

EMP2267HF
CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL HEALING:
THEORY AND PRACTICE
EMMANUEL COLLEGE, TORONTO SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Tuesdays, 6.00 – 8.00 p.m., Fall, 2006

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- I. In SEMINAR to consider Christian spiritual healing in relation to:**
- (i) Scientific evidence and scientific theory**
 - (ii) precedents in scripture and tradition: contemporary congregational experience**
 - (iii) Illness of body, emotions, and spirit; interconnections between these**
 - (iv) Sin and saintliness**
 - (v) Contrasting theological presuppositions concerning illness: always God's will or never God's will?**
 - (vi) New Testament principles for Christian spiritual healing**
 - (vii) Involvement by ordinary Christians and congregations.**

2. In PRACTICUM to investigate experientially various forms of spiritual healing and of preparation for spiritual healing. The Practicum will include self-healing and liturgical-service healing. Emphasis is not on "techniques" of healing but on spiritual changes in the healer.

Students should be forewarned that the Practicum will include forms of healing that are universal or are drawn from non-Christian sources. If you object in principle to this, you should consider not taking the course. (The extent to which Christians should use such forms of healing will be a topic of Seminar discussion, particularly in the Third Session.)

REGISTRATION

Students at Toronto School of Theology: Use ROSI
Auditors (about \$200): Registrar, Emmanuel College (416) 585-4539

COURSE TEXTS

BOB MILLER BOOKROOM, 180 BLOOR WEST (416)-922-3557

1. Rochelle Graham, Flora Litt, and Wayne Irwin, *Healing from the Heart: A Guide to Christian Healing for Individuals and Groups* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1998. (Lowville Prayer Centre in the United Church of Canada initiated this book.)

2. Francis MacNutt, *Healing* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1999 revised edition). (A best-seller from a carefully pondered Roman Catholic charismatic perspective).

3. Ian Cowie, *Jesus' Healing Works and Ours* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2000). (The author has been director of a Presbyterian Healing Centre and he has links to the Iona Community.)

4. George Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, translated from the French by Pamela Morris, (New York: Carrol and Graf, 1999). (An exploration of sin, saintliness and soul-healing.)

Excerpts from a fifth book will be provided for students, with permission from the author: Kathy Edmison, *Growing a Healing Ministry: A Resource for Congregations*, Wood Lake Books, 2004.

COURSE INSTRUCTOR: DON EVANS

Academic Background

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Victoria College, UofT
Retired Minister, United Church of Canada

Degrees: B.A. (Toronto), B.D. (McGill), B.Phil. (Oxford), D.Phil. (Oxford), D.D. (Huntington).

Author of six books, including *Spirituality and Human Nature* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1993)

Courses on Spirituality Taught for Toronto School of Theology:

“Varieties of Christian Spirituality: Theory and Practice” (twice through Emmanuel College)

“Spirituality in Literature” (once through Regis College).

Personal Spiritual Path

For over thirty years has been involved continuously in intensive processes of personal spiritual change, exploring many varieties of

meditation and prayer. While open to learning from non-Christian paths (especially Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi, Shamanic) his path is centrally Christian. Indeed, the core is a continuous openness to the bodily indwelling of the crucified and resurrected Christ. A special emphasis for over twenty years has been healing the rifts between men and women and between the masculine and feminine within all of us.

Focus on Spiritual Healing

Workshops on spiritual healing offered twice at TST Continuing Education, at a hospice in Devon, England, at Huntington College Sudbury, for interested people in Stratford, Ontario, and for the patients of a cancer consultant. He has also led hundreds of workshops on meditation in various secular and Christian contexts. The latter included: Toronto School of Theology, Continuing Education (15 times), Five Oaks Retreat Centre and Cedar Glen Retreat Centre, Ignatius College, Guelph (co-led with John Veltri, S.J.), Metropolitan Community Church, Huntington College, Sudbury (5 times)

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COURSE REQUIREMENTS

(1) Discussion-Openers (250 words – 50% of final mark)

Each discussion-opener is due at the session for which it had been assigned, and is handed in to the instructor at the end of the session. No later submissions are accepted. Each discussion-opener is a mini-essay response to a guide-question.

A total of TEN discussion-openers are required, each worth 5% of the overall final mark for the course. If a student submits more than ten the BEST ten will be considered in calculating the final mark.

(2) Final Essay (1500 words – 15% of the final mark)

(A) “Personal-reflection” essay, outlining and explaining any changes and/or confirmations in your own understanding of Christian Spiritual Healing in response to the course.

OR

(B) “Topic-focused” essay, exploring a particular issue in the course more extensively than in your mini-essays. Be sure to “clear” your topic with the instructor before writing it. Additional reading is not required for (B), but is permitted.

(3) Seminar Discussion (20% of the final mark).

This will be evaluated less on the quantity than on the quality of a student’s contributions to discussion. The quality involves many elements: clarity, brevity, and originality, insight into the text or the issues, pertinence in relation to other students’ remarks. etc.

(4) Practicum Participation (15% of the final mark)

Because of the difficulty in assigning a mark to someone’s spirituality, students will receive an automatic mark of 1% for each of the practicum sessions they attend. Also, if someone’s involvement is especially keen, this might increase their Practicum mark.

SOME TIPS CONCERNING DISCUSSION-OPENERS

1. Notes do not count as a discussion-opener mini-essay. Your whole answer should be legible and ready to hand in at the end of the class session. (If you speak from notes this can be one way of participating in class discussion, but it does not count as a written discussion-opener.)
2. Focus on the assigned guide-question. If you want to raise a different issue, do so orally in class discussion.
3. Assume that everyone has read the assigned text, so that you need only summarize or explain to the extent necessary in making your point. Try to provide a clear and stimulating initial basis for class discussion rather than a comprehensive survey. Answers do not have to “settle” an issue, they can be exploratory probes perhaps even ending with a question. Avoid long introductions; plunge right in instead.
4. Supplementary reading is not required and is, indeed, discouraged. Devote your time instead to REFLECTION in response to the assigned readings and to WRITING your answers to guide-questions. The course Bibliography is for possible follow-up AFTER the course.

5. Do not discard your marked answers. Keep them to check the instructor's tally later on.

A NOTE CONCERNING REGULAR ATTENDANCE & WRITING
10 DISCUSSION-OPENERS

If you know in advance that you can not commit yourself to regular preparation and regular attendance you would be unwise to take this course. Some courses can be salvaged by a last-minute flurry of activity at the end of term, but this is not one of them. The dynamics of the course require the building up of a group momentum. Participation in Seminar discussions and in Practicums is essential.

Especially important in relation to grades is the requirement that you submit 10 discussion-openers. If you do not, your final grade will be considerably reduced. Yet there are only 11 sessions when discussion-openers can be submitted.

Some flexibility is possible, however, in relation to possible difficulties in submitting discussion-openers that may arise from various unforeseen crises. There are several ways in which you can deal with such difficulties, whether in advance or afterwards:

- (i) In the second, sixth and eighth sessions you can submit two if you so decide.**
- (ii) In the twelfth session you can get double credit if you are on the team preparing and leading the worship.**
- (iii) At the end of term you can submit ONE late discussion-opener concerning a guide-question to which you did not respond; but your mark for it will have a 10% deduction.**

READING FOR THE EIGHTH SESSION

Students should realize that although the required reading for most sessions is reasonably restricted, the required reading in Bernanos for the eighth session is heavy. Virtually no additional reading in Bernanos is required for the ninth and tenth sessions, but some pre-planning or pre-reading may be appropriate for the eighth.

BRINGING A MAT and/or BLANKET FOR PRACTICUM

Please do this if possible for sessions five, six, nine and ten, when the meditations are most appropriately done lying on one's back. Each of these Practicums mentions "MAT" as a reminder.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE FIRST (INTRODUCTORY) SESSION

***The instructor will explain some major features of the course and respond to questions concerning this explanation and concerning the Course Outline.**

***The students will introduce themselves briefly or at length, in relation to their hopes and apprehensions concerning the course.**

***The instructor will briefly present four different kinds or dimensions of "spirituality": humanistic, naturalistic, spiritualistic and mystical as these pertain to spiritual healing. This presentation will include references to distinctively Christian modes of healing. Some student discussion will follow.**

***The instructor will lead a Practicum that introduces students to some varieties of concentrative contemplation, including "Christian mantra".**

WHAT HAPPENS BEFORE & DURING EACH SUBSEQUENT SESSION

In PREPARATION for the session, students must read and ponder the assigned pages. Usually each student will respond to the guide-question with a written discussion-opener to perhaps present at class. Students also engage in the spiritual practice week introduced at the previous session (e.g. for the 2nd session, the concentrative contemplation introduced at the 1st session).

DURING the session the guide-question is discussed as several students volunteer to read their openers and others respond. For about 30 minutes, usually at the end, the instructor introduces a new "Practicum".

REQUIRED READINGS AND GUIDE-QUESTIONS

SECOND SESSION:

There are two alternative topics. Read the chapters assigned for both, and write a discussion-opener in relation to one. If you so decide, you can submit discussion-openers for both. We will spend roughly equal time on each in seminar.

1. Science and Spiritual Healing

Required Reading: *Healing from the Heart*, chapters 4,7,10 and 13 by Wayne Irwin. (You may also read MacNutt, ch.18, but this is not required.)

Guide-question: How important or unimportant is support for spiritual healing from scientific theory and scientific evidence in relation to your own attitude towards spiritual healing? Explain why, in relation to Irwin's presentations.

2. The Case for Ordinary-Christian Involvement in Spiritual Healing

Required Reading: MacNutt, Preface, chapters 2 and 17 and also pages 130-131. (Possible supplementary reading in *Healing from the Heart*: chapters 1,2,3, Appendices D&G.)

Guide-question: Is spiritual healing part of the Christian calling for all Christians? Discuss this in relation to MacNutt's arguments.

Practicum: An elementary and universal introduction to spiritual healing.

THIRD SESSION

Christian Use of Non-Christian Healing Modalities

Required Reading: *Healing from the Heart*, chapters 5, 6, 12, Appendices A, B. Also MacNutt, pp.251-253, Cowie, pp.84-88, 218-220, Evans' discussion of Cowie in this Course Outline, and Edmison, pp. 8-12 and 149-158.

Guide-Question: Much of the counsel offered here in *Healing from the Heart* is not distinctively Christian in its origin or its application. Are there limits on Christian use of non-Christian modes of healing?

Practicum: Combining concentration and elementary healing.

IAN COWIES'S "JESUS' HEALING WORKS AND OURS"

SOME INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

By DON EVANS (September, 2006)

My choice of Ian Cowie's book as one of four for the course on Christian Spiritual Healing implies that I think that we will learn much from studying and discussing it together. But my choice does not imply that I fully endorse everything in it. So I am writing a brief account of what I see as its strengths and its weaknesses. You may well not agree with me concerning this appraisal; if so, such disagreement will provide excellent material for discussion in seminar. Meanwhile, my reflections may help to forestall premature judgments concerning the "slant" of the course.

Strengths

1. Cowie provides a conservative evangelical perspective on Christian spiritual healing that is not identified with the TV spectacles which many main-line congregations find repugnant, so he can not be easily swept aside. Moreover, what he presents arises from forty years of ministry, many of which have involved leadership at the Christian Fellowship of Healing in Edinburgh. He reads the Gospels in the original Greek and provides his own translation –especially important where translators have been reluctant to imply that Jesus might have had strongly emotional responses to people and situations. Again and again his very detailed studies of all the healing miracles in the New Testament provide fresh and illuminating exegesis and reflections. One specially helpful contribution is his biblically-based criticism of alleged "universal rules for healers" and his insistence that healers need to adapt to each individual's distinctive context and needs.

2. More specifically, his scriptural exegesis, linked with his personal experience of healing work, provides an important proposal concerning what is distinctive about Christian spiritual healing, in contrast with healing where a gifted person transmits "an objective, almost physical energy"(p.44). In particular, the emphasis on a "Word of Authority" more than, or even rather than, a laying on of hands, may challenge some Christian healers to reconsider their assumptions – or, at least, to broaden their horizons. Also, in so far as Cowie detects an energy transfer in Christian healing it is "from Christ-in-us to Christ-in-you"(85), and this approach, too, may be challenging.

3. Concerning the "Word of Authority" Cowie has a shrewd implicit critique of healing by TV-spectacular "stars": "We cannot stress too often that there is nothing authoritarian about the Word of Authority. No amount of posturing or posing, dressing up or dramatic gestures can give us authority to speak in Jesus' Name...Above all there is no authority *over* the sufferer, only *for* him/her. Beware of those who use imposing rituals or who work up emotions by hypnotic music and overpowering preaching....It is a way of saying, 'I have power over you'". (239)

“Jesus never came to do a solo act, a “look at me” show. He came in order to pass on what he was doing, to delegate his Authority to ordinary people.”(18) “Jesus called the Church into being to meet the need of the suffering masses, not to dominate them or to make money out of them. We have authority to heal, deliver and bless people, to spread the good news, not to boss them.”(21).

Weaknesses

1. In his zeal to preserve the integrity of distinctively Christian healing, Cowie rules out any combining of Christian and non-Christian healings whether within a Christian setting or alongside the non-Christians. Anyone who has the gift of healing must become Christian before exercising it within the Christian community. Maybe such a rule can be justified in some unusual circumstances, but Cowie’s reasons for it seem repugnant to me.

Several times Cowie assumes that all non-Christian spiritual healers are bound to be egoistic and have to become Christians to be freed of this. This ignores the (to me) obvious fact that many non-Christian healers have been transformed as persons through their disciplined receptivity to grace. His insight is in distinguishing between (i) the gift of healing, which like a gift for music is not itself character-transforming and (ii) the gift of being deeply healed, saved, made whole, transformed – out of which, then, healing for others may come. His mistake is in confining the latter to Christians

2. Worse still, he not only stereotypes non-Christian healers as egoistic but in one place views them as “enemy” of Christ: “There is something potent and dangerous in many of the old religious beliefs. Perhaps consulting the Oracle at Delphi was the best available to people of that time, but, once the Christ had come, the second best became the enemy of the best.”(219) Such a sweeping dismissal of all non-Christian healing resources as “enemy” is blasphemous in cases where it demonizes the work of God in a non-Christian healer. I agree with Cowie that perhaps in the particular spiritualistic context that Cowie was citing before he made his generalization, a harmful spirit had invaded someone. But I have witnessed similar things happening in some Christian contexts.

Some evangelical Christians go beyond Cowie in that they view all non-Christian spiritual paths and spiritual presences as evil. This renders them totally blind to the work of the Spirit even where the fruits of the Spirit are completely evident. Perhaps we can understand Cowie’s occasional excesses as arising from working for decades within a Scottish culture where there have been centuries of mutual distrust between Calvinistic Christianity and individuals who have “the gift”. Some of his statements, however, are likely to be very offensive to Canadian Christians who have experienced a spiritual re-awakening through non-Christian healing modalities such as Reiki or Therapeutic Touch. That’s my main reason for writing these notes. (MacNutt’s biases against non-Christian healing are far less prominent, so I have not criticized him.)

3. A third weakness in Cowie, in my view, is that he does not seem to envisage even the possibility of a sacramental use of what he calls “an objective, almost physical, energy”(44) or “some kind of electromagnetic power in their hands”(166), which seems similar to what some Canadian Christian healers call “cosmic spiritual energies” or “universal life-energies”. He cites what he calls “the sacramental principle”: “God often takes ordinary things, such as the friendly touch, water, bread or wine, to convey something far more than can be accounted for in purely physical terms” And he has been insisting that “one cannot draw a clear distinction between the friendly touch, the blessing and the laying-on of hands”(87). But he does not recognize that the quasi-material energies transmitted through the hands may themselves be viewed as creaturely, natural realities like bread and wine through which God brings blessing and healing.

FOURTH SESSION

Three Kinds of Spiritual Healing:

Required Reading: MacNutt, chapters 11-15 and Cowie, pp.181-185 (re inner, emotional healing) and pp.89-111 (re exorcism) (Possible supplementary reading in *Healing from the Heart*: chapters 8, 9, Appendix C.

Guide-Question: Discuss any ONE of the following questions:

- (1) Is praying to be forgiven by God for one’s refusal to forgive people and God the central focus in healing of spirit or soul?
- (2) What is the connection between spiritual healing and psychotherapy in healing of the emotions or “inner healing”?
- (3) Does some healing of spirit, emotions and/or body require deliverance from invasive presences? Explain why you think “Yes” or “No” in relation to Macnutt and Cowie.

Practicum

“Tree” Meditation Connecting in Six Directions

FIFTH SESSION

There are two closely-related topics. Read what is assigned for both, but prepare a discussion-opener only in response to one.

1. God’s Will Concerning Human Suffering

Required Reading: MacNutt, chapters 3-7.

Guide-Question: In general, how should we view suffering (spiritual, emotional, physical) in ourselves: as opportunities sent by God through which we can grow? OR as not being willed by God but rather as ills

concerning which, in general, God wills our co-operation in reducing or eliminating? OR in some other way?

2. Confidence or Caution in Praying for Physical:

Required Reading: MacNutt, chapters 3-10, 14 and *Healing from the Heart*, chapter I and also Currie, page 134.

Guide-question: When praying for physical healing, should we always include an implicit or explicit “If it be Thy will”?

Practicum (MAT)

**Meditation on Bodily Healing and Bodily Loving One’s Self
(followed by distant healing)**

SIXTH SESSION

Cowie on Jesus’ Healing Works and Ours (first discussion):

Required Reading: Cowie, pages 7-23, 165-67, 236-43, then pages 24 to 88. Edmison, pp. 21-36. Also re-read Evans’ notes on Cowie.

Guide-question:

(1) There are four sections, with summaries that begin on pages 38, 55, 69 and 88. Concerning one of the sections, perhaps in relation to another one, present your own personal reflections.

OR

(2) Does the “Word of Authority” have significance for you in Christian spiritual healing? If it does, explain some of the significance. If it does not, explain why it does not.

Practicum (MAT)

**Meditation on Self-Emptying
(followed by group healing of an individual)**

SEVENTH SESSION

Cowie on Jesus’ Healing Works and Ours (second discussion)

Required Reading: (all three of the following topics)

Cowie on Healing in Anger (pages 112-138 and 172-77);

Cowie on Healing conquering Death (143-155, 199-202)

Cowie on Healing in the early Church and now (pp.188-197, 203-

226)

Guide-Question: Discuss whatever issues arise for you from any ONE of the three topics.

Practicum: Invoking the Name/Presence of Jesus
(followed by group healing focused on an individual)

INTRODUCING BERNANOS AND SOUL-HEALING **(Sessions 8, 9 and 10 are on his novel)**

Assigned Text: Georges Bernanos, The Diary of a Country Priest, translated by Pamela Morris, (New York: Carroll & Graf: 1983 to 1999)

Assigned reading: pages 1-181.

It is very important to read ALL of this before the EIGHTH SESSION. You are not required to read the rest of the novel since this would involve spending too much preparation time on reading, leaving little time left for in-depth study, personal reflection and writing your response(s). You are free, of course, to read the entire novel, but for purposes of class discussion we will not assume that everyone has done so.

Introductory Comments by Don Evans on Bernanos' Novel: **Sin, Saintliness and Soul-Healing**

This monumental novel stirs readers to many diverse reflections, but for purposes of seminar discussion I have selected two topics: the origin and nature of sin and the origin and nature of saintliness. My choice is not arbitrary, for Bernanos introduces them very early and returns to them again and again. And they are inter-related, for one theme is that only a saint can deeply understand what sin really is, having deeply explored it within him/her self

Indeed, the novel seems to imply that only as the priest becomes saintly can he become an instrument of soul-healing for the Comtesse, whose conversion also involves the beginnings of a process towards saintliness.

Another topic, instead of saintliness, might have been priesthood, the requirements for being a “good priest”. Much in the novel would support such a focus, but this is an enormous topic in itself. Nevertheless as we examine saintliness we will need to bear in mind at times that perhaps – or perhaps not – a particular dimension of saintliness is connected with the distinctive responsibilities of a priest.

Bernanos' depictions of sin and of saintliness are complex, profound and controversial. As a way of bringing some initial structure to the seminar discussion, I will be outlining a number of themes or dimensions for each. This analysis is, of course, open to question and revision, both concerning its clarity and concerning its faithfulness to Bernanos' intentions. But the outline can provide a useful starting-point.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO READ THE NOVEL BEFORE READING THE DETAILED ANALYSES BY THE INSTRUCTOR

Students are encouraged to respond to Bernanos' presentation not only through their own detached theological reflection but also as "existentially" as seems appropriate for them. That is, it is clear that Bernanos wants us to respond, to some extent, in a personal, experiential way, e.g. "What is wrong with me?" and "To what do I aspire?" Of course our main emphasis can be on "What is wrong with human beings?" and "To what should human beings aspire?"

Some readers, like myself, may on first reading be put off by the Cure de Torcy's monologue in pages 8-23, with its portrayal of the ideal priest as a condescending, authoritarian ruler not unlike Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor! If this is true of you, I encourage you to set aside first impressions and to persist, as I did.

**AN OUTLINE ANALYSIS OF BERNANOS
ON THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF SIN;
TEN DIMENSIONS OF SIN**

1. Sin is an Inner-Life State, not a Behavioural deed or omission

"People always refuse to see beyond the individual fault. But after all the transgression itself is only the eruption. And the symptoms which most impress outsiders aren't always the gravest and most disquieting."(108b; cf. 107d-108a & 75c)

Concerning misuse of confession: "I still cannot manage to understand what horrible metamorphosis has enabled so many people to show me their inner life as a mere convention, a formal scheme without one clue to its reality. Petty lies can slowly form a crust around the consciousness of evasion and subterfuge. . . their sly candour reminds one of a dirty window-pane so blurred that light has to struggle through it, and nothing can be clearly seen." (86d-87a; cf. the Comtesse in 157d-159c, especially "It has nothing to do with my confessor. These are feelings which I can't control. But I've never let them influence my conduct.")

"How many men will never have the least idea of what is meant by supernatural heroism, without which there can be no inner life! Yet by that very same inner life shall they be judged." (108d; cf. 108b-110c)

"I'm not stopping you from calculating the procession of the equinoxes or splitting the atom. Bu what would it profit one even to create life itself, when you

have lost all sense of what life really is? Might as well blow our brains out among your test-tubes.”(20cd)

“To judge us by what we call our actions is probably as futile as to judge us by our dreams. God’s justice chooses from this dark conglomeration of thought and act, and that which is raised towards the Father shines with a sudden burst of light, displayed in glory like the sun.” (87d)

“Crimes, no matter how atrocious, no more reveal the nature of evil than the greatest works of saints the splendour of God.” (144a)

2. Sin Defined as the Destruction of the Desire for Faith

Faith: “supernatural knowledge of ourselves in the Divine”(126b)

Sin: “Impurity does not destroy this knowledge, it slays our NEED of it. I no longer believe, because I have no wish to believe. You no longer wish to know yourself. I no longer believe, because I have no wish to believe. You no longer wish to know yourself. This profound truth, your truth, has ceased to interest you.”(126bc)

“We can only really possess what we desire, since complete and absolute possession does not exist for a human being. You no longer want to possess yourself. You no longer desire your own joy. You can only love yourself through God. You no longer love yourself, and you will never love yourself again either in this world or hereafter —through all eternity.”(126cd)

DE: This passage concludes a section on sin as “impurity” in the form of “lust”. People substitute lust for their desire for supernatural self-knowledge and self-love in the Divine. If they persist, their state can become permanent. There are, however, examples where the “impurity” is not “lust” except in an extended sense of the word, where it refers to any inordinate human desire that is substituted for the desire to know and love oneself in the Divine. For example, when the Comtesse is finally “face to face” (168a) with God, she is dangerously close to that permanent, hellish state. What she has substituted for her desire for self-knowledge and self-love in the Divine is her addictive, idolatrous attachment-‘love’ for her son. And although Chantal is not hovering close to permanent hell, her state involves a similarly obsessive attachment-‘love’ for her father (135) which has changed into hatred towards him (as well as the governess and her mother). Concerning her, the priest comments: “God, are we really such wretched creatures that a proud soul in revolt must needs turn against itself?”(137cd)

3.Sin as “Lust”

(1) Bernanos contrasts lust with “that desire which unites the sexes” (123bc) and with “virility”(125d) which it “stifles”. But he does not elaborate on this in any clear way, offering no examples of life-enhancing sexual desire.

(2) Concerning lust as sinful sexual desire he is very eloquent, comparing it to a (cancerous) tumour devouring the sexual organ, “a tumour whose very deformity horribly reproduces the shape”(123bc). In his dreams he still sees the lust-filled faces of men in the low-life pub where he lived as a twelve-year-old: “I had seen those hard and avid faces suddenly fixed in indescribable smiles. God! how is it we

fail to realize that the mask of pleasure, stripped of all hypocrisy, is that of anguish? (124b) “Ultra-sensitive, shifty faces, skilled in disguise, that hide themselves in lust, as beasts hide to die.”(124d-125a)

(3) Such lust is specially corrupting for a child to witness, whether in the disgusting pub or artfully disguised by society. Initially the “still unsullied”(123c) children have a “human dignity”(123c) and might revolt against this “wound in the side of humanity; or rather at the very source of its life!”(123b). Although “angels still stand guard”(124a) over the child, society prevails in its corruption.

(4) It is concerning such “lust” that the priest says, “Impotent to create, it can only contaminate in the germ the frail promise of humanity; it is probably at the very source, the primal cause of all human blemishes”(125d). With an implicit reference to Genesis, he goes on, “Lust, just as she is, as she emerged forth from the hands of the Master of Prodigies, the cry from our hearts is not only terror, but imprecation: ‘You, you alone have set death loose upon the world!’”(126a)

DE: This seems to involve an interpretation of Genesis in which the Devil’s tempting of Adam and Eve was not that they proudly substitute narcissistic desires for their desire to know themselves in God. Rather, the Devil somehow worked directly on human sexual desire, corrupting it. This is a perennial debate among theologians. (See, for example, Sebastian Moore’s critical review of Mary G.Durkin’s book concerning Pope John Paul II on Human Intimacy in *Commonweal* (November 7, 1986).)

The quotation also suggests – as most Christian theology has traditionally held – that but for the Fall human beings would be immortal. This is difficult to reconcile with contemporary evolutionary-history accounts of our origin, unless our very existence as embodied beings is itself a “fall”.

4. Childhood, Innocence and Sin

For Bernanos, some children retain for a while an INNOCENCE with which they come into the world. Eventually everyone loses it, yet saintliness involves, to some extent, a recovery of it. (Concerning saintliness consider, later, 175ac.)

As we have seen, the loss of innocence is for Bernanos mainly associated with the advent of lust. But as we shall see it is also associated with socialization into human conventions and with a wretched, despairing loneliness.

(1) Sylvestre. . . is a strangely beautiful child who gives me the almost poignant feeling of innocence, an innocence previous to all sin, the sinlessness of an innocent beast. . . I felt that in his quiet attentive eyes I could read the sympathy I craved”(88ab).

(2) “The dying girls of whom I speak showed plainly how they repented of their sin. Yet it was only after death that their poor sweet faces managed to recapture that serene look of the little children which they almost were. . . An indefinable air of confidence and wonder, that limpid gaiety. The devil of lust is a dumb fiend.”(72c)

(3) “Why does our earliest childhood always seem so soft and full of light? A kid’s got plenty of troubles, like everybody else, and he’s really so very helpless, quite unarmed against pain and illness. . . But that very sense of powerlessness is the

mainspring of a child's joy. He just leaves it all to his mother, you see. Present, past, future—his whole life is caught up in one look, and that look is a smile.”(18d-19a)

(4) “It is rare for a child not to have known any inner life, as Christianity understands it, however embryonic the form. One day or another all young lives are stirred by an urge which seems to compel; every pure young breast has depths which are raised to heroism. Not very urgently perhaps, but just strongly enough to show the little creature a glimpse, which sometimes half-consciously he accepts, of the huge risk that salvation entails, and gives to human life all its divinity. He has sensed something of good and evil, has seen them both in their pristine essence unalloyed by notions of social discipline and habit.” (109ab) Cf. 52bc.

(5) “The first realization of misery is fierce indeed. Blessed be he who has saved a child's heart from despair! . . .A little boy is all alone. . .Distress is not shared, each creature is alone in his distress, it belongs only to him, like his face and his hands. . .I don't think I had any perception of that loneliness . . .but merely submitted to this law of my life, without understanding. (52cd) The priest goes on concerning how his reading of Gorki's childhood memories “gave me a whole people for my companions”(53top). This people, as it were, join together in sounding their distress in a hymn which is not a church hymn: “the howling of a moujik under the rods, the screaming of a beaten wife, the hiccup of a drunkard, and the growling of animal joy, that wild sigh from the loins. . .distress that has forgotten even its name, that has ceased to reason or to hope” (53b)

5.Human Wretchedness and Suffering as the Soil for Sin

DE: The collective wretchedness portrayed by Gorky in adults and by Bernanos in children involves a loss of the discernment which might otherwise arise “heroically”, that is, the discernment arising from the inner reflection that draws on our human desire to know and love ourselves in God.

(1) “That shifty fear of the Divine, that oblique flight through life, as of a man in the shadow of a wall, while the whole earth is bright with sunshine. . .It puts me in mind of some wretched animal, dragging itself back into its hole, having served as the plaything of cruel children. . .Ah, if we could view with angelic sight these maimed human beings”(95b)

(2) “I had before me a distorted face, whose disfigurement was not due to pain, but to a deep inner panic. I had seen features thus strained before, but only on the faces of the dying. . .What could I say, what could I do to help this wounded creature whose life seemed to be flowing away from some secret hurt.”(133d)

(3) Torcy provides what could be called a “social-scientific” account of the behaviour of a coward, a miser and a brutally-heartless person (118d-119b) whose “wretchedness” Christ takes on. (Compare with Gorky's chanting sufferers, whose distress “lays its tortured head at random, will awaken one day on the shoulder of Jesus Christ” 53c) DE: Does the use of a social-scientific account here imply that human freedom is minimal among the “wretched”?

6. Human Boredom as the Soil for Sin

“My parish is bored stiff; no other word for it. We can see them being eaten up by boredom, and we can’t do anything about it. Some day perhaps we shall catch it ourselves, become aware of the cancerous growth within us. You can keep going a long time with that in you. . . It is like dust. . .To shake off this drizzle of ashes you must be for ever on the go. And so people are always ‘on the go’. . .I wonder if man has ever before experience this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay.”(1c-3a)

7 Sin as Culpable Connivance with Evil

The priest seems to view the wretchedness and boredom in human beings generally as a kind of “folly” with whose shameful and suffering he can empathize without judgement, but in the case of the Comtesse he feels differently: “The contrast of the graceful house with its loathsome secrets made me indignant. For indeed the folly of human beings seemed as nothing beside their stubborn malice, the sly help which under the eye of God Himself they will give to all the powers of evil, of confusion and death. When you think how ignorance, misery and disease eat into thousands of innocent lives—and then, when Providence miraculously spares some haven in which peace might flourish, human lusts must needs creep into it.”(158c)

DE: Human beings seem to be portrayed as giving “sly help” to powers of evil as a way of obscuring their awareness of the Divine and of themselves in the Divine. Their connivance or conspiracy or secret cooperation is with three aspects of evil: (i) their own individual tendencies towards malice, hate, judgement and heart-hardening. (ii) what Bernanos calls “the communion of sinners”, which is a collective tendency towards reinforcing these qualities and (iii) what Bernanos calls “essential” or “satanic” evil, which is a metaphysical reality transcending human individuals and human collectivities. Human beings draw on this evil by permitting themselves to be possessed by it. We’ll consider (ii) & (iii) in turn, in sections #8 & #9.

8. Sin as the “Communion of Sinners”

(1) “There is not only a communion of saints; there is a communion of sinners. In their hatred of one another, their contempt, sinners unite, embrace, intermingle, become as one. . .Who are you to condemn another’s sin? He who condemns sin becomes part of it, espouses it. You hate this woman and feel yourself so far removed from her, when your hate and her sin are as two branches of the same tree. . .Who cares, if from now on you are linked together in evil, trapped all three in the same snare of vice, the same bond of evil flesh.”(138d-139b)

DE: Here one person harms another and the latter responds sinfully with hatred and judgement, so both contribute to a collective evil that exceeds their individual evil. This also happens on a larger scale. The one remedy is forgiveness.

(2) In another passage the priest (like Father Zossima) explores a special dimension of sinful human interaction, where not only our deeds but also our private feelings and thoughts affect others telepathically: “Hidden sins poison the air which others breathe, and without such corruption at the source, many a

wretched man, tainted unconsciously, would never have become a criminal.”(166b). And the consequences of bad thoughts are unpredictable, random: “Evil thoughts are like good ones; thousands may be scattered by the wind, or overgrown or dried up by the sun. Only one takes root.”(166a) Elsewhere the priest is pessimistic concerning the frequency of good taking root: “Truly, man is always at enmity with himself—a secret sly kind of hostility. Tares, scattered no matter where, will almost certainly take root. Whereas the smaller seed of good needs more than ordinary good fortune, prodigious luck, not to be stifled.”(102c) A “clear knowledge”(166c) of how closely we are bound together psychically in good and evil would make it impossible to go on living; so we typically repress such awareness.

9. “Essential Evil” or “Satanic Evil”: a METAPHYSICAL (DE: my word) Source from which Humans Draw and by which they allow themselves to be Possessed.

(1) The priest recalls his challenging words to Chantal as conveying his own “very vivid sensation of evil. . .more than sensation, almost vision. . .my own image of evil, of the power of evil, since as a rule I try to push the thought away from me. It hurts too much, it forces me to realize the meaning of. . .certain suicides.”(143d) He sees some people who are indifferent to any religion or morality glimpsing for an instant “something of this satanic possession”(144a) and longing to escape it.

(2) Bernanos distinguishes human evil from this essential evil: “CRIMES, NO MATTER HOW ATROCIOUS, NO MORE REVEAL THE NATURE OF EVIL THAN THE GREATEST WORKS OF SAINTS THE SPLENDOR OF GOD”(144a). “Historians, moralists, even philosophers refuse to see anything but the criminal, they re-create evil in the image and likeness of humanity. They form no idea of essential evil.” (144d-145a)

Human beings have only a “very limited choice of wrong. . .at their disposal. .for miserably plagiarizing true evil. Satan is too hard a master. He would never command, as did the Other with divine simplicity: ‘Do likewise’. The devil will have no victims resemble him. He permits only a rough caricature, impotent, abject, which has to serve as food for eternal irony, the mordant irony of the depths.”(144b)

(3) Bernanos has two images of essential evil:

(i) “The world of evil is so far beyond our understanding. Nor can I really succeed in picturing hell as a world, a universe. It is nothing, never will be anything but a half-formed shape, the hideous shape of an abortion, a stunted thing on the very verge of all existence. I think of sullied, translucent patches on the sea. Does the Monster care that there should be one criminal more or less? Immediately he sucks down the crime into himself, makes it one with his own horrible substance, digests without once rousing from his terrifying eternal lethargy.”(144c)

(ii) “that vast yearning for the void, for emptiness, since if ever our species is to perish it will die of boredom, of stale disgust. Humanity will have been slowly eaten up as a beam by invisible fungi, which transform in a few weeks a block of oakwood into sponge matter which our fingers have no difficulty in

breaking”(145a) (Compare with 164b: “The sorrow, the unutterable loss of those charred stones which once were men is that they have nothing more to be shared”)

(4) DE: Three Reflections concerning “Essential” or “Satanic” Evil

(i) Bernanos speaks about “Satan” as both in both personal and impersonal ways, that is, as both an individual agent and a pervasive reality. He also speaks about God (as most of us do) in both ways, though Satan is a parody of God in that Satan is subhuman and barely real at all. Indeed Satan reduces humans to Satan’s subhuman level.

(ii) Bernanos is not, for me, clear enough in distinguishing between what he calls “Satanic possession” and possession by an “invisible spirit of evil”(135c). In my own experience invasion by an evil spirit is not uncommon, but possession is rare; and evil spirits vary greatly in the degree of their evil. I think that the existence of individual evil spirits, whether these be disembodied humans or fallen minor angels, needs to be distinguished from the possible existence of what Bernanos depicts as “Satan”. For one thing, only a very small minority of malevolent spirits is comparable to Satan in being what I call “demonic” because they go beyond mischief-making and even beyond hate, revenge or sadism to focus their intention on destroying love as such.

(iii) All that he explains by reference to “Satan” I attribute to demonic forms of collective human evil. Human evil accumulates as patterns or “pools” of malevolent human energy and thought. Such patterns persist independently of any individual human beings, sometimes remaining in particular places where hate-filled atrocities occurred. It is from these that sinful individuals unconsciously or consciously draw. Some of the patterns are what I call “demonic” and these are the ones that I view as equivalent in function to Bernanos’ Satan.

(Of course I expect that some students will reject not only Bernanos’ metaphysical claims concerning the existence of Satan, but also my proposals concerning disembodied or unembodied evil spirits, and concerning accumulated thought-energy patterns of evil. On what bases do we accept or reject these various beliefs, or suspend judgment concerning them? Scripture and/or tradition and/or reason and/or personal spiritual experience? How important or unimportant are they?)

10. Hell as a Metaphysical “Shape” and as a Loss-of-Humanity Human State

In 144c, above, Bernanos equates Satan with Hell, and vice versa, and sees self-damned human beings as assimilating into this sub-human “shape”. This happens if and when hardness of heart is so extreme that the person has lost entirely the power to love (163c)

Bernanos distinguishes such hardness of heart from hate, which involves life: “Our very hate is resplendent, and the least tormented of the fiends would warm himself in what we call our despair, as in a morning of glittering sunshine. Hell is not to love any more, madame. Not to love any more! That sounds quite ordinary to you. To a human being still alive, it means to love less or love elsewhere. . . The error common to us all is to invest these damned with something still inherently

alive, something of our own inherent mobility, whereas in truth time and movement have ceased for them; they are fixed for ever.”(163d-164a). The compassionate priest would be willing to share in the sufferings of the vilest of the living cast into hell, but “the unutterable loss of those charred stones which once were men, is that they have nothing more to be shared”(164b)

For Bernanos hell is not to be conceived as “a kind of penal servitude for eternity”(163a). It is not punishment but a consequence, a self-damnation. Nor does it involve suffering in any usual sense of the word. The person who has become completely unable to love has ceased to be a person who can grieve a loss!

DE: Many questions to ponder and discuss here, for example: If the priest had not tried “to liven (the Comtesse’s) heart in an instant, bring light into the innermost recess of a conscience”(168c), would she have moved into a permanent loveless state? Is it only if one is clearly and consciously “face-to-face” with God and in that moment rejects God that self-damnation can occur? Or does such a clear awareness of God preclude hardening one’s heart against God? Indeed, can one render oneself totally inaccessible to God’s love? Are there none or many “in hell”?

GUIDE-QUESTION FOR EIGHTH SESSION

(first session on Bernanos):

There are two possible guide-questions to which to respond, but you may not respond to the second unless you have already responded to the first. That is, you can not respond only to the second.

1. Discuss ONE or TWO of the ten “dimensions” of sin in Bernanos’ novel with reference to the exploration given above, the text and your own experiences and reflections. .

2. Discuss Bernanos’ “inner-life” emphasis concerning sin in relation to the ideas presented in the novel concerning the inevitability and the holiness of poverty for example in these two quotations:

60cd: “Have we kept God’s word intact: *the poor you have always with you?*”

50a “Our Lord took poverty as his bride, and invested the poor man with such dignity that now we’ll never get him off his pedestal”

Consider also 46b-63a, 79b-83b, 92b-93b and 158a-161b and any other passages that seem relevant.

Practicum (MAT) On Discerning Sin Within Oneself

NINTH SESSION (second session on Bernanos):

Required Reading: same as for the eighth session

Guide-Question (You may answer either version A or version B of this question. Version A can be quite impersonal, but Version B is more personal and “existential”.)

(A): In relation to your own spirituality and/or theology discuss briefly what you see as the main strengths and weaknesses of Bernanos’ portrayal of the origin and nature of sin.

OR

(B): Discuss briefly Bernanos’ overall portrayal of the origin and nature of sin in relation to your own awareness of sin in yourself and in others.

Practicum (MAT)

“As we forgive those who sin against us”
(presented as a part of a healing service)

TENTH SESSION (third one on Bernanos)

ORIGIN AND NATURE OF SAINTLINESS

Additional Reading Required for the Second Session:

199ab, 203ad, 291d-298d

SOME EXPLORATIONS OF BERNANOS ON SAINTLINESS

BY DON EVANS

Preliminary Reflections concerning the Origin and Nature of Saintliness

For Christians the distinction between the origin and the nature is clear at the most fundamental theological level: the origin is the Holy Spirit, and the nature is manifested in a saint as various “fruits of the Spirit”. The origin is divine and the nature involves a process of divinization of the human.

If, however, we inquire concerning human involvement in the process through which a human being becomes saintly, the distinction between origin and nature becomes less clear. The process involves a person becoming more open to the Spirit in various ways. Each way of being more open gradually becomes less impure, more intensive and more pervasive. By persevering in these ways, one can increase in holy receptivity; and this increase is an increase in saintliness.

At a particular stage in an earthly life others may say, “She’s a saint”, because the saintliness seems so evident; and later the Roman Catholic Church may, or may not, declare that the person is to be recognized as “a saint”. But during an earthly life it’s clear that being saintly is a matter of degree, even for people who later are canonized, but also for many less saintly, less holy people. Perhaps if we

used the words “saintliness” and “holiness” as alternatives, it would become clear that a person might aspire to become “more saintly” without aspiring (presumptuously!) to become “a saint”!

It is possible to read Bernanos’ novel as a posing of the question, concerning the fictitious priest’s life as a whole, “Was he a saint?” in the sense, “If he had existed, would he appropriately have been designated such by the Roman Catholic Church?” In our seminar discussion, however, we will not be focusing on this question. Rather, we will consider four dimensions of saintliness as they are depicted in the priest.

1. Saintliness as Participation in Divine Compassion for Human Beings, Identifying with them in their Suffering.

(1) Wise monks through prayer undergo a “deepening of the spirit” which renders them “tender in their humanity”, enabled to “enter more deeply each day into the pain of others” uniting them as individuals “with mankind in the spirit of universal charity” (104d, b). It is “the unanimous testimony of saints” that the deepening of the spirit “ends in sudden total illumination, opening out upon azure light”(104d-105a). Cf. “the strong gentle pity of the saints”(8d).

DE: What makes Bernanos’ novel especially insightful is that it presents not only descriptions of the outcome of a profoundly transformative process but also, in the case of the narrator-priest, the stages and struggles within that process. I discern the following stages:

(i) Self-Preoccupied Empathy and Collective Wretchedness: the priest feels a connection with, and a place within, the collective wretchedness of human beings in suffering. As I have noted in the analyses of dimensions of sin, the priest, on reading Gorki, found such a connection positive in that it considerably reduced his own sense of utter aloneness in his own suffering. But his empathetic openness also affected him negatively, as a “childish shrinking from other people’s pain”(8c), a vulnerability which overwhelmed him by reinforcing his own pain. And at times he even complains to God for making him wretched: “You cast me off into despair as we fling a scarce-born animal into the water, tiny and blind.” (145cd)

(ii) Judgement and the Community of Sinners: In one of the passages cited previously concerning this (138d-139b) the priest challenges Chantal: “Who are you to condemn another’s sin? He who condemns sin becomes part of it, espouses it.” Yet in the first part of his encounter with her (130a-133b) he had done just that himself, most blatantly when he says, “I wouldn’t do what you have done were it to save my life”(133b), but also in his harshness and lack of empathy for Chantal’s plight as the scape-goat in a dysfunctional family: She, not the governess, is being forced to leave. But then there was a shift in his way of seeing her, a shift from judgement to compassion:

(iii) Compassionate Empathy Focused on the Suffering from which the Sin Arises. “I had before me a distorted face, whose disfigurement was not due to pain, but to a deep inner panic. I had seen features thus strained before, but only on the faces of the dying. . .What could I say, what could I do to help this wounded creature whose life seemed to be flowing away from some secret hurt? In spite of all this I felt I had better remain silent a little longer.”(133d) Then the priest has a

vision of Chantal's face and wonders whether this vision has "something to do with my prayer, *was* my prayer, in some way? My prayer was sad and so was the image. I could hardly bear such sadness and yet I was anxious to share it, to assume it in its entirety, to let it flood my soul, my heart, my bones, my whole being." (134bc)

DE: This passage expresses the essence of compassionate empathy, but there are three additional features that need to be considered:

(a) Grace and human co-operation. The priest's shift into compassion silences "the confused rumble of inner hostile voices which had troubled me for the last few weeks. The old silence had returned to me. The blessed quiet wherein the voice of God can be heard."(134c) DE: Perhaps his own initial silence in response to the vision was a human part of the transformative shift from turbulent judgement to quiet compassion; but perhaps it too, like everything else that happened, was simply a work of divine grace in him.

Later on, however, speaking to the Comtesse, he describes such a shift as something which he as a priest can in a sense facilitate by shifting the energy of his own attention beyond a person's blasphemous words so as to focus on his/her suffering: "A priest pays attention only to suffering, provided that suffering is real. What do the words which express it matter, even if they're so many lies?"(151b) Compare this with "I refused to see anything else but the girl before me, tottering as though on the brink of a double gulf of hate and despair. O agonized face! Such a face can never have lied, such anguish..."(142b). DE: His commitment to focus on her anguish, her "terrified shrinking from all the sorrow and shame of life"(142c) requires courage and determination, for her anguish stirs similar feelings within himself, vivid "memories of unhappy childhood".

(b) Transforming the Community of Sinners by Eliminating Judgement. The shift from being judgmental to being compassionate occurs through acknowledging, alongside the sinner, that both of us have suffered and thereby been tempted into sin. His words to the Comtesse concerning paying attention not to her blasphemies but to her suffering were immediately preceded by these words: "I don't presume to judge you. . .neither can I allow myself to judge your daughter. . . I know what it is to suffer. I've suffered myself. . . And I know that suffering speaks in its own words, words that can't be taken literally. It blasphemes everything: family, country, the social order, and even God". (150d-151a) He acknowledges that he doesn't approve of such blasphemy, but says, "I try to understand it. A priest can't shrink from sores any more than a doctor. He must be able to look at pus and wounds and gangrene. All the wounds of the soul give out pus, madame". (151ab) He has suffered such wounds himself. Indeed, he implied to Chantal his own acquaintance with sin within the communion of sinners (138c-139a) and this seems to have been the occasion for evil to begin leaving her, in this her "great and final struggle against God"(139a).

© Compassion and Forgiveness. The priest's restraining himself from judging the Comtesse and Chantal has to do with their dealings with each other, not their dealings with him. He seems to ignore their scornful contempt, nasty insults and condescending dismissals, so the issue of forgiving them does not directly arise for him. Consider, for example, this passage: "She (the Comtesse) may have been trying to hurt me. But at that instant I was incapable of taking any kind of offence.

Usually my dominant feeling is that of the powerlessness of us all, poor feeble creatures that we are—our invincible blindness. And now the feeling was stronger than ever in me.” (147d).

Most of us, however, can find an application of Bernanos’ teaching in the context of forgiveness: I need to focus my attention not on an abuser’s unfair judgements of me but rather on the suffering out of which it arises. If I do, I am less likely to feel not only judgmental but also resentful.

2. Saintliness Involves Humble Reliance Solely on God’s Wisdom and Power

(1) Initial Note Concerning “Humility”:

The “humility” that saintliness involves must not be confused with the priest’s “humble” acknowledgment that he is less competent than other priests and other human beings. His acknowledgment is merely an honest self-appraisal, though it also may involve some self-preoccupied self-rating. It is a fact that he is less competent than others in his management of property and of money. He is also less competent than others in skilful interactions with people. Instead of being able to lead people where he wants them to go, he is easily manipulated by them. He lacks discernment, confidence and assertiveness, and this enables individual parishioners such as M. Pamyre and Seraphita to manage him for their own purposes. And he allows himself to be defined and constrained by the parish as a whole, while he deludes himself that he understands them. (Instances of his incompetence occur throughout the novel, but an initial impression can be gained in 6b-7a, 23b-28c, 33d-34d and 90d-91d.)

Is it easier for him to be humble than it would be for a very successful TV evangelist? The answer to this question depends on what one means by “humble”:

- (i) The everyday understanding construes “humility and “pride” as contrasting self-ratings alongside others on a scale of comparative competence. Clearly in this sense the priest is humble as contrasted with, say, a successful TV evangelist, who is bound to be proud if he is honest with himself.
- (ii) A genuinely spiritual understanding views “humility” as a matter of surrendering oneself to God to be used as an instrument of divine wisdom and power. “Pride” then is a matter of being self-preoccupied concerning one’s self-rating, whether this rating be high or low. Such pride, whether self-inflating or self-deflating, is an obstacle to surrendering oneself so as to become a divine instrument. If I think that I’ve already “got it all together”, I’m unlikely to let God do more than assist me in scoring my goals. If I see myself as too incompetent to affect people positively, I’m unlikely to let God do wondrously divine works through me! The latter is the priest’s challenge and it is evident in the priest’s crucial encounter with the Comtesse (146d-174d). We will consider this encounter in the next section.

(2) How Total Reliance on Grace Brings a Calm, Discerning Confidence to an Incompetent Man.

When he first arrives to talk with the Comtesse (146d) he is initially self-preoccupied, hesitant and confused, but he challenges his own cowardice and blurts out his desire to talk about Chantal (147b). She then tries to intimidate him, but – as we have seen – he refers to his own powerlessness, febleness and invincible

blindness, but this time not singling himself out in these respects, but noting that they apply to “us all”(147d). Then he compares himself to the Comtesse’s poker: “Had God endowed it with just enough consciousness to put itself into your hands whensoever you needed it”(148bc).

“I was amazed at my own calm. Perhaps it contrasted so entirely with the humility of my spoken words that this intrigued her and made her uncomfortable. Several time she sighed, eyeing me furtively.”(148cd). From here on, God speaks to the Comtesse through the priest, not as a spirit might speak through a medium, displacing the medium’s personality and voice, but through the priest’s personality and voice. In 164b he writes: “I think the above is more or less what I said to her, and on paper my words may look quite impressive. But I know that as I spoke them they came so clumsily, so haltingly, as to seem ridiculous. . .Anyone seeing me there . . .would have taken me for a culprit (and doubtless I was really that) whose excuses are not believed.”

Eventually the decisive moment arises: “Now at last you’re face to face with Him. She still stared into space and would not reply. At the moment I was seized with unnameable fear. . .I had tried to liven this frozen heart in an instant, bring light into the innermost recess of a conscience which perhaps God’s mercy intended still to leave in the pitiful dark. What was I do say? Or do? . . .while I struggled with all my might against doubt and terror, a spirit of prayer came back to my heart.”(168b-169a). DE: I interpret this as a shift into even deeper surrender, which enables the Comtesse to draw out the medallion and to begin her arduous process towards surrender of her attachment to her dead son. He can only become an instrument that helps her towards surrendering completely if he himself is similarly surrendering alongside her in his own way.

Later he reflects concerning what happen in his own way ed, in a passage that is for me unusually inspiring in its insightful eloquence: “‘Be at peace,’ I told her. And she had knelt to receive this peace. May she keep it for ever. It will be I that gave it her. Oh, miracle –thus to be able to give what we ourselves do not possess, sweet miracle of our empty hands! Hope which was shrivelling in my heart flowered again in hers; the spirit of prayer which I thought lost in me for ever was given back to her by God and – who can tell – perhaps in *my* name. Lord, I am stripped bare of all things, as you alone can strip us bare, whose fearful care nothing escapes, nor your terrible love!”(180cd)

3. Saintliness Presupposes Knowing the Depths of SIN within Oneself

(1) Introductory Considerations

In the previous section on “saintliness as participation in divine compassion” we saw how the priest, responding to Chantal, is himself moved from “collective wretchedness” through “judgement within the community of sinners” into saintly compassion. He can help her because he himself has been through what she has been feeling, and knows the way out. And this not only explains why he, as a saintly man, can help others. It is also an essential part of the journey in which he has become saintly. For he starts out simply as a human being alongside other human beings, experiencing human wretchedness and suffering as the soil for sin, and being tempted to connive with evil in the community of sinners. He also recognizes, and

struggles with, the temptation to distract himself from his desire to know himself within the Divine, as we shall see later.

At one point in his exchange with the Comtesse (170c) she speaks about challenging God to “stamp out” her son and herself, and she is surprised by his gentle response, which arises from his recognizing a similar impulse within himself and within Dr. Delbende. He goes on concerning the human soil for such impulses: “And I heard, or thought I heard, the groaning of so many men, their dry sobs, their sighs, the rattle of their grief, grief of our wretched humanity pressed to earth, its fearsome murmurings”(170d). Previously he had acknowledged that he had tried to avoid letting himself become aware of essential evil, for it “hurts too much”, forcing him to realize the meaning of “certain suicides”(143d).

At one point in his exchange with Chantal he rebuked her for using the word “love” as if she knew what it meant (138b). The intensity of his response probably came his ongoing personal glimpse of hell: “Supposing I were never able to love again”(106a). He went on: “I am nothing more than a poor priest, very unworthy and very wretched, but I know what sin is. And you don’t. All sins are alike. There is only one sin. I’m not speaking to you in riddles. Such truths are within reach of the humblest Christian if only he be willing to receive them from us.”(138d).

It is possible to interpret this passage as an appeal to the teaching authority of the Church, in which he as a priest participates, having studied Catholic theology and been ordained. In context, however, it seems to me more plausible to see him as appealing to his own personal experience on his journey of increasing saintliness. And more generally, it seems clear that the depth and range of the priest’s discernments concerning sin have arisen from his life-experience. This is true even of hell. Consider the following passages.

(2) Sliding Towards Hell:

“Let me force myself to think of other agonies like mine. I can feel no compassion for these strangers. My solitude is complete and hateful. I can feel no pity for myself. Supposing I were never to love again!” (105d-106a)

“What wouldn’t I give to be able to suffer! Even pain holds aloof. Even the most usual, the most humble, the ordinary pain in my inside. I feel horribly well. No fear of death, it is just as indifferent to me as life.”(106c)

“A dark, more terrible resignation than the worst convulsions of despair in its cataclysmic fall”(122d). Compare with his words to the Comtesse: “Yes, madame, one gets used to not loving. Satan has profaned everything, even the resignation of saints.”(159b)

“The sin against hope—the deadliest sin and perhaps also the most cherished, the most indulged. It takes a long time to become aware of it, and the sadness which precedes and heralds its advent is so delicious! The richest of all the devil’s elixirs, his ambrosia.” (110c)

DE: The title “Sliding Towards Hell” is mine. It is meant to suggest a movement-towards rather than an arrival. Although the priest is caught up in hellish, satanic states, a part of him is still free. His faith has not totally departed from him (122a, 122, 111a). Consider this passage: “I feel as though I had gone right back all the way I’ve come since God first drew me out of the void. First I was

no more than a spark, an atom of the glowing dust of divine charity. I am that again, and nothing more, lost in unfathomable night. But now the dust-spark has almost ceased to glow; it is NEARLY extinguished.”(106d) DE: A Dark Night!

(3) In the Dark Night of the Soul

In hell there is a total extinction of light, life and love. Hence a state of NEAR extinction of these can seem very close to hell. But in a dark night of the soul one’s sense of personal identity is stripped down to one’s origin in God. Nothing else of one’s self remains to cling to, and God is “known” only as darkness. So the above quotation from 106d can be viewed either as part of a drift towards hell or as a letting go into “heaven”, that is, into God.

In the novel, authentic prayer is, or expresses, the desire of the soul to know itself in God. Sin is, therefore, whatever we substitute for prayer. “Faith” is the knowledge of oneself in God from which springs true self-love and love of others. But “faith” also is at work in the desire for faith. The priest’s “dark night” process involves both sin and faith, and hence it can be confusing in its complexity.

His dark night involves a loss of his sense of identity in relation to everyday life, to which he can “return” from his prayers: “What lay behind me was no longer any normal, familiar life, that everyday life out of which the impulse to pray raises us, with still at the back of our minds the certainty that whensoever we wish we can return. A void was behind me.”(103c) This new situation gives his prayer a new intensity: “I needed prayer as much as I needed air to draw my breath or oxygen to fill my blood.” So in a way his prayer-desire is unusually strong. But what he had previously grasped as his self-knowledge in God seems to have disappeared: “The same solitude, the same silence. . .I breathe, I inhale the night, the night is entering into me by some inconceivable, unimaginable gap in my soul. I, myself, am the night.” And his love for self and for others has, in the moment, disappeared.

What he laments in other passages is the loss of the “joy of prayer”(122d) or the “spirit of prayer”(127a). This he recognizes as sinful, no longer desiring one’s own joy, no longer able to love oneself (126d). We human beings can only “possess” what we desire, for complete and absolute possession of anything is impossible for us (126d). At one point the priest insists that he has lost “neither Faith, Hope nor Charity”(111b), but these “eternal goods” are useless in this mortal life. “What counts is the longing to possess them. I feel I have ceased to long for them.”(111b) DE: If he has ceased to long for Faith, how can he claim not to have lost Faith? Perhaps here what he means is that he has not lost the concept of Faith and can remember something of what such Faith used to mean experientially. But he no longer hopes for Faith (cf. “the sin against hope”(110c)). Nor does he hope for Hope or for Love-Charity!

The dark night of the soul involves grave temptation, since an intense desire to know oneself in God no longer brings awareness of God or of self as previously known. The temptation is to replace the desire by a Hell-prone despair and resignation. Having persevered through the temptation, however, the priest is more profoundly transformed towards saintliness.

Perhaps, however, the priest’s path has distinctive features that are not true of other saintly people. These may be indicated in 199ab and 203ad, which imply

that for him there is a pervasive agony of abandonment which mingles with his humble surrender into God.

4. Saintliness Involves some Recovery of Childhood

This theme is explicit very early in the novel: “Villages do not scramble to their feet like cattle at the call of a little boy. And yet, last night, I believe a saint might have roused it”(2c). It is also implicit in the Comtesse’s letter of thanks to the priest: “What can I say to you? I have lived in the most horrible solitude, alone with the desperate memory of a child. And it seems to me that another child has brought me to life again. I hope you won’t be annoyed with me for regarding you as a child. Because you are! May God keep you one for ever! I wonder what you’ve done to me....*Now* I hope again! This hope is really all my very own, nobody else’s. . .This hope is the flesh of my flesh. I can’t express it. I should have to speak as a little child.”(175ac).

I leave it to you, students, to explore this theme in relation to section #4, “Childhood, Innocence and Sin” of the outline concerning SIN, consulting also 291d-294a, 296b, 296d.

GUIDE-QUESTION FOR TENTH SESSION (third on Bernanos)

You may answer either A or B versions of this question. Version A can be quite impersonal, but Version B is more personal and “existential”

(A): In relation to your own spirituality and/or theology discuss briefly what you see as the main strengths and weaknesses of Bernanos’ portrayal of the origin and nature of saintliness.

OR

(B): Reflect concerning all the following questions and write a response which includes some of your reflections and conclusions: “Do I aspire to participate more than I do in the dimensions of saintliness exemplified in the priest? If I do, is it all of them or only some? Why? If I do not aspire to a dimension, is this because I do not esteem it in anybody, or because I do not feel drawn to it myself? Or, while esteeming it in general, do I regard it as, regrettably, inaccessible for myself? Would I esteem any dimension, or find it more accessible, if it were revised in some aspects?”

Practicum

Varieties of Surrender into God

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ELEVENTH SESSION
Involving the Christian Community

Required Reading: Cowie pp.188-95; *Healing from the Heart*, chapter 11; MacNutt, chapter 19; Edmison, pp.101-105, 118-120.

Guide-Question: How can a congregation best be encouraged to introduce or expand spiritual healing as (i) a service offered on church premises to anyone and/or (ii) a liturgical occasion for Christian worship focused on healing.

A Note concerning Edmison's book:

When this academic course is over, some students may wish to explore the Guide-Question in depth and detail for practical implementation in relation to an actual congregation. They are strongly urged to acquire and study her book, which provides experienced counsel concerning the “nitty-gritty” of implementation.

Among the many practical issues that she discusses, and which we will not try to deal with in the seminar, are these:

- (i) processes for creating an organic vision and mission statement for an energy-touch healing ministry
- (ii) processes for evaluating the ministry periodically
- (iii) ethical guidelines for practitioners
- (iv) ethical guidelines for congregations that assume responsibility for a ministry which is “high risk” because it brings intentional touch to vulnerable people in an intimate and influential way (hence a need to screen applicants carefully and to obtain liability insurance!)

Practicum
Healing Each Other in Pairs “Free Style”

TWELFTH SESSION
Designing a Healing Service of Worship

Required Reading: *Healing from the Heart*, Appendix D; Edmison, pp.200-210.

Guide-Question: (i) Write a mini-essay concerning why such-and-such possible “ingredients” in such a service should be included and why others should be excluded.

OR

(ii) Write a draft of such a service

OR

(iii) With one other person, or at most three others, draft and lead such a service for the class. (This counts as TWO discussion-openers. At the 11th session those involved will need to agree to take this on, and let the instructor know in advance.)

Practicum
Healing Service of Worship Led by Several Students