

## THE CHOICE OF NOTHING

Noel Rowe

I cannot say when I was chosen by the word, 'nothing', but I felt it first in Phuket, southern Thailand. It was in the New Year of 1990 and I was visiting the abbot of a Buddhist monastery called Wat Mongkolnimit. I had been taken there by my friend, Stephen Fahey, a disciple of the abbot's. According to Stephen, the abbot was an extraordinary person: wise, compassionate, detached, unpretentious and humorous. I can remember going up the stairs to the monk's room clutching my spiritual insights, hoping that I would not say anything too banal and that I might receive at least one little nod of approval. And the abbot gave us tea and never spoke to me.

This was unusual. He was a very polite man and, while I could not speak Thai, he spoke English. When my friend, speaking in Thai, explained that I had come from Sydney and would like to understand something of Buddhism, the abbot replied in Thai that I might benefit from reading the Kalamas Sutra. As it happened, I had been reading a selection of Buddhist Scriptures while I was in Thailand and was a little surprised when I went back to the guest house and turned the page to find the Kalamas Sutra. This Sutra told me not to rely on my usual bases for religious belief — tradition, teacher, revelation — but to see for myself which practices were harmful and which beneficial.

I went a second time to meet the abbot. He continued to ignore me and to speak in Thai, though this time he asked Stephen to tell me that the most important thing in Buddhism was to empty the heart of all its clinging and the rest would follow. I was at the time involved in a fair bit of clinging: grieving for my father, holding on to my own viewpoint, blaming others, especially church others, for my disappointments and disillusionments, clinging to the notion of love. I began to wonder if the old monk was one of those people who can look into someone and know all about them. And I began to be sure that he was up to something.

I went a third time to meet the abbot (any similarities with Christ going a third time into the garden were purely coincidental). This time he spoke in English, but not to me. He and his disciple discussed the state of world peace and the effects of tourism on Thailand. I was sitting off to the side of their conversation. Then I noticed that the abbot had begun to turn his head towards me. He was not speaking to me. He was continuing his sentence to his disciple but managed, without faltering in the rhythm or sense of that conversation, to turn his head so that he was facing directly at me just as he said the word, 'Impermanence', then turn back into his continuing sentence as if nothing had happened. And I might have decided nothing had happened had he not looked at me so intently. It seemed as if his eyes opened and enlarged, almost as if they changed colour. Certainly they took me in.

Of course, I resisted the idea of impermanence at least long enough to record the meeting as a modest narrative poem:

'Kata Beach'

Could it be  
the hills have learned patience  
enough to lie lightly on the sea,  
not to cling, instead to make their touch  
complete with emptiness, as a dancer's hand  
will train the air to wait, will borrow beauty just  
for a while, then, wiser than the thieves who tried  
to steal the moonlight, throw it back.

Could it be  
the fishing boat  
has netted peace:  
red, white and weathered,  
it's sitting on its haunches like amusement,  
as motor scooters pass it by with noise and speed.

Could it be  
as simple as the Buddhist monk's instruction:  
while the mangy kitten stretched itself,  
hair by hair, along a careless stroke of sunlight,  
while a hazy green untied the room and trees

until the mind had lost its hold,  
while his loose arms moved easily, as pity might,  
asking ignorance to put its power down,  
while his hand, attentive, touched his glass  
as if to keep its water cool, while his eyes  
were opening suddenly corridors calm with bronze,  
he said a single word: 'Impermanence'.  
And laughed. It sounded like a shell  
breaking.

Could it be:  
the clear-hearted sea.

A few years before I met the Buddhist monk I had had another meeting, this time with a Catholic priest who believed he was about to give up everything and follow Christ. He was, in fact, about to board a plane for Rome, with a ticket someone else had paid for and with only the clothes he was wearing. I must have looked sceptical because he quoted me the gospel: 'Carry no purse, no haversack, no sandals.' (Luke 10:4) I am afraid this only made me more sceptical and I asked if he was at least taking a change of underpants. He wasn't. He was going to Rome as part of a missionary venture. He would join others from around the world. He would be briefed for a few weeks on evangelisation. He would be allotted a country and sent there. He would evangelise that country for a few more weeks, then return to Rome to report on the state of its belief. He was no more concerned about his lack of language than he was about his lack of underpants. God would provide.

As far as he was concerned he was travelling with empty hands. He had chosen nothing so that God might be everything. Which might seem a spiritually respectable way to go, if you haven't heard the story of the two Buddhist monks.

These two monks belonged to a strict observance and were forbidden to touch women. They were on their way home after a long forest retreat. One was young and satisfied: he could see that he had taken very definite steps along the path of virtue. The other was old and had already forgotten the retreat. He was simply walking. These two monks came suddenly upon a flooded river. Beside the river was a woman.

She could not cross. She had been waiting all day for someone to help her. So the old monk picked her up and carried her across. He put her down and the two monks continued on their journey, although the young monk was now walking well behind, sulking in a way that only the virtuous can. Finally, as they reached their monastery, the old monk turned to the young.

'Is there something troubling you?' he asked.

'I cannot understand,' said the young monk, 'It is forbidden to touch a woman, yet you carried that woman across the river.'

'But,' replied the old monk, 'I left her at the river. You are still carrying her.'

The priest would have seen my scepticism as evidence of some form of spiritual disillusionment, some failure in courage and commitment. Perhaps it was. I had begun to experience the emptiness of my Catholic tradition: phrases that had held my life, phrases like 'the will of God' and 'the supremacy of truth', had grown tired. I had become very critical of what I saw as an alliance of literalism and dogmatism in the Catholic Church, an alliance which had made it too cocksure of its images of the sacred.

This had nothing to do with the by now stereotypical horrors of growing up Catholic. I had a reasonably happy Catholic childhood because I enjoyed the incense, the ritual, the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, and thought the Green Catechism was the basis for a great screenplay. It was while I was myself a priest and part of the official power structure that I began to see what happens when people believe too much in their sacred images.

The more I heard the authoritative church declare that women should not be ordained, that the divorced and remarried should not receive communion, that homosexuals should be celibate, and that Buddhism might damage my Christian belief, the more I realised I could no longer be an ecclesial official, the more I realised I wanted to approach God by way of nothing.

That, of course, makes the process sound positive. It may not have been. It may simply have been a further failure in

commitment and certitude, a kind of spiritual depression which needed to deny the sureness of God. It may also have been both positive and negative. Negative theology, at least as I half-practise it, involves a continual shifting between scepticism and belief, just as my personal symbolism involves a continual interchange of light and dark energies.

At this time I was thinking a lot about the relationship between religion and poetry and I was trying to become a writer. I had come to the conclusion that religious language is at once the most profound and the least reliable of all the languages. It constitutes itself as much by unsaying as by saying, as much by not affirming God as by affirming. It cannot afford to let its identifying function overrule its dis-identifying function. It cannot afford, it cannot sustain the presumption of referentialism nor the arrogance of literalism. Somewhat like Christ, it must empty itself and take up its cross.

I imagine an intellectual adventurer would think me a rather slow learner, but, for me, the realisation that religious language is fundamentally metaphorical was also the realisation that I had somehow to deal with a primitive tension between play and duty. I sometimes refer to this as the tension between my grandmother's house and my mother's house (and should add that 'grandmother' and 'mother' in this context do not refer to the actual people, but to my internalised construct). My mother's house was a place for doing the will of God, for duty, for sacrifice, for endurance, for obedience and reward. It was not a place for wasting time when there was work to be done. My grandmother's house *was* a place for wasting time. I could hide away in her spare room and create my own little Hollywood. I could play.

This primitive tension played itself out in my religious life as a conflict between theological obedience and imaginative freedom. The church, at least for me, was not a place for wasting time, and certainly not a place for unhindered words. It was a place of duty, not play. I saw that, if I wanted to become a writer, I had to decide whether I could afford most authority to images or dogmas.

At much the same time I was reading what Australian theologians were doing to Patrick White. They were trying to tame the monster. They were taking his work and selecting familiar themes of sacrifice, suffering, quest and illumination, but ignoring the way White, connecting both his creativity and spirituality to his homosexuality and sustaining his own romance of the

ambivalent artist, imagined God as cruel and brilliant, squalid and beautiful. They were using their theology to read Patrick White's fiction, but they were not allowing his fiction to read their theology. They were assuming that art is the servant of theology and I was developing sufficient arrogance to assume the reverse.

I had also begun to believe that the degree to which a religious institution reduces its truth to its language, the degree to which it becomes idolatrous, is the degree to which it loses real sympathy for those it sees as 'different', 'marginalised', 'deviant', 'disobedient'. It can only give them a moralist's sympathy, and a moralist's sympathy is ultimately meagre and self-serving. Even to see the 'marginalised' mainly as recipients of compassion is greatly to reduce their function within a religious institution. The women who want to be priests, the divorced who want to remarry, the homosexuals who fall fully in love, and the followers of other religions perform a symbolic function (one which is largely independent of their personal qualities and indifferent to their personal pain). They recall the true nature of metaphor and religion: that metaphor does not so much gather meaning to the centre as project it to the edges, that religion does not so much contain or protect mystery as be fractured by it.

The 'marginalised' often symbolise an instinct to keep God small. I have noticed that many religious officials do seem to like to make big statements. Maybe they think God is big. The abbot of Wat Mongkolnimit made, of course, no claims about God, just as the Buddha neither affirmed nor denied the existence of God. But the abbot of Wat Mongkolnimit is, so far, the holiest person I have ever met.

To thank him for his teaching I gave him a poem called 'Bangkok III' which records a moment when I went to see, for the first time, the shrine of the Emerald Buddha in Wat Phrakeow, Bangkok. This temple is administered as a sacred space and so it was necessary for me to take off my shoes. Just in case I thought I could take a photograph in order to have the memory and miss the experience, I was told that cameras could not be used. I was also told to keep my feet facing away from the image. I went in, looking for some great image, and I didn't see it. Instead there were large angel-like figures, standing upright, and holding their hands out and flat up against the air, showing their empty palms. Above them was another row of such figures, smaller, but with the same hand gesture, and above them another row. Then, high up at the

back, was the Emerald Buddha, smaller than I had imagined, cool, quiet, undemonstrative.

I am drawn back to those empty hands. Whichever they are in that position, they can hold nothing, they can lose nothing, they are 'poor and therefore unafraid'. They are also signs of what Christ meant when he spoke of the last being first, of dying in order to live, and when he used a cross to reveal the emptiness of God. They are a place where the Christ and the Buddha meet to make the heart empty and poor. They tempt me to make a wager: that the final, risky act of faith is to follow to the negative edge of metaphor, to where there is nothing.

At the same time I wonder if this 'nothing' is not also an anticipation of my past, a surrender to one of the most primitive possibilities in my religious imagination.

I am probably about five years old and standing at the door to my parents' bedroom. The door is slightly ajar. I can hear crying. My father is not there. I can see my mother sitting on the side of their bed. It seems to be the first time I have really heard anyone cry, or cry so absolutely. I seem to know that there is no sufficient reason for the way sorrow slumps and shudders her body and that there never will be. I seem to know that she is crying before God, curved into God, but at the same time I seem to know that there is not a God who can hear her.

As I stand there I am remembering the picture of Christ which hangs in our kitchen. It is a picture of Christ praying in the garden of Gethsemane, leaning into a rock, and sitting on him, riding on his back is a black shape, a featureless devil, an empty scream. Later I will realise there is no such thing, that I have never seen this picture accurately, that what I have called a black shape is really his cloak billowing in the wind and the night. By then it will be too late to undo the symbolism. My mother and my Christ will already have shown me the emptiness of expectations.

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