explore the believer's status as one who is baptized into the resurrection community[8] is an imaginative attempt to look beyond the sexual straitjacket. Adrian Thatcher[9], in a review of her book which describes it as important and profound, expresses reservations on precisely this point. Yet although there are risks of reading into the tradition flexibilities which may not always have been there, Elizabeth Stuart is surely right to encourage us to engage more energetically and imaginatively with the tradition than we are often inclined to do.

Among the features within the tradition which Elizabeth Stuart invites us to revisit are the values enshrined within the monastic movement in all its forms and the understandings of celibacy expressed within it[10]. I suspect that these understandings may show marked differences from the enforced celibacy required by the 1991 Bishops' Report *Issues in Human Sexuality*[11] in the case of gay clergy. James Nelson[12] comments that for the religiously sensitive gay or lesbian "Celibacy is an option to be honoured when voluntarily chosen for positive rather than negative

reasons. If celibacy is embraced not out of the belief that homosexual genital expression is intrinsically wrong, nor out of generalized fear of sex and intimacy, nor because celibacy is believed to be morally more meritorious, but rather is embraced because celibacy best expresses the person's own sense of integrity or vocational commitments, it should be genuinely supported. The celibate is still 'a sexual celibate' whose positively affirmed sexuality, while not genitally expressed with another, is the grounding of emotional richness and interpersonal intimacy." These different approaches serve to illustrate the variety of ways in which received understandings are communicated and received. This includes of course the variety of ways in which Scripture is read and understood. Those who see in it a rule-book for living will tend to read it in terms of commands, sanctions and control. This will be felt by many as imprisoning. Rowan Williams[13] suggests that such an approach can be all too limiting:

> "Scripture, with all its discord and polyphony, is the canonical text of a community in which there are limits to pluralism. ..... Our time – perhaps more than earlier Christian ages, or more self-consciously than earlier Christian ages – is characterized by profound conflict in many areas as to what is authentically Christian – conflicts over areas of sexual and personal ethics (especially, in the West at present, the admissibility in the Church of overt homosexual partnerships), over economic and public matters (the Church's relation to capitalism), and over major issues of war and defence (the legitimacy of the nuclear deterrent). Honesty compels the admission that none of these questions is likely to be 'settled' in the foreseeable future, certainly not by appeal to what is commonly taken to be the 'literal sense of Scripture' (i.e. particular clusters of quotations)." (*On Christian Theology*, pp 56f)

Another way of coming at the tradition is to see the 'Story' as living and open-ended, inviting imaginative and ever-changing responses. Immensely helpful in this respect is the work done by David Brown[14] in his book *Tradition and Imagination*. His approach is stated early in the book:

> "I want to focus the reader's attention upon the way in which even the stories within Scripture itself have not stood still. In very many cases they have been subject to imaginative 're-writing', both within the canon and beyond, and that 'beyond' needs to be taken with no less seriousness than what nominally lies on the biblical page."

David Brown's account of the way in which the artistic imagination has led to rich and changing understandings and interpretations of 'the Story' is wonderfully illuminating and may encourage us not to be daunted by apparently irreconcilable differences in understanding human sexuality but to continue to interrogate the tradition with all the imagination we can bring to it.

James Nelson[15] discusses human sexuality, not only in the context of pastoral theology, but seeking also to discover what sexuality says about faith, rather than the other way round. Like Michael Vasey[16] he re-visits the 'cluster of quotations' to which Rowan Williams refers above, noting that both the Hebrew and Christian texts may be more open than current received interpretations allow[17]. From the interpretation of texts he moves to considering the influence of external attitudes upon the way in which each of us perceives the particular sexuality which is ours [18]:

> "Two theological issues in particular frequently surface in counselling. One is the claim that homosexual orientation itself is contrary to nature, or to natural law, or to God's intention in creation. To the extent that this is internalized, counsellees will probably regard themselves as freakish and unnatural in this very fundamentalist way. Frequently, of course, the' 'unnatural' label is coupled with psychological notions of illness, perversion, and arrested development, or even with religious notions of idolatry."

He goes on [19]:

> "Now we recognise that there is no fixed human nature that can be read from the structure of human biology. Because human beings are constantly in the process of becoming, the definition of what is naturally human is forever being modified and changed."

The question for each person, then, is: 'How do I accept and use creatively the particular nature that I have, with all its fallibility and opportunities?'

Desiring the Unattainable

A feature of desire is that it frequently attaches itself to objects and goals which cannot be had. From earliest childhood we learn that this is so, yet the desire will not go away. It brings us face to face with the mystery that is ourselves, the mystery that is the other person, and the mystery of the world in which we are placed. It is a mystery best contemplated in silence. The famous prayer of Augustine: "God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you", captures powerfully our desire to be at the end of the quest while we are still in the middle of it, a desire mirrored in our tendency to be impatient of difficulty and conflict, to have things settled as nearly as possible on our own terms. Such a desire effectively prevents us from engaging in the rigorous exercise of the kind of detachment which may help us to understand ourselves and others in all the vunerability and subtle complexity of our being. A comment by Rowan Williams[20] is a salutary reminder:

> "A certain degree of hesitation in our willingness to offer the first kind of help that comes to our minds is no bad thing if it means that we end up attending to the reality of someone else – not giving in to the pressure that comes from wanting to make myself feel better. And that word 'hesitation' is one which the French philosopher Simone Weil put at the centre of her vision of how we should relate to each other in love: 'hesitate' as we might do on the threshold of some new territory, some unexplored interior. It is an aspect of our reverence for each other, and I think that

> it is an effective modern translation of quite a lot of what the desert fathers and mothers meant by 'fleeing'."
>
> "I cannot become holy by copying another's path. Like the novice in the desert, I must watch the elders and learn the shape and rhythm of being Christian from those who have walked further and worked harder; but then I have to take my own steps, and create a life that has never been lived before."[21]

Perhaps, to conclude this reflection, I can not do better than to repeat the line from the poet, R-M Rilke, quoted by Eley McAinsh at the Dunblane meeting referred to above:

> "Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart; live the question."[22]

[1] Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity,* San Francisco: Harper, 2000
[2] Richard Harries, *God outside the Box,* London:SPCK, 2002
[4] Peter Vardy, *Being Human*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003, p. 87
[5] Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies– Repetitions with Critical Difference*, Ashgate Publishing, 2003
[6] Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995
[7] Elizabeth Stuart, op.cit. Chapter 7, p. 89
[8] Elizabeth Stuart, op.cit., pp. 106ff
[9] Adrian Thatcher in *Theology,* March/April 2004, SPCK
[10] Elizabeth Stuart, op.cit.,pp. 96ff, 108ff
[11] House of Bishops, *Issues in Human Sexuality*, Church House Publishing, 1991
[12] James B. Nelson, *Between Two Gardens*, Pilgrim Press, 1983, p. 122
[13] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Blackwell, 2000, pp.56ff
[14] David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, O.U.P.,1999, pp. 5ff
[15] James B. Nelson, op.cit.,
[16] Michael Vasey, op.cit., pp. 124-140, 195-199
[17] James B. Nelson, op.cit., pp. 112ff
[18] James B. Nelson, op.cit., p. 116
[19] James B. Nelson, op.cit., p. 117
[20] Rowan Williams, op.cit., pp. 73f
[21] Rowan Williams, op.cit., p. 93
[22] Rainer-Maria Rilke, source not traced