

Introduction

Renunciation and Happiness

In my first year of academic teaching, I decided to enter the Roman Catholic Church. It was a simple decision: I wanted a religion, and I had already tried the respectable academic religions, Judaism and Anglicanism. I began the six-month class at the local parish to prepare me for baptism, confirmation, and Communion, to take place at the long liturgy the night before Easter.

I didn't mind receiving simple teaching along with ordinary parishioners. It was refreshing to be exposed to wisdom that anyone with some life experience could understand. To me it was like stripping off the inessentials to live for a time in my human skin. Nor did the dogmatic requirements present any difficulty to me; I'd been in academic philosophy for years. My graduate program had been free-wheeling and ambitious: Theories built in minutes, or years, crumbled in an instant on a counter-example. One could never predict the conclusion that might issue from the baroque machinery of argument.

It was evident to me that the exercises of analytic philosophy were a wonderful training in clear thinking but faced serious shortcomings as a means of discovering the truth. I knew people far more intelligent than I was who denied the existence of everything except indivisible corpuscles, or who thought that if I could have had pork chops

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for breakfast, there was a real place where I did have pork chops for breakfast. Why shouldn't I believe in a three-personed God, born as a man to a virgin, who died, was resurrected, and returned to us under the forms of bread and wine?

Two weeks before Easter, I heard Genesis 22, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, read at Sunday Mass. The voice comes from nowhere. The voice which called Abraham to travel to the land of Canaan, which has promised him a son for decades, which grants his desire only after his wife is past menopause, now makes a different kind of request. The voice asks Abraham to take "your son, your only son, whom you love" and sacrifice him on a mountaintop.

The ancient author takes us step by step. Abraham arises early and packs his donkey – with the wood for the burnt offering and the knife. As he travels with his son up the mountain, the boy notices that they carry every supply for a sacrifice – "but father, where is the animal?" The narrator only reports Abraham's evasive reply: "God will provide the sacrifice, my son." We are left to imagine how Isaac's words cut his father to pieces, just as we the listeners are cut to pieces.

Like the intervening angel who saves Isaac's neck in the end, the narrator sympathizes with our horror. But it is easy to feel the horror without feeling the sympathy. So it was. When I heard the story read at Sunday Mass, my peace was destroyed. I went into a panic.

The seed of my distress was the following thought: God had absolute power over me without the least concern for my happiness. And happiness – the happiness of

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learning and friendship, the hoped-for happiness of marriage and children, was everything to me. How could it be otherwise? Consequently, how could I worship such a God? What sacrifice would God ask of me? I related my panic to my pastor, and he recommended to me the life of Thérèse of Lisieux, a French Carmelite nun of the late nineteenth century, dubbed the “Little Flower” for her childlike joy.

Thérèse’s mother died when she was a child, and her father suffered from serious mental illness. The young girl insisted on entering Carmel as soon as possible, begging for permission to enter before she met the minimum age of sixteen. Carmel is among the most severe of the religious orders, requiring real poverty, silence, and sacrifice. For Thérèse, it also meant enduring the scorn of the other nuns, colored by ignorance, for her preternatural intelligence and determination. Thérèse died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four, after suffering two years of complete emptiness in which it seemed there was no God at all.

The story did not console me. Yet somehow I traveled through the last days before my baptism, one step at a time, respecting the difficulty but unwilling to let it determine my decision. In the end, the crisis was not resolved so much as it was moved out of focus. I had a nice job, after all, along with opportunities to travel, volunteer work, hobbies, and friends. It was easy to think that no voice had yet come out of nowhere instructing me to sacrifice what I loved most. Easy, but false, as my initial reaction to Abraham suggested that I had, in fact, heard just such a voice.

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When a few years later I felt drawn to enter religious life myself, the specter of Abraham and Thérèse sacrificing everything human for an invisible God returned to haunt me afresh. As I gave away most of my possessions and said goodbye to my friends and family, it felt like dying. It seemed I was a ghost haunting the empty vestiges of my previously vivid life. Worse: it was supposed to feel that way.

Azer Youssef Atta, who became Pope Kyrillos VI of the Coptic Church, entered a monastery in 1928 as a handsome, successful young man of twenty-five. As his biographer tells it, after a night of vigils and prayers,

Azer lay on his back on the ground before the relics of the saints, crossing his hands on his chest, as though he were dead in a coffin. It was his funeral. According to the rite, the Scripture readings and hymns were chanted in the “mournful” tone, and over the body of the reposed young novice, the Litany of the Departed was prayed. Having died to his old self, the novice now arose as a monk of Christ. After cutting his hair five times in a cruciform pattern, the abbot clothed Azer in his monastic cassock, head covering, and leather girdle. Azer was no more. Henceforth he was Fr Mina el-Baramousy.¹

My spiritual director at Madonna House, a former dentist, was less ceremonious. “If you didn’t come here to die,” he said, “you came for the wrong reason.”

Baptism is death, as Paul writes in the letter to the Romans: the death of Christ that is the condition for his resurrection.² Likewise, religious profession is death. Paul describes his own life as a disciple as a daily embrace of

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death.³ Death in Christianity is ambiguous: There is the good death, the death to self, the death to “the world” – that is the locus of ambition, competition, and the pursuit of wealth and power – which leads to life. There is also the bad death, the death that for Paul is the fruit of sin and rebellion. Baptism, like religious profession, is a good sort of death. We might be inclined to sugarcoat and look to the promised goodness. Alas: at least on the surface, Christianity reverses conventional terms of “good” and “bad.”

Consider the true story told in the 2010 film *Des Hommes et des Dieux* (*Of Gods and Men*). A community of Trappist monks in Algeria in the 1990s lies under threat from Islamist rebels who have been murdering Europeans. The monks must discern whether to go back to France or to stay with the local Muslim villagers, with whom they have lived for decades. Over the course of a few weeks, one by one, each of the monks determines to stay, refusing to return to the life they left behind in France. In a dramatic confrontation, the abbot tells one of the more frightened and reluctant men, “You have already given up your life!” The abbot means that when the man made his initial commitment to the monastery, he offered his life as a sacrifice to God. In other words, he compares joining a monastery to accepting one’s imminent murder by hostile strangers.

When I was discerning religious life, both from the outside and within the Madonna House community, I could not swallow the prospect of total renunciation, even unto a violent death. I could not even bear to give up my large collection of books. What was drawing me on if it was not death or violent death?

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My attraction to religious life grew in intensity corresponding to my discontent with the life I was leading. I was restless, bored, and frustrated with the tedium of a moderately successful academic career. I had had enough of teaching for money, studying for status, loving in order to advance myself. I was tired of using myself and being used; I wanted to live a life that could not be bought or sold. I had studied the philosopher Aristotle for years, without living out his central ethical insight: that happiness consists in human activities pursued for their own sake. I still wanted to think and learn and teach, but I wanted to do so out of love for human beings, not to score points in an invisible game where victory always slipped just out of reach.

For me, then, the draw to religious life was partly alienation from my own work. I experienced that alienation as a kind of superficial selfishness, as though my academic life mattered only for its most immediate and thrilling forms of sweetness: publications, citations, promotion, and praise. These goals – which governed my life unconsciously, not explicitly – provided temporary satisfaction but long-term nausea, like eating too much candy.

I sought to remedy my selfishness by adding on new activities, various forms of volunteer service in the community: hospice work, literacy tutoring, and finally jail ministry. That broke my life into fragments: loving my neighbor here, earning money there, scrabbling for status here, simple acts of service there. I kept putting on and off my human skin, as if I couldn't make up my mind about it. I wanted a life that was dedicated, wholehearted, and governed by what I aspired to hold as my deepest values, love of God and love of neighbor.

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We say that someone has dedicated their life to mathematics, or to music, or to ending the achievement gap, or to teaching sewing or gardening, or to the good of the town of Peoria, Illinois. We mean that they gave everything they had to it. We do not seem to mean that literally everything they did was mathematical or musical. But we might mean that everything that doesn't contribute to that end is discarded – say, if my basket-weaving hobby is useless to the cause, no more basket-weaving. Or we might mean something less stringent: I discard everything incompatible with that end. I can keep on basket-weaving, but if I want to dedicate my life to Peoria, I cannot move away – unless, of course, my presence is Peoria's biggest problem.

God is not the only person who demands wholehearted commitment without compromise. So does anyone we seek to love unconditionally. If I claim true devotion to my romantic partner but hedge my bets by keeping channels open with my previous lovers, or if I keep investigating real estate in lands where I know he will not live, I am lying, either to myself or him or both. My love is conditional until I throw away the exit routes. I am meant to love my child without condition; if my other activities compete with my child's needs, or worse, threaten their safety, I have failed to love them as I should.

The clearest violation of wholeheartedness is corruption. A police officer wears the uniform of law, order, and the protection of the innocent but takes bribes from criminal rackets on the side. A teacher or priest, dedicated to the care of the young, secretly preys on them. Both Plato and Aristotle claimed that the ban on private property that made

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the ancient Spartans so austere and admirable was too harsh to be borne: Their citizen-soldiers kept secret treasuries and hoarded gold in private.⁴ We call corruption “hypocrisy” after the Greek word for acting, putting on a mask. The corrupt lead a double life behind a false front, not only for public consumption but as part of the corrupt person’s own self-deception. The real danger of living a lie is not so much getting caught in it as beginning to believe the lie oneself.

Total dedication and wholeheartedness are among the strongest themes of the New Testament. The voice of God, spoken through John in the book of Revelation, tells the church of Laodicea:

I know your works, I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, “I am rich and have no need of anything,” and yet do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.⁵

Lukewarmness is grounds for rejection by God. The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great price for which one sells everything. The sons of Zebedee are fishing on the Sea of Galilee when they meet Jesus; they leave their boats and nets to follow him. The good in question, however we understand it, is worth all of our other goods – or rather, it is incomparably more valuable than anything and everything else.

Lukewarmness seems different from corruption: It is more lack of commitment, half-heartedness, than hypocrisy. Why is it condemned so harshly? The Revelation passage does not only condemn lukewarmness; it diagnoses it. We

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say, “I am rich and have no need of anything,” not realizing that we are in fact wretched and vulnerable. Lukewarmness and compromise suggest a double life, built around a central fantasy of self-sufficiency, where one’s vulnerability and weakness are kept private.

Consider Oedipus, the central character of Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus*. His fame is for his unusually sordid crime, which can obscure his function as an illuminating human type, an “everyman.” He begins the play self-assured, accomplished, in control; he has won the crown by his ingenuity in solving the Sphinx’s riddle; he rules from his own resources. At the end of the play, which takes place over a single day, he is blind and wretched, an exile, the object of fear and revulsion. The difference is the discovery of the truth of who he is: a person who was born, like all of us, in ignorance of his parentage, who makes only choices that make sense at the time and ends up doing the very things he has dedicated his life to avoiding. What seemed to be in his power, avoiding this fate, was in no way in his power. That his fate is to murder his father and marry his mother is only a detail. His fundamental helplessness, the blindness he is subject to in virtue of being a human being, is just like ours.

It was that fundamental helplessness that I caught a glimpse of when hearing the story of Abraham and Isaac. I feared that if I were not in charge of my happiness, I would not attain it. Such fears were fed by my relative wealth and success. Wealth is dangerous: it provides the illusion of dominance over my surroundings. If I can replace something in my household if I simply don’t like its looks; if I can

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order a car and driver whenever my feet are tired, or fly to Rome whenever I crave pasta carbonara, or order a warm blanket at the first chill of winter, I develop illusions about myself. Even worse, if I can transform a landscape with my enterprise, whether by building or by destruction, if I have the power of life or death over others, I begin to imagine that I am a different sort of being than I really am, a godlike one that makes reality when I open my mouth or raise a single finger. Yet ultimately my control is extremely limited, as Oedipus learned, by the luck of circumstances and by inescapable forms of human ignorance. Wealth can seem to make these contingencies shrink, but they cannot be eliminated. Dependence and blindness are core realities for every human being.

The illusion of dominance and control that wealth and comfort bring can be subtle – I was, after all, very grateful for the comfort and luxury I lived in, and the gratitude softened my sense of entitlement. Yet once I had the luxury of high status, it was central to the way I thought of myself. It was deeply painful even to leave the academic Olympus of Princeton University, where I had finished my degree, to move on to a merely excellent job. Even my initial interest in religion showed signs of the illusion of self-sufficiency. It is the epitome of lukewarmness to treat God as one choice among others, as an added benefit to one's already wonderful, flourishing life. No wonder the story of Abraham unsettled me so.