

Discerning the Spirit's Mission In the Crosscurrents of Life and Laments

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Robert Davis Hughes, III, in *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life* has an ambitious agenda in this learned book. Center stage he advances a robust trinitarian theology of the spiritual life that privileges the role of the Holy Spirit in the mission of God the Fount and Father in creation and covenant, in the mission of the Word/Wisdom in salvation, and in the Spirit's own 'appropriate' mission of sanctification (47). His approach is intended to provide a wiser and more spiritually effective framework for discernment amid the personal and collective dynamics of life. He seeks to affirm the wisdom of classic spiritual writers on the threefold rhythm of life described in terms of purgation, illumination, and mystical union while avoiding problems such as subjective self-absorption, social and political disengagement, an elitist mentality, or viewing these three dynamics in the spiritual life as fixed law-like stages. To do this, he recasts the rhythm of purgation, illumination, and mystical union in terms of the tides of conversion, transfiguration, and glory—the pitch, roll, and yaw of the pilgrim voyage of life, which I imagine as sailing. Drawing on the work on the Spirit in the life of the Trinity by Robert Jensen, Kilian McDonnell, and Eugene Rogers, Hughes focuses on the Spirit's distinctive mission of sanctification and wishes, and, here I'm quoting directly, to “ground spiritual theology not merely in a new pneumatological locus but specifically in a doctrine of the Spirit's mission as *koinonia*—the gift to the whole created order of participation in the intra-Trinitarian relationships of *perichoresis* (co-inherence)...(45).”

So much more could and really should be said about Hughes' constructive argument to do it justice, but in the interest of time let me turn to my response. Here I am faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, I agree in large part with his central argument about a trinitarian and

pneumatological approach to the spiritual life; this is quite compatible with my own trinitarian and Spirit-oriented approach to ecclesiology and to the church's practices of participatory structures of discernment and decision making. On the other hand, however, and for a variety of reasons that have come into clear focus during this tumultuous period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, I have reservations about his proposed "grounding [of] spiritual theology ... specifically in a doctrine of the Spirit's mission as *koinonia*."

Now, I'm hoping this does not sound like a call for mutiny on this sailing vessel that has a hard enough time negotiating the tides of life! Hughes' concentration on the Spirit's gift of *koinonia* promotes and warrants the sacramental, eucharistic, episcopal, and clerical theology and ecclesiology of communion that has become so important in Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox theologies, as well as in numerous Protestant traditions. There is much that can be affirmed here. But over the past several decades in my church, this kind of theology has often been used to promote church unity by means of obedience to papal, episcopal, and clerical authority, even clericalism, while undermining a prophetic spirituality and missiology that is essential to an individual's faith development and to a local church's mission of inculturation, social outreach, and proclamation by all the people of God. To state matters differently the official Catholic ecclesiology of communion has, since the 1980s, eclipsed the theology of the people of God, and the prophetic calling of all the faithful, that dawned in the documents of Vatican II. This has been the cause of many heartaches and much mental anguish.

Christians cannot thrive in the spiritual life without the Spirit's gift of *koinonia* in our life, our churches, and our social networks. But it is *as important*, and perhaps a necessary precondition, to foreground and feature the Spirit's missionary impulse, an impulse discerned by heeding passionate engagements in life and the disturbing groans and lamentations of God's

people and damaged world, to elicit the prophetic mission of Christian disciples and the church as a community of disciples. Instead of thinking of the Spirit's mission in terms of the gift of *koinonia*, I wish to stay close to the Nicene Creed as it echoes so many biblical motifs: "the Spirit is the giver of life . . . who has spoken [and we can add continues to speak] through the prophets." To embrace the prophetic character of Christian discipleship and the church as equally important as the church's character as sacrament of *koinonia* requires the spiritual work of prophetic discernment and prophetic obedience led by the Spirit.

Hughes concentration on *koinonia* can be detected in his many fine discussions of the Spirit's gift of *koinonia* that springs forth in love of God (280ff.; 324ff.), neighbor (297ff.), the order and beauty of the world (311f.), and friendship and community (342ff), and in the sacraments of restored *koinonia*, ordering *koinonia*, and worship (331ff.). To be fair, our author does not entirely avoid, repudiate, or marginalize the role of prophetic action in spiritual and ecclesial life. To this end he engages David Tracy's treatment of "three interpretive models for theology, ethics, and spirituality that often compete but which [Tracy] sees as ultimately complementary" (198) Proclamation concentrates on negative aspects of life and the gospel themes of word, sin, judgment, and the cross; Manifestation accentuates the presence and immanence of God in creation and life; Prophetic action focuses on liberating praxis as found in the exodus tradition and eschatological motifs associated with God's reign and the resurrection. This provides Hughes with a framework for three spiritualities: self-denial associated with proclamation, self-fulfillment or self-actualization with manifestation, and self-criticism with prophetic action (201-206). Hughes states that "self-transcendence . . . [is] a style that that must now govern all three modes [self-denial; self-fulfillment; self criticism] and all three tides, currents, or movements of the spiritual life [conversion, transfiguration, and glorification]. On

this basis, . . . conversion [can] be seen as a response to the Holy Spirit's call to self-transcendence" (208). While Hughes suggests that "any one of the three modes may predominate in any particular conversion" (209), he suggests that self-denial or cleansing the *imago dei* as he also calls it (associated with proclamation) correlates with conversion; self-fulfillment (associated with manifestation) correlates with transfiguration (265), and self-criticism (associated with prophetic action) correlates with the third conversion--the dark night of the soul or the second slack (360-1). As intriguing as this framework is, I wonder whether there is not also a prophetic dimension in instances of proclamation and manifestation, and not simply in prophetic action, and likewise in every tide in the spiritual life.

To repeat my main point thus far: while Hughes privileges the Spirit's mission of *koinonia* in his theology of spirituality, he does offer ample material for developing the Spirit's mission at work in prophetic action so desperately needed in our churches and world today. This prophetic dimension of the spiritual life, I believe, however, needs to be brought into clearer focus and more prominently featured in a theology of spirituality, ecclesiology, and in practice. I will simply suggest several ingredients involved. By augmenting rather than undermining what Hughes offers, my proposal gladly joins his own effort to help individuals and groups negotiate difficult eddies and whirlwinds in personal life, church life, and social life.

First of all, a needed focus on the prophetic character of Jesus Christ and the people of God, must nonetheless be situated in the larger tradition of three threefold messianic offices of priest, prophet, and king --a tradition that has roots in the scriptures and early Christian literature, but is most widely credited to Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Henry Newman, a group of Russian Orthodox émigrés to Paris-- Nikolai Berdyaev, Serge Bulgakov, Georges Florovski, Aleksy Khomiakov, ¹ Yves Congar, and more recently by Romanian Orthodox theologian

Dmitru Staniloae, whose work is interpreted by Radu Bordeianu, and Australian Catholic theologian Ormond Rush.² This tradition has its detractors, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and Andrew Louth, who raise issues that merit attention.³ But even legitimate questions about how all the faithful share in the threefold offices, do not undermine the prophetic character of the people of God.

Thus, I would suggest that we supplement Hughes and Eugene Roger's valuable concentration on the Spirit's agency in the resurrection and transfiguration so indebted to the Eastern fathers, with more attention to Jesus' discernment of his own mission in the desert at the beginning of his active ministry and in the garden on threshold of its end, and throughout Jesus' life on the highways and byways with the poor and those overpowered by destructive spirits, with the blind, the lame, and the lost, and in the public squares where Jesus engaged priests, Sadducees, and Pharisees and official representatives of the Rome Empire. The anointing of the Spirit in Jesus' baptism crystallizes but a moment in a prophetic life of discerning the spirits by the one Christians recognize and worship as Messiah and incarnate Son of God.

Second, the distinctive calling of the Spirit-animated prophet that we find revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus, embodies, for Christians, the summons to be attentive and responsive to the voice of the Spirit sounding in the deepest aspirations and yearnings of the human heart, in the laments of those suffering in life, and indeed even in the groaning of creation in travail. This is what St. Paul acknowledged in Romans chapter 8: when we struggle with our heartfelt aspirations and our heartbroken laments the Spirit cries out sometimes in sighs too deep for words. This can only be the work of the Spirit of God that we read about in 1 Corinthians 2:10-16 who teaches, gives wisdom, and helps discern the ways of God. "Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny." This is neither

blind obedience to religious authorities, nor to mob rule; rather it is discernment requiring eyes of faith to recognize, receive, and respond to the truth of faith witnessed in the sense of the faithful.

Third, the prophetic life of Jesus and of his followers is precisely a life of discernment, one of discerning vocation for an individual or the mission of communities. This is difficult enough for individuals to cultivate, but it is extremely challenging for communities, no matter how small, as Ralph Del Colle and I can testify after being in a small Christian Life Community for over ten years that struggled to engage in communal discernment about our mission. Nevertheless, the Trinitarian understanding of vocation and mission is precisely about becoming an individual person and about a local church realizing its own identity and mission through relationships. Individuation requires communion--perichoresis; and communion fosters individuation. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, "union differentiates."

The Spirit calls individuals and communities to discern and distinguish the spirits by giving precedence personally and collectively to aspirations and lamentations. This is what we discover in the life of Jesus. Ruth Cohn, a Jewish psychoanalyst and educator believed that in matters of discernment and decision making in life: passionate engagements and disturbances should take precedence. This is true in the spiritual life as well: the passionate aspirations of life and the lamentations and conflicts that disturb should take precedence. Ignatius of Loyola invites people to develop the daily *askesis* (exercises) of the examen when we ponder our deep desires in and through our experiences of consolation and desolation. Thus we seek to negotiate our way in daily life as "contemplatives in action." So too, we need to keep track of our personal and collective life aspirations and our lamentations and disturbances in order to discern our personal vocation and our collective mission. This is how we guide the rudder in the tides of

life. As averse as we might be to conflict and as much as we might try to repress our laments, these disturbances can be a catalyst of the Spirit in the work of purgation, illumination, and even union. We may be sailing with a passionate wind at our backs, or into head winds of laments and conflict and even struggles with our own self-destructive dynamics of sin, but we must always strive to discern our way forward.

Hughes speaks powerfully of this kind of discernment in the key of communion, but I think more attention to its prophetic character would serve better his important call for a post-colonial pneumatological missiology (300-308). Too often, Hughes argues, the new Trinitarian missiologies tend to move from the *missio Dei* . . . to the *missio Christi* . . . and then to the *missio ecclesiae* . . . in a manner typical of the functional binitarianism of Western theology. . . . Missing in such an account is a serious consideration of the *missio Spiritus* . . . as coming between the *missio Christi* and the *missio ecclesiae*. This is not only an error in Trinitarian thinking but also a lost opportunity to ground a new postcolonial missiology” (303). In a similar way, Kirsteen Kim invites us to learn from those who foster discernment and the distinguishing of the spirits in a post-colonial way that can explore the challenges of inculturation and social outreach in the local church.⁴ But such a post-colonial missiology will require both the Spirit’s gifts of prophetic discernment and a *koinonia* that thrives on diversity.

¹ Radu Bordeianu, “(In)Voluntary Ecumenism: Dumitru Staniloae’s Interaction with the West as Open Sobornicity”

² Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation* (CUA Press, 2009).

³ Louth, Andrew. "The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology of Dumitru Staniloae." *Modern Theology* 13, no. 2 (1997): 253-67; Louth, Andrew. "The Orthodox Dogmatic Theology of Dumitru Staniloae." In *Dumitru Staniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, edited by Lucian Turcescu, 53-70. Iasi, Romania; Palm Beach, FL: Center for Romanian Studies, 2002.

⁴ Kirsteen Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation*, 2007.