

The Contemplative Struggle: Radical discipleship in a broken world.

Ian Cowley.

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How ephemeral, and how localised, is our consciousness of history. That is why there have to be historians and history departments, because, so easily, what we know of the horrors some people are living through either goes quickly to the back of the mind or, by the next generation, becomes an unknown. Our attitude of localisation means that what happens to others may seem to have nothing to do with us. So Jewish people, for instance, have to campaign to keep the memory of the holocaust alive, and, while there may be an especially tense rivalry in games of football between England and Germany, how many remember what fascism really meant as a threat to the world? And Tiananmen Square?

I say this because Ian Cowley's short but powerful book finds the origins of what was, to him, the revelation of prayer as contemplation, in the racial cauldron of South Africa in the depths of the apartheid regime of the last century.¹ His epiphany came through the University Christian Movement when he was a student at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzberg in the 1970s. There he came to understand the terrible sinfulness of the racial divide that ruled South Africa, and his life's course was changed.

For me, Cowley's vivid account of South African life was a revision lesson. I was serving in Botswana at that time and, although it was a country with a quite different ethos, we in the Church were not isolated and were very aware of what was going on with our neighbours, not only South Africa but Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) as well. I became peripherally involved in some anti-apartheid activity that crossed the border and drew me in, so I relate to Cowley's descriptions. I knew some of the people he talks about, and reading his book I was taken back to a time which, while key in my life, has been overlaid by layers of subsequent life and work. Even experience has an ephemeral quality.

Hence the thoughts about the ephemeral quality of contemporary history. Who remembers even the word apartheid now, other than in an intellectual sense, apart from those who suffered it? The question applies even more strongly to those who are not South Africans. While there were, in Britain, some noble anti-apartheid activists who helped to cause

profound change, their activity was outside the main stream of life and often looked upon with suspicion. Most people got on with life without worrying about South Africa. Now, bar Covid, that country is a favourite of tourists, who return to Europe unbrushed by a history that was all consuming at the time and still has many offshoots. Most were unborn when apartheid reigned.

I have to ask, then, whether for Cowley to use his South African life as a base for his argument is too esoteric. I hope not and I am sure it need not be, for not only does it gain great strength from being so personal, but it also makes us think into situations beyond our own circles. To think ourselves into apartheid South Africa is a good exercise.

'There were giants on the earth in those days' is a quotation which comes to mind.² South Africa was then, and still is, an extraordinary country, captivating, in the sense of drawing you in until you are engrossed. It is a land of wonderful beauty but what astounded me even more were the people one met. The mass of the people are a very interesting historical and anthropological mix, with their histories, cultures and divisions, but I will concentrate on two smaller sets: those implementing the apartheid policy and those who opposed them, struggling for what was later called, by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a 'rainbow nation'.

The first thing to say is that these people were honed by apartheid. The giant of apartheid was Hendrick Verwoerd, the SA president who was assassinated in 1966. He gave the philosophical basis to the National Party's policy of racial separation and white dominance, which was implemented ruthlessly. It was a giant endeavour, and the skills developed by the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) were second to none. Their use of technology was as sophisticated as possible for that time, and their information gathering work was everywhere. Furthermore, they knew what was going on elsewhere in the world, and could use it very cleverly in persuading people to conform.

The resisters were also people of exceptional knowledge, understanding and courage. There are great names: Nelson Mandela, Albert Luthuli, Helen Suzman, the Black Sash leaders, Beyers Naudé, Trevor Huddleston, Desmond Tutu, Steve Biko, to name but a few. But there were many, many more who worked and witnessed at continual risk to themselves, both from BOSS and also from being denigrated by the mass of whites happy with apartheid. Organisations like the University Christian Movement (UCM) were banned and many people had their passports removed or were put under house arrest. I felt both very

fortunate and also hugely humbled to meet some of these women and men. I did not meet Ian Cowley, but I am confident that he would be of these giants.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the struggle against apartheid and for justice was how it had such a strong Christian motivation. I have to be careful here, because Christianity was active on both sides. The Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church played a significant part in giving theological justification to apartheid, yet there were some notable DRC giants, the Bonhoeffers of their day, who rebelled against this, and were thrown out of the church. They played a great part. Nevertheless, it was very much among people from other churches that the understanding grew that the Christian law of love meant equality applied universally.

Cowley grew up on a Natal farm, with church, Anglican and formal, on Sundays, remembered as very boring. It was at university that faith caught him through the remarkable, if short lived, UCM. He describes how vibrant student worship attracted him and how he worked through the trauma — for it was a trauma — of mixing with people of other races and finding them human. After some vicissitudes, he hears his vocation to the priesthood in the Anglican Church of the Province of South Africa and eventually he comes to England, where he is first a parish priest and then Coordinator of Vocations and Spirituality in the Diocese of Salisbury, where he set up the Contemplative Minister Programme.

The great question that runs through the book is: what does it mean to be held firm in Christ in the centre of our being and to live with integrity in the 21st century? Through his student days he comes to see the sinfulness of the way power is held and exercised in South Africa, and to long for the justice that he discovers through his Christian faith. How does he hold the two in balance, so that the one undergirds the other? In other words, there is a double question: on the one hand, how can you be an activist, mixing in the hurly, sometimes unsavoury, burly of life and be true to Christ? On the other, how can you be true to Christ without, in some way, being mixed up in the difficult life of practising the love of neighbour in all its roughness? Through friends and mentors and the trial and error of trying to live a life for justice, with mistakes and setbacks and leaps forward, he discovers prayer as God's invitation to see the world with His eyes and to feel it as He feels it. He reads Merton and his development from longing to be solitary to understanding that the world needs the witness of the contemplative if it is ever going to overcome evil with good, and that means that the contemplative has to know and be known.

Now in South Africa the struggle against apartheid is over and an enormous wickedness has been demolished. In fact, though, when one injustice is stricken, the hydra of evil raises another. A strength of Cowley's book is that it is not only a memoir but makes use of his experience to show how Christian love is showing up many other aspects of life on the planet which threaten true human living, that is living as the people of God. As we are drawn in to the presence of God, how do we live with the divide of rich and poor and with other forms of inequality; with climate change; with war, national ambition and xenophobia; with the continuing oppression of peoples in many parts of the world; with homelessness in our own country? The list goes on and on. Simply, how do we help to make the world more Godly, restoring the creation which He saw was good?

Contemplative prayer is not shown as an opt-out but as the source of strength and ability. It is a struggle because of our fallen human nature, which is continually being pressed to sway one way or another. A hard struggle, but contemplation shows us how to 'put on the whole armour of God, for our struggle is not against the enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.'

The Contemplative Struggle is written to encourage us workaday Christians as we try to follow Jesus in our daily lives. In this it certainly succeeds, and the author adds an excellent introduction to contemplative practice as an appendix.

Two years ago I reviewed Ian Cowley's previous book, *The Contemplative Response: Leadership and Ministry in a Distracted Culture*. I suggested that it needed another volume, looking at how we can bring understanding of the love of God to the world outside the Christian community. In many ways this book does this, but may I ask Ian to set fingers to word processor once more and tackle the question of the contemplative response to the problems posed by today's atheists. When we talk of God in a universe of which astrophysics has revolutionised our understanding, how is He showing us how to talk of Him and act as His people? I find this an urgent question to stir the hearts of many. To ask an author for another book is, surely, a compliment.

Notes

1. Apartheid was the policy of segregation and political, social, and economic discrimination against the non-white majority in the Republic of South

Africa. The extreme racial segregation of apartheid lasted from 1948 to 1994 and included such restrictions as where people of certain races could live or own land, what jobs they could hold, and who could and couldn't participate in government.

2. Genesis 6:4

3. Ephesians 6 :11-12.

Ben Hopkinson is a priest, living in retirement in Northumberland. He was in the kindergarten of contemplation in 2019 and has still to enter the reception class.

Taking Heart: Experiences of spiritual searching, self-acceptance and journeying to the heart of faith

Fiona Gardner

Introduction by Jim Forest

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What a gift to read a book that takes us straight into the heart of matters. Fiona Gardner, a qualified psychoanalytic psychotherapist, spiritual director and former chair of The Thomas Merton Society, has written a short but rich book about the core of our spiritual journey and transformation. She uncovers the heart, the centre of all spirituality. This book is a wonderful brief account of the spiritual journey of true transformation in a contemporary and day-to-day situation, and a guide into the complexities of the emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of our being. Gardner shows us the way to the core of our being. Starting from the motto of the book by Alexander Ryrie about our 'hidden secret place, the inner chamber of our hearts', through the thoughts of not only Thomas Merton but also Carl Jung and others, she penetrates into the deepest connection with Christ. Woven throughout the book are real life stories of four of her clients: their journeys, struggles, but more so their rebirth in freeing themselves from those psychological and spiritual mechanisms which keep us trapped. In doing so we meet, what Merton called, our 'Inward Stranger'.

Reading the book feels like walking a labyrinth. It brings us closer into contact with our hidden parts, and creates a sense of wholeness. Her gentle support lets us breathe in dialogue with the Breath of Life. Gardner