

The Work of Forgiveness:

Memorial Tribute to John Hughes by John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock.

With the loss of John Hughes, a man who possessed such immense promise as a theologian and an ecclesial leader, a gift that had been but inadequately received has been suddenly snatched away.

"... potentially unrequited acts of forgiveness are encouraged on the basis that God will 'underwrite' them ... gathering up our unrequited gifts of charity and returning them to us either now, or eschatologically, at the resurrection."

These are words of John Hughes, the Dean of Jesus College, Cambridge, who was recently killed in a car crash at the age of 35, in a famous essay on King Lear written when he was still an undergraduate. They illustrate an extraordinarily rare intellectual talent for bringing together usually disparate themes and exhibiting their simple unity.

In this case, the notion of unrequited erotic love is deployed to explore the nature of ethical love and reconciliation in general. If unrequited love should never be a perverse romantic goal, then equally charity and forgiveness aim primarily for reciprocity and relationality. But since this aim is generally in our world thwarted, we can only understand them as being in accordance with the bent of reality if we have a religious faith that our good offerings will not go forever unreturned, that frustration will not be infinite.

All the many people who knew and loved John may now ponder this wisdom in the face of a sense that, with his loss, a gift to us all that had been but inadequately received has been suddenly snatched away. The sense of non-fulfilment is overwhelming, for he possessed such immense promise both as a theologian and as an ecclesial leader.

This sense is scarcely mitigated by gratitude for his already considerable achievements as the author of *The End of Work*, arguably the finest theological treatment of this topic ever written, and as a teacher, inspirer and helper of so many people in Cambridge, in his native Devon, and all over the world.

Yet it now seems striking that his thought embraced an insistence on the natural finality of the convivial and an awareness that all our sociality has been poisoned. Just for this reason, it can only be reconstituted through an exchange of gifts that is a for-giving.

In terms of this insight, John Hughes brought together all the major themes of Christian theology with an astonishingly subtle and yet simple economy: since forgiveness presupposes being forgiven, there must be a "first forgiver" who requires no forgiveness; but since the cycle of human vengeance conceals this reality, it must be shown to us in the Incarnation. And to have faith in the power of the forgiveness Christ promises is to have faith in the final "return" of resurrection.

All redemption then is, in a classically Anglican vein, a "re-creation." Gift is also work, and forgiving is also reshaping. In the end, there is no difference between everyday labour, art, sacrament and contemplation: all constitute a stammering attempt to recompose community in the light of the faint vision of the intra-divine Trinitarian work in which we participate.

Nor is there any final difference between the intellect that sees and the will that does. With characteristic boldness and clarity of mind, in his most recent work on the "divine ideas," John did not hesitate to agree with the modern Russian theologian Sergei Bulgakov that even his usual hero Thomas Aquinas had introduced too much of this distinction into the godhead. A dubious division between God's knowledge of mere possibilities and decision for a certain actuality had later dire

cultural consequences in terms of the liberal division between "the rational," on the one hand, and "the merely chosen," on the other. With Bulgakov and beyond Aquinas, John insisted on the mysteriously inevitable and yet free perfection of the one "work" of wisdom-imbued creation within which we dwell. It is this single sacramental mystery of all reality which we must labour to restore if we are to be redeemed.

John Hughes applied this same insight to the social order. The great Lear essay was nothing less than a Christian Socialist reading of the play - far more convincing than most interpretations. According to John, the play suggests that the true political alternative to conservative fixed hierarchy or nihilistic "progressive" anarchy is the arduous attempt, beyond the "formal equivalence" of justice, at mutual forgiveness which attends always to our unique specificities.

Rather than regarding this vision as an unreal fantasy, we should see that the other alternatives tend to commodify such exchange and to substitute the mere means of "utility" for the true ends of joy. It is the apparent "realists" whose grasp of reality is insufficient, since they mistake the nature of social exchange for calculated transaction, and the nature of work for mere pragmatic necessity.

Given this perspective, John did not disguise his always genial contempt for the "realism" of liberal Anglicans happy to bow to the will of the state and market. By contrast, he was beginning to renew, in an astonishing fashion, the spirit of Hackney, Ditchling and Thaxted - of Anglo-Catholic and British Catholic distributist socialism.

It is a rare person who possesses such an indomitable spirit and yet offends almost no one. But John Hughes was this rare person - without ambition, but able to assume with radiant humility any elevation; as innocent as a child and yet as wise as an ancient sage; full of fun and yet attuned to sorrow; able to polemicise, yet also to offer wise counsel. In debate, like no other, he knew how not to alienate while avoiding vacuity. In his sermons (several of which have or will be collected in print) he knew how to delight as well as to instruct. In his life as in his work, he managed to interweave gentleness with an optimum pitch of boldness and exactitude - and in such a way that these attributes combine as one.

As John Dryden described Henry Purcell, who died when he was just one year older and equally in the full flood of his creativity, John Hughes was a "matchless man." It is now up to those who knew him to ask him and all the saints to assist us in dealing with this new lack in our lives. We can envisage this lack as being like guilt, since John had a strong New Testament and Patristic sense that sin and death are bound up with one another - are indeed in the end but one abyss.

Therefore we can apply his words in his Lear essay on the recognition of guilt also to the recognition of lack: "Properly, the recognition that the judge may be as guilty as the thief can be understood, not as universal innocence, but as the universal need for forgiveness and transformation." We are all both lacking and guilty, but beyond this negative diagnosis of much secular existential and social critique, and consequent illusions as to either "natural" innocence or incurable anxiety and ferocity, lies the faith that alone allows us to build each other up once more.

This was the Christian Socialist vision of John Hughes. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

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<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2014/07/31/4057838.htm>