Nomad's Progress

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IN THIS LECTURE I want to put a proposition. There was a time, and perhaps there still is for some, when the metaphor appropriate to the individual in search of moral and spiritual fulfilment was 'pilgrim'. The goal or *telos* of human life was known and identifiable under some description; the problem was, how to get there.

From Plato's attempt to show us the way out of the Cave to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the problems of the journey were recognised, but the point of arrival was not in dispute. The implied unity of aspiration has unravelled. The problem today is not simply 'how to get there', but rather where 'there' is.

Two alternative metaphors suggest themselves, 'tourist' and 'nomad'. I wish to recommend the claims of the latter in an attempt to help set a moral and spiritual agenda appropriate to our times.

The reference in the title of the lecture is of course to Bunyan, and to him I shall return shortly. However, I am privileged to be giving The Isaiah Berlin Lecture, and although the point of this annual lecture is emphatically not simply to discuss the work of our distinguished former President, it would be intellectually helpful to mark out an area of overlapping interest without in any way attempting to pray in aid.

In the volume of his essays, titled engagingly by a metaphor borrowed from Kant, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Berlin contributes a piece of intellectual autobiography in his address 'The Pursuit of the Ideal'. His theme there is the utopianism of past political thinkers, and their

conviction that 'the rational reorganisation of society would put an end to spiritual and intellectual confusion . . .'[1]

His characterisation of this is telling:

> At some point I realised that what all these views had in common was a Platonic ideal: in the first place that, as in the sciences, all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors; in the second place that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths . . .[2]

As of course you are well aware, Berlin's judgement on such a position was severe:

> The notion of a perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things co-exist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable . . . but conceptually incoherent.[3]

I quote Berlin's position on utopianism, in part as an act of intellectual piety, but also as a means of giving broader context to my own more modest attempts to examine the nature of ethical and spiritual fulfilment. And we might just wish to recall from the same essay Berlin's firm linking of moral and political philosophy:

> These beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do, are objects of moral enquiry; and when applied to groups and nations, and indeed to mankind as a whole, are called political philosophy, which is indeed but ethics applied to society.[4]

However, my intention is not to attribute responsibility for what follows by association, for what I offer must stand or fall on its own merits.

There is little doubt that Berlin's diagnoses very clearly bridge the gap between the culture which he and many others inhabit, and that of a Plato or a Bunyan. In each of these latter cases there was a sometimes loose, sometimes unstated, but nonetheless powerful structure of beliefs and assumptions which gave coherence to two related metaphors of journey and pilgrimage. In the one case it was that of a journey from illusion, from the limits of what the prisoners could see from their constrained shadowy seats, from the separation of the pursuit of truth from the perception of value and the reality of goodness: that is to say, the journey out of the darkness of the cave to the clear apprehension of knowledge and goodness.

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[1] I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity,* ed. Henry Hardy (London, 1991), p. 5.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 13.

[4] Ibid., p. 2.

In the the case of Bunyan, the beliefs and assumptions had their roots in the Christian religion; in this particular version in a Bible-focused form of Protestantism fuelling the power of a metaphor of a pilgrim. What Plato and Bunyan held in common was the centrality of the idea of a journey in the human search for fulfilment. Our common language reflects this in the overlapping meanings of the words 'end' and 'goal'. The Greek word *telos* had even stronger connotations of fulfilment and completion and, in usage, initiation into what is mysterious.

I am not presuming that these two disparate examples share with each other, and with the many others which could be cited, a single well-worked out philosophical position. Indeed one might say that what they shared was in its impact even more important than that. What they shared was a powerful set of presuppositions, that one way of life was better than all the others, that this could be identified in terms of the goal which it advocated and that the resultant process and progress towards that goal would be shaped and directed only by the nature of the goal. Interpretation of the latter might well involve reference to authoritative knowledge and revelation.

For Bunyan, this was authoritative interpretation of the Bible, whereas for Plato it was the power associated with the knowledge of those alone who would guide the initially unwilling conscripts out of the comfortable illusions and shadows of the cave.

The dominant picture of human life given by these metaphorical journeys carries with it a series of connected ideas which if disconnected will undermine the power of the metaphor, whether of 'journey' or more specifically 'pilgrimage' to give shape and structure to human lives and human living.

In the context of the unity offered by the religious metaphor of pilgrimage, for example, it is assumed that there is a purpose or end to human life and that this is the process which will lead to that fulfilment. Also implicit is the belief that this fulfilment is unique and has no alternatives. It is, after all, offered by God. In it what is right and true is defined religiously and so the religious or spiritual is at one with the ethical or the good. No other knowledge of truth is necessary or perhaps even possible, and the fulfilment is a fulfilment of what it is to be human. The old Church of Scotland catechism had no doubt that 'man's chief end' was to be defined in these unified terms. This was, as a form of traditional theism, all-encompassing in its account of what it is to be human.

The shape of Plato's journey does not draw on the unities of theism, but that he taught unity in a variety of ways is not contested. The ultimate

or ideal unity is that of knowledge and goodness, and human virtue is defined in the light of that. The fact that in the *Republic* he chose to characterise the implicit hierarchies of fulfilment as understanding through the metaphor of a journey carries one very important similarity to Bunyan, however vast the differences.

Human beings are purposive yet in their natural state undirected. Knowledge and virtue—the integration of these in a realisation of what it is to be fully human—can be achieved only through effort, through change, through journey, through progress. The outcome is realised by a transformation defined by the Ideal (Plato) or God (Bunyan).

The problem for many who have been part of the cultural change of renaissance and enlightenment is that these metaphors of journey as pilgrimage have lost their force and impact. I quote once again Isaiah Berlin:

> The notion of a perfect whole, the ultimate solution in which all good things co-exist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable ... but conceptually incoherent.

On this view, which I share, the metaphor of pilgrimage loses its force to guide and structure human deciding and doing.

At one level we all know this, but we would do well to heed the words of Charles Taylor in a related but in many ways rather different discussion:

> The worries I will be talking about are very familiar. No one needs to be reminded of them ... that sounds like a reason not to talk about them further. But I believe that this great familiarity hides bewilderment, that if we don't really understand these changes that worry us, that the usual run of debate about them in fact misrepresents them.[5]

I. Pilgrims

The use of the metaphor of a pilgrim to characterise the search for spiritual and moral fulfilment has in English culture the name of Bunyan engraved on it. *The Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the formative works of Puritan thought as well as being one of the more remarkable pieces of literature to emerge from within prison walls.

In the rather plodding rhymes of his introductory Apology Bunyan makes plain the purpose of telling the story of his dream:

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[5] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 6.

> This book will make a traveller of thee,
> If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be:
> It will direct thee to the Holy Land
> If thou wilt its directions understand.[6]

There is no dispute about where the goal lies. That is common ground between reader and writer. The issue is how to get there.

In the Dream, which constitutes the substance of the narrative, the question raised by the pilgrim is 'What shall I do?' although that quickly becomes 'What shall I do to be saved?' (In the broader political and secularised context of the focus of much of Berlin's work there is to be noted a parallel here with the title of Cherneshevsky's revolutionary and utopian tract *What is to be Done?*)

This particular version of spiritual and moral wayfaring was assimilated into a protestant culture much broader than this Puritan narrative. The Victorian hymn characterises well this assimilation:

> Through the night of doubt and sorrow
> Onward goes the pilgrim band,
> Singing songs of expectation,
> Marching to the promised land.

The solitary pilgrim may now be a 'pilgrim band' but from our point of view the essentials (shared with the Utopians) have not changed. The goal of the journey needs no detailed identification or discussion: the focus is upon the deterrents to be found in the way to be followed—be they Mr Worldly Wiseman or the Slough of Despond.

Now, of course, not everybody takes this elaborate, almost gothic structuring of metaphors seriously, but there might be at least three different reasons for that.

One of them which clearly caused Bunyan to pause is the practice of investing so much in a metaphor—'they want solidness'.[7] He is sufficiently concerned to argue the case for putting such weight upon a figure of speech and offers three reasons for continuing down the metaphorical path.

The other two sorts of reason for seeing the likes of *Pilgrim's Progress* as no more than a quaint period piece are nicely highlighted in Huckleberry Finn's description, 'Pilgrim's Progress, about a man who left his family. It didn't say why.' Two different concerns seep out from the innocence of Huck's comment although he might not have separated them in this way.

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[6] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London, 1987).
[7] Ibid., p. 6.

The first is the specific content of the message in the metaphor—in this case a man who under the description 'pilgrim' can justify the abandonment of wife and children in search of . . . well, what? Kierkegaard agonised over a parallel question in his treatment of the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the influence of this is to be seen, I believe, in Ibsen's *Brand*.[8]

I doubt that either Brand or Abraham would fare well in a twenty-first-century divorce court contesting either the divorce or the wife's custody of the children.

The second is an enlargement of the perceptions required here. Our moral perceptions, inclinations, or intuitions, are not as acute, as certain, as absolute, as ruthless—choose your word to taste—as those required to justify Bunyan's notion of pilgrimage (or indeed as those required to comprehend the concept of martyrdom).

My point, however, is not simply an historical one about this century rather than previous centuries. There are intellectual issues in play here. These are of two sorts.

The first is the whole range of arguments to be found in Hume and Kant, before and since, about the credibility and coherence of the theistic position which gives intellectual structure to the idea of pilgrimage Bunyan-style. This is not the moment to rehearse these in full detail. Suffice it to say that the many who find these counter theistic arguments conclusive have not *ipso facto*, dispensed with the wish to find or to impose such degrees of order in life and decision-making as are still conceivable. But whatever else is true of them, the powerful metaphor of *Pilgrim's Progress* has no moral or spiritual fertility in their quest for order or form.

The second parallel series of arguments have to do with the perennial philosophical metaphysical questions of whether the one can be found amidst the many, whether the ideal form can be discerned through the multitude of lesser copies, whether all sensible questions can in principle be answered correctly, and whether if they can, all these answers will be compatible with each other. The particular manifestations of these huge issues which underlie the purpose of this lecture are those which have to do with answering the questions 'What shall I do?' or collectively, 'What is to be done?'

[8] S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1945). See also Stewart Sutherland, 'Ibsen's Brand', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 1 (1973).

I have elsewhere argued that theistic belief is characterised by two related and unresolved problems.[9] The first is that however careful, circumscribed and qualified the writing, there is implicit in the whole enterprise of defining and defending theism, a working assumption that the world can be described, so to speak, from God's point of view. The standpoint of eternity is the perspective from which the theist seeks to order our understanding of the world and God's relationship to it. This can take crude as well as sophisticated forms.

The second unresolved problem arises directly from that assumption. The problem is what to say about those forms of evil and suffering which seem to most observers disproportionate. Of course some forms of evil arise from the exercise of freedom which human beings have to define their own relationship to others. Of course, some forms of suffering are endured to the benefit of the victim—including the pain of making progress as a pilgrim, or in the journey out of Plato's cave. However, reading such forms of theodicy into the suffering of innocent children, or into the mass horrors of genocide whenever and wherever it occurs is to test the intellectual unities of theism to destruction. It is also to detach the demand for intellectual coherence from the sensitivities of civilised moral perception.

The need to make such procrustean moves in the defence of theism is based upon the assumption that the world can be viewed as God views it—from an eternal perspective—and that such a standpoint will create unity in our understanding of what seem to be the surd elements of human suffering. The philosophical pilgrim who is an apologist for Christian theism has for centuries sought the articulation of such a unified view of the world.

The metaphor of pilgrim, even secularised versions of it, seems to carry too many assumptions about unity and wholeness. Alasdair MacIntyre and Ernest Gellner, as well as Isaiah Berlin are amongst the many philosophers who have given detailed attention to the difficulties to be faced.

MacIntyre confronts some related issues very directly in his Gifford Lectures, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*. In his stimulating discussion of the role of the great encyclopaedias of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, MacIntyre identifies three conditions for the decline of one central role which some of them played.

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[9] Stewart Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief* (Oxford, 1984).

> They were all works of reference increasingly indispensable to a growing
> reading public. And some, but not all, were also bearers of a unified
> secular vision of the world and the place of knowledge and of enquiry
> within it.[10]

This latter claim was true, he argued, of the ninth edition of the
Encyclopaedia Britannica, but not of the eleventh.

One of the important points to be drawn from this is that although the
search for unity is, as Iris Murdoch insisted, characteristic of religion it is
also to be found in secular systems of thought and belief.

MacIntyre offers three reasons for this transformation between the
ninth and eleventh editions. I shall quote these for illustrative purposes:

> Enquiry had become finally fragmented into a series of independent, special-
> ized, and professional activities whose results could, so it seemed, find no place
> as parts in any whole. Such medieval and renaissance metaphors as those of a
> tree of knowledge or a house of knowledge had finally lost their application . . .

> Secondly, an encyclopaedia could no longer be a set of canonical books for an
> educated public, since increasingly such publics [had] disintegrated . . .

> A third change . . . was not merely that academic enquiry increasingly became
> professionalized and specialized . . . but that for the most part and increasingly,
> moral and theological truth ceased to be recognized as objects of substantive
> enquiry and instead were relegated to the realm of privatised belief.[11]

MacIntyre's analysis is, I believe, substantially correct, and is, in part,
explanation of why the metaphor of pilgrim has lost its force. Whether he
would see justification for the use of an alternative metaphor, nomad, is
a separate question.

In a very perceptive but late contribution to the discussion of the nature
of the society in which we live, Gellner argues for the positive values of
some aspects of the pluralism which MacIntyre has identified as being at
the heart of that society. His book *Conditions of Liberty, Civil Society and
its Rivals* is an argument for the reinvigoration of the idea of civil society
as one of the ways of finding coherence of political and social process in
the kind of world in which we live. He defines it very concisely as follows:

> Civil Society is that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong
> enough to counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from
> fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests,
> can nevertheless prevent it from dominating and atomising the rest of society.[12]

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[10] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (London, 1990), p. 216.
[11] Ibid., pp. 216–17.
[12] Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty, Civil Society and its Rivals* (London, 1994), p. 5.

In a complex but strong series of arguments he concludes by proclaiming the virtues of pluralism, in a way which at points clearly draws on Popper: Civil Society

> requires intellectual pluralism: the growing economy which is indispensable to the system is impossible without science, and science is incompatible with a cognitive picture of the world which is socially sustained, enforced and endowed with a priori authority.[13]

Gellner's reinvigoration of the idea of civil society has as its objective the need for political and social counterweights in and to those

> societies which had strongly centralized all aspects of life, and where a single political-economic-ideological hierarchy tolerated no rivals and one single vision defined not only truth but also personal rectitude.[14]

In so arguing Gellner shows the connection between the personal question of the individual in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, 'What shall I do?, and the social and political question of the citizen or revolutionary in Cherneshevsky's *What is to be Done?* He strengthens my inclination to see parallel issues between the theme of this lecture and his own concerns by his choice of Islam as one of the examples of such singularly focused groups. It is no accident that the clearest example of the compelling power of the reality as well as the metaphor of pilgrimage in our contemporary world is to be found in Islam.

I quote the positions of these two major philosophers to give context to the position which I am defending. In the respective books from which I quote they offer plausible diagnosis of the loss of the power of the kind of metaphor on which Bunyan could call in his attempt to illuminate ethical and spiritual search.

In Gellner's case they also make a link between the abandonment of the metaphor of the pilgrim, intellectual pluralism, and the empiricism which that pluralism requires if it is not to fall into the paradoxes of relativism.

I cite MacIntyre and Gellner as two writers who have helped diagnose some of the key intellectual conditions which have contributed to under-mining the power of the metaphor of pilgrimage. Others can be cited in relation to aspects of this, for example, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper and Charles Taylor.

The processes which we call renaissance and enlightenment sought to replace the religious foundation for intellectual unity by secular alternatives.

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[13] Ibid., p. 212.
[14] Ibid., p. 1.

Philosophers contributed to such efforts—for example Descartes' search for such a structure, whether epistemological or methodological. In different ways the empirical tradition, represented by Locke's starting point of mind as a *tabula rasa*, or Hume's division of all perceptions into impressions and ideas, sought unity and singleness of direction in building our understanding of the world.

However, with the thoroughness of Hume's scepticism and empirical method, the stable-door was finally unlocked. The certainties of a single epistemological basis for our understanding of the world in which we live were subjected to a painstaking sceptical interrogation. Gaps appeared which have troubled philosophical thinking ever since.

The details of Hume's arguments and responses to them—whether the magnificent baroque structures of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or the banalities of James Beattie's populism—are not the concern of this lecture. My central point is to emphasise the most obvious but sometimes forgotten fact about empiricism: that is to say that all knowledge of human beings, of human society, and of the world which we inhabit is provisional and fragmented. We can of course build magnificent theories —whether those of Freud and Skinner, or of Weber and Marx, or of Kelvin and Einstein—but always, at very best, these are provisional. They may well be the most comprehensive, the most coherent, the most elegant theories which can be built on human capacities to observe, to collate, to experiment, to take new readings, and to build mathematical models, but they are always 'the best so far'.

The central driving force of empiricism is that however much the world can be shaped by the ingenuities of the technological developments of our observations and theories, nonetheless there are limits set by the way the world is to our understanding and manipulation of it. This shows itself in the seemingly unlimited capacity of the empirical world to surprise us, to upset or reshape our most thoroughly researched and well-founded readings and understandings of that world.

This provisionality should not be seen in relation to epistemology and metaphysics alone. It has affected the ways in which we understand human beings and human society and therefore the decisions and actions which define our living and being.

A central pattern of thinking developed which helped accelerate this infusion of empiricism into our ethical and social decision-making. This is the consequence of twentieth-century readings of Hume's separation of fact from value, of 'is' from 'ought'. This is the point which MacIntyre addresses when he writes that,

moral and theological truth ceased to be recognized as subjects of substantive enquiry and instead were relegated to the realm of privatised belief.[15]

Insofar as this has become a prevailing assumption, ethical and religious belief is no longer part of a coherent structure incorporated into well-found views of the nature of the world and human beings' place in it. In this context Hume's views might be crudely paraphrased as 'Clerics are some of my best and most respected friends—so long as they do not attempt to derive moral conclusions from religious premises.'

What this has undermined, which is central to the idea of pilgrimage, or of Plato's journey from the cave, is the view that there is an uncontested account of truth and fulfilment and where it is to be found. This is the case for two different but related reasons. The first is that, as I have suggested, in an empiricist-dominated approach to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, truth is always to some extent provisional. Candidates for claims to truth can in principle be falsified, but not verified.

The second is that the unity of truth and value, knowledge and virtue has been undermined. Whereas Aquinas or Plato would offer us a way of deciding, of acting, of living based upon an integration of beliefs about the way the world is, about the nature of human beings and human society, and the goals for virtuous living and human fulfilment, the provisionalities of empiricism have eroded the intellectual foundations of such a unity.

Thus my contention is that whereas once it was conceivable that 'man' in the words of a Protestant catechism could have a chief 'end' and that the search for human fulfilment was the realisation of that end, the intellectual underpinnings of this have been disaggregated. Whereas the task of a pilgrim was to make progress towards the designated end or goal, now there is no agreement on what or where that goal is; the idea of the completeness or fulfilment of human life has at best provisional form and shape.

II. Tourists

An alternative metaphor to 'pilgrim', which seems more to fit the spirit of our contemporary life is that of 'tourist'. Tourists also are travellers in search of something. The question is what? To mark the difference between pilgrim and tourist, we need only visit a major cathedral or religious site in

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[15] See above, n. 11.

the summer months. The difference is not simply in terms of dress, or lack of it, nor in terms of who carries the camera, and who the prayer beads, nor, in at least some cases, who has to be asked to leave the ice-cream outside.

The difference is rather one of demeanour, attitude and aspiration. Metaphorically Plato gave us the finest descriptions of tourists that I know: 'lovers of sights and sounds'—*philotheaumon*.[16]

Now some of my best friends are tourists, and I confess to being from time to time a fairly enthusiastic member of the species. Tourists sally forth from a base to travel but in the knowledge that they will in due course return to that base. They go to observe, to perceive, to experience.

At best they pursue what is of value and or interest. From a primary base of experience they go to expand that experience but their 'new' experiences will be parasitic on the lives and achievements of others.

Many of the sights and sounds which they/we love are the highest products of human civilisation: cathedrals, galleries and paintings, the finest examples of architecture and engineering, and so one could go on. These educate, and improve.

But to be a tourist only, in matters social, cultural, moral and spiritual has its own dangers: for it is to seek experience, and experiences as atomic things in themselves bereft of a framework of meaning. Ultimately, there are no grounds for discriminating between them. One experience is as good as another. What matters ultimately is how it was for you.

Plato had fun in the *Republic*, and caricatured the depths to which such an approach to life can descend in remarkably modern terms. Glaucon refers to them as 'the lovers of spectacle', and talks of them as 'those who always want to hear something new':

> You couldn't induce them to attend a serious debate or any such entertainment, but as if they had farmed out their ears to listen to every chorus in the land, they run about to all the Dionysiac festivals, never missing one, either in the towns or in the country villages. Are we to designate all these and similar folk and all the practitioners of the minor arts as philosophers?
> Not at all, I said, but they bear a certain likeness to philosophers.
> Whom do you mean, then, by the true philosophers?
> Those for whom the truth is the spectacle of which they are enamoured . . .[17]

If we substituted 'Glastonbury' and 'T in the Park' for 'Dionysiac festivals', it is easy to imagine that Plato foresaw something of the banal-

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[16] Plato, *Republic*, 476b, trans. Paul Shorey, in *Plato, The Collected Dialogues,* eds., Edith Hamilton and Huntingdon Cairns (Princeton, 1963).
[17] Ibid., 475d–e.

ity and depths at the bottom of the slope which is the search for experience and spectacle as ends in themselves.

The difference between tourists and pilgrims is this. Pilgrims head towards a fixed point, a *telos*, and the whole point of the journey is to arrive there. Tourists come from a fixed point to which they ultimately return laden down with sights and sounds, but happily eventually back home again. Equally, the criteria by which the journey is mapped out are different. If the tourist sees something interesting on the way — perhaps Mansion House or the Royal Exchange on the way to St Paul's — then he or she need have no qualms or reservations about diverting to these additional sights and the experiences which they generate.

The pilgrim on the contrary will not even contemplate such a diversion from the path which is in that sense straight and narrow.

I cannot resist a fanciful illustration of the extent to which we have become preoccupied with 'experiences' in the unstructured form of feelings. 'How do you feel?' asks the TV reporter of the newly widowed woman or of the football player who has just missed the key penalty, or broken his leg, or of the marathon runner who has just dropped out of the race.

Imagine how a TV reporter might have addressed Job as he sat on his dung heap scratching his sores:

> Now Mr Job (may I call you Ruben?), now Ruben, you have lost all your family and your fortune, your livestock and your riches. You are covered in boils and you have no home to rest in. You are avoided by those who once sought your company, and your mother-in-law is standing behind your wife saying 'I told you so'. Now Job, tell the viewers, How do you feel?

If we are not tourists in far places, we become so quickly couch tourists savouring the experiences and feelings of those paraded across our screens.

As you will gather I do not see this as a very fruitful metaphor in the search for moral and spiritual fulfilment. It is part of the same process to which MacIntyre draws our attention when he laments the relegation of moral and theological enquiry from the realm of engagement with substantive truth to the realm of privatised belief. The problem is that, as Plato implied in his own terms, the sole criterion of adequate response is the question, 'How was it for you?'

So much for the metaphor of 'tourist' (and I stress that some of my best friends are tourists) but what of the metaphor 'nomad'?

III. Nomads

What benefits could such a metaphorical characterisation of our position in moral and spiritual matters as nomads confer upon us as we embark on post-twentieth-century western civilisation? What power lies in such a metaphor? What insights might it unlock?

It would be encouraging, indeed for some reassuring at this stage, to offer an account of the power of the metaphor of nomad which is theoretically and empirically well-grounded and which presents a systematic way of answering all the questions which have been raised about the metaphor of journey interpreted as either pilgrimage or tourism.

This would doubtless be appreciated, but sadly it is not possible. There are several reasons for this and reference has already been made to many of them. The first is that it implies that we can find in the metaphor of nomad all, as I have been arguing, that has been lost and whose loss has undermined the metaphor of pilgrimage. This latter was built upon 'the notion of a perfect whole . . . in which all good things co-exist' which Berlin described as 'conceptually incoherent'. It is not simply that those for whom the metaphor of pilgrimage was energising had got it slightly wrong and that the mistake could be remedied, but rather that the whole project was misconceived. In that particular respect the metaphor of nomad cannot remedy the failings of the metaphor of pilgrim.

Equally, we cannot expect the alternative metaphor to provide the means of identifying an already unified ethical theory complete with first principles and practical consequences deduced from them. The nomad is not a pilgrim by another but slightly more inscrutable name.

The nomad certainly has the practical wisdom necessary for survival, and the preservation of what has been found valuable, but he cannot offer an account of the human journey that replaces risk with certainty and provisionality with finality. The nomad is not in the position of offering an alternative goal or *telos* which can be inhabited after an admittedly difficult crossing of alien terrain.

Such are the conditions of the post-enlightenment life we lead, that the project to define 'secular' pilgrimage seems not to have been successful. However the forces of human will and emotion, the pressures of the need to answer the very practical questions, 'What must I do?', or 'What is to be done?' remain with us. There is need still to find stepping stones through the intellectual cross-currents we experience, for finding paths through the moral uncertainties created by technological advances, or to

discover how to survive without the total destruction of human values in extreme forms of tyranny and terrorism.

At this stage, the best I can offer is a series of examples, each of which has three separate functions: the first is to remind us that in extreme conditions it is not always the case that complete relativism prevails; the second is to challenge the reader to identify further examples of nomads; and the third is to help provide a focus for the reflection of those for whom a search as well as a wish for order and purpose in human deciding and doing is still a necessity rather than simply a receding dream or illusion.

So I now turn to offer some examples of those whom I considered to be moral and spiritual nomads of the twentieth century, those whose journey, whose direction of travel led them through swamps and thickets every bit as much a deterrence to integrity of purpose as the slough of despond.

Shostakovich is one. He lived in the moral and spiritual desert of a landscape created by Stalin. This was the Russia in which Shostakovich lived and composed, in which Solzhenitsyn was sent to the Gulags, and in which Osip Mandelstam died. Martin Amis in his powerful *Koba the Dread*, characterises it thus:

> Stalin personally monitored a succession of novelists, poets and dramatists. In this sphere he wavered as in no other. He gave Zamyatin his freedom: emigration. He menaced but partly tolerated Bulgakov . . . He tortured and killed Babel. He destroyed Mandelstam. He presided over the grief and misery of Anna Akhmatova [and Nadezhda Mandelstam]. He subjected Gorky to a much stranger destiny, slowly deforming his talent and integrity; next to execution, deformity was the likeliest outcome for the post-October Russian writer, expressed most eloquently in suicide.[18]

The choices for an artist or a writer or a composer were reduced to two in Stalin's Russia, martyrdom or survival on Stalin's terms. What a wilderness in which to raise the question of integrity! It is a story for another day whether Shostakovich did succeed in raising and at least partly answering that question.

But this is for sure, if the question was raised by him in his music the journey of nomad rather than pilgrim is a more adequate characterisation of his route through uncharted territories.

Bonhoeffer the theologian lived in an alternative wilderness, that created by Hitler. He was tested to the death. En route he contributed to the theological discussion of Europe and North America. His final legacy of

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[18] Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread* (London, 2002), p. 15.

writings from prison, in the form mostly of letters, I would argue (and elsewhere have argued),[19] is effectively that of a nomad rather than of the pilgrim emanating from Bunyan's prison. They drew heavily on his much earlier *Christology*, as well as his unfinished *Ethics*.

With these and others, I would include the poet Edwin Muir, if for no other reason than to help make plain that the landscape of the nomad in search of moral and spiritual insight extends beyond that of dictator's tyranny to the more familiar pastures of twentieth-century Britain.

Edwin Muir gave eloquent expression to this in two different forms. One is his poem *Variations on a Time Theme*. The other is his attempt to find a means of connecting up the various elements of his life in his *An Autobiography*.[20] The title he gave to the first draft of the latter is *The Story and the Fable*. In these terms the story is simply the chronicle of the events and experiences which make up his life, what the song of the American depression characterised as 'one damned thing after another'; or what Professor Ronald Hepburn referred to as 'the daily dross of experience'.

The fable on the other hand, as Muir understands it, is the attempt to find some form of unity and connection between at least some of these events, some of these experiences, such as to suggest purpose and coherence, and, I would argue, beyond that some form of integrity and identity.

Muir's life and poetry were intimately bound up with one another. In his fourth decade he attempted to give expression to some of the implications in his *Variations on a Time Theme*, published in 1934. The opening lines set the context and the question:

> After the fever of this long convalescence,
> Chapped blood and growing pains, waiting for life,
> Turning away from hope, too dull for speculation.
>
> How did we come here to this broken wood?[21]

In section VI alluding to the journey of the Israelites for forty years through the wilderness, he concludes:

> There is a stream
> We have been told of. Where it is
> We do not know . . .
> . . . when shall we leave this sand
> And enter the unknown and feared and longed-for Land.[22]

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[19] Stewart Sutherland, 'Transcendence and Christology in Bonhoeffer' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 27 (1977).
[20] Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London, 1960), *An Autobiography* (London, 1966).
[21] *Collected Poems*, p. 39.
[22] Ibid., p. 47.

Clearly a journey, but hardly that of the pilgrim. This is nomadic life.

Muir's search, autobiographically, is for escape from the constraints of human life. Place, as above is one way of symbolising this. The other is time.

> Ransomed from darkness and released in Time,
> Caught, pinioned, blinded, sealed and cased in Time;
> Summoned, elected, armed and crowned by Time,
> Tried and condemned, stripped and disowned by Time; . . .
>
> Buried alive and buried dead by time:
>
> If there's no crack, or chink, no escape from Time, . . .
>
> Imprisonment's forever; we're the mock of Time,
> While lost and empty lies Eternity.[23]

There is a clear sense in which Muir in his own distinctive poetry is tackling the question which we have already encountered: is transcendence of the here and now possible? The pilgrim has a clear map and compass. Muir, in his nomadic jousting with place and time, is not so certain.

Kant struggled with these issues in a different way. To be a man or a woman was to exist in space and time. To be here and now. This was not simply how we are, it is how we are constrained to think, and indeed to think of ourselves. His language and thought-forms are convoluted and require us to learn a new language—that of the *Critique of Pure Reason* —and I do not propose to engage with them in detail in this lecture. However, one central part of his claim to originality was to demonstrate the problems of much previous philosophy which attempted to transcend the constraints of humanity being spatio-temporal creatures who think within the constraints of space and time. In his terms concepts are 'schematised'. The attempt in thought and language to transcend this, to transcend what is effectively the language of empirical science, brings only paradox and confusion.

He had his own ways of dealing with the consequences of this, in particular for his great trilogy of ideas, God, Freedom and Immortality. My point at the moment is not to pursue the content of his other two *Critiques*, although I may return to one element of his, nor even of his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. My point is to prompt what is perhaps a shameless extension of the range of the concept of a nomad.

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[23] Ibid.

Just as in Muir, so in Kant, the search for what might transcend the limits of thought and experience as inevitably conditioned by space and time, lies at the heart of their respective intellectual journeys. In his *An Autobiography*, Muir wrote bluntly: 'Religion once supplied that knowledge, but our life is no longer ruled by religion.'[24] For many, myself included, in rather different discourse Kant showed why that was the case.

However, both Muir and Kant feared losing the baby with the bathwater. There however, is the rub. If we are no longer pilgrims, if we fear that 'there's no escape from time, while lost and empty lies eternity', if we, like most contemporary philosophers, are not convinced of Kant's success in reinstating the concepts of God, Freedom and Immortality, then nonetheless Pilgrim's question still remains 'What shall I do?', as in social and political contexts does Cherneshevsky's, *What is to be Done?*

Bunyan and especially those political and social revolutionaries who followed Cherneshevsky thought that they knew the answer to these questions. The end was well defined, it was simply a matter of ways and means—and will-power.

We could of course, take some of these implications to their extreme conclusion and argue that, if that is how things are so be it! 'Live till thirty and dash the cup to the ground', was one solution proposed by Ivan Karamazov. Or perhaps become full-time tourists, perennially in search of new experiences—dashing unreflectively from one Dionysian festival to another.

My alternative and tentative suggestion is that there is richness and possibility in the alternative metaphor of nomad.

Summary and Conclusions

In this lecture I have questioned the usefulness, the appropriateness even the viability of the metaphor of pilgrimage as applied in the post-twentieth-century world to the search for moral and spiritual fulfilment.

In the opening section I suggested some parallels with Isaiah Berlin's rejection of the central premise in utopian thought that the idea of a perfect whole in which all good things co-existed was coherent. Certainly I should want to argue against the coherence of the pilgrim's presupposition that there is a single *telos* encapsulating final fulfilment towards which, if we only have the key and the will-power, we might progress.

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[24] *Autobiography*, p. 51.

I implied that there were parallels to my concerns in the recent work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Ernest Gellner. In these writers I identified a number of themes central to their theses on which I should wish to draw in painting the broader philosophical context of my lecture.

In MacIntyre, there were two particularly important elements: the first is the stress he gives to the way in which, since the eighteenth century, knowledge has become increasingly fragmented, and the second, as the partial consequence of this, the relegation of ethical and theological discourse to the realms of the subjective.

In Gellner I pointed to the way in which intellectual pluralism was important for the very idea as well as the embodiment of civil society in our social and political structures. The reinstatement to the centre of political and social thinking of the concept of civil society is seen by Gellner as perhaps the most important bulwark against mono-focused and oppressive fundamentalism, whether that be found in forms of Marxism, Islam, or mercantilist capitalism.

In Berlin, Gellner and MacIntyre significant emphasis is laid upon the as yet not wholly digested dominance within our culture of the methods, thought forms and applications of empirical science. I have been able only tangentially to allude to this in this lecture.

En route in the lecture, almost one might say, as a lighter sub-theme, I toyed with and rejected the metaphor of tourist, the lover of sights and sounds, as an alternative to pilgrim.

My preferred metaphor is that of nomad, one whose task is first to survive, then to preserve what is of value in his society, and finally, in the hope that future generations may find their way out of the wilderness, to hand on the complex of insights, values and well-found beliefs which have been accumulated en route.

I gave three examples of those to whom the metaphor of nomad might illustratively apply—Shostakovich, Bonhoeffer, and Edwin Muir.

The former two lived in extreme political wildernesses created respectively by Stalin and Hitler. The force of Muir as an example is that although he lived at times in societies faced with extremity (pre- and then post-war Prague, and while there shared with his wife the translation of another nomad—Kafka), he was for a large part of his life a participant in a society to which we can much more easily assimilate. He was an economic migrant from Orkney to Glasgow where he began the process of self-education which led him as a poet and critic to a respected place in the twentieth-century world of British letters.

Muir's preoccupations in poetry and prose were the search for identity

and integrity, for the patterns of meaning and purpose which might be found, or indeed fashioned in the chronicle of events which constituted his life.

The pressures and constraints which frustrate such searching and making are those fundamental to the human condition—that we are spatio-temporal beings whose attempts to transcend these boundaries seem doomed to failure:

> If there's no crack, or chink, no escape from time, . . .
> Imprisonment's forever; we're the mock of time,
> While lost and empty lies eternity.[25]

These thoughts expressed in poetry were related to what I regard as one of Kant's fundamental insights—in his terms that we cannot use concepts unschematised. Our very thinking as well as our living is conditioned by the fact that we cannot think of ourselves coherently as other than existing in space (here) and in time (now). Whether this is a necessary or a contingent truth is a Kantian problem which we need not explore now!

The pilgrim believes that we can transcend space and time: that our *telos* can be realised; that by following the direction of pilgrimage we shall come to a goal in which such transcendence is to be found. The escape from 'time's arrows' is the prescribed journey.

The nomad, on the contrary, believes that within the constraints of space and time, we might achieve elements of integrity, but that we shall always be an insight or two short of the full revelation. Perhaps the best guides on the way are not the guides, gurus, texts and cabals which claim to possess the full truth, but fellow nomads who have made some progress on the way.

Did Shostakovich manage in his music both to survive Stalin and to resist the triple fates of, exile, execution or deformity of talent and integrity to which Martin Amis testifies so eloquently? If so, how?

Did Bonhoeffer find in much reduced forms of ecclesiology and Christology, the resources to hope that the evil that was Hitler could be resisted while his journey in space and time took him towards the gallows? If so, what were these insights? For my part I can make something of his reshaping of Christological questions, but not much of his ecclesiology.

Did Muir find elements of connection sufficient to establish the elements of identity over time, to create a fable from the chronicle of the 'daily dross' of experience? If so, how?

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[25] *Collected Poems,* p. 48.

My thesis in conclusion is that if any of these three or of the others whom we might identify, have insights about identity, integrity, ethical and spiritual fulfilment, then they are fellow nomads who provide signposts to others who are attempting to survive, to preserve and to enhance what is of value in our respective journeys.

However, as nomads rather than pilgrims, we must not be either surprised of disappointed if the vision and our perception of it is not perfect and whole, if it is the best those who live *sub specie aeternitatis,* can expect. The reasons for that were well understood and expounded by Isaiah Berlin.[26]

Coda

If I am right, then one need our culture has is to make as widely available as possible the resources to identify and learn from fellow nomads. I can think of no better and clearer prospectus than that for the contribution which this Academy might make to the advancement and the education of our society.

We need to retain and develop the scholarly skills of engagement with history, literature, philosophy, theology, the arts, and the nature and structure of human society, if we are to journey well. Doubtless there have been scholars who were essentially pilgrims often driven by the search for, and application of, a single and exclusive method of unveiling truth and value. There are certainly those who are tourists of the cultural landscape, those whose love affair with the sights and sounds of the scholarly world exhausts their engagement with its value.

I ask simply that in a fully aware Academy we give attention to the extent to which we can contribute to Nomad's Progress.

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[26] For a fuller discussion of what it means to live *sub specie aeternitatis,* see Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief* (see above, n. 9).