

The Spirituality of Authentic Interiority and the Option for the Economically Poor

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Abstract

O'Donohue's endorsement of 'the art of inwardness,' though captivating is open to misunderstandings. Interiority is often branded as a withdrawal from or refusal to engage the public realm with a view to serve oneself embracing a spirituality of detachment. This article is an attempt to explore the notion of interiority in its diverse textures and to propose authentic interiority as a spiritual praxis (reflective and reflexive practice aimed at developing access to, affirmation of, and personal response to ultimate reality) of engagement with the world. The article will further explore how such praxis grounds and develops a preferential option for the economically poor, who constitute the majority of the world's population. Engaging in a continuous soul-searching into one's own foundational human spirit a person can arrive at a realization that at the level of common human experience they themselves hunt for such human goods as food, shelter, clothing, relaxation, education, health and friendship.

Introduction

The late Irish philosopher and poet, John O'Donohue, observed:

If you look at the educational system and most of the public fora in our culture, there is very little time or attention given to what you call learning the art of inwardness or the pedagogy of interiority (O'Donohue 2007).

While I agree with O'Donohue's emphasis on the need for the art of inwardness or the pedagogy of interiority, it is important to clarify what

we mean by 'interiority'. This is necessary to remove any suggestion that the term 'interiority' involves moving into the sphere of what is simply individual and private from the sphere of what is shared and public. This clarification is also important because of the long-standing connection between interiority and spirituality and the fact that a privatised view of human interiority has resulted in a spirituality of detachment from engagement with the public realm. This article will first offer an understanding of authentic interiority as a spiritual praxis of engagement with the world and then articulate how such praxis grounds and develops a preferential option for the economically poor who are the majority of the world's population. Authentic interiority is praxis and not simply a practice because it is an exercise in reflective and *reflexive* practice and not simply mechanical or habitual practice.

Interiority, according to Bernard Lonergan, a renowned theologian and philosopher, is the foundational self-presence that enables us to know and choose what is meaningful, valuable, and lovable. Interiority as per this view is that we are already open to the world and to ourselves precisely because of the reflexive and relational character of our inwardness. Focussing on the praxis that is our reflexive and inherently projected interiority draws us into the quality of our connections with ourselves, others, the planet, our life and times in this world, and whatever lies beyond that. Such focussing is a disciplined practice. It is a form of self-presence that draws on the disciplined use of four basic operations of consciousness, namely, experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding (including the decision to believe or trust). Lonergan gives the following list of operations: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, inquiring, imagining, understanding, conceiving, formulating, reflecting, marshalling, weighing the evidence, judging, deliberating, evaluating, deciding, speaking, and writing. The operations of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding are arrived at by denoting the various operations on the four levels of experience, understanding, judgement, and decision by the principal occurrence on each level (Lonergan, 1990, 6). Let us engage in a simple experiment of consciousness to connect with and verify this foundational and methodological pattern of operations in common human interiority.

Imagination-Experiment

Imagine that each of us is doing some quiet reading in a public park when suddenly we hear what sounds like a cry for help. If we are reflective about experiencing that cry we realize that experiencing the cry means our interiority is inherently relational in how it is constituted

in the sense that it is naturally open to the wider world. This also means that how we receive the cry, and how we respond to it, will reflect our existing quality of self-presence which is foundational for how we relate to ourselves and the wider world. This quality of self-presence is also open to higher order transformation under the impact of lived experience.

So what do we do in relation to our particular *experiencing* of the cry? Is our way of being present to our reflexive and relational self of a kind that we ignore the cry, or is it of a quality that moves us to attend more acutely to the cry? If the latter, do we find ourselves moved beyond the experience of hearing the cry to a higher form of self-presence that enables us to, not only attend to the data that is the cry, but also seek an *understanding* of it by asking questions like, what does the sound I have heard mean? Does it mean that someone is in trouble, or does it, for example, mean that there might be a drama group nearby who are practicing their roles? Given that both are possible, do we find ourselves being pushed or pulled to move on to a higher level again in ourselves where we are engaged in not only understanding, but also *judging* between different possible understandings. How do I know which understanding of the situation is correct? This is a question rooted in a self-presence that relates to reality out of a desire for truth. If we find that further question surfacing within us, does it not mean that there is within us a dynamism by which we can move from experience to understanding and beyond understanding to judgment and that the criterion to guide such movement is inherent in it. Staying with our practice of self-attention to our lived experience in the park do we not find that the dynamism at work in us does not leave us content with coming to know what is happening, but continues to prod us until we *decide* to act consistently with that discovered meaning of the cry. For example, if we discover that someone really is in trouble there arises from the interior ground of our subjective experiencing, interpreting, judging, and deciding a desire or an imperative that we do something about that situation by, for example, calling the police, or seeking the help of others who are also in the park.

Our participation, therefore, in the illustrative imagination-experiment enables us to affirm the reality of the structured operations of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding in common human and, therefore, gender-neutral, knowing and choosing. It also discloses that reality is a reality of meaning (reached in judgment) and value (reached in decision) and that we connect with it methodologically, not by bypassing our subjectivity, as though reality was already out there

now only waiting to be looked at, but by participating *authentically* in our subjectivity.

Authentic and Inauthentic Interiority

The realization that we can participate authentically or inauthentically in our subjectivity makes us aware that how we use the operations of consciousness when we are engaged in the practice of knowing and choosing is not a neutral practice but a value-laden praxis that makes a statement about the kind of person we are or desire to become.

In the example of our imagination-experiment our engagement in the experiment shows that we might have chosen to ignore the data of experience regarding the cry for help, or refused to investigate different possible meanings for it, or rejected correct interpretation of it, or chosen to run away from taking the decision consistent with what we came to know. In other words, the experiment also enables us to affirm that fidelity to what I call the dynamism of authenticity permeating the pattern of operations of experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding cannot be taken for granted and calls for life-experience that is conducive to positive development and the cultivation of practices that will vary depending on which operation a person, group, society, or religious tradition is employing at a particular time. (See O'Sullivan, 2008, 223-33, O'Sullivan, 2010a, 173-82, and O'Sullivan, 2010b, 88-119).

Authentic experiencing requires the practice of attending to all the relevant data, including the data of the quality of our own performing consciousness, which makes the practice a praxis; authentic understanding involves raising all the relevant questions about both sets of data; authentic judging involves being critical about the different interpretations arrived at by understanding; and authentic deciding involves acting consistently with correct judgment for the sake of promoting the good and the lovable. Authentic deciding can be a function of the dynamism to do what is good on the grounds of what is responsible, right, just, or dutiful, but it can also go further still by being the fruit of love. Acting out of being-in-love, which also shows that feelings are involved in the exercise of each operation, is the supreme expression of the dynamism for authenticity because love is ultimately gratuitous. It explains the desire to go the extra mile and to give and not to count the cost. Of course, the desire to give oneself in a way that does not count the cost must itself be subject to the standard of authenticity since it can be motivated by lower order motives. (See Saiving, 1979).

It is important, also, to point out that the operations of knowing and choosing do not always begin with attention to data of experience for the sake of making a discovery, but can also be directed by a decision to trust (e.g., that the Bible contains self-revelatory material about God) so that our judgments are judgments of belief and value (e.g., that God is, therefore, a God who loves us and desires to be in a loving relationship with us) and our understanding is about getting insight into those beliefs (e.g., the Incarnation means that God's love for us is not simply a romantic love, but is also a heroic love) and our terminal desire is to bring that insight on into lived experience for the sake of transforming the experience for the better (e.g., God's heroic love moves me to take stands for the wellbeing of others).

Because self-attention discloses that the dynamism for authenticity in our subjectivity when it is functioning uninhibitedly moves us to desire to be a person of gratuitous loving, and such high quality desire makes us a mystery to ourselves, we can say that education and formation regarding the experience and character of the foundational and methodological desire for authenticity at the heart of human interiority calls for a pedagogy of mystagogy. It is about teaching, learning, and researching to live contemplatively and rigorously in a mysterious milieu. For some such living may not get beyond transcendent experiences of immanence; but for others it will be about immanent experiences of the Transcendent. For Teilhard de Chardin it meant learning to live in the divine milieu; for Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, it meant being able to find God in everyone and everywhere and being moved to do everything for the greater glory of God; for Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founding father of liberation theology, it meant that "we have been made by love and for love. Only by loving, then, can we fulfil ourselves as persons; that is how we respond to the initiative taken by God's love" (Gutiérrez, 1984:110). For Hildegard of Bingen the mystery experienced at the heart of life meant we were feathers on the breath of God.

Because we are all the time in our lives dealing with a mysterious milieu, however it is named and understood, I believe we need to replace the language of mindfulness with the language of mystagogy and the praxis of being mindful with the praxis of being mystagogical. The term mystagogy also highlights better than the term mindfulness that the praxis of authentic interiority is a spiritual and not simply mindful one.

Authentic Interiority and the Preferential Option for the Economically Poor

I turn now to how the mystagogical reflective and reflexive practice (praxis) of authentic interiority connects with one of the great problems in our world, namely, economic poverty. Authentic interiority is, always, a contextualised praxis because of the situated character of the desire-filled human subject. As such it seeks to promote the transformative effect of authenticity within the human person in and in relation to a *historical situation*. It does this in the case of global economic poverty by promoting the human person to think and theorise about such poverty in a way that can lead him or her to develop *meaning and value* that can transform the situation of poverty into one that is instead truly good, beautiful and loving for people. Self-liberation in the praxis of authenticity promotes the human person to the self-transcending level of being an authentic and effective agent in the social praxis of transformation of lived meaning and value concerning such poverty. This self-liberation in terms of authenticity in the interest of social transformation through meaning and value reaches its peak in the state of being in love without reserve, which is what religious conversion as an event of consciousness means. In this state the human person is not content to do what is right and just, but is moved beyond these standards to do what is not required, because love does that to a person. It enables him or her to feel, be aware of, imagine and conceive higher possibilities in a situation, and moves him or her to act gratuitously. As a result it alters the probabilities of what is possible concerning the transformation of a situation like that of global economic poverty. This general religious conversion of consciousness becomes a conversion to the specific religious tradition of authentic Catholic meaning and value when God's love in Jesus Christ is identified as the source and term of desire filled consciousness. Then there is "nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39, NRSV). On the foundation and in the horizon of such a specific religious conversion authentic Christian meaning and value become the standard of authenticity for the human spirit seeking genuine beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness and love in and in relation to the global situation of economic poverty.

As a person, therefore, attends to the reality of global economic poverty from a perspective of self-attention to the character of authenticity of his or her interior and foundational common human spirit for beauty, intelligibility, truth, goodness and love in life, she or he finds in that spirit a foundation and horizon for people to know and do what is required of them if they are to transform the situation of poverty. Their

discovery may lead them to choose the authentic Christian tradition as the foundation and horizon for such social transformation.

The Human Good and Global Poverty

A conversion to the authentic Christian tradition as the fulfilling ground of what the transcendental human spirit desires in the face of the challenge of global economic poverty is strengthened by a person's discovery that the dynamic structure of that spirit mediates a method that is conducive to a preferential option for the economic poor of the world. What follows clarifies this statement. Through continuing self-attention to his or her foundational human spirit a person can discover that people at the level of common human experience in themselves seek such human goods as food, shelter, clothing, relaxation, education, health and friendship. At the level of common human understanding they seek a way of organising the data that these particular goods desired in experience are. This means that they seek the good of social order. At the level of common human judgement they weigh up the claims of different understandings of social order concerning how best to organise the data of experience. They seek the system that actually has the highest probability of delivering in a recurrent way the particular goods desired. And at the level of common human decision they deliberate until they find the course of action that offers the highest probability of implementing their judgement effectively. All this occurs when they are functioning as they can, that is, authentically, and occurs in a deficient way otherwise.

Because these interrelated levels of empirical, intellectual, critical and responsible consciousness in a human person are common to all human persons, what is mediated by the interrelated operations of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding on the respective interrelated levels of consciousness is a shared human good, so that in the measure in which people are tuned into the authenticity of their subjectivity and are committed to its implications they will be moved to cooperate in the construction of an objective common good.

The dynamism of desire for the truly human good in the context of global economic poverty mediates into consciousness the contradiction of authentic human wellbeing that is the contemporary global order. It also leads to the emergence of feelings that make it possible to apprehend the value in terms of which a judgement can be made concerning which social system proposed by understanding is preferable. This transcendental, or foundational, apprehension of value in feelings is facilitated by historical experiences, feelings, and

participation in traditions and groups that tune one into the pain of oppressed people and the beauty and goodness of their liberation. In this way the value of a system constituted by a preferential option for the economically poor emerges in consciousness, and a judgment is made that this indeed is the way to create a new global order. This judgement evokes a decision to make the apprehended and affirmed value of a preferential option for the poor a practical reality by working for 'globalisation from below.' (See Gutiérrez, 1983:22, 169-221, 230-33 and Schüssler Fiorenza, 1984:50).

Religious Conversion and Globalisation 'From Below'

At this level of felt-value-laden decision the person as a transcendental subject of activity emerges as an ethical subject. However, such a person is moved to religious conversion in the context of a decision to opt for globalisation from below by the imperative from within his or her own being to ground his or her option in ultimate meaning and value. This transcendental drive to ultimate meaning and value as the foundation and horizon for ethical action makes the situated human person tune in even more deeply to the mysteriousness of his or her being and can open him or her to the historical religious meaning and value that Christian revelation offers as ultimate meaning and value, especially where such meaning and value is part of the cultural matrix. Where such meaning and value are already constitutive of the person's life, it will lead the person to re-read them in the light of the new situation. In both cases the human person reads Christian revelation through the hermeneutical resonance of the praxis of authenticity of his or her own being as he or she seeks a relationship with Christianity that is expressive of a life of integrity at the level of knowledge in his or her era.

A re-reading of this kind recovers a reported central trajectory within scripture concerning a belief by others in a mystery of infinite beauty, truth, goodness, and love named God that calls people to a preferential option for the economically poor. This fundamental option is revealed in the liberating events of the Exodus (Gottwald, 1979), for example, who argues that Israel did not pre-exist in Egypt but was a coalition of peoples that came together in Palestine to forge a life for themselves free from economic and political oppression. There was a group from Egypt and they brought with them a religious faith in a God called Yahweh, which was adopted by all the people who came to make up Israel), the communion between this God and the people in the Covenant, the call of the Prophets to the people to remain faithful to their covenant with this God, the refusal of the remnant in exile to give up on their belief in this God's abiding fidelity to them, and the person and praxis

of Jesus of Nazareth who declared that the Spirit of the Lord had sent him to bring good news to the poor and liberty to captives (Lk 4:16-20), and whose resurrection affirmed, it was believed, his historical option of universal salvation through social liberation from below. This reading of scripture is facilitated by the writings of theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, a pioneer from Peru of Liberation theology (see, also, O'Sullivan, 1990:65-68). The meaning of this option, however, has to be refined a good deal following the critique by feminist scholars of patriarchy, kyriarchy (a term coined by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza) and androcentrism in Israel, and the discovery that 70 per cent of the economically poor of the contemporary world are women, which leads some authors to speak of the feminisation of poverty (see O'Sullivan, 1999:103-29).

The person who is moved by the dynamism of his or her depth level of desire towards beauty, truth, goodness and love to undergo conversion to this mediated biblical God moves from knowledge and decision through discovery to knowledge and decision through belief. By doing so she or he recognises and accepts that the self-communicated God who is witnessed to by the Christian tradition is, not only the fulfilment of the "desire-as-gift" orientation of his or her subjectivity, but also the source of that desire, so that the revealed outer self-communication in Jesus Christ ultimately explains and fulfils the dynamism of the inner gifted spirit (Dunne, n.d.). This means that Christian revelation is not a transcendental deduction, something reducible to a merely human event, an achievement of human reason, but is instead an event of divinely initiated inter-subjectivity.

The divine initiative in a Christian religious conversion is gratuitous, and the conversion it initiates and promotes is dramatic. It is dramatic because the revelation of the gift of Jesus Christ goes way beyond what might be expected in consciousness, so that conversion to such a gift involves being raised up to a corresponding level of self-transcending subjectivity. However, the conversion is also in harmony with the intentional trajectory of the foundational desire of human subjectivity because such a desire and its trajectory are elements oriented to the gift of the divinely originated and fulfilling saving grace (Loewe, 1981:220).

A person who lives a Christian religious conversion, functions in interiority in a way that decides to trust that what scripture offers is evidence concerning, not just a report of what others have believed and thought, but the *reality* of who God is; to judge as believable that this God has entered the world as a universal saviour in Jesus Christ; to understand that this doctrine of salvation can be conceived to

mean that God's universal saving love is available and made effective through a preferential option for the economically poor, as liberation theology argues, and to communicate such understanding to others by transformative lived practice. The situated human person who is faced with global economic poverty and who arrives at this position as a result of functioning in consciousness according to the criteria of human and Christian authenticity will promote the work of globalisation from below as central to Christian redemption.

Behind the emergence, for some, of a Christian conversion that is bound up with the situation of the economically poor may be prophetic mystical experience. Such experience should not be regarded as being reserved for elite only. Not only is it open to all as a result of what Vatican II called the universal call to holiness, but it may also arise without being directly linked to the situation of global economic poverty and only subsequently move in that direction. It can initially develop through a person's prayerful attention to the God of the Christian tradition in the context of dealing with key events in his or her life that need not have been concerned about such poverty. Through such contextualised activity in the subjectivity of the socially located person the Spirit that is in the Trinity can lead the person into a dynamic state of being in love with God as the foundation and horizon of the first and only edition of himself or herself (Lonergan, 1974:83). Subsequent developments may result in such a dynamic mystagogical state opening into a lived preferential option for the economically poor. An experience I had thirty years ago will illustrate what I mean, and conclude this article.

The Role of Religious Experience: An Autobiographical Example

During 1973/74, the final year of my studies for a degree in social science at University College Dublin, Ireland, I was struggling with my Jesuit vocation. Because of this struggle I sometimes found myself alone at night, when my friends were sleeping, praying in the community oratory in our residence in Rathfarnham which was later sold. On one of those nights, and quite unexpectedly, the scene of Jesus in Gethsemane appeared before me. It did so in a way that held me, and kept me focused. There seemed to be no effort on my part, as though everything that was happening was being shown to me, and in a way that was so vivid, real, and illuminating. The next thing I knew I was in tears, as the inner Jesus was revealed to me. I saw with stunning clarity his inside life of tremendous, courageous love. This, then, was the secret of his motivation. It was behind the stands he took. It kept him going. It meant he would not give up, even when vulnerable to great inner suffering and external danger. As this extraordinary courageous love

took hold of me I felt myself strengthened to continue on in my vocation. I experienced God's answer to my own struggle at that time and to what my life could mean for the future. I was being called to remain a Jesuit in order to live the same kind of heroic love of Jesus. I, too, would suffer in the process, almost certainly, but God would see me through. God and I were in it together. I felt the intimacy of that connection and assurance. It was not clear to me then in what way precisely I would experience the call to be courageous like Jesus; I only knew that I had left myself open to receiving it and that it would come.

In the summer of 1975 I spent four weeks in what was then the Jesuit novitiate at Manresa House, Dublin praying and reflecting on the documents of the recently concluded 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits (a GC is the highest authority in the Jesuits). At the end of that period I experienced a conversion to the newly articulated Jesuit mission to serve the faith that promotes justice as an absolute requirement. This conversion was due to the effect on me of my foundational commitment in love to the God I had met about eighteen months earlier in the oratory in Rathfarnham interacting with the new prayerfully mediated meaning and value concerning how to be a Jesuit in the modern world from the Congregation (Doran, 1990, 173). As a result of this conversion I have tried to live my Jesuit life since that time by taking clear and courageous stands in different ways and places on behalf of the economically poor, women, and people of other races.

These responses on my part have sometimes resulted in forms and depths of suffering I had not expected. Such suffering has dragged me down, and sometimes I have felt I could not go on. But then the experience in Rathfarnham oratory would come again and renew my spirit. Because of it, and additional graces like deep friendships, the discovery of the positive difference I have made in the lives of some, and the inspiration of the goodness of others, I understand now more fully the redemptive character of the enlightening and empowering role of religious experience in the work of justice and love. Such religious experience of gifted initiative from the mystery that we call God, either through focused prayer experience or in interactive experience with people, or through reading the signs of the times, can subsequently make it possible for a person to develop, not only an option for those who are treated as though they are non-persons¹ like the economically poor, and to conceive that option in relation to redemption in the love

1 This way of speaking about the economically poor has become the preferred way of speaking about them in the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez. It is also a way of speaking that makes it possible to embrace others who were not at the forefront of the concern of Liberation theology initially: women, indigenous peoples, etc.

of Jesus Christ, but also a capacity to link up with others of a similar experience and to endure, like Jesus, in that option, the inevitable pain and hardship that it brings. In this way I have learned from religious experience that gifted initiative from the mystery that we call God, at a turning point in a person's life, can become foundational in interiority for subsequent options of co-operative grace, such as giving a priority to the economically poor, in the first and only edition of the person's life.

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