HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Acedia: its history and development

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The first in a series of articles on acedia, this article focuses on the history and development of the ancient anchorite malady of acedia, the 'noonday demon' as it was sometimes called. Akēdia, *in Greek, originally suggested 'a lack of care'. Its symptoms were many, including lethargy, boredom, an 'unwillingness' to stay in one place. Over time acedia's meaning changed from 'lack of care' to 'sloth', one of the 'seven deadly sins', to a 'lack of love for God and the things of God', to melancholia, depression and existential boredom and ennui. This survey of acedia forms the basis of forthcoming articles, in which acedia is used as a paradigm for modern pastoral 'dis-ease'.*

ACEDIA • LETHARGY • BOREDOM • DEPRESSION • DEPLETION • PASTORAL RESILIENCE

ISSN 2058-5969

Introduction

In the fourth century, a movement began among Christians, a move away from urbanisation to a life spent in the desert. These were known as anchorites. There is some debate among scholars of this period as to why these godly persons withdrew from society to seek a greater focus on their spirituality in desert places. Some scholars believe that the movement was sparked by the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and the resultant elevation of Christianity from an outlawed religion to the official state religion. Because of its official imperial status and backing, Christianity and its leadership were considered, by some devout believers, to have become less radical, more 'worldly' and in danger of compromising the gospel. In the light of this the so-called anchorites moved out into the desert to practise a 'deeper' spirituality.

Other scholars, such as the Oxford church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, have other views. In his book, *Silence: A Christian History*, MacCulloch posits that the reason for some anchorites moving to the Egyptian deserts was to avoid trenchant imperial taxation![1] Other writers, including Richard Harries, believe that the reason for the anchorite exodus was not to escape conformity and spiritual compromise but to engage in spiritual warfare in the desert places. Harries writes:

> When in the fourth century a number of Christians left the newly Christianized Roman Empire to go into the deserts of Egypt, they did not do so primarily to flee the compromises of a newly fashionable Christianity or to get way from the world. It was because the desert was the front line in the struggle against evil. There, faced with nothing but the desert and the inner life, they discovered that the ordeal was indeed fiery.[2]

Rowan Williams, in his book *A Silent Action*, comments further on this 'demonic engagement in the desert':

> The Church has failed to recognize the devils in the city, and so the monk seeks them out in the desert; the only real reason for the flight to the desert is the impulse to confront the diabolical, the infernal, which threatens all men, be they ever so oblivious of it.[3]

In the desert the Israelites found a place of testing, temptation and challenge. It is well known that the symbolic significance in Hebrew culture of 'forty years'

in the wilderness is that 'forty' is the number that signifies a period of 'testing'. We can see this concept again expressed in terms of Jesus spending 'forty days' in the wilderness. The desert was where Jesus encountered the devil and faced temptation to divert from his God-given identity and purpose (Mt 4:1–11).

The Solace of Fierce Landscapes

Before leaving this discussion of why the anchorites headed for the desert places, we need to add one more line of thought. Belden Lane, in *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, has very pertinent ideas about the 'metaphor' of the desert landscape. Lane sees the desert, in one sense, as a metaphorical place of disorientation, a place of fear and emptiness: 'Emptiness offers answers of its own. Deep speaks to deep.'[4] Also, this sense of the desert being 'the abode' of djinns and spirits makes it an uncanny and supernaturally unsettling, unnerving place. This sense of 'the uncanny' is a theme that is picked up by Heidegger in his concept of 'uncanniness' (*Unheimlichkeit*). He saw in the uncanny moments in life moments when things suddenly seem strange – objects in the world lose their meaning, 'we feel like strangers to ourselves', or human existence itself strikes us as bizarre and unintelligible.[5] So the desert is an unsettling place, a place of extremity. As William James describes, 'extremity' is the necessary, even normative starting point for understanding the strenuous character of the spiritual life.

In his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1997), T. E. Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia') wrote of his years in the Hejaz along the Red Sea (Hebrew: *Yam Suph*). In the naked desert night, he said, 'we were stained by dew, and shamed into pettiness by the innumerable silences of the stars'.[6] Belden Lane says of Lawrence, 'He found in the desert something that cut to the bone, reducing his soul to a thinness he would spend the rest of his life trying to recover.'[7] This place of silence also stands as another metaphor that would undergird the apophatic tradition in the Eastern Church.

Lane believes that twenty-first-century Christians still need 'a desert place'. He writes:

> My fear is that much of what we call 'spirituality' today is overly sanitized and sterile, far removed from the anguish and pain, the anchoredness of place. Without the toughminded discipline of the desert-mountain experience, spirituality loses its bite, its capacity

> to speak prophetically to its culture, its demand for justice. Avoiding pain and confrontation, it makes no demands, assumes no risks.[8]

Mark Craig Barnes makes a parallel point in terms of when our prayer life 'dries up'. Barnes states that the desert is where we should go and remain:

> There simply is no alternative but to remain in the desert places when we are led there, including waiting out the long spells when we are doing nothing but wandering around in the wilderness of our own prayers. There is no easy way out. It always feels as though we are wasting time in the wilderness, that we are heading nowhere and will never be able to leave *but it is there we must stay*.[9]

Spiritual deserts

Brian Kolodiejchuck, in his book about Mother Teresa of Calcutta, speaks about Mother Teresa's *desert period*, which lasted for at least two decades. Mother Teresa experienced 'the absence of God' or the 'hiddenness of God' (*Deus absconditus*) – her prayers seem to go unheard and her pilgrimage became a barren place. Teresa spoke of it as her 'deep loneliness' and 'interior darkness'. However, she was faithful to remaining in 'her wilderness' and saw it as a place of learning through suffering.[10]

Perhaps modern 'spiritual urbanites' have lost the challenging sacred symbolism that desert landscapes can bring. We miss both their 'uncanniness' and their ability to put things back into perspective. In his book *Celtic Sacred Landscapes*, Nigel Pennick writes helpfully on this point: 'As human beings, we are rooted in the earth, but modern civilization obscures the fact to the point where many people appear unaware of it. Much current human behaviour results from the denial of this reality.'[11]

It was in this 'uncanny place' of the fourth-century deserts that the anchorites faced temptation and direct attack by 'the noonday demon', the malign influence which became known as acedia.

Acedia and its linguistic development

We should note from the start that *akēdia* is a word unmistakably Greek in form and always a linguistic foreigner in Latin. As we will see, the transition from Greek to Latin in terms of acedia caused in some cases a radical redefinition of the word.[12]

Marc Cardinal Ouellet writes of the burgeoning early interest in acedia:

> Very early on, the monastic tradition became interested in a strange and complex phenomenon: acedia. Spiritual sloth, sadness, and a *disgust with the things of God, a loss of the meaning of life, despair of attaining salvation: acedia drives the monk to leave his cell and to flee intimacy with God, so as to seek here and there some compensation for the austere way of life to which he felt called by God*.[13] (italics mine)

In the context of a monk wanting to leave his cell, Thomas Merton cites Abbot Antony's advice:

> Just as fish die if they remain on dry land so monks, remaining away from their cells, or dwelling with men of the world, lose their determination to persevere in solitary prayer. Therefore, just as the fish should go back to the sea so we must return to our cells, lest remaining outside we forget to watch ourselves intently.[14]

We first come across the 'noonday demon' in Psalm 91:6 (Hebrew numbering; Psalm 90:6, as it is numbered in the Vulgate of St Jerome). The Hebrew text reads, *mi-ketev yashud tsohorayim*, 'from destruction that despoils at midday'. The Septuagint (LXX) version reads: ἀπὸ πράγματος διαπορευομένου ἐν σκότει ἀπὸ συμπτώματος καὶ δαιμονίου μεσημβρινοῦ, '[you need not fear] the pestilence that walks in the darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday'.

The Vulgate reference to the noonday demon (*daemonium meridianum*) comes from Jerome's translation of the Septuagint into Latin. It is important as we move forward to understand that here Jerome has personified the word *daimonion*. There we find the words: *Non timebis … ab incurs et daimonio meridano*, 'You will not fear … because of the assault ('invasion' and 'incursion') and the noonday demon'.[15]

The Canadian scholar Donald Grayston continues by noting that this element of personification holds true in the Douay translation of 1609, where the Latin translation is literally 'the noonday devil'. On the other hand, the King James Version of 1611 follows the Hebrew text, rendering the verse, 'and the destruction that wasteth at noonday'. This is echoed in the most commonly used contemporary translations, for example the NRSV has 'the destruction that wastes at noonday'. However, particularly through the influence of the Vulgate, 'the noonday demon' has come down to us in personalised form through the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the Christian hermits of Egypt, Syria and Palestine. The fourth-century Christians found that this personalised form of the noonday demon resonated with their ascetical experience.[16]

Acedia and monotonous toil

The anchorites lived a strict spiritual and work regime, coping with the extremes of desert life. Their routine of prayer and work sometimes led to weariness of body, mind and soul. In the *Institutes* by John Cassian (*c*. 360–435), a monk and theologian, we find Cassian speaking about Abba Paul, who like many desert monks wove baskets as he prayed and subsisted on food from his garden and ate a few date palms.[17] Unlike monks who lived closer to cities and could sell their products there, Abba Paul

> could not do any other work to support himself because his dwelling was separated from towns and from habitable land by seven days' journey through the desert … and transportation cost more than he could get from the work he did. He used to collect palm fronds and always exact a day's labour from himself just as if this were his means of support. And when his cave was filled with a whole year's work, he would burn up what he had so carefully toiled over each year.[18]

This monotonous toil must have been mind-numbingly boring at times. As Norris mentions above, the palm-leaf baskets made by monks were collected and burned at the end of the year, and the whole process apparently was repeated ad infinitum. If this was the case, then the anchorite's boredom must have been tinged by the absurd.

This sense of existential boredom and absurdity are major themes of Camus' *La Peste* (The Plague).[19] The novel features a man passing the time counting peas, though he seems to have found some (ironic or perhaps insane) pleasure in it: 'When Rieux entered the room, the old man was sitting up in bed, at his usual occupation, counting out dried peas from one pan to another. On seeing his visitor, he looked up, beaming with delight.' (We might also mention that the apparent meaninglessness of life and mundane activities is expertly explored in Ecclesiastes.)

Rowan Williams, in *Silence and Honey Cakes*, adds to our understanding of acedia when he writes: 'acedia has to do with frustration, helplessness, lack of motivation, the displacement of stresses and difficulties from the inner world to the outer world'.[20] Tomlin, in *The Seven Deadly Sins*, writes: 'sloth (acedia) is essentially a giving up on life, and it leads us to finding no pleasure in life, only dull, steady torpor that expects nothing new, nothing exciting, nothing worth getting out of bed for'. Tomlin goes on to quote Dorothy L. Sayers' words when she writes of sloth (acedia):

> It is not merely idleness of mind and laziness of body: it is that whole poisoning of the will which, beginning with indifference and an attitude of 'I couldn't care less', extends to the deliberate refusal of joy and culminates in morbid introspection and despair.[21]

In his Foreword to a symposium on the seven deadly sins, Ian Fleming writes that acedia is 'a form of spiritual suicide and refusal of joy'. In the same volume, Evelyn Waugh writes, 'besides acedia there is *pigritia*, "plain slackness", which is a deflection from, if not an outrage against, the divine order'. Waugh informs us that as a writer he sometimes experienced what the ancient monks did in terms of how laborious and irksome life and labour can be. Waugh writes that the actual process of writing is laborious and irksome: 'We sit at our desks for, say, two hours and emerge with a thousand deathless words.' Waugh continues with these insights into acedia and the ageing process:

> Medical science has oppressed us with a new huge burden of longevity. It is in that last undesired decade, when passion is cold, appetites feeble, curiosity dulled, and experience has begotten cynicism, that acedia lies in wait as the final temptation to destruction. The last deadly assault of the devil.[22]

It was particularly in the middle of the day (noon) that some monks began literally 'to wilt'. It was in this atmosphere that the noonday demon of acedia was said to operate. In *The Praktikos* by Evagrius Pontus (fourth century) we find an exposition of the dangers associated with the noonday demon of acedia. Evagrius speaks of the devastation caused by this demonic attack:

> [The demon of acedia] made it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Boredom tempts the monk to look constantly out of the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine the lunch hour.

Evagrius soon discovered that this apparently innocuous activity has an alarming effect, 'for having stirred up a restlessness that he is unable to shake, the demon taunts him with the thoughts that his efforts at prayer and contemplation are futile. Life then looms like a prison sentence, day after day of nothingness.'[23] This is prescient of what modern-day pastoral ministry has become for some clergy. Acedia, the noonday demon, seems also to embody fatigue, listlessness and what is later referred to as the deadly sin of 'sloth'. In *The Praktikos*, Evagrius describes the listless monk in terms that might fit some modern clergy in their studies:

> When he reads … [he] yawns plenty and easily falls asleep. He rubs his eyes and stretches his arms. His eyes wander from the book. He stares at the wall and then goes back to his reading for a little. He then wastes his time hanging on the end of words, counts the pages, ascertains how the book is made, finds fault with the writing and the design. Finally, he just shuts it and uses it as a pillow. Then he falls asleep not too deep, because hunger wakes his soul and he begins to concern himself with that.

Acedia as a malevolent force

Looking at the etymology of acedia is helpful at this point. It will help to explain some of the reasoning behind acedia being seen as a malevolent spiritual force. The Greek root of acedia – *a+kēdos* – means 'without care' or 'absence of care'. However, it has proved difficult to find a dynamic equivalent in English. As well as the later Latin form – *acedia* – modern writers tend to leave the term untranslated, or employ the Middle English (via Old French) term *accidie*.

Acedia, then, is about 'lacking care', 'lacking passion' and 'lacking attentiveness'. However, what makes acedia not just a psychological issue but also a metaphysical one is its focus. What made this so much more shocking for Evagrius and others was that this sloth, this weariness, this listless apathy, was being expressed by Christian monks concerning their relationship with God and things of God. Surely to be bored with God and God's work must be demonic in origin. At this stage in history, there was religious, philosophical and theological commitment to belief in the demonic.

Grayston writes of this belief in demons:

> A belief in demons, differently understood at different times, had been part of Greek culture since Plato. Their existence was an accepted aspect of human experience, and was confirmed for the monks by their presence in the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. Once in the desert, the monks found that as external distractions diminished, interior distractions, the work of the demons, increased, 'and they began to study their thoughts as they arose, noting which were life-giving and which destructive' – that is, which ones come from the demons (the passionate thoughts, the logismoi) and which ones from God.[24]

All *logismoi*, according to Evagrius, have essentially a twofold origin which corresponds to the twofold nature of a human being, corporeal and spiritual. They come from two impassioned faculties of the soul – first, the *concupiscible* (the appetite by which we sense attraction to what appears to be a good – even if it is not); second, the *irascible*, 'aversion to evil, even if it is not evil'. Again, Nault states that the concupiscible and the irascible elements of human nature arise and darken the third faculty, the intellect, the principal function of which is to know God. But acedia holds a very special place among these psychical elements, because it arises from all the faculties at once and hence its terrible character. It is found at the intersection of two series of vices: one that comes from below (corporeal passions) and the other from above (spiritual passions). Acedia affects the body and soul simultaneously. It takes advantage of the body and so affects the soul. Gabriel Bunge, in his book *Despondency: The Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius Ponticus on Acedia*, writes:

> In the life of the soul, acedia thus represents a type of dead end. A distaste for all that is available combined with a diffuse longing for

> what is not available paralyses the natural functions of the soul to a degree that no single one of any other of the (positive) thoughts can gain the upper hand.[25]

One can see here echoes of what today we may well call 'depression', where ruminating on dark thoughts can lead to mental illness. Nault notes that acedia, 'like an obscure malady, plunges the heart of the person that if afflicts into the gray fog of weariness and the night of despair'.[26] Evagrius' advice to those experiencing such an attack was to 'stay in one's cell' (ie, the monk's room), that is, to 'stand firm' (see Eph 6:11) and to meditate, particularly on Scripture. The Psalms, anything from the Gospels, and the very name of Jesus, formed the staples of the monastic armoury.

Acedia and sloth

Moving from Evagrius to John Cassian, we see a shift in the perception of acedia. It appears to move from being an attack made by demons to a specific sin committed by the individual and that tinged with laziness, hence his designation of a*cedia* as 'sloth'. In Book 10 of the *Institutes*, Cassian notes that acedia is chief among the capital vices. He describes acedia in terms of 'weariness of heart', 'anxiety', akin to sadness. The sin of acedia is in 'ingratitude' about one's position and location. Acedia, according to Cassian, 'makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell (room) … disdainful of his brothers who live with him … being careless and unspiritual'. The monk experiencing acedia is bored, listless, lacking in love for God and humanity. Cassian's interpretation of acedia can be viewed as developmental change in the understanding of the term. While Evagrius spoke of eight *logismoi*, John Cassian speaks of eight daughters of acedia or sloth. As noted earlier, Cassian is at the origins of the transformation of acedia into sloth. This view greatly influenced the thinking and writing of St Benedict. The 'eight daughters of acedia/sloth' (Cassian's eight principal vices, or *vitia principala*) are: laziness, sleeplessness, peevishness, restlessness, vagrancy, instability of mind, garrulousness and curiosity .

The next stage of the transformation of the term can be seen in the work of Gregory the Great (540–604). We owe Gregory for the revised list of deadly sins, reducing the list from eight to seven by folding 'sadness' into acedia. Aquinas (1225–74) aligns himself with the Gregorian tradition by considering acedia to be a form of sadness, but a specific sadness about God. Aquinas, we should

note, translates acedia, some say unhelpfully, also as sloth. (NB: It is likely that Aquinas was not strong linguistically in terms of reading the Greek of Evagrius.) However, his views were massively influential even into our own time – not least through his taxonomy of the seven deadly sins. What is more important here for our argument is that Aquinas saw the sin of sloth as 'sadness, a lack of love for God and for the things of God'. Aquinas analyses acedia/sloth under two headings: 'Sadness about spiritual good (*tristia de bono divino*)' and 'Disgust with activity (*tedium operandi*)'.

Sadness about spiritual good

For Aquinas, acedia seems to reverse our spiritual and perhaps our intellectual polarity. When we are in the grip of this malady, we experience a kind of sadness when faced with spiritual good. The spiritual good seems to us to be evil. This results in a severe depletion of joy. It is a sin against the *gaudium de caritate* – at core it is the sadness of having to give something up for God (see the response to giving up his wealth by the rich young man in Mark 10:17–27). Aquinas seems to consider that 'acedia causes sadness, a negative reaction to what ought to be our greatest happiness, participation in the life of God'.[27]

Disgust with activity

According to Aquinas, acedia causes spiritual paralysis, stopping us from being fully participative in the divine life. This, for Aquinas, is not now simple sadness, but a kind of sluggishness, a reticence that prevents action. Acedia, then, is a sin against charity and charitable action. Aquinas also names joy as the first three effects (or 'fruits') of charity. Acedia, as 'a kind (species) of sorrow' is a vice opposing this joy (in activity). Rather than being lifted up by joy at its union with God, the person afflicted with acedia is oppressed or weighed down; as one's own, the divine good (and good actions) is seen, rather, as an unwelcome burden. For Aquinas, acedia can cut a person off from God as the very heart of his or her activity. Dave MacQuarrie, in his book *The Darkness Within*, picks up this theme of acedia militating against activity. He writes: 'I propose that the behavioral outcomes of acedia lead to a loss of community, an intolerance of diversity, an avoidance of authentic exploration of inner experience, and an *unwillingness to do the work necessary for effective change*.'[28]

Aquinas views acedia as 'a kind of spiritual torpor accompanied or even causing physical weariness'. It seems that those who spend much time handling sacred things can become detached and blasé about things of God. This can amount to a 'trivialization of God'.[29]

We can also see Aquinas' influence in Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy*. In the central volume, *Purgatory*, Dante reflects on acedia on three occasions. Dante sees acedia as indolence. He writes: 'Here the slackened oar is pulled with greater force' (XVII:82–87). Like Aquinas, Dante considers that acedia results from insufficient or improper desire to attain the good.[30]

The theme of acedia is picked up in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400). In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Parson's Tale features a discussion of acedia, or *accidie*. 'Accidie', says the Parson, will make us 'sad, anxious and angry'. The cure for *accidie* is *fortitudo* (fortitude) – the cardinal virtue of strength, magnanimity and courage. With *fortitudo* must be joined the theological virtues of faith, love and hope; and with their exercise will sinners find acedia departing from them.[31]

Acedia and melancholia

In later centuries acedia morphs again, this time from metaphysics and sin to a medical condition. Acedia now becomes melancholia. Melancholia traces back to Greek *melan* ('black', 'dark') and *cholē* ('bile'). Medical practitioners once adhered to the system of humours, bodily fluids that included black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm. An imbalance of these humours was thought to lead to disorders of the mind and body. One suffering from an excess of black bile (believed to be secreted by the kidneys or spleen) could become sullen and unsociable, liable to anger, irritability, brooding and depression.[32]

Robert Burton, who himself was a depressive, wrote a seventeenth-century epic tome, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, on this disorder.[33] It was Burton's life work and is still consulted today. The modern writer Andrew Solomon, who also experienced a debilitating episode of depression, points out that in later centuries, notably in the Renaissance, the term melancholia was used to refer to what we now call depression.[34] Also, that it was given an Augustinian interpretation, meaning that, 'the melancholiac's despair suggested that he was not suffused with joy and the certain knowledge of God's divine love and mercy'. By the time of the Inquisition, which began with the Dominicans in the thirteenth century, some depressives could even be fined or imprisoned for their malady. This may well have been the case; however, we should not lose sight of the steady separation of acedia from a metaphysical state to a medicalised malady.

Acedia and depression

Solomon notes that '*acedia* seems to have been almost as widely used as depression is today … sharing as it does many of the same symptoms'. Though, we should note here that there was always the 'shadow of sin' hanging over this condition. People felt, and were often made to feel, guilty about their melancholy. In some ways, it was an illness with 'guilt' attached. Solomon is insightful when he writes that it is from these primitive understandings of acedia, and to some extent melancholy, that 'the stigma still attached to depression today has grown'.[35]

In the early part of the nineteenth century we saw the birth of a discipline known as psychoanalysis. Acedia again had its shadowy presence in this embryonic approach to understanding the human psyche. The process of the secularisation of our understanding of the psyche, particularly through the work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Solomon asserts, moved society away from dependence on religious categories regarding depression, but without shedding the stigma of imperfection (if not sinfulness) and shame that was the legacy of the medieval Church.

Acedia has moved, then, from being a demonic attack in the fourth century to being a secular psychological condition in the twentieth century. Moreover, with the work of Samuel Beckett, Sartre, Camus and Heidegger, in the twentieth century, acedia now appears as ennui, nausea, nihilism and existential boredom. Samuel Beckett, in a conversation with Harold Pinter, expresses the essence of acedia and twentieth-century 'formlessness' and nihilism in this way:

> If you must insist on finding form, I'll describe it for you. I was in hospital once. There was a man in another ward dying of throat cancer. In the silence, I could hear his screams continually. That's the only kind of form my work has.[36]

One suspects that the fear of this nameless horror, this impotence in the face of 'the nothingness of life', is expressed in the last words of Kurtz in Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*: 'The horror! The Horror!'[37] Harries, in his book *The Beauty and the Horror*, suggests that it is not surprising that Konrad's words were referred to by T. S. Eliot in the epigraph to his poem 'The Hollow Men', a poem written at a time when his personal life was bleak but that also reflected the breakdown of spirit and the sense of *total meaninglessness* felt in the aftermath of the First World War.[38]

In terms of another genre of art, this nameless horror, meaninglessness, nihilism and existential boredom is powerfully depicted in Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. Again, Harries comments that this 'became one of the iconic images of the twentieth century, with its portrayal of a person on a bridge whose scream seems to fill the whole universe'. The psychologist Eric Fromm also notes that part of our difficulty is our 'self-awareness', leading to a sense of isolation in the cosmos. He writes: 'Human self-awareness has made man a stranger in the world, separate lonely and frightened.'[39] Elsewhere Fromm speaks of what he calls, 'moral aloneness'.[40]

Acedia and boredom

In his novel *Identity*, Milan Kundera has the main character Jean-Marc rehearsing his 'old theory'. According to him, there are three types of boredom: passive boredom – the girl dancing and yawning; active boredom – kite-lovers; and rebellious boredom – young people burning cars and smashing windows.[41] Here Kundera is seeking to summarise modern views. However, boredom is more sophisticated and textured than Kundera states. Peter Toohey, in *Boredom: A Lively History*, argues that boredom is a complex 'grab bag' term covering emotions such as frustration, surfeit, depression, disgust, indifference, apathy and that feeling of being trapped or confined.[42]

There are two types of boredom. The first results from predictable circumstances that are very hard to escape – so-called *reactive boredom*. As Reposa notes, 'for the bored person, time seems to stand still'.[43] On the other hand, time almost ceases when, as Mihaly Csikszentmihaly writes, 'you're in the flow'. Toohey also notes that one of the reasons we moderns love extreme sports is our natural aversion to boredom. This presents both a positive and negative reflection on how some deal with boredom. While adrenalin-enriched activities can help some deal with 'the blahs', others turn to drugs, alcohol and sexual dalliances. We will look at the link between acedia and sexual misconduct among clergy later.

The second type of boredom is what Toohey calls '*complex boredom or super boredom*'. This is more akin to elements of acedia and links into Sartre's concepts of ennui in his work *Nausea*.[44] R. J. Snell sees acedia in modern garb as an insatiable desire to be free. He suggests that, for modern people, 'freedom has become an idol'.[45] Snell writes that 'freedom' has become flattened and unhooked from reality. 'Our lives', he notes, 'are arbitrary and insignificant.' There

is about our modern society 'an instance bearing no weight'. (See in this regard Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.[46]) Snell continues: 'This weightlessness, this unbearable lightness of being, results in the torpor of meaninglessness, the spiritually enervating results of a life not worth living.'[47] For Snell, acedia seems to capture with aptness the spiritual conditions of our own age. Acedia has become a cultural reality, nestled deep in the roots of our ways of acting and living; sloth (acedia) seeps into our loves and lives in virtually every domain, before finally transforming itself into boredom and nihilism.[48] Acedia, in its modern manifestation, seems to result in a 'disgust at being'.

Charles Taylor, in his book *A Secular Age*, describes this '*acedia* infected modern' world well as 'a terrible flatness in everyday life, the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary'.[49] Taylor writes in *The Ethics of Authenticity*: 'There is a sense that our freedom came at a cost, namely the loss of a higher purpose, of anything worth living for, and so the only remainder is a "centering self".' He continues: 'And since the world is devoid of "thick meaning", the world itself loses depth, sinking to the level of mere resource for our use and abuse in pursuit of our own, rather shallow comfort.'[50]

In his remarkable book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera's character Tomas wants to be light and free as he hunts for some difference to distract him from the boredom of it all. Tomas represents the modern sufferer from acedia – unsure whether to choose weight or lightness.

Remedies for acedia

Nault gives five traditional remedies for acedia:

1 *Tears*. These are an external manifestation of the need for salvation. Water will melt the stony heart. 'Tears will make a notch so that mercy might pour in the gap.' Evagrius states that 'Sadness is burdensome and acedia is irresistible, but tears shed before God are stronger than both.'[51]

2 *Prayer and work*. Work with your hands (exercise) will overcome the demon of acedia. It helps to deal with sloth (laziness) and listlessness. Evagrius in his eight thoughts said perseverance (resilience) is the cure for acedia.

3 *The antirrhetic method or contradiction*. Jesus used this approach in the desert to counteract the attacks of Satan. It is about 'talking back' – replying to the temptation with a verse of Scripture. Benedict later

adopted this approach in his Rule: 'when evil thoughts come into one's heart, [we are to] dash them against Christ immediately'. John Cassian also developed this principle in his tenth *Conference.* Linked into this use of Scripture to repel the demon of acedia, the Desert Fathers, particularly in the Eastern tradition, developed the so-called 'Jesus Prayer': 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner.'

4 *Meditation on death*. In his Rule, Benedict recommends as one of the instruments of good works 'to keep death daily before one's eyes'. There is nothing morbid about this – it reminds us of our finitude. It stands to reason as a simple element of vigilance.[52] For Benedict, the first degree of humility is to live in the presence of God. Recognising finitude helps us not to fight to hold on to ourselves (the sin of *philautia*, self-love). Evagrius regards 'self-love' as the root of all sins.

5 *Perseverance (resilience)*. The essential remedy for acedia is ὑπομονή (*hypomene*) perseverance. This is a very active thing that increases faith. Benedict said, 'The handrail is fidelity to one's everyday routine – the fidelity to rule one's life.'

All five remedies are bound together with prayer. This is not Stoicism per se, but rather 'long patience in God's sight' (echoes of Nietzsche's 'a long obedience in the same direction').

Snell suggests other ways to deal with the malignity of acedia, some of which we will revisit later. He suggests that those suffering with acedia might:

- *start seeing boredom as a heresy*. Despite Nietzsche stating that 'Against boredom even the gods struggle in vain', Snell sees boredom as heresy, because it declares that God was wrong when he saw goodness in the world. God 'looks the world into loveliness' and the bored think God's vision is impaired. G. K. Chesterton says that to be 'a Christian means a person who believes that deity or sanctity has attached to matter or entered the world of senses'.

- *start loving the world passionately*. Instead of despising the world, we are to love it passionately – amateurishly – into grace. For like Chesterton says of Aquinas, it was 'that positive position of our minds, which are filled and soaked as with sunshine, the warmth and wonder of created things'. It is as Gerard Manley Hopkins says in 'As kingfishers catch fire', the sheer 'thingness of things'.

- *start engaging with glory*. The Hebrew for glory, *kabod*, also carries with it the sense of 'weight' or 'heaviness'. God's glory and the glory of creation imply a weight immanently present at the core of things. This is reminiscent of Hopkins' poem, 'God's grandeur': 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.' We humans can share in this 'weightiness', this glorious 'heaviness' of meaning too. Ruth Burrows argues, 'God is not glorified by half-persons.'[53] Simply by living 'whole-lives', 'full lives' can we bring glory to God. The second-century theologian St Irenaeus put it well: *Gloria Dei vivens homo* – 'The glory of God is the person fully alive.'

- *start approaching the world with wonder*. Because of the exponential rise in technology,[54] the society we live in has tended to some extent to become 'dis-enchanted'. As T. S. Eliot stated, 'the nymphs are departed'. Snell helpfully writes, 'the glory and weight (*Kabod*) of the disenchanted world is hard to see given "the gradual bleaching out" of the sense that things possess integrity and … have been "loved into being"'.[55] We perhaps lack the antennae to pick up the intrinsic signals of the wonder of 'being'. Gerard Hughes, in *Cry of Wonder*, writes that technology, while bringing so many advantages to us humans, does have a dark side. These wonderful gifts of technology 'can blind our long-distance vision; we become so overloaded with information, so preoccupied with the complex details of life, that we no longer have the energy, or the inclination, to consider wider questions about the meaning and the wonder of it all'.[56]

The magnetic qualities of wonder can help draw us away from acedia. Snell notes that we tend to become fixated with 'objects'. 'Moderns', he writes, are those 'who reduce things to mere objects with extension. Flattening and thinning things to matter in space, objects … stripped of their glory.' Snell continues this idea that modern humans are missing wonder by 'objectifying' life, by commodification – making life a thing, a resource. He states that 'objects please us according to our objective taste – the world has become a mere resource, what Heidegger called "standing-reserve"'. Life's interiority is denied, its splendid formula dimmed and there is no *Kabod* or 'freshness deep down' – nature is 'mute'.[57]

For society, for Christians and for clergy, 'wonder' can act as an effective antidote to acedia. Sometimes this wonder can be seen in the ordinary things of life. The Oxford academic and novelist Iris Murdoch found that on one occasion when she was distracted and anxious, simply looking at a bird in her

garden brought about the peace she longed for.[58] Wonder, apparently, can be found in the quotidian. In the following articles in this series, we move forward using acedia as a paradigm for everything that is likely to deplete clergy resilience.

Notes

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