Liberation Theology and the Bearers of Dangerous Memory

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Liberation theologians, from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and even from North America and Europe, are actively engaged in responding to massive human rights violations in countries where revolution has either been a success or a tragic failure. The inspiration for this commitment is the Church's 'Option for the poor', originating in the historic Conferences of the Latin American Bishops at Medellin and Pueblo. But twenty years on, in a changed global context, there is a need for Liberation Theology to develop more than a praxis-oriented focus: there needs to be a further development of that epistemic shift on which Liberation Theology was originally constructed, as well as a new sensitivity as to how knowledge itself is attained. This new sensibility must extend to those who have withstood and suffered the violation of human rights, and include reflection on who has the right to know, and the de-humanisation process on both individual and communal levels. I will briefly explain what I mean by this epistemic shift before exploring the whole notion of 'dangerous memory' and its bearers.

I consider this to be a theo-political task: theology has always been concerned perhaps over possessively with the location of truth and its formulations. But since the work of Michel Foucault, philosopher and social historian, and his call for the 'insurrection of the subjugated knowledges', it is no longer possible to ignore the power factor in theological expressions. The call to listen to oppressed peoples as the 'bearers of theological truth' must be woven into the struggle against the dominant ideology. By proposing to recover and empower 'dangerous memory' as three distinct tasks — de-constructive, re-constructive and prospective — theology aims to recover, slowly and painfully, the past which has been suppressed by the oppressor, specifically as a tool to build hope in a liberated future.

Epistemology from the Broken Body

There is now an increasing acceptance of the need to challenge the

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rationalist paradigm of knowing which was inherited from the Enlightenment.[1] Whatever else this may have achieved, in particular, the movement towards the Declaration of Human Rights (which at the time did not mean including women, slaves and black people), it firmly located knowledge as issuing from those in power, deriving from a standard of knowledge defined by themselves, not from the 'lived' experience of anyone else. Foucault shows how intimately truth is linked with this standard of knowledge:

> 'Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has a régime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each one is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true'.[2]

But if one resists a standardization of knowledge by those who hold the key power positions — government, media, World Bank, multi-nationals — and privileges instead the knowledge emerging from the underside of history, what is the kind of epistemic shift which is necessitated?

First, the call for 'the insurrection of the subjugated knowledges' means the uncovering of the histories of subjugation, conflict and domination, lost or buried in an all-encompassing theoretical framework. As Foucault writes, these are often considered to be 'naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity'.[3] And, secondly, if the western form of the 'will to know' is correlated intrinsically with élitism and oppression, what alternative starting point could there be for attaining knowledge?

Here we should listen to the voice of the Korean Liberation theologian Chung Hyun Kyung. In her book *Struggle to be the Sun Again*[4] she declares that Asian women do theology from 'an epistemology of the broken body'. That is, any process of coming to know is grounded in the existential reality that Asian women experience, which is that violence, humiliation, poverty and prostitution form the political and social framework of their world. Everything else is tested against this bedrock. I suggest that this is the framework of all oppressed and tortured peoples, as well as being the starting point for all who are in solidarity with them. As the recent

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novel by Jeannette Winterson so succinctly put it: the real text is 'written on the body' — in this case the bodies of poor Asian women.

Our task as theologians is to recover this text, this embodied knowledge, in all its fragility, to give it a privileged place in the discourse and to construct from it an alternative politics of truth. But this is a fearful and perilous affair. It is perilous for those whose lives are literally endangered by engaging in the struggle for human rights, as well as for those uncovering the stories; but Foucault alerts us to the fear and anxiety when the historian (or, theologian) becomes aware that all discourse is 'destined for oblivion'[5], of its very nature transitory. The Liberation theologian Sharon Welch writes that:

> . . . the oblivion of earlier discourses, the strange pattern of change within the Christian tradition is a symptom of this temporality. Conflict and change, far from being transitory aspects of the Christian tradition, appear to have characterised Christian discourse from its origins.[6]

Foucault reminds us of the 'uncertainty at the suggestion of barely imaginable powers and dangers behind this activity'. Yet recovering this discourse, which has real life and death consequences, has the power to shape our world differently, to determine the type of response the Church makes to political crises, and leads to that alternative concept of truth, written out of this epistemology of the broken body.

Again, Sharon Welch writes of her shock at realising that even her own feelings of certainty held no absolute value, but were illusory: that they were simply a sign of participation in a particular episteme (way of knowing). Susan Thistlethwaite, another Liberation theologian from the United States, calls for a notion of truth as defined by doing justice; she calls for the notion of sojourning towards the truth, and here she is deliberately playing on the name of the black American woman activist, Sojourner Truth. What is important to the case argued here is first, the need to construct truth, not as a claim to represent a so-called reality, since there is no way to reality except through construction and interpretation; secondly, the need to re-construct this truth from the suppressed memories and histories of those who have been victimised by the dominant version of reality; and thirdly, that this is a task of theology, as well as of other disciplines. As the American poet Adrienne Rich wrote, it is a task we owe to those who have no voice:

> Are we all in training for something we don t name?
> to exact reparation for things
> done long ago to us and to those who did not

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survive what was done to them whom we ought to honour
with grief with fury with action
On a pure night on a night when pollution

seems absurdity when the undamaged planet seems to turn
like a bowl of crystal in black ether
they are the piece of us that lies out there
knowing knowing knowing[7]

It is dangerous, also, because the method involved is that of uncovering dangerous memory.

Dangerous Memory

The concept of dangerous memory, which is so important for Liberation Theology, was coined by the political theologian Jean Baptist Metz; but it originated with the German Jewish literary critic, Walter Benjamin, (1892-1940). Benjamin is clear that to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'. 'It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'[8] This danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. 'The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming the tool of the ruling classes'. So he calls for an effort to be made in every era to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower, for, he writes, 'The Messiah comes not only as Redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.'

Walter Benjamin was influenced in this attitude to history as the recovery of this dangerous memory, by a famous picture of Paul Klee, '*Angelus Novus*', or '*The Angel of History*'. In this picture the angel's face is turned towards the past, mouth open, wings spread:

> Where we see a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned while the pile of débris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[9]

Attending to this pile of accumulating debris, through the process of dangerously remembering, is precisely the task of recovering truth in doing justice. Here for Benjamin the work of naming was essential.

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Thus epic, narrative and story all have significance as the work of remembering. In fact they have the status of revelation, the bringing into speech 'that which must be heard'. In Feminist Theology this this become known as the task of 'hearing into speech' that which has been silenced by the dominant narrative.[10]

The first task of Liberation Theology as dangerous memory — memory of suffering as well as that of freedom — is that of critique, what I have called the 'deconstructive moment'. But it is also at the same time re-constructive, because the past is reclaimed in order to survive the present and build the future. Liberation Theology constructs a genealogy of resistance, engaging with and building on the biblical tradition of resistance, in solidarity with actual communities of struggle. To quote Adrienne Rich again:

> My heart is moved by all I cannot save;
> So much has been destroyed
>
> I have to cast my lot in with those
> who age after age, perversely,
>
> with no extraordinary power,
> re-constitute the world.[11]

The consciousness of the irreplaceable and transformative value of what has been lost urges on the process of remembering. Catherine Halkes of the Netherlands called her first book in Feminist Theology, *Zoeken naar wat Verloren ging* (Seeking for what has been Lost)[11] — but it would be naive to assume that this has been a matter of carelessness, or of individual forgetfulness. What we are dealing with is a structured amnesia, a structural blotting out of the voices of resistance, the voices of all who are 'Other' to the dominant story. Hence, Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, the biblical scholar, uses a four-fold hermeneutic of suspicion with regard to the dominant biblical tradition, ending with the proclamation and creative actualization of the excluded contents. According to Sharon Welch, the three elements of a genealogy of resistance are: 1) the preservation and communication of memories of conflict and exclusion; 2) the discovery and exposition of excluded contents and meanings; and 3) the strategic struggle between the subjugated and dominant knowledges. This strategic struggle can be empowered by the Bible's own tradition of resistance, that prophetic-messianic strand of the Biblical tradition which re-surfaces again and again, and in which tradition Jesus of Nazareth placed himself.

Memory as critique stands in critique over Western theology

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insofar as it has removed itself from the actual struggle of poor people for human dignity; it criticizes also the anthropocentric domination of the earth, uncovering and throwing into prominence alternative traditions which are kinder and more respectful of ecological balance. Remembering the stories of suffering and death, for example, of the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, will always be a critique of the oppressive régime responsible, as well as of any form of theological education which does not place the liberation of oppressed peoples centrally, but sees this as a problem-solving exercise peripheral to the real task of exegesis and preserving doctrinal purity at all costs. There is an implicit call to repentance here, where theology has simply failed to address the massive underlying structural problems causing human and non-human suffering. There is also a challenge addressed to church celebrations of reconciliations in many countries: how authentic can it be joyfully to proclaim the reconciliation of God with humanity, without facing the vast unacknowledged areas of injustice within this particular community; between, for example, the police, the military, and those who suffered their brutality?

Lastly, memory as critique and deconstruction, uncovers the class, race and gender-specific nature of theology itself. What has been claimed as universally true is now seen to be serving the interests of the male ruling class. In the classic words of Mary Daly: "If God is male, then the male is God". And yet, the bible, the poetry, the music and art of peoples in struggle are witnesses to another truth, for the Bible can be read as the memory of the excluded ones, as the memory of resistance and suffering: the injunction to 'Love the stranger, the widow and the orphan, for you too were strangers in Egypt' can be seen to be a crucial exhortation to a landless people, struggling for survival throughout its history, and not merely as a memory of slavery in Egypt. The memory of Exodus from slavery, usually referred to as a founding symbol for Liberation Theology, has to be balanced by the symbolism of being in exile. For the cry of the captive people in Babylon, 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in an alien land?' can be read as a desperate struggle for identity under the domination of an alien power. As the psalmist cried:

> How shall we sing the Lord's song in an alien land?
> If I forget you O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
> Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
> if I do not remember you,
> if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!
>
> (Ps. 137.46)

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But as well as the traditions of struggle and resistance, the Bible can also be read as enabling the knowledges and wisdom of the unheard voices: in one of the few sayings which stand a chance of being authentically of Jesus, he prays: 'I thank you Father, because thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to mere babes.' (Mt. 11.26) This leads me to the reconstructive moment. The tradition of 'the wisdom of fools' of the Gospel refers not merely to the mediaeval fool and clown of later tradition, but the need to listen and respect the witness of children (with no rights under the law), to women, and to ethnic minorities. And lastly, the core of each of the Synoptic Gospels is the inevitability of suffering and the priority given to these stories of suffering and exclusion: 'And Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9.51) to face the suffering which accompanies the struggle for justice. But the message was as unpopular then as it is now.

But how are these dangerous memories of suffering, resistance, and freedom to form part of a constructive response in the current situation, especially in situations where it is not so much a question of remembering, but of not being able to forget? To tackle this, I use both the writing of the Jewish novelist and Nobel prize winner, Eli Wieisel, and the feminist liberation method of Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza.

Between Memory and Hope:

The task of painfully and truthfully remembering for Eli Wiesel — survivor of Auschwitz where most of his family died, and whose life ever since has, in a sense, been devoted to this very task of 'dangerously remembering' must be balanced with the need also to forget. Wiesel recogizes that forgetting allows us to survive;

> How could we go on with our daily lives, if we remained constantly aware of the dangers and ghosts surrounding us? The Talmud tells us that without the ability to forget, man would soon cease to learn. Without the ability to forget, man would live in a permanent, paralysing fear of death. Only God, and God alone, can and must remember everything.[13]

Yet, despite the admission that forgetting shields from the wounds, which is why the great temptation is to fictionalise the past, when balancing the need to forget with the task of remembering Wiesel simply relates how everyone in the death camps felt compelled to record every story, every encounter:

> Each one of us felt compelled to bear witness. Such were the wishes of the dying, the testament of the dead. Since the so-called

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civilised world had no use for their lives, then let it be inhabited by their deaths.[14]

Remembering is for him crucial, first, for sheer personal survival. He tells the story of the great Rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name (or the Besht), who was banished along with his faithful servant, to a remote island as a punishment for having tried to meddle with history. Such was the state of despair into which he fell that all his powers vanished, including his memory of everything, including every prayer or litany. He begged his servant to remember — anything. But the servant too had forgotten everything except the alphabet: 'At that the Besht cried out joyfully:

> 'Then what are you waiting for? Begin reciting the alphabet and I shall repeat after you . . .' And together the two exiled men began to recite, at first in whispers, then more loudly: "Aleph, Beth, Gimel Daleth.." And over again, each time more vigorously, more fervently, until ultimately, the Besht regained his powers, having regained his memory.[15]

This need to remember-to-survive can be linked to the meaning of the word itself. In Dutch this is '*her-inneren*', suggesting a return, a recovery to the most basic, deepest sense of interiority, a painful reconstructing of a sense of self.

But this is not only a task for the individual. It is more than the therapeutic task of uncovering the buried memories blocked by trauma, important as this is for personal growth. Remembering is a community challenge: the putting of new flesh on the bones, when the layers of official lies and deceptions have been stripped away. Wiesel speaks of this remembering as a call from

> 'the very dawn of history. No commandment figures so frequently, so insistently in the Bible. . . . New Year's Day, Rosh Hashana is called *Yom Hazikaron*, the Day of Memory. On that day, the day of universal judgment, man appeals to God to remember .

Hence subversive memory is far from being a rational recall of information, a learning by rote of forgotten facts. It is rather, the activity which keeps the spark of hope alive. It is also expressing, in Wiesel's eyes, a symbol of contradiction before humanity. As he writes in another novel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem*:

> The Jews are God's memory and the heart of mankind. We do not always know this, but the others do, and that is why they treat us

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with suspicion and cruelty. Memory frightens them. Through us they are linked to the beginning and the end. By eliminating us they hope to gain immortality. But in truth, it is not given to us to die, not even if we wanted to. Why? Perhaps because the heart, by its nature, by its vocation too, cannot but question memory. We cannot die, because we are the question.[16]

What this tells us is that if a community of people survives oppression, and keeps the memory of suffering alive, then this forces all humanity to 'pay attention through memory to the presence of God in the history of humankind'.[17] Let's say, says Wiesel, that God needs witnesses.

> 'In the beginning there was the word; the word is the tale of man; and man is the tale of God'.[18]

But this re-constructive moment of dangerously remembering — which is also a profound meaning at the heart of Christian Eucharist, but has usually lost its cutting edge and been tamed beyond recognition — is not only about the *memoria passionis*, the memory of oppression. Rather, much of the re-constructive work of Feminist Theology hinges on the *memoria libertatis*, the memory of freedom. For example, Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza's reconstruction of early Christianity takes the presence of women in the background of some of the scriptural stories as a counter-cultural clue, as a challenge to bring them to the foreground and recover buried memories, memories of freedom, of leadership and authority. The recovery of such memories themselves stands as a critique over the present situation, where attitudes of domination persist and are given a spurious authority as the norm. Dangerous memory proclaims; 'The way we are is not the way we have to be'. It is therefore not surprising that in a feminist Liberation Theology the metaphors and images of weaving and spinning stand central. In order to recover the memories, to move from deconstructing the deceptions, the structured amnesia, to re-constructing an identity, the idea of weaving the fragments together into a new vision is inspirational. As Adrienne Rich wrote, of an identity painfully pieced together after being fragmented by destructive experiences:

> Anger and tenderness: my selves.
> And now I can believe they breathe in me
> as angels, not polarities.
> Anger and tenderness: the spider's genius
> to spin and weave in the same action
> from her own body, anywhere —
> even from a broken web.[19]

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The images of re-weaving and spinning the fragmented identity are complemented by the notion of inheriting our mother's gardens. This image came originally from the literature of black women in the United States, and specifically from Alice Walker. Convinced of the creativity of black women, even if this had been erased from common perception, she discovers the immense courage and ingenuity of black women in creating beauty when all the odds were against them. This is a poignant example of an epistemology from out of the broken body. In fact this image has proved inspirational for Women theologians from the south: in a moving book, *Inheriting our Mother's Gardens* a group of these women mostly from Asia and Latin America use this image to recover their memories of their own mothers, the creativity and courage of their mothers in the oppressed circumstances of poverty, racism and violence: these memories are then explored as empowering their own struggle.[20] Similarly, the whole genre of resistance literature of African women, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American, witnesses to the power of re-membering the struggles of the past in order to empower the present. There are few works as poignantly moving as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where the tragic story of a mother who killed her baby in order not to let her be captured into slavery is woven into the crushing memory of that very slavery experience: the very remembering is so overwhelming that it cannot be recalled in a continuous flow, but in short, painful gasps, in bursts of short tellings, where past and present are interwoven. No false hope is presented: but there is a sense of redemption emanating in the sense that loyalty to the community, and the strength which emerged from fidelity throughout the suffering, provide hope to go on living.[21] So this re-envisioning of an identity, through re-membering, is clearly linked with the past, but not merely for the sake of recovering this. The whole point of recovering the submerged truth of the past is to build a different, redeemed future. And this is where we enter the 'prospective moment'. Terence McCaughey, in his study *Memory and Redemption* which focussed on Northern Ireland, warns of the danger of a false or dangerously inadequate recontextualisation of memory. He uses the example of Ireland's role in the new Europe. Rather than follow the example of the other European imperialist powers in their new protectionist policies with regard to the poor south, he says that Ireland should remember that her origins were as a poor, colonised country: as such, her future should lie

> . . . on the side of the exploited and (she should be) responding unilaterally to the agonised cries for help they are sending out to us.[22]

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In other words, past experience gives constructive direction. This will be a direction not only for the Irish people themselves but,

> If this happens, then our European vision, as the poor of Europe, could become part of the infinitely wider search for a world in which people interdepend with dignity. The future would shape the present not just out of the imperial pasts of France and Germany and Britain — but out of the colonial past of Ireland, the poverty and the exploitation.[23]

Remembering past experience in order to be able to bear the anguish of the present, and to give constructive direction to the future is what I take to be crucial in the whole theme of 'dangerously remembering'. But I want to develop this to show that there is also a challenge in remembering for those who have historically been on the side of the privileged, the dominating class, who do not share the subversive memory, whose amnesia is of a different kind. Unless oppressor and oppressed are both engaged in the process of uncovering and recovering truth, what hope is there of a shared future?

The North American Liberation theologian Mark Kline Taylor shows a way forward in this respect in his book, *Remembering Esperanza: a cultural and political theology for North American Praxis.* In this work he uses his childhood memories of the young Guatemalan girl Esperanza — culturally and sexually different, as other — as a trope, a rhetorical device to stimulate reflection.[24] Remembering Esperanza creates a dissonance, an unsettlement in his identity as a North American. He feels on the margins of his own social placement. *Remembering Esperanza* becomes a metaphor for the social problems facing North Americans, as they turn to respond to the new voices and texts of people so long denied both. It is also a trope for a certain kind of pain — 'the pain of an American who is neither poor, nor discriminated against, because of skin colour, gender, or sexual orientation'. As he struggles with this pain, he suggests that *Remembering Esperanza* is also a trope for a kind of hoping, suggesting a kind of conviction that somehow the remembering is one contribution to the reconstituting of new life for those most 'dis-membered' by oppressive forces. In a manner similar to Eli Wiesel he asserts that to remember without hope will only reinforce the patterns of dismemberment operative in Esperanza's world.

Conclusion

In this article I have concentrated only on the theme of amnesia, or, as I have called it, structured amnesia. I have tried to show the importance

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of dangerously re-membering on the part of poor communities but also of the need for the more affluent and privileged to engage in their own process of re-membering, perhaps in a spirit of solidarity, humility and repentance. For the task is the redemption of the culture of violence; it is the recovery not just of the memory of freedom but its attainment. And there is no short-circuiting the process of dangerously remembering. As Adrienne Rich said, and I end with her words:

> The past is not a husk yet change goes on
>
> Freedom. It isn't once to walk out
> under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers
> of light, the fields of dark —
> freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine
> remembering. Putting together, inch by inch
> the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.[25]

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2 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge/Selected Interviews* 1972-7, New York, Pantheon, 1980. p. 131.
3 Foucault, ibid., pp. 81-2.
4 Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1990.
5 Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, New York, Vintage, p. 216.
6 Sharon Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity, Orbis*, Maryknoll, 1986.
7 Adrienne Rich, "The Spirit of Place", *in A Wild Patience has taken me this far*, New York, W, & W. Norton, 1981.
8 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations* ed. and introduced by Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken Books, 1969.
9 *Ibid. 257–8.*
10 The phrase became significant through the work of Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*, Boston, Beacon, 1985.
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13 Eli Wiesel, *Hope, Despair; Memory*, unpublished text on receipt of the Nobel Prize, Oslo, December 1986,p.6.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p.1.
16 Wiesel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, New York, Random House, 1970, p.113.
17 Marcel Dubois, "The Memory of Self and the Memory of God", in Eli Wiesel: *Between Memory and Hope*, New York, New York University Press, 1990, ed. Carol Rittner, p. 72.
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23 Ibid. p. 119.
24 Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza: a Cultural and Political Theology for N. American Praxis*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1990.
25 "For Memory", in *A Wild Patience has Taken me thus far*. New York, Norton and Norton, 1982

Spirituality in Post-War British Opera

Michael Fuller

Opera is currently enjoying a great deal of public interest. In its popular understanding, as the most lavish, the most spectacular, the most luxuriant of art forms, it might not seem an obvious form for religious exploration, or the working out of spiritual problems. That, one might think, is rather the preserve of more private and introspective art forms: to be left to writers, poets, and workers in the plastic arts. Yet, in the operatic works produced by British composers in the last fifty or so years, many do take this apparently private subject-matter into this most public of artistic domains. This article is an attempt to draw together some of the more notable examples of this tendency, to compare them in their diversity, and to draw attention to this phenomenon among the non-opera-going public. (In all that follows, dates after opera titles refer to the year of their first production.)

Bishop Richard Harries has recently remarked, 'All works of art, whatever their content, have a spiritual dimension',[1] in that they can be a source of comfort and solace. He goes on to distinguish 'a distinctive tradition of ostensibly spiritual art', which 'seeks to indicate through symbols the eternal reality behind, beyond and within this world'.[2] In this article, the term 'spirituality' is used quite loosely, usually to refer to the use by composers and their librettists of material from sources acknowledged to be of spiritual significance. I have also drawn attention to composers' uses of myths and legends, since these may be said to have a spiritual content in Harries' sense, insofar as they

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