

**Conference: Beyond the Brain VII: Contemplation in Action**  
**- a still point in the turning world**  
**Bath Spa University 24 - 26 August 2007**

Report by Dr. Julian Candy

It need not surprise that a conference whose topic was contemplation should be so full of music. As Bishop Kallistos reminded us it is through music that we may reach out in contemplation beyond the reasoning brain to the level of the intuitive intellect, the nous that lies within the heart; and David Lorimer cited as did many other speakers T S Eliot: 'music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts.'

Following custom, on the first evening our Chairman of Council, **John Clarke**, welcomed us to the conference, including in his remarks a gracious tribute to his predecessor Bart van der Lugt, members of whose family were in the audience. **Andrew Powell**, as founder chair of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and associate sponsor of the conference added his welcome and thanks.

Again following tradition, **David Lorimer** gave the opening presentation, entitling his remarks *Being and Doing*. He expanded this theme into a set of contrasted pairs, amongst them finite and infinite, surface and depth, ego and soul, outer and inner, receiving and giving, noise and silence, fast and slow. He pointed out that our Western culture is unbalanced toward doing rather than being, so we as individuals are challenged to strive continually to strike a better balance for ourselves. To do that and to discover meaning in life we must acknowledge the infinite. Jacob Needleman points out in his *Time and the Soul* that the frequently heard claim of 'time poverty' can be met by the recognition that 'right away is the opposite of now'. Our consciousness can itself become the bridge between the physical and the transcendent, the many and the one, the finite and the infinite. David concluded that the prospect for a new renaissance within our culture depends on the recognition and active living of these truths. Finally we listened to (the silences in particular, David asked) Rosalind Tureck playing the C sharp minor fugue from the first book of Bach's Well Tempered Clavier.

The next morning began auspiciously. **Dr Carol Lee Flinders** spoke calmly and movingly to the intriguing title '*We Piece Alone, We Quilt Together*'. She built on a quotation from Gandhi concerning mystical union that runs in part: 'as soon as we become one with the ocean in the shape of God there is no more rest for us: our very sleep is action for we sleep with the thought of God in our hearts'. She commented that 'the lives of the great mystics display that... deeply human oscillation between solitude and company, between the poles of deep interiority and rich active human connection... The call back into community is of necessity always a call to action as well.' She went on to develop the theme that mystical experience, though on a continuum with the everyday, at the far end of the spectrum 'drops through a trap door' into another realm of reality. What, she asked,

following anthropologist Donald Johansen, might be the evolutionary advantage of the mystical experience within primitive societies? She drew on two case studies, of St Catherine of Genoa and of Etti Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz, to illustrate the remarkable process of transformation, of mystical unfolding, which can unsought transmute ordinary human affection and love into something impersonal yet universal: into a human being living in the light without night, a person through which torrents from the ocean of mercy may flow. Both these two began as grounded, very human, indeed earthy characters: Catherine who ran a hospital for plague victims, and Etti who claimed with pride in her diary that she was 'good in bed'. Significantly Dr Lee Flinders noted that scientists, the following speaker Dr Newberg among them, are more and more discovering that each of us, apparently so separate, is *at the level of brain functioning* intimately connected with and interpenetrated by the rest of us. Perhaps the mystic is able to pass over the threshold into an awareness of the oneness of all things. 'God did not create the world, but He became the world.' And perhaps mysticism can best be seen as an emergent quality within human societies, called forth in times of crisis to enable us to perceive what unites us.

After coffee **Dr Andrew Newberg** began by characterising the brain as an organ for generating beliefs, a view most psychologists would endorse, though they might speak of 'elaborating hypotheses'. He laid out for us in lucid and entertaining fashion much of the current research that is teasing out the correlations between religious and mystical experiences and brain activity. This rapidly growing field, important and interesting though it be, cannot of course tell us whether the correlations it uncovers reflect a causal relationship, and he was careful not to suggest that it does. Whatever we may believe, this sort of research will never tell us whether or not the mind lies within or beyond the brain. A lively dialogue between the speakers with some audience participation concluded the morning.

A bishop in the Orthodox Church may be expected to inhabit a certain imposing presence, and in this **Timothy Ware, Bishop Kallistos of Diokleala**, fully lived up to his billing. However, we soon appreciated that gravitas was to be leavened by wit, itself enhanced by exceptionally clear and emphatic diction. Indeed, his enjoyable presentation demonstrated a deep humanity and a sensitive awareness of the links between mystical experience and everyday life. He pointed out that the silence of contemplation provides an opportunity for active listening, and that right contemplation does not isolate or separate but rather provides the inspiration for and impetus to right action. He explained that the eastern Christian tradition emphasises that the Divine is not only completely different, mysterious, transcendent; but equally is 'nearer than the jugular vein', immanent. The heart represents the central point where we may encounter the Divine in both these aspects, and only with the heart can we see rightly. It is the place of insight, of the nous, of simple cognition, of the spiritual intellect. Contemplation is an activity of the nous within the heart. How then do we enter the heart? Music is one way, and the invocation of the holy name, in particular through the Jesus prayer, is another. In the fixed mode of using this prayer we are led through simple repetition into silence, a contemplative but active silence that enables listening: 'Be still and know that I am God.' This is not a selfish activity since it leads to the loss of

the narrow self and the finding of the greater self in the other: acquire inner peace and thousands around you will find salvation; understand through the stillness, act out of the stillness, conquer in the stillness.

After tea came a profoundly moving and memorable musical experience. A fifteen minute walk across fields, and we filled the church in the village of Newton St. Loe. **Professor Paul Robertson** took a few minutes to introduce the work, setting it in the context of a tragic period in Bach's life, and then played his D minor Partita for solo violin, which includes the incredibly inventive and dauntingly difficult Chaconne. Commonly I find that after initial attention to a musical performance my 'monkey mind' wanders and has to be brought back to its focus -- very much as in the early stages of meditation. On this occasion I discovered after a few minutes that the music was not to be evaded; it compelled my attention and drew me inexorably and notwithstanding tragic aspects of its message joyfully into its universe. A living example of 'music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts'. This truly uplifting performance was for many of us the high point of the conference.

More music after supper, in its way equally compelling and this time garnished with words. **Sir John Tavener** was interviewed by Paul Robertson. Although carefully prepared, the outcome was remarkably spontaneous and frank. We began with a stunning extract from his recent work *The Beautiful Names*, and ended with the opening section of *Lalishri*, a piece at that time not yet publicly performed based on Hindu themes and composed for young violinist Nicola Benedetti. Paul's sensitive questioning provoked bold replies. We learnt that for Sir John it is when he is creating music that he knows God exists, and that although at one time preoccupied with the process of dying he has come to recognize that 'the true state of man is bliss.' He spoke of his encounter with the feminine, and with two women in particular, and he agreed with Paul that one of the major and damaging taboos of our time prevents proper discussion of the relationship of the erotic to creativity. He described his dislike of the concert hall and of the rituals surrounding concert performances; for him music that aspires to be sacred deserves to be performed in a sacred space, as indeed Bach's Partita had been a few hours before. The audience responded warmly to this courageous and revealing interview, a fitting end to a remarkable day.

The two presentations on the last morning were strikingly contrasted, and in some ways a reflection of the polarity between feminine and masculine energy. **Dr Camille Adams Helminski** spoke gently and movingly about women and Sufism. She introduced us afresh to the Koran and to the Prophet, freeing us from the distortions so often promulgated by fanatics, whether adherents or opponents. She sang, she danced, and illustrated her theme with stories of holy women. Unlike some presenters, she constantly returned explicitly to the theme of the conference: her description of a novice's introduction to the kitchen as a place where right contemplation may lead to right action reminded me of Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God*, another beautiful illustration from a different tradition of contemplation in action. She spoke of breath, of sound, and in response to a question endorsed the insight that shared experience of contemplation can provide a bridge between people from different traditions, a bridge part of a movement

she termed 'interspirituality' rather than 'interfaith'. As indeed with music, which plays a major role in Sufi practices; it speaks directly to the soul in a way words cannot. Other questions concerned the part Islamic Sufism might, or should, play in countering extremism and its persistent projective 'misunderstandings' that are so dangerous because they are fuelled from the shadow. How do we deal with the suicide bomber and his kin within all of us? She gave encouraging examples of women in particular coming together to disperse enmity and spread compassion, but here is the supreme test for contemplation in action: uplifting talks are not enough.

**Professor Les Lancaster's** presentation centred on Jewish mysticism and a text from the Kabbalah. In a way characteristic of masculine energy, he spoke of structures, of schemata, of meaning and the interpretation of texts, of man as partner in the process of creation. In particular he illustrated correspondences between different aspects of reality, of the Divine. What he asked lies 'beyond the brain'? 'Another brain - indeed according to the text two more brains.' The existence of correspondences paves the way to an enlarged epistemology of science, one which would, for example, incorporate both recent evidence that consciousness is formed of discrete 'micro-moments' with Buddhist descriptions of separate but endlessly successive moments of consciousness - thus contributing to a marriage of science and mysticism. He cited William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* as an early example of this approach. His clear and interesting talk was well placed as the last formal presentation of the conference, grounding and framing it in well-informed and forward-looking task orientated speculation.

A conference such as this is made up of much more than formal presentations. One important and indispensable participant has not yet been mentioned: the audience. As one of its number at all seven occasions, I was impressed this time with the quality of audience response, and by the sensitive often penetrating questions and comments coming from the floor. Moreover, all speakers kept to their time, which enabled the balance between speaker presentation and audience participation to be properly struck.

We enjoyed good weather and good food. The beautiful natural site, a campus of Bath Spa University, was marred by some ugly buildings, though the immediate surroundings of the University Theatre were pleasant enough, fostering those informal yet sometimes profound and enhancing encounters with new friends and old so characteristic of this series of conferences.

All of us appreciated the relevance and challenge of our theme for our time. The world and its condition require action, right action. Can contemplation, and more widely spiritual values, lead from recognition of the best response to a crisis or a persisting imbalance through to effective action? Sometimes it may seem that we make no progress and that contemplation and spiritual values are as impotent and irrelevant as conventional 20<sup>th</sup> century science would have us believe. Surprisingly perhaps an identifiable Buddhist voice was lacking at our conference. Here then is one such, writing in today's newspaper. 'Pictures of the Saigon monk in 1963 meditating as flames devoured him first troubled America's conscience about the war.' He goes on to say, '... the history of the modern world furnishes many examples of political victories achieved through moral persuasion and spiritual strength:

national self-determination in colonised countries, the Civil Rights movement in the US, the Velvet Revolution in Russia and Eastern Europe, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the gradual spread of parliamentary democracy around the world.' (Pankaj Mishra, the Guardian, 1 October 2007) And none of us who attended this conference will need the terrible example of the Saigon monk to recognize that it is contemplation that can provide the source from which flows spiritual strength.

So, contemplation is not irrelevant or self-indulgent but central and essential. To contemplate the Names of God through the music of Tavener, or of Bach, is to learn that lesson directly rather than through the inevitably darkened glass of words, however inspired. This excellent conference gave us both.

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