Human Vulnerability: Wisdom under Fire

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Abstract: The paper explores human vulnerability, essential to transformation in Christ for grounding right judgement and decision making. It finds support in Bede Griffiths' theology and applies the concept to critique two particular historical situations. The thrust is to secure a theological undergirding for right approaches to refugees and asylum-seekers.

Introduction

This paper emerges from my concern for the plight of refugees in general but particularly Australia's 'boat people'. My own parents you could say were 'boat people' - migrants to Australia in 1948, after Hindu/Muslim separation. They came with four children, one a new-born babe, accompanied also by my father's teenage sister. Fifth of seven and I was the first to be born in Australia, in Brisbane, Spring Hill - 1950.

My subject was partly motivated by Redemptorist Professor Anthony Kelly's presentation at *Orientale Lumen* conference held this year in Melbourne at same time as ACTA. Professor Kelly's presentation there centring on the Incarnation was mainly katagogic.[2] But some of his introductory cartoon imagery – he's clever with this – stimulated an awareness for me moving from the other direction - that the Incarnation is most profoundly expressed by those graphic demonstrations of human vulnerability immersed in, penetrated and transformed by divine love.

I thought of the profound tenderness in images of the Madonna and child, the Pietà, especially Michelangelo's, and the Crucifixion that were inspired by the Gospel stories. The skill of the Christian artist in this instance is that the more profoundly human the presentation, the more present the transcendent 'other'. Here, earth and heaven meet intimately, exquisitely, uniquely.

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[2] "*Katagogic*" refers to the downward movement of Christology that describes the great and startling paradox of the pre-existent and eternal Word descending into a perfect humanity with its natural limitations, and thus achieving salvation. It is properly balanced by the *anagogic* upward movement that takes as its basis the full depth of humanity which, perfect in Jesus, in like paradox, uniquely figures the divine.

Differently, a series of documentaries I had been watching also round this time on the ruthless activities of the German SS showed the opposite: a nightmarish division and absence of sympathy, a clinical insensitivity that was dehumanising. It was in comparison a scene 'emptied' of divine life.

When I voiced my response an Anglican theologian responded excitedly with a quote from Ignatius of Antioch that the further from Christ we move the more we become as ghosts. Just so, an ideology that had sought a final solution to achieve a goal of human perfection – the perfect society - through the elimination of 'others' had turned the Nazi perpetrators into 'ghosts': inhumane, disembodied – divided from the natural interconnectedness with Earth, the clay from which we come.

The question of humanity

While I don't claim to know the complex political and sociological details of issues that surround others seeking a home in Australia I *am* seeking a basic theological undergirding to support humane decisions and actions for the sake of vulnerable humanity. It has an ontological significance in terms of humankind's movement to new levels of consciousness, the divinising of humanity and ultimately the transformation of all creation in Christ.

Despite the worth of post-modern thought, accompanying fragmentation and nihilism can prompt destructive defensive postures. In resistance, how can I best determine 'humane'?

The 'imago Dei' is a central. While the image is traced much further back to *Genesis*[3] I accept second century Irenaeus' interpretation of humanity growing into fullness over time; this is applied both to the individual life-span and ever wider historical processes. I also look to the Christian *sannyasi* Dom Bede Griffiths OSB and Ken Wilber, trans-personal psychologist, to whom Griffiths turned for assistance for developing a multi-perspectival methodological framework. Griffiths includes the work of proponents of the new science such as physicist David Bohm.[4] The recently awarded PhD dissertation by Daniel Fleming proved valuable with his argument in support of 'vulnerability.'[5] From the Roman Catholic perspective Fleming

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[3] Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self. A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). This work by Grenz provides a very thorough exploration of the image in the Christian tradition.

[4] I deal comprehensively with these influences in my PhD Dissertation, *A Christological Interpretation of "The Golden String" of Bede Griffiths' Spiritual Journey* . Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Brisbane: Australian Catholic University, 2012), 167.

[5] Daniel Fleming, Attentiveness to Vulnerability: A Dialogue Between Emmanuel Levinas, Jean Porter, and the Virtue of Solidarity. Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Sydney: Australian Catholic University, 2012).

comprehensively indicates other important sources as the Wisdom utterances in OT and NT and Catholic Social Teaching, especially Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* and *Gaudium et Spes* of Vat II. To this I would add the appropriate sections of wisdom literature from other Religious traditions along with their comparable declarations for our times.

In his recent Masters dissertation, Jim Cregan, proposing a recovery of the symbolism of the Garden of Eden for Christian Theology, notes how the Paradisiacal Garden bookends the bible.[6] In comparison, I would like to note how it is a vulnerable humanity that bookends the Gospels, whether or not we take John to end of 21 or Luke to end of Acts.

Central are the motifs of Christ's birth and death. Scripture scholars tell us the earliest 'Gospel story' collection circulating was the Passion Narrative. This of course includes the Resurrection reports but Jesus' being raised and breaking through into new life is fully dependant on his disposition towards his suffering and death. A profound vulnerability is obvious in Matthew and Luke who took up infancy narratives each selectively honed for a different theological focus. Without such a narrative, an earlier Mark, however, has Jesus significantly coming from Nazareth, undergoing John's baptism of repentance and then urgently hurrying about, with the 'messianic secret', protecting his mission from a premature end. Even in the fourth Gospel where Jesus is in control and knows his purpose and end, the Prologue introduces Christ as one not recognised even by his own (John 1:11). And more pointedly, in the Eucharistic motif of the Footwashing, a Jesus in his underclothes on his knees in their midst as servant/slave (John 13: 3-14). And, even after he has been raised by God from the dead, Jesus must request, Mary, (significantly, again, in the garden – where things grow) not to "hold on to" "to cling" to him as he has not yet "ascended to the Father" (John 20:11-17). The vulnerability of Jesus himself and his presentation of the value of vulnerability as epitomised in the Beatitudes (Matt 5: 3-12, Luke 6: 20-22), is emphasised variously in the Synoptics; at the end of Luke/Acts a convicted and imprisoned Paul quotes Isaiah prophesying rejection of Jesus and his message (Acts 28: 25 - 27).

Indeed, the heightened narrative of Luke's Gospel where the Soldiers' demand "if you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Luke 23: 37) and the hanged criminal - "if you are the Messiah, save yourself and us!" (Luke 23: 39) cuts to the core of the Christ-paradox.

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[6] Jim Cregan, *Water as a Blessing: Recovering the Symbolism of the Garden of Eden through Ezekiel for Christian Theology – a Theological Investigation.* Thesis in partial fulfilment for the Degree of Master of Theology (Fremantle: Notre Dame University, 2012).

I am arguing that the Gospel emphasis on Christ's assuming human vulnerability that incorporates his promotion of self-giving and his conscious reception of   suffering and death, can with further contemporary interpretative assistance, guide decision-making in regards to refugees, boat-people, asylum seekers.

The Christ-paradox means a recognition of each unique human being and humanity as a whole, in terms of Jesus Christ, as *Ikon* of God, or *Imago Dei* at the heart of which is human vulnerability. I see the quality of vulnerability as a primordial 'wisdom' which manifesting in our present times is 'besieged' by forces inimical to her transformative processes; a process of becoming which extends to the whole of creation.

In order to elaborate this and, importantly try to bring this Christian perspective into dialogue with secular humanist and post-modern philosophical perspectives, we need to make a few links.

Irenaeus and like approaches

We find that Irenaeus understands *adam* as humankind in infancy that is represented in combination as (in Hebrew) *selem* – image, and *demut* – likeness, [translated in the Vulgate as *imago* and *similitude*].[7] In the Fall relationship with the wholly transcendent One is never completely sundered, due to free will and reason being free gifts. However, the 'likeness' that is the growth towards unity with the 'Other' present in *adam* only in seed form, is wounded and it is this which Christ heals; and, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit a healed *similitude* is restored to humanity which ultimately reaches eschatological full conformity to Christ and union with God. Ireneaus' centring on Creation and relationship (rather than the Fall) can then be seen to bring into relief the grand narrative of the journey of humanity with novelty and creative endeavour beyond our imagining.

Growth and accompanying change are, then, a human calling or in another sense, the human person's openness to the experience of transcendence. It is accompanied by passion. We see this reflected in Aquinas' explication of the natural passions or rather the appetites of the will, either concupiscible – satisfying bodily needs - or that which desires the good in an abstract sense. Furthermore, Aquinas makes the link between self-love and justice in that a person's happiness depends on their right relations with proximate others and community generally.[8] I have elsewhere comprehensively explored this aspect of growth in respect of Griffiths' own unique contribution.[9]

For these terms and their implications, see Stanley Grenz, *The Social God,* 195.[7]

[8] For more detailed discussion, see Daniel Fleming, *Attentiveness to Vulnerability:A Dialogue Between Emmanuel Levinas, Jean Porter, and the Virtue of Vulnerability.* Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Sydney: Australian Catholic University, 2013), 134, 194-196.

[9] Beatrice Green, *A Christological Interpretation*, 167.

To acknowledge the Post-Modern referents and remember past Ecclesial deficiencies is of no small consequence. *Extra ecclesia nulla salus* – outside the church no salvation leaps to mind. Earlier, in the 6th century, at the second Council of Constantinople, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, noted otherwise for great achievements, consigned his co-patriot Bishop Theodore of Mopsuestia together with his works, to hell as a heretic. This was despite the brilliance of Theodore's teaching – re-instated in our day - that the "imago" must refer to the whole human being, that Christ in the flesh represents all of creation[10].

Bede Griffiths' life experience and writings emphatically point to human limitation in knowledge and insight. The differences in religions can yet be bridged through relationship which enables a deep synthesis of understanding. It requires dialogue based on a sharing of images from different religious traditions. But it does not mean a collapsing of differences. Finding understanding extends to other disciplines, and an indication of the creative value of 'difference' which Bede points out is sourced in the Trinitarian relationship, he discovered in the work of physicist David Bohm.

Bohm shows how the tendency of indeterminacy, and the drive to exhibit or express all potentialities at the small-scale level is incontrovertibly linked with the large-scale tendency "for a specific tendency to be realised at the expense of all other potentialities."[11] The process of reciprocation is continual because just when the quantum system is influenced by the greater level towards a narrowing down and finer definition it exhibits a broader range of complementary variables and a compensating widening of "the range of new potentialities."[12] Bohm therefore concludes that, "the nature of what can exist at the nuclear level depends to some extent on the macroscopic environment."[13] Perhaps we could extend this image to support and assess the Church's effective use of assemblies, synods and councils, the exercise of collegiality and subsidiarity, and the valuation of the *sensus fidelium*.[14] In terms of 'horizon' limit, Griffiths' view is comparable with Rahner and Lonergan; it operates in tandem with his radical Benedictine injunction to those in his ashram, to *always* respect and welcome another as one would Christ.[15]

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[10] Frederick G. McLeod, S.J. *The Roles of Christ's Humanity in/ Salvation: Insights from Theodore of Mopsuetia* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005.), 126-270.

[10] Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1954), 184.

[11] David Bohm, *The Quantum Theory*, 3rd edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1989), 627.

[12] David Bohm, *Quantum Theory,* 627.

[13] David Bohm, *Quantum Theory,* 627.

[14] Bede voiced the need for an awareness of the grounding importance for Church as institution, for assemblies, synods and councils operating interdependently, with a spirit of conciliation and generosity with regard to the entire system. See Griffiths, "The Church," Tape Transcription of a talk given at Osage Monastery, Sand Springs, OK, July 1992. Available from the Bede Griffiths Trust.

[15] My italics. Griffiths' words to Fr Christudas in Shantivanam, the Sth Indian ashram, are, "Please understand that everyone is the image of God. For that reason alone you accept anyone. In spite of the weaknesses of people, we should not disregard anyone." In "My Experience with My Guruji, Fr Bede" by Fr Christudas OSB Cam. *Ashrama Aikiya Newsletter,* No 28. Special Issue in Memory of Dom

Griffiths found support in Ken Wilber's work that dealt with the recapitulation of earlier stages of consciousness in the movement to new levels.[16] More recently, Wilber takes a wider purview. He seeks to conceptualise the extent of our *present* human knowledge of various perspectives through his Quadrants' model which he names AQAL. The acronym specifies – All Quadrants All Lines but includes, levels – development, states –consciousness, stages – being and types – male/female. His task is to encourage us to resist the tendency to make judgments from a perspective that does not make allowances for the information and insight derived from the perspectives proper to other quadrants. He acknowledges infinitude and the always partial appropriation of knowledge/reality at any point in time.[17]

Humility and vulnerability

In light of the above, humility is the prerequisite disposition. Griffiths prioritised daily practice of contemplation while Wilber prescribes integration in a particular religious tradition along with meditation and contemplation to 'speed up' the movement to new levels.[18] I noted also the words of John Muir of the Sierra Nevada, 1838-1914 who saved the great old sequoia trees and pioneered wilderness preservation and national parks. Muir said: "One is most joyful when one is closest to God. When one is aware of one's smallness – then one is closest to God. Being in the wilderness brings one closest to God."[19] We remember how Matthew's Gospel reports Jesus giving the injunction – "When you pray go to your room and shut the door and pray in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Mtt. 6: 6)

Wilber calls ALL human endeavours and forward movements in thought, Spirit, insisting at the same time on humanity's task of fidelity to openness towards different ways of knowing. [I'm relieved to note he doesn't over-emphasise striving noting that any person is free to stop at a particular level or stage, or even simply – take a break.]

Our argument asserts that the disposition of humility is based in human vulnerability that is vital for openness to growth and change; to different perspectives of coming to know - life, truth, reality as such, for the sake of humane judgments and decisions.[20]

Levinas and vulnerability

Bede Griffiths, Sept. 93. Griffiths' words reflect *The Rule of St Benedict* that lays stress on "the happy state" of humility and hospitality whereby each stranger "should be received just as . . . Christ himself." In *The Benedictine Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 32.

[16] See for example, *The Atman Project* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1996), *Up from Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 1996).

[17] Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality* (Boston: Integral Books, 2006).

[18] Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality,* 191 – 200.

[19] See *John Muir in the New World.* Documentary film. Accessed 19 April, 2011.

[20] Vulnerability is not 'weakness' as we shall see. This is because vulnerability "carries with it the 'moral sense' that implies the possibility of an unjust violation". In Daniel Fleming, *Attentiveness to Vulnerability,* 171.

Vulnerability is axial in the anthropological approach of Jewish/French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, it is the sheer vulnerability of the 'Other' that both gifts me with freedom which is a recognition of my freedom and also "appeals"[21] to me in my capacity to respond with violence or compassion. It is this vulnerability that characterises the "epiphany" of 'the face' that establishes first relationship and is at the same time a "moral summons"; "The face opens the primordial discourse" and thus shows the "ethical plane" as the first basis of knowledge.[22] While 'the face' expresses itself "in the sensible" it yet "rends the sensible" because of "the infinity of its transcendence" that is sourced in its infinite alterity[23] which is "the fullness of the transcendent presence which the self encounters"[24] when *face à face* with the 'other'. The face of the Other is radical mystery.

Paradoxically, although the Face is characterised by "essential weakness and vulnerability" it is here that: "I discover in the poverty of the Other a substantial strength, a radical resistance." [25]

This is not, however, "a relation . . . with a very great resistance" but entirely based on the infinity of the Other's transcendence. This is "an ethical resistance". It is "from the depths of defenceless eyes" that the Face of the Other "paralyses my powers." [26]

Furthermore, the encounter with the 'other' involves a further dimension of the 'I-Thou' relationship:

> The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is of the whole humanity who looks at us), and a command that commands commanding.[27]

For Levinas, this, then, represents the primordial grounding of human responsibility which is sourced in exteriority and includes the prophetic challenge to injustice.

> Through its very appearing as naked otherness, thus the powerless and needy poor, stranger, widow and orphan, the face . . . challenges the ego as it strives after happiness and greater power to now grasp the Other in his weakness.[28]

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[21] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority.* Duquesne Studies Philosophical Series, 24. Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

[22] Ibid, 200, 201.

[23] Ibid, 194, 198, 199.

[24] Daniel Fleming, *Attentiveness to* Vulnerability, 41.

[25] Roger Burgrave, *The Wisdom of Love*, 95.

[26] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199, 200.

[27] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 213.

[28] Roger Burgrave, *The Wisdom of Love,* 95.

Orientation towards the value of the Other is pre-rational, a first movement of consciousness that is a response; thus the human person is constituted by infinite responsibility. For Levinas, the self's encounter with the face, the infinity of the Other defines the human person as outwardly focused, thirstingly oriented towards transcendence.

Negatively, if the 'I', the ego is permitted to dominate and treat 'other' as an "element", to defensively endeavour to bring the other within the "four walls" of the self, it is a violence, which Levinas names "totalisation". Differently, the ethical commitment comes through vulnerability as a "first response", a pre-rational orientation to a way of seeing; "Ethics is an'optics'."[29] Fleming would now prefer to call 'the preferential option for the poor' in the Church's Social Teaching on the inviolable dignity of the human being, "the preferential option for the vulnerable".[30]

Moreover, this arousal to goodness that is prompted by the Other, induces a response of like vulnerability, that is, "to manifest oneself as a face . . . in one's destitution and hunger."[31] It means to take up what Levinas calls a "fine risk" in the "patience borne even under the fire of what can shatter it."[32] The primordial "shock of encounter"[33] will continue to reverberate ever anew because the Other remains infinitely transcendent and provokes Desire. When Desire is expressed in the ethical response, the associated compassion will continue to deepen the more it is exercised.

Levinas' philosophy supports the argument that the condition of vulnerability, thus understood, is necessary in order to act in solidarity for right decision-making in the cause of justice in response to the urgent needs of our day. It will mean the mature embrace of religion which for Levinas is:

> Desire not struggle for recognition. . . . the surplus possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself.[34]

Even though the first encounter with the Face is neither rational (or, as Wittgenstein has it, neither rational nor irrational),[35] nor prudent, practically speaking today's issues demand astute planning in solidarity for just measures to be undertaken. To determine a 'humane response' requires awareness of the essential value of vulnerability and its degrees, aided by various perspectives such as those presented.

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[29] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 29.

[30] Daniel Fleming, *Attentiveness to Vulnerability*,

[31] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200.

[32] Roger Burgrave, *The Wisdom of* Love, 115.

[33] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 42.

[34] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 64.

[35] Bob Plant, *Wittgenstein and Levinas: ethical and religious thought* (London, N.Y.: Routledge, 2005), 9.

Fleming emphasises the cardinal virtue of prudence as being essential to right decision-making.[36]

Moving forward or going backward

To reflect on the past should encourage us that we are now better equipped to respond justly.

A story of sixth century St Gregory is recounted by a monk of Douai Abbey. Passing through the Roman market Gregory noticed "boys on sale, their bodies white their countenances beautiful, and their hair very fine." On hearing they were pagans from Britain, Gregory was filled with consternation that "though being remarkable for such graceful aspects, their minds should be void of inward grace". He left the market planning to convert the pagans in Britain to Christ.[37] There was no plan of action for the boys in the market.

This seems to indicate newer stages of consciousness achieved since such earlier times.

More recently, the betrayal of the Molong Fairbridge Farm School children, Britain's child-migrants to Australia that began in 1938 is more discomforting. The stories of the hundreds of small children who were cold, hungry and overworked and physically and sexually abused eventually came to light, after the place was closed in the 1970's. Pointedly, the people in the local town knew something desperate was happening simply by the appearance of the children. But no action was taken. When a visitor to the school from England returned home and in shock and horror sought help through civic channels, doors closed.[38]

This is so recent as to bring into question our quality of response to government policies for the Boat People.

Conclusion

We noted earlier how the vulnerability of the holocaust victims is graphically opposed by the uniformed and armoured might of the Nazi system.In comparison, I argue that we need both to be vulnerable, and to respond justly to the vulnerable, recognising vulnerability itself as the essential human requisite and inherent property that conforms with the call to right relationship and self-transcendence.

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[36] Daniel Fleming, *Attentiveness to Vulnerability*, 223 – 225.

[37] A Monk of Douai Abbey, *The High History of St Benedict and his Monks* (London: Sands & Co., 1945), 15.

[38] David Hill, *The Forgotten Children: Fairbridge School and its Betrayal of Britain's Child Migrants to Australia* (Sydney: Random House, 2007). Partly, this opposition seems due to the situation in Fairbridge having improved in its final years.