

## Tablet - February 2011



At dinner I sat next to the French philosopher with whom I was sharing the platform for the weekend and found to my relief that he was earthier than I had imagined. He loved his food and washed it down with plenty of red wine even just before he was to give a talk. He listened attentively, laughed heartily at the good jokes, enjoyed his freedom of spirit and was comfortable with his own eccentricities.

On religious issues Bertrand Vergely has become a national voice in his country confidently confronting the prevailing reductionism and the more superficial reasons for rejecting religion. He is a great ally in the cause of good religion and authentic spirituality and is a man of depth and mission. His series on the great philosophers sells in large numbers. Orthodox faith and spirituality empower him to seek new language for the ancient truths.

‘Le Chemin de la Pensee’ (The Way of Thought) was the theme for our French national conference weekend. I can’t think of another national community in the Christian Meditation world who would have chosen that. Meditators come with all sorts of leanings, activist, artistic, intellectual and managerial; but they all agree that the art of meditation, according to the 4th century desert father Evagrius, consists in the ‘laying aside of thoughts’; or as John Cassian, one of his students, put it ‘renouncing all the riches of thought and imagination’. But wanting to think of what it means over a weekend is rare.

We live so much in our heads, we easily think of thought as our highest capacity. We admire clear thinking, creative thinking and, in the Anglo-Saxon world especially, practical thinking. So, this thought-free approach to prayer presents a conundrum: a challenge to the intellect’s supremacy that we more readily dismiss or evade than try to understand. Secular approaches to meditation teach much the same but because they emphasise the practical benefits like lowering cholesterol and improving sleep patterns this bold statement about the essential nature of prayer – which touches too on the essential nature of religion – is not addressed.

It takes a French philosopher to think with muscular intellectuality about why prayer takes us beyond thought. Because it is a subtle issue it benefits from a sensual and bodily approach. That way we don’t get lost in ideas but the ideas can become charges that jump from the

processing mind, down the cerebral cortex and which around the neurological system with the thrill of understanding and a sense of breakthrough as a truth felt.

The audience, remember, were mostly French ? and so they liked ideas for their own sake. For them, to be engaged in a brisk intellectual endeavour was entertaining and enjoyable. They admired the excellence of a good mind generating and transmitting fresh batches of rationally organized insights. But they were not philosophers. Interestingly, what united us all was a commitment to a daily practice of silence, the silence of the mind when it looks beyond its own mental and emotional operations. Just seeing, not looking at anything.

As the token Anglo-Saxon-Celt I played my role in this performance with the admiration the English feel towards their ancestral foes. Some federalists are now asking how realistic is the dream of a European political union. The British, claiming to be at the heart of Europe, look on knowingly from the sidelines again. (?Fog in Channel. Europe Isolated?.) As the Euro stumbles, the old tribalism is fuelled by the ineradicable differences of temperament and taste that divide and unite these closest of neighbours. When we are not having to be politically correct, or asking the richer cousins for a few billion to tide us over, Europeans enjoy celebrating these differences in jokes about each other, comic caricatures and satirical stereotypes. This is how we deal with diversity among those we are so alike. But perhaps it is a new mystical theology that Europe now needs.

Read the Fathers of the Church or the Philokalia or Rahner and it is obvious that our need to understand the mystery that lies beyond understanding is irrepressible. Attempting to do so is one of the pleasures of life, along with music and art, food and wine. There is an intellectual appetite in the spiritual life which, in different degrees for different types, needs to be encouraged and satisfied. Good education and unfrightened theologians are necessary for this to happen.

When theology and prayer became separated a split in the Christian mind occurred that distances us from the Mind of Christ and so from the old vibrant European Christianity. If religion is scared to think it becomes as damaging to society as when it forgets that it must also, at times, lay thoughts aside. (As Vergely and the French meditators agreed there are thoughts but beyond them - is Thought itself.)



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*The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which Laurence Freeman OSB is director, has recently opened a new outreach program ? ?Meditatio? ([www.wccmmeditatio.org](http://www.wccmmeditatio.org))*

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