

The Master and His Emissary by Ian McGilchrist

Notes on an excerpt from Chapter 9: *The Renaissance and the Reformation* for the Cornerstone Reading Group on Friday 13 February 2015.

The viewpoint of these notes.

As in my discussion of Part 1 of the book a fortnight ago, I do not intend to offer a summary of this section of the book; as such, most of McGilchrist's actual argument regarding hemisphere differences is going to be missed. Instead, I am going to flag up remarks from his argument that strike me as telling for any one of several reasons, and will hopefully stimulate good discussion. They either

- (1) Betray his value system, as per our prior discussion,
- (2) Touch on a topic relevant to the ongoing dialogue in the church today about worship and practice, or
- (3) Clearly suffer from a lack of consideration of the underlying theology, some in a way that could actually benefit from a more insightful application of his own thesis.

A word on words.

Since a great part of this section is built on McGilchrist's distaste for explicit verbalization in preference for "the implicit and metaphorical," a short explanation of his position is important, lest his comments be completely misunderstood. (They are provocative enough without misapprehension.) Early in the book, he makes the prescient observation that the metaphor we choose to describe a thing—or indeed the name we choose to give it—tends to reinforce particular traits of the thing, while making us less aware of those traits the metaphor does not emphasize. Left to itself, this seems to me an important reminder to be cautious with language; to be aware that the words we choose are not chosen from a "view from nowhere;" and to avoid the flattening assumption that the multidimensional picture we describe is completely captured in the words we use. For any discussion of the nature of God and the Church, this seems an apt reminder indeed.

McGilchrist extrapolates in two directions on this observation. First, it feeds his argument that the "more holistic" right hemisphere is in closer touch with reality "as it really is": if our categories (left hemisphere) are usually based on a subset of traits of a given thing, then to be attentive to traits beyond those categories (right hemisphere) is to have a more realistic apprehension of that thing. Second, it becomes a strong critique of precise, explicit language, which he sees as creating an illusion of a well-defined, static, clearly delimited thing at the expense of those connotations left out by the denotative *word*.

The notes.

The transformation of Sacrament and exaltation of proclamation.

“One can see the second process (a rejection of the right hemisphere’s world) in the way in which the decline of metaphoric understanding of ceremony and ritual into the inauthentic repetition of empty procedures in the Middle Ages prompted, not a *revitalization* of metaphoric understanding, but an outright rejection of it, with the advent of the Reformation.”

Interestingly, he views transubstantiation and reduction of the Eucharist to mere symbol as kindred positions and is critical of both: both are unnecessary dichotomies rather than “the belief that [the elements] *are* in some important sense the body and blood of Christ, metaphors of it.”

“Sacrament becomes information-transfer. Its material elements convey not substances, but meanings, and these latter are immutably conveyed regardless of the form they take.” (quoted from J. Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, U. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004.)

“‘Sacred centres thus gave way to centres of attention’ in which the focus is no longer the altar, but the pulpit...the place of dissemination of the moral law, often situated at a dizzying height over the heads of the masses near the roof of the church, high above the altar...” (partially quoting Koerner again)

“Proclamation” of the word, which he criticizes, versus “manifestation” of the divine, which he praises. He has a rather...humanist?...definition of “the divine.” He seems to essentially mean a sense of mystical awe at that which transcends us, and whatever lets us get a subjective sense of that awe is “good” religion.

A lot of what he says about art and sacrament in worship is, I think, valid: they do surpass words *about* God with a kind of participation in the *action* of God, but he misses the specific, thoroughly non-subjective “personness” of God, which cannot be entirely communicated without explicit identification, but who indeed can’t be fully known merely by description. It’s a shame that he misses the opportunity to further support his thesis by noting this productive synthesis of right- and left-hemisphere modes of knowing God in Christianity. Of course, if there is nothing specific and definite in “religion” as he sees it, it’s not a productive synthesis, but a usurpation, and that seems to be his theme throughout.

Rather strong non-theological claims about the motivation of the Reformers.

Luther’s concern was “for authenticity, and a return to experience, as opposed to reliance on power structures.” He makes the claim even stronger later: “What is so compelling

here is that the motive behind the Reformation was the urge to regain authenticity, with which one can only be profoundly sympathetic. The path it soon took was that of the destruction of all means whereby the authentic could have been recaptured.”

“Luther perceived that the inner and outer realms, however one expresses it...needed to be *as one*, otherwise the outward show had nothing to say about the inward condition.”

Laying aside his claim that these were Luther’s actual motivations, I suspect that the *ideas* he presents can be made more or less convergent with Christian thought depending on whether or not we stick with his definition of his cardinal virtue, “authenticity.” In the vaguely spiritual sense in which he uses it, perhaps not, but I do detect hints of the book of James in his psychological interpretation of Luther (above) if I take “authenticity” as meaning something along the lines of “the expected correspondence between the life of a person pursuing Christ and the life of Christ himself.” Authenticity with respect to a very specific reality.

“Self-reflexivity” in the use of images and (printed) word.

“Rather paradoxically for a movement that began as a revolt against apparently empty structures, it is in fact the structures, not the content, of religion, that come into focus *as* the content.”

“Such pictures as were permitted in the Reformation Church are self-referential, in that what they depict is what is actually going on in the church. In as much, they become redundant: they do not reach out to the Other, but remain stubbornly trapped within a system of signs. Images become explicit, understood by reading a kind of key...”

The link between explicit decontextualization and power.

“The Reformation was the first great expression of the search for certainty in modern times...both [the Reformation and the Enlightenment] attempted to do away with the visual image, the vehicle *par excellence* of the right hemisphere, particularly in its mythical and metaphoric function, in favour of the word, the stronghold of the left hemisphere, in pursuit of unambiguous certainty.”

“Contexts bring meanings from the whole of ourselves and our lives, not just from the explicit theoretical, intellectual structures which are potentially under control. The power-hungry will always aim to substitute explicit for intuitive understanding. Intuitive understanding is not under control, and therefore cannot be trusted by those who wish to manipulate and dominate the way we think...Hence the Calvinists set about an erasure of the past, involving the destruction of everything that would nourish memory of how things had been...”

From his position that “religion” is primarily some kind of access to awe and transcendence, he interprets an emphasis on the truth of the gospel—hard to imagine Christianity without—as a bid for control.

The frustrating thing, of course, is that the first sentence of this quote *is* quite valid, and awareness of our context, both contemporary and historical, *is* an important element in all conversations about how to shape our worship. The problem is that he sets up an antagonistic dichotomy between the context and the proclamation (though he doesn’t like dichotomies...).

He compares Protestantism to capitalism, observing among many other features an “emphasis on individual agency, and a discounting of what might be called ‘communion.’” He notes that capitalism is “anti-traditional” and observes that “it is not wise to reject [tradition] or uproot it altogether and on principle,” on which he happens to be in agreement with C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man*, and on a very similar topic.

Form and meaning

A claim with marks for and against it, I think: “That meaning is independent of form [is] one of the most damaging legacies of the Reformation.” For it, we have the discussion of Sacrament above. Against it, we have the following.

“The invisible Church being the only church to have any reality, the Church existed literally everywhere, and actual churches became less significant: every place was as good as any other in which to hold a service...In an important sense, if everything and everywhere is holy, then nothing and nowhere is holy...A recognizably similar development became familiar in the twentieth century, where the retreat of art into the realm of the idea, into concepts, enabled it to become a commonplace that ‘everything is art’...”

While I take his analogical point, it’s still a painful misconstrual of Christianity, in which the Church is not *just* the vehicle in which we venerate The Holy—though it is not less. Ironically for his overall thesis, which emphasizes the importance of embodied human experience, he misses the meaning of “the gospel can be proclaimed everywhere” as the *embodiment* of the gospel in all of life; he also misses the lack of separation between Christ and (embodied) humanity, and the ultimate vision of a New Creation that *is* all holy, without diminishment.