

PILGRIMAGE ACCORDING TO A PHILOSOPHER: A TRIBUTE TO MICHEL MESLIN

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In the preface to the study on *L'Homme Romain*, M. Meslin has declared that through the analysis of the cultural and religious values underlying the action of the Romans from their origins to the beginning of the Christian era, he sought above all to help us understand the attraction mixed with horror, the fascination laced with distaste, that Rome has continued to exercise for two thousand years, right up to our own day.

In fact, M. Meslin has utilized the vast historical knowledge that he developed over many years of scientific study of all the vestiges of the past with which the Mediterranean world is so heavily laden in order to build over very solid empirical foundations a systematic and original anthropology of religion of the greatest contemporary interest.

I can perhaps most easily bring out this contemporary interest in the local context by referring to just one chapter of the major work by M. Meslin on Religious Experience — the chapter which deals with pilgrimages. The major economic thrust of our island state has been in the quarter century since independence in the area of tourism and, moreover, that there has occurred over this period a growing realisation that this development can only be sustainable if it is nourished not only by the search for sea and sun, with which nature has also abundantly graced many other parts of the world, but by the quest for a cultural uniqueness which yet responds to the deepest desires of all men.

Archaeologists and prehistorians have surmised that the great megalithic civilisation which so astonishingly flourished on our island five thousand years

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He is the author of a number of books [including *Beginning Philosophy* (1987)] and numerous articles mainly in the border areas between philosophy and the human sciences.

ago is only explicable because of an attraction it exercised over visitors from abroad. Likewise, the second golden age of Maltese culture, from the late sixteenth to the eighteenth century, is indissolubly linked to the cosmopolitanism of the Knights of St John, which resulted in the symbolic complex which gives its identity to Maltese Baroque — namely, that in a very small space the visitor can experience the whole gamut of a style — from its Germanic to its Portuguese variants, from its inception to its demise — with the imported features in a constant dialectic with the local, South-European, vernacular, living elements of an Arabic medieval heritage. The visitor from abroad can find a trace of his own place of origin lodged here in a setting at once markedly individual and universally hospitable. Thus, the destiny of Malta is in a way bound up with the phenomenon of a special kind of human travel — the journeying and voyaging which is animated by the deep thirst in the heart of man for a meaningful existence.

There are perhaps no other twenty pages in print which give a more thorough and illuminating analysis of the phenomenon than M. Meslin's. M. Meslin begins by giving a quantitative idea of the sociological importance of the phenomenon, but quickly points out that his interest is rather in its central universal feature: the personal existential character of a quest most often carried out collectively, and according to the rubrics of a tradition. His concern is to depict Man, the Pilgrim.

The etymology of the word associates it first with exile, political exile in a foreign land distant from home, but towards the end of the fourth century of the Christian era, *peregrinatio* comes to signify a symbolic action expressive of man's sense of exile from his heavenly home. The pilgrim face of man shows him, like Abraham leaving Ur, feeling the need of conversion, and driven by a faith in the existence of somewhere on earth where the Holy has made a therapeutic irruption, where one can still experience with one's senses the physical reminders of that irruption, and perhaps carry away with him some recollecting sign. Usually, such a place is conceived as symbolically central.

M. Meslin underlines first the freedom that is essential to the pilgrim's act, his hope of a physical cure or of peace of soul, of a different style of life; then, the succour expected of mediators between the earthly and the heavenly spheres, whether these are conceived as Ancestral figures as in the Maltese megalithic culture, or as eschatological icons, as in the Baroque image of the Assumption of Mary. The pilgrim shows the sense of his search by the changed style of clothing and other behavioural traits including ritual acts.

The highly personal act is, accordingly, usually carried out in groups, because as essential a part of pilgrimage, and it is not easy to sharply

distinguish the pilgrim from the tourist as the breakaway from routine and the dull greyness of mediocrity, is the provisional abolition of social hierarchies and the destructuring of habits and conventions. The inner journey accomplished in the course of travel is aimed at the rediscovery of the simplicity and creativity of childhood. Victor Turner has compared the modern pilgrimage to the liminal rites of primitive tribes. They aim at a co-nativity, and a transformation of the old into a new humanity, as if by an individuating alchemy. For this reason, also, the mystics have often likened their spiritual adventure to a pilgrimage, with dark nights and resting-places en route to the Beloved and the Absolute.

I have cited at some length Professor Meslin's analysis of the significance of pilgrimage because I think it is a clear case where deep scholarship shows itself to be of great practical relevance.

Malta, at the geographical centre of the Mediterranean world, is caught up with the rest of the region, in the destiny of being a global centre of human travel, of a kind of human mobility that is ever on the increase. This human phenomenon brings certain evident benefits, but we already know from experience that it spells out equally certain dangers.

It has been established by the social scientists who have analysed the phenomenon of mass tourism — undoubtedly one of the “signs” of our times — that it can ultimately lead to the destruction of those very qualities which initially were the reason for its rise.

In Malta, for instance, we are already worried about the “carrying capacity” of our island, and in particular of certain special areas like Venice, we have to impose restrictions on numbers. Our cry has become “quality”, not “quantity”. But I think it is important that we should not mistake “quality” for “money”. The wealth of the tourist is not to be calculated in purely pecuniary terms. Students, for instance, and often even scholars, do not have their pockets overflowing with dollars or marks or yen. But they do not usually seek to just spend a few days or weeks in a bubble which merely transposes them with their old habits and rules of life to a different physical space. They are usually in search of meaning, of alternative styles of life. They are often in quest of a graal, like the Knights of the Round Table, and to a certain extent the Knights of Malta. They are not perhaps what Rahner called “anonymous Christians”; but they are all perhaps what one might call pseudonymous pilgrims.

The pilgrim, even if he does not describe himself by that name, is, as Professor Meslin has shown, engaged in an existential search for symbols

which serve communication.

I have noticed a clear pattern of development in practically all of M. Meslin's analysis of the different phenomena studied in his book on the *Human Experience of the Divine*, a pattern indeed visible overall throughout his oeuvre. He begins by focusing attention on a behavioural trait — such as groups travelling to a particular place. It then emerges that the physical action and the physical place have a symbolic dimension which men seek to interpret and express. So that, as a third step, M. Meslin is led to the analysis of the language in which they express it — of the peculiar language which humans resort to in their always strained attempts at expressing their experience of the transcendent, of mystical language.

I think it is this three-step method — the movement from physical reality to concrete symbol to interpretative language — which has enabled M. Meslin to solidly establish the anthropology of religion as a science. I have stressed its practical interest to us in our present, local context, but I would like now also to emphasize its great relevance to the development of theology itself.

Five years ago, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, the late Père Chénu was asked what he now saw as defective in the first great conciliar text, the Constitution on the Liturgy. Père Chénu unhesitatingly answered that they had given inadequate attention to the findings of the anthropologists — to that miscellaneous, vast and often chaotic work which ethnographers and historians of comparative religion have produced over the last century — an inadequate attention partly due to the then confused condition of the results, affected as it was by all sorts of prejudices and biases, but which has begun to emerge in a fairly systematic and orderly way in Professor Meslin's work, as it has grown and is still growing progressively. Père Chénu pointed out that theologians had for the most part, in modern times, passed over and ignored the fact that St Thomas Aquinas had devoted a very great part of his study of the sacraments to, for him, who is usually so concise and who claims brevity of treatment as the great merit of his *summa*, very lengthy treatment of ancient Hebrew ritual and of whatever pagan rites he found described in the Bible, in the book of Leviticus and the other so-called sacerdotal texts, which most modern theologians found boring and even failed to read. Père Chénu remarked that these texts were the only anthropological material Aquinas had available, and the importance he gives to them is a clear indication of the importance which he attached to what today we would call anthropology.

Of course, it is well known that perhaps the most famous Catholic theologian of our times, Karl Rahner, has spoken of an anthropological turn

that had to be given to theology. But, unfortunately in my opinion, as I have tried to show in an essay included as an appendix in my book *Beginning Philosophy*, Rahner understood this anthropological turn in a Kantian sense — that is in the delineation of a set of necessary a priori conditions for the human receptivity of revelation. On the contrary, the anthropology which M. Meslin sets out is the methodical ordering of empirical and historical facts, and I believe it provides the acceptable basis on which theological reflection can flourish as the method of transcendental deduction does not.

If I may be allowed to conclude on a personal note, in a reflective context which is inevitably existential if it is taken at all seriously, after the small book on St Benedict, it was M. Meslin's great scholarly work on the feast of the January Calends in the Roman Empire, his study of the rituals of the New Year, which produced a lasting impression on me, well after its publication in 1970. I have alluded to my little book *Beginning Philosophy*, which was meant to introduce to Philosophy through a reflection on the very idea of Beginning. I began the book by alluding to the theory of Louis Barthes that beginning is always a ritual act, but, of course, since my field is philosophy, I did not follow it up by any deep or detailed investigation of the rituals of beginning. Nevertheless, at the end, since I wished to show the relevance of the philosophical analysis of the concept of beginning to Theology, I dedicated a short epilogue to the subject, indicating that philosophy could only give an account of relative beginnings, and absolute beginnings could only be understood in a religious context. I believe that the elaboration of a Theology of beginnings could hardly do better than take as its beginning M. Meslin's studies on the Rites of the beginning of the New Year.

M. Meslin has shown that religion is essentially connected with the definition of the human identity of each one of us. I have chosen to focus, by way of example, on two illustrations of it: the movement in space we call pilgrimage, and the looking back in time towards beginnings. I chose these two examples because they seemed to be particularly relevant to the here-and-now of Malta. But they are that because they are perennially and universally significant in human life. It is because M. Meslin has illuminated the most visible feature of our economic and social situation and the identifying origins of the civilisation which is our heritage in a manner which shows them as our mode of participation in an inseparable humanity that we wish to honour him today.

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