

## On Pity and the Origins of Community

By Giles Pickford

*'The point at issue was the value of the non-egotistical instincts, the instincts of compassion, self-denial, and self-sacrifice, which Schopenhauer above all others had consistently gilded, glorified, "transcendentalised" until he came to see them as absolute values allowing him to deny life and even himself. Yet it was these very same instincts which aroused my suspicion, and that suspicion deepened as time went on. It was here, precisely, that I sensed the greatest danger for humanity, its sublimest delusion and temptation — leading to whither? Into nothingness? Here I sensed the beginning of the end, stagnation, nostalgic fatigue, a will turned against life. I began to understand that the constantly spreading ethics of pity, which had tainted and debilitated even the philosophers, was the most sinister symptom of our sinister European civilisation... This preference for and overestimation of pity, among philosophers, is an entirely new development in Western Civilisation. The philosophers of the past deny, to a man, all value to pity. I need only instance Plato, Spinoza, La Rochefoucauld, and Kant, four minds as different from each other as possible yet agreeing in this one regard, the low esteem in which they hold pity.'*  
Genealogy of Morals by Friedrich Nietzsche.

*'At the end of every three years you must take all the tithes of your harvests for that year and deposit them at your doors. Then the Levite (since he has no share or inheritance with you), the stranger, the orphan and the widow who live in your town may come and eat and have all they want. So shall Yahweh your God bless you in all the work your hands undertake'. Deuteronomy 14:28-29*

The conflict inherent in the two quotations above is an old one. It was illustrated last Easter by three events.

- The Pope said that divorced people should not go forward in the Mass to take Communion.
- The Salvation Army appealed for more volunteers, explaining that they had to pay their staff double time over Easter.
- An industry sponsor of worthy causes called on charities to try to think of better ways of giving something of value back to donors.

All three statements demonstrate a failure to appreciate something that was taken for granted everywhere a few years ago. Something that was common knowledge to ordinary people. Something which was like sinews, holding muscle to bone and making sense out of the communal body. What was missing?

Divorced people are sufferers in a good number of cases. A celibate priest may have felt the same pain. St John of the Cross called them 'the aridities', and felt them as the absence of God.

We know that the Son of Man said 'What God has joined together let no man put asunder'. Therefore, taken in isolation from anything else he said, one could almost

agree with the Pope. Except that the lack of pity in the statement leaves it lying stillborn on a marble slab.

But how much more did the Son of Man say which modifies and softens that simple command about marriage? Would he be happy to think that the command had been extrapolated to such an extent that the other fundamental command 'Take, eat, this is my body' must not apply to those who are suffering? Would Jesus have refused communion to any of the sinners that surrounded him on the first Good Friday? Did he not give the Eucharist to Judas Iscariot **after** he had betrayed him?

The Pope's statement is just another obstacle which, along with many others, leaves ordinary people floundering in the slough of uncertainty. Making sense out of things is hard enough, without being made even harder by dogmatic decree.

The Salvation Army has come a long way since Major William Booth declared war on poverty and homelessness. It is now a big business which runs shops, kitchens and job placement agencies. It applies for multi-million dollar government grants, and supports the same Government on moral issues such as drug policy. Its leader heads the Drugs Task Force and opposes taking a more lenient attitude to the sick.

Various agencies ranging from the ACT Government through to Catholic Nuns in King's Cross have tried to come up with a better way to help the sick. Their concern for the souls of terribly troubled people contrasts with the officially triumphal view that evil is the result of an act of choice, made in free will, and that evil must be punished. So the desperate and confused are caught between the massive power of the most lucrative industry in the world, their own irrepressible cravings, and a Government which listens to the argument of hate.

Was the Son of Man a punisher? He certainly took the stick to the powerful: agreed. But his compassion for the powerless was clearly demonstrated. I think that he would have supported the ACT Government and the Catholic Nuns of Kings Cross in the present time. It is astonishing that Major Booth's Army has lost sight of this probability.

But the Army is now a big business which handles millions of dollars and employs thousands, without paying municipal rates, payroll tax, income tax, stamp duty. Real businesses, offering the same products, are forced to compete with the Army on a tilted playing field.

Then along comes Easter, and its handmaiden double time, and the Army feels entitled to call on the righteous to volunteer time and money, scurrying around in a season when recollection and family are the first call on the people. The Army has lost sight of its origins. Being busy and profitable is the purpose of business. The purpose of the Army is compassionate care of the desperate, or it was when Major Booth ran the show.

Giving is a duty on the strong. The Old Testament is quite clear about that. In ancient times of barbaric power, when the strong trampled on the weak in Nietzschean contempt, the Religion of Slaves commanded the strong to give to widows and

orphans. That is the origin of charity, founded by the Children of Israel and outliving Nietzsche's attack.

Like much else, however, charity has been transformed from an act of love into a business transaction.

Unlike the wombat which is hairy-nosed, business people are necessarily hard-nosed. So when community leaders remind business of the commands of the Prophets, business looks for a business-like way of giving.

A tax-deductible receipt is required first of all. Immediately a long list of good causes is deprived of business-like charity, because the tax department has a shortish list of good causes which it recognises.

But a receipt is not enough. Recipients of charity have been asked by sponsors to find more and more effective ways to recompense business for its donation. The old law returns and the weak must pay tribute to the strong. The giver loses sight of the objective and becomes a partial taker.

The end result is a business transaction of great complexity which sucks the warmth and humility out of the act of giving. Once again the strong get stronger and the weak are humiliated. Once again the origins of community are forgotten.

Community, and communion, are living things. The word 'companion' is derived from breaking bread with a friend or stranger. In a barrier reef of tiny lives, each one holds up its neighbour (friend or stranger) so that it can withstand the rage of wind and water that assails it along its mighty length.

How would such a structure survive if each individual polyp decided that its neighbour was a useless, lay-about, evil doing bludger?

- That some polyps should be forbidden to take part in the communion of nutrient-laden tides because of a personal misfortune.
- That some polyps, going through an internal Hell, should find their own way out of trouble: in gaol.
- That some polyps which were going strongly should give some of their strength to the reef, but at the same time feel entitled to claw back part of the gift and thus diminish it.

Such a community of polyps would eventually be called the Risible Reef, because it certainly would not be a barrier against disaster.

How can we change things for the better? I can only say 'go back to origins'. When we lose our way, we need to try to get back to the point where we lost it. When we end up in a cul-de-sac we have to go back to the point where we left the main road. Historians and philosophers conduct the study of origins. They are the people who are best equipped to notice where and how we left the main road and became lost.

Historians and philosophers spend their time thinking and teaching in Faculties of Arts in all our universities. They have a civilising influence which permeates the

whole world, like tea leaves in a billycan. There are fewer and fewer of them, as the headlong rush to applied, technological, busy thoughtlessness continues apace. Commerce and government remain unconvinced, sceptical, and persistently ask what value we derive from the Faculties of Arts?

The demonstrable answer is that we get the examined life, the recollected community, the thoughtful society which preserves the best and discards the worst as it journeys along. Without this quality control, social evolution goes into reverse.

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