

# Society of the Sacred Mission

## OUR SSM THEOLOGICAL TRADITION IN TODAY'S WORLD

By Hilary Greenwood SSM

*Hilary Greenwood taught at St Michael's House from 1961–1967 and at Kelham, of which he was the last Warden, from 1967–1973. In 1992 he wrote, for our English SSM magazine, 'some reflections on what we might mean by our theological tradition'—under the intriguing title 'We're all made here'. Dunstan McKee quoted the conclusion of this at Hilary's requiem in 2003, but the article as a whole has never appeared in our Australian Sacred Mission; herewith a slightly shortened version. In today's mad world—torn apart by the rival certainties of resurgent political and religious fundamentalisms and irreconcilable 'either/or' paradoxes—Hilary's account of Father Kelly's wisdom offers a sober, refreshing breath of sanity.*

I should like to consider three HK characteristics which may beheld before us as the quintessence of our technological tradition. We can begin in the chapel. The centre of our daily life has always been the round of worship. I can see now that we might have had to be liberated from being held in thrall by the mystique of Kelham chapel; but on the other hand, I myself would not have been here today had not that chapel been the cave where the secrets of the rose were revealed to the growing youth. One of these secrets is the experience of the dark shadow to the numinous: the chapel was always the first place where theology had to do battle.... One gradually took in the spirit of the tradition in the shades of a theological prison-house, in the shadow of truth, so to speak. A style, a taste, a temper emerged, in music, hymns, sermons, devotions, visual art, and so on. One part of it was a healthy disregard for religion, even when we were taking care with the performance of what was known as "high mass at Wellington Barracks."

There was a positive side to this disrespect: one did not divide the sacred from the secular in such a way that God's providence was confined to the spiritual. We did not read the lives of the "saints in the refectory; we read *Alice in Wonderland*, in which every episode and dialogue had a wonderful aptness for our situation. So perhaps the first element in our theological tradition can be summarised as: 'Down with religion, and up with God!'

The second element was less easily learnt. It was Fr Gregory who taught me in my first months that the opposite of faith was not doubt but certainty, and that a basic essential for all study and belief was a reverent agnosticism. This principle is vital for understanding the thought of our founder and for following his interest in both epistemology and history....

In 1974 I went to Spain and began to read all I could lay hands on of the great Spanish thinker Unamuno. So often it was a case of *deja-vu*. 'The greatest threat to the gospel is the study of the Bible' ... this comes from the naughty sage of Salamanca, but it might as easily have come from the naughty sage of B-corridor. Both of them, in their often irritating ways, emphasised the Pascalian tension between experience of the head and experience of the heart, which together make for personal knowledge and which separately demonstrate the limits of empirical science and the weakness of religious ideas.

Both men trusted the exposed should to the faithfulness of the unseen, unseeable God of the darkness. Both men taught that we live in empirical ignorance of the future, have no immutable guiding principles to answer our problems, and wet our hearts in hope upon that resurrection—life of which human science can say nothing.

In the Kelham course there was a threefold thread of history, the Bible, and philosophy. The first half of the philosophy course might have been followed at that time in any modern university; logic, psychology, the history of ideas. The second half was what we called dogmatics: anthropology, cosmogony, natural theology, doctrine, etc. The idle hinge between the two halves was the term of ethics. Each subject was accompanied by a 'scheme', a summary of the lectures and a commentary on them. By the time I reached Kelham the ethics scheme had disappeared. It was quite late in my life before I got round to looking at it, but I now think that, however difficult it may be to follow, it is quintessential HK. Just as in logic at the beginning we discovered that we were learning about valid arguments, but learning nothing of truth, so in ethics we discover that all attempts to have any certainty for moral guidance end in the pursuit of a will-o'-the-wisp.

The scheme ends: '...all reason shows us that the true ethical ideal is self-sacrifice, but attempts to fulfil it land us in various forms of self-deception.... The pursuit of self-sacrifice is intellectually ridiculous and on the moral side impossible... the only ethical ideal which remains solid, and which all ethicists accept in the end, is the ideal of self-perfection, which, as we have shown, is not only the most futile, but the most pernicious and harmful a man can set before himself. We are looking for perfection, goodness, righteousness, in ourselves, first by one road and then by another; and there are no such things to be found in us by any road. "O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto Thee, but unto us confusion of face, as at this day."

And so the root and ground of our Christian faith is our uncertainty, not only in doctrine and in science, but also in human behaviour. This is the paradox of those who seek the will of God which, *ipso facto* is unknowable. ('Father, how do we know the will of God?' 'We never do, and that's the giddy joke.') Throughout our history, people have often been disappointed that we have not fulfilled their expectations and shown a persistent loyalty to certain church-principles or ideas. They have not understood that our obedience has been a challenge to make use of free-thought, to be individuals of differing opinions and styles, and to live without the luxury of certainty to prop us up against mental discomfort.

The entire Christian religion is, when verbally expressed, a series of unresolvable paradoxes. The basic one is that in order to live in eternal life, we must first die somehow. Some of these paradoxes have been anaesthetised by the church, or wrapped up in jargon and dogma. But the basic ones always defy the vandals. The general thrust of theology has been to try to get rid of paradoxes, or to hide them, usually by stressing one of the two elements and damning into oblivion the other. But our HK had a penchant for *paradox*: he may have been so successful in Japan because his method of education was so similar to what the gurus of Zen did. He would answer questions with amusing stories, or with counter-questions of an absurd kind. The method tends to irritate Europeans and Americans. But I think it is part of our theological tradition. ('What are the proofs of the resurrection?' 'Come and look at the pigs...')

I submit, therefore, that our theological tradition might be seen under the species of three characteristics of our founder: a reverent agnosticism in all things, including human morals; a tendency to teach and meditate with paradoxes; and (the ultimate paradox) a slightly flippant attitude to human religion, eclipsed by a loving trust in the God of paradoxes.