Patrick Rice; A tribute to the legacy of a contemporary prophet

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When a new year begins, we often wonder what it will bring of novel into our lives and our world. Yet, as it grows day by day, we soon become aware that so many bright promises quickly fade. And we are left with a sense that the many kinds of justice, solidarity and hope for which humanity and our planet are crying out, will once again stumble over the blindness and the mediocrity of our purpose.

Conferring of Honorary Doctorate at University College Cork, 2008 (Clare Keogh collection)

If that sounds a somewhat pessimistic way to look at a freshly minted new year, it does at least have the merit of being grounded in the hard reality of our human condition. We tire quickly of the struggle for utopia. We cut corners and make dubious compromises all too easily. We are too infrequently troubled by the insomnia that might keep us awake in the cause of righteousness. Maybe that is why, from time to time, a prophet rises up amongst us. Someone to remind us that above and beyond all our mediocrity and myopia, our true greatness, often camouflaged by alienation or fear, is to be our brothers' and our sisters' keeper. One such prophet, known and loved amongst us here in Latin America, and beyond, was the late Patrick Rice.

It was Patrick himself who wrote to me not long before his untimely death, asking for a contribution on the issue of human rights. At the time, I did not reply, due to a mixture of pressure from other commitments, and also, from a sense that what I might be able to say would be a mere footnote in comparison with the eloquence of his own lived witness. Looking back

now, six months after his death, it occurs to me that even a humble footnote on the significance and the impact of Pat´s life commitment to one of the noblest causes of all, from the perspective of our common Latin American experience, might not be out of place.

Latin America experienced a series of brutal dictatorships spanning the years from 1964 to 1990. It is also the case that a crucial, though not exclusive element of resistance to those dictatorships, came from people like Patrick, who, in his friend Dermot Keogh´s words, nurtured a ´deep commitment to the values of the Gospel´ (Keogh 2010). Here in Brazil, for example, it is impossible to speak of the period of military rule from 1964 to 1985, without recalling the names of people dedicated to and inspired by the same values, some of whom lost their lives as a consequence, and others who lived under permanent threat of assassination. Ezequiel Ramin, Santos Dias, Padre Josimo, Pedro Casaldaliga, John Bosco Brunier, Helder Camera, Paulo Evaristo Arns, to name but a few, whose commitment to and defence of the inviolability of the human person, in the face of arbitrary ideological barbarity, was a case of permanent 'ethical insomnia'.

This ´ethical insomnia´, according to the contemporary philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, is not the privilege of a few enlightened and courageous prophets. It is what more properly defines our essential humanity. In so saying, Levinas is breaking with a long occidental tradition in philosophy where this essence tends to become a sovereign and totalising preoccupation with the question of 'being in itself', and where, as a consequence, 'being for the sake of', or true otherness, is merely formal. What he proposes is to substitute the discussion of the primacy of 'being in itself', for that of the 'primacy of mutuality'. This, for Levinas, is not just a philosophical treatise. 'If there is no mercy between one human being and another, there is no God in heaven', he once declared before an astonished Shabbat assembly in Paris. The primacy of mutual responsibility for and between one person and another is both the foundational value and the justification for human existence.

There is a twofold background which helps to understand the development of this perspective in the philosophy of Levinas. One, he was born into a Jewish family in Lithuania where his father was a librarian, and where, from an early age, he became familiar with the Thalmud and with the classics of Russian literature. Secondly, as a result of his experience of the Russian Revolution in 1917, and then as a prisoner of the Nazi regime from 1939 to 1945, he found it impossible to erase from his consciousness, the horrors of the twentieth century, plunged as it was, into a totalitarian

nightmare of both right and left, beyond all reason, all ethics and all humanity.[1]

The sequel to such abominations has left its imprint deep on the twentieth century psyche. A century marked by individual and collective hatred, by a nihilism that has produced the anti-humanism and crass consumer self-sufficiency of so many societies in the west, currently in thrall to the new totalitarianism of technological ecstasy.

None of this is completely surprising. Given the weight of so much violence, destruction and inconsolable pain not far beneath the surface of living memory, the desire to escape through amnesia, distraction and self-indulgence, as the very condition of survival is understandable; an escape route that is ultimately a hell of thinly disguised despair.

Fortunately, there are counter witnesses among us who contest such a surrender of our hope. Patrick Rice believed and lived the conviction that there is a door leading out of hell. This door opens onto the 'irreducible otherness' of every human being, for the sake of whom my own ego, even my own life, takes second place, because my insomnia in the face of human distress, and in Patrick's case, arbitrary torture, is infinite. If that sounds like a rather high ideal to expect of our fragile humanity, especially in the light of the perverse ideologies and fundamentalisms, both secular and religious, that have dogged our time, and indeed our entire history, annihilating millions of our fellow human beings, it is nonetheless grounded in the simple and enduring values that are integral to any great religious tradition. In Patrick's case, 'the values of selfless generosity that he first learned in Fermoy, Co. Cork, Ireland from his father and mother… and which he carried with him wherever he went as a priest and as a defender of human rights'(Keogh 2010).

Small wonder then, that at his funeral mass in the Church of the Holy Cross in Buenos Aires, it took seven hours for all those assembled there, 'to express their appreciation of his life's work, in words, in song and in prayer' (Keogh 2010). A life's work that saw him emerge from the darkness of captivity at the hands of a merciless dictatorship, to become the courageous voice of protest against the depravity of state terrorism, not only in all of Latin America but throughout Africa, Asia and Europe.

What lessons could there be here for us? For those who knew him intimately and for those whom, wherever he went, were touched by his humanity and his witness? Perhaps we can say with some truthful regret, that we never appreciate sufficiently, a gift that is constantly before us. It is only when it is gone or when its existence is under ominous threat that we

[1] http://www.egs.edu/library/emmanuel-levinas/biography/

are struck by the full measure of its grandeur. And that moment of insight is often the product of a serious crisis, which Levinas defines as 'the permanent surprise of the Spirit', bringing us to the point of a radical change in attitudes and values that we may have long carried unconsciously or only theoretically.

For Patrick, despite his being 'the essence of human kindness and generosity…a gentle man who would literally give you the shirt off his back', and despite his courageous work in defence of human rights in the early days of the dictatorship in Argentina (Keogh 2010), it is probably true to say that the real and radical turning point came with his disappearance, imprisonment and torture. We cannot say for sure why some people in such circumstances of 'exile' from their own body, mind and soul and from all that they know of humanity, break and fall asunder. And why others discover in such a state of 'exile', a reason for permanent insomnia for the sake of the distress of the world.

Emmanuel Levinas throws some considerable light on the issue in the way that he subverts philosophic rationality by bringing into the debate the lived experience of the Hebrew biblical tradition. This, to conceptual classical philosophy, is heretical, but Levinas argues that there is no inherent obstacle as to why reason need feel humiliated by listening to the voice and inspiration of the Hebrew prophets. In fact, in so doing, reason maintains its spirit in a state of permanent vigilance and constructive 'in quietude'.

What however, does the Hebrew tradition have to say concretely, as far as Levinas is concerned, to our contemporary culture of Faustian individualism? Basing himself on the experience of exile throughout the history of the Jewish people, from the Old Testament times to the present day, he develops a paradigm applicable to any ethnic or religious minority on the margins of the world; that it is not a sense of roots and personal or collective identity, fundamental though they may be, that define our humanity. More radical and primordial than all that, he argues, and something that the hard pedagogy of exile imprinted on the soul of the Jewish people, is that our humanity is ultimately defined by our capacity to be open to the other. Such openness, he continues, does not allow me to install myself in the isolated comfort of my home, my land or my interiority, thus turning my back on the misery of the world. It represents also, he contends, a fairer and more just perspective on the true nature of our humanity, than the conceptual elaborations of metaphysics or the strident indifference of the market place.

If all that sounds scandalously uncomfortable to our contemporary definitions of ourselves, we will be even more outraged to hear Levinas tell us that it is not our freedom of choice that determines whether or not we

allow ourselves to be open in this way, to the other. On the contrary, he says, our freedom of choice cannot be invoked as a pretext for 'being free' of the other, precisely because such a notion of freedom is incompatible with and posterior to, the foundational biblical imperative 'to welcome the stranger because you yourself were a stranger in Egypt' (Leviticus 19; 34).

Such a conclusion is bound to seem absurd to modern ears so accustomed to consumer choice and the right to individual freedoms unknown to our forebears. Our culture bristles at the notion that some fundamentalist crank who knows nothing of the conquest of rights in our time, should invoke an archaic piece out of the Bible so as to deprive us of our enjoyment of a serene and untrammelled individuality.

Perhaps Emmanuel Levinas and Patrick Rice are both serenely smiling from their mutual place of light, at the idea that they know nothing of modern hard won freedoms or that the Bible, for all the perverted uses it has known, is no more than an archaic piece of gibberish. On the contrary, maybe they know more than most, about the price of a freedom not based on that biblical invocation, and as a consequence, used as a tool and a justification for hatred, torture and annihilation.

And as for the issue of a serene untrammelled individuality, there is surely a place for that too, though not a place whose foundation stands on the irreducible, exclusive and 'un-postponed' rights of my own ego or even, according to Levinas, of my own life.

My true home and my essential humanity are not found in my own hearth. They are found, in exile, beyond it. They are found where my responsibility for the other generates an 'in quietude,' which keeps me permanently awake. They are subject to neither temporisation nor discussion. And they are unimpressed by the precariousness and the impoverishing seduction of possessions, titles or riches, all of which are radically insufficient for bringing to birth our essential humanity (Levinas 1993).

And lest we create here, a portrait fit only for a flawless hero, it is apt to recall the words of the nineteenth century English writer, George Eliot, at the end of her classic work *Middlemarch*. Referring to the main character of the novel, Dorothea, she had this to say.

Certainly, those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of a young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith, the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not

greatly determined by what lies outside it…Even so, the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs (Eliot 1994, Chapter XVI).

Patrick's life was far from being a hidden one. And his tomb is and will remain, I am certain, a flame of inspiration, gratitude and of hope in our moments of discouragement and darkness. But, he was also a hidden man, in the deepest spiritual sense of that word. A man whose own self was constantly displaced, 'exiled' for the sake of the other. The kind of displacement and exile that was 'incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world'. (Eliot, 1994, Finale)And, contrary to what might be imagined, a displacement and exile which neither took away or muted, his love for the land and the place of his birth, for his own hearth, for his immediate family, for the home in Buenos Aires that was a place of legendary hospitality, for the simple domestic joys of cooking and carpentry. For all that Levinas would call 'the primacy of the secondary'. That is, the primacy of all those things that 'don't matter', but which are the mark of all authentic spirituality, as well as the condition for the kind of exile that takes us beyond ourselves so that we may hear and identify with the cry of the oppressed.

To those of us who remain and who may not yet have the courage of the prophet to say, 'Here I am. Send me' (Is 6;8), for the sake of the 'widow or the orphan' (Exodus 22:21-24) 'and the stranger'(Leviticus 19:34 & 25:35), may we at least be inspired and sustained along the road from ego to compassion by the example of a man who without ceasing to be just one of us, in all our frailty and broken dreams, ennobled our humanity by the legacy of his life, and brought to our turbulent times, a bright ray of utopian hope.

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