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Eclipse and aftermath: religious life and the shift from soul to self

Frances Moran | Aug. 16, 2012

Viewpoint

All is not well in religious life in the English-speaking world -- that is, if we are to believe the media of late. The situation of the troubled state of apostolic women religious in the United States brought this to world attention with reports of both a review of one leadership group and an apostolic visitation conducted in regard to the question of quality of life of contemporary membership.

Much has been said about these matters and no doubt much more will be said over time. But all the discussion and inquiry is secondary to what underlies the nature of the changes that have taken place in religious life throughout the past 50 years. The root cause of the changes has been totally unacknowledged. Indeed, it has never been recognized.

I refer to a monumental religious and cultural shift that took place sometime circa 1955-65, namely, the gradual eclipse of the concept of the soul by the concept of the self. This change is to be found quite explicitly in Catholic and Protestant Bibles, missals and in the whole thrust of the movement that swept through the schools: from a catechism taught by rote to religious education that centered on the notion of the dignity of the individual, taught with an emphasis on experiential learning.

It could be held that this movement in wording from *soul* to *self* was merely a matter of keeping abreast with the times by adherence to more contemporary language or, broadly speaking, simply an effort to make religious faith more personally relevant. It is possible, too, that some attempt to overcome the problems inherent in an acceptance of the dualism of body and soul was implicit.

Nevertheless, irrespective of whatever may have been the initial intentions of revising religious language post-1960, much has been proven to be at stake as a direct result of the widespread shift in mentality of which the changes are representative. To be specific, it is one thing to say: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof: but only say the word and my *soul* will be healed" (The Layman's Missal and Prayer Book, 1962). It is entirely another thing to say: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and *I* shall be healed" (The Roman Missal, 1973). These wordings are quite literally worlds apart -- and there have been momentous attendant consequences.

Why is this so? Because the concept of the soul is a key word in a world that gave structure and meaning to a spiritual way of life. Without this key element, the structure that underpinned a life of faith slowly and silently disintegrated. The appearance of the key concept self brought with it a differently structured world and frame of meaning. It brought a new way of life, informed predominantly by the psychology of the era. This means in practice that whereas St. John of the Cross and the dark night of the soul was food for thought in the former world, Abraham Maslow and his notion of self-actualization was food for thought in the latter world. While the faith and lived experience of all Catholics have been affected by the movement from one world of meaning to another, not surprisingly, it is religious who have borne the consequences most profoundly.

With the eclipse of the soul, religious life found itself bereft of its essential focus. The soul may have communed with God hour by hour, but what then was to be the aim of the self? And if souls were no longer to be saved, what then was the special mission of dedicated religious? When the soul was prioritized it made sense that the self be pulverized, so leading to a life of enclosure, prayer, abnegation and submission to the will of God. But with the eclipse, the self assumed priority in a world of meaning wherein the soul had no clear place. This new prioritizing brought with it changes that derived their sense and consistency from their relationship to the new key term. These changes rippled throughout every dimension of religious life, leading to a new lifestyle characterized to some degree by personal responsibility, self-actualization and the ministry of social justice in one form or another.

Multiple far-reaching examples of what took place after the Second Vatican Council could be given. However, one will suffice here to illustrate the true depth of what was involved. Around the early 1970s, the majority of religious changed their names. Sr. Mary Xavier, for instance, became Mary Smith, ABC. This was not a sign that her order had merely discarded something considered old-fashioned. Rather, Sr. Mary Xavier who, within a world of spiritual meaning, had once identified herself with a saint, a spiritual ideal or sanctified soul, now identified herself once more within a different world, that of her family of origin and its history. By transition from one world to the other, she moved from loss of self to become her*self* in the context of group membership. This means that, as Sr. Mary Xavier and as Mary Smith, ABC, she drew on radically different concepts to make sense of herself and her relationship to both God and the world. Such a de-identification and re-identification process loosened the bonds of community as each found her own path to self-actualization. This speaks not so much of communities unraveling in some tragic manner, but of the unraveling of an unacknowledged underpinning framework with human consequences that played out in individual lives.

The transition from one world to the other was not made as easily as might be imagined because the change indicates a personal uprooting and personal re-rooting with all the turmoil that such significant movement involves. While there was much excitement and energy at the time this took place, there was, too, a less noticed underside of anguish. The latter arose from the experience of the disintegration of one world of meaning into which so much had been invested and the effort required to re-invest in a world that was far from clear in its meaning and institutional dimensions.

There is much felt disquiet about the direction that has been taken by the majority of apostolic women's orders in the United States and elsewhere. On the surface it may appear that one form of religious life has simply morphed into another in the process of modernization. Many attribute the changes to the effects of Vatican II and to the interpretations made of the document on the renewal of religious life. Others hold that the sisters themselves, especially the leadership, have gone too far and so are responsible for their own demise. Yet what underpins and gives shape to these changes is the structuring force of language such that there has been a movement from one world of meaning to a world of radically different meaning. With the advantage of hindsight it is possible now to come to terms with the consequences of this determining process and so better assess exactly where responsibility for what has taken place truly lies.

Put succinctly, it is unquestionable that changes have taken place in religious life over the past 50 years. No doubt *Perfectae Caritatis*, Pope Paul VI's 1965 decree calling for the adaptation and renewal of religious life, had a major influence on the lives of apostolic women religious as have other social and political movements. Be that as it may, unless recognition is given to the eclipse of the concept of the soul by the concept of the self, as a movement from one world of meaning to another of radically different import, it is likely that all contemporary discussions will generate little more than disagreement or alternatively reach a stalemate. This is so because the agenda will concern itself with secondary issues rather than those that are primary or causal. If the eclipse and its aftermath are given recognition and brought to the table, at least all participants will be in the position to deal with the consequences together.

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