2

The Beginnings of a Spirituality of Reading

In the early days of the pandemic crisis of 2020, Daniel Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year*, a fiction published in 1722, probably based on his uncle's diary which had recorded first-hand experiences of the 1665 plague, sold remarkably well in the United Kingdom. The journal, a first-person narrative purporting to be the journal of a Whitechapel saddler, recounts the curious effects of fear and anxiety on the behaviour of a population dreading an awful death, including the diary-keeper's regret that he had been careless and had not stocked up on necessities. Later, he stockpiled flour, malt for brewing, butter and cheese, yet was never confident that this was the right thing to do. He witnessed instances of appallingly callous behaviour, as fear reduced some of his fellows to a dog-eat-dog mentality.

In Britain in 2020, fear and anxiety also had an immediate impact on how people behaved when coronavirus threatened the way of life we had previously enjoyed. Some behaviour caused by the pandemic was irrational: in the early days, panic buying resulted in empty shelves in supermarkets, especially in the spirits, wine and beer section, with the weird exception of Corona beer. Other behaviour was more easily understood. Weeks of staying at home except for essential business increased some people's spare time, while others, who had to try to adjust to working and educating children from home, had less free time. The pressures of inactivity and hyperactivity changed much for many. One change was a turn to religion: at one point it was

said that over ten per cent more people watched online worship during the lockdown than usually attended church in the good times. Was this because more people found they had spiritual needs, or was it because watching an online service took less effort than attending church in the good times? Another change was in reading habits: as bookshops closed for lockdown they reported a remarkable increase in sales, most notably a 45 per cent spike in sales to people in the 18- to 24-year-old age group. More will be said about reading habits later, but, for now, the question on my mind is whether there was any link, other than coincidence, between these two effects of a crisis that transformed our culture, lifestyle and economy. Did, and does, reading feed spirituality? Why might I feel close to God with literature not only when *in extremis* but also whenever I engage with the best words in the best order, the beauty of a well-crafted story, a well-written passage of prose or the aesthetics of language? Is it because God dances across the page uninvited, or is it because I look for this in my reading? In this book I intend to explore the relationship between spirituality and literature, and to encourage religious believers to read literature other than sacred texts for spiritual enrichment. This is a *spirituality* of reading; and I must begin by sharing with you the assumptions about spirituality that lie behind my thinking. They are not especially original but they lay the ground for my reading of the literature I refer to here.

Spirituality is a slippery concept, generally agreed to be difficult to define and sometimes seen as a woolly substitute for traditional, institutional religion. In contrast with hard doctrine and rigorous dogma, spirituality is regarded as soft and lacking academic rigour. Whereas the study of theology is rooted in authoritative texts, reason, experience and established tradition with repeated tests to distinguish heresy from orthodoxy so that no one strays far from what is claimed to be true, spirituality can seem to roam free, linked to not much more than what we think about what we experience. However, this is an unfair caricature of an important feature of religious faith. It is better to think of spirituality as theology-in-practice or lived theology. Theology can be studied as a purely academic subject but being a theologian involves more than being an academic. It involves being a theological person who thinks with theological tools and behaves in a manner based on theological principles. Theology is only complete when it is studied as a faith. Studying theology leads to doing theology and being theological. This means that theology always has a practical aspect; it

is lived. Spirituality cannot, therefore, be set apart from theology, but is that aspect of theology that helps people study religion as faith. In this regard, spirituality is what reminds theologians that the object of their otherwise purely intellectual quest to know, or at least find God, is unattainable because God is the mystery beyond our imagining and the perfect Other beyond our imperfect knowing. Spirituality is associated with mysticism and takes us to the edge of mystery and the limits of human language. We cannot deny that theology and spirituality need each other to keep each other grounded: spirituality prevents theology from being merely theoretical and unhinged from experience, whilst theology prevents spirituality from veering away from centuries of human faith. Theology offers criteria by which we can evaluate spirituality, and vice versa. Some thinkers see this relationship as mutually interactive, whilst others attribute priority to spirituality because it reminds theology of its spiritual core. I see the study of spirituality as a discipline that prevents us from merely doing theology in an academic way; it underscores our efforts to be theologians, by which I mean that what we study has become part of who we are.

University prospectuses reveal that in recent decades the academic world has often tended towards interdisciplinary studies, no longer inclined to separate one pure discipline from another. Blurred boundaries between subjects rather than hard edges have become the norm in the human pursuit of meaning and understanding. What I explore in this book is another example of this trend, for I am, in effect, hosting a conversation between spirituality and literature, the latter a traditional purely academic discipline and the former less distinctive. We shall discover that spirituality is unavoidably in dialogue with several other disciplines, including ethics. We shall also find that our spirituality is always informed by its context in culture, which is the *locus* in which human experiences take form and find expression. For these reasons, I argue that novels and poetry can be in fruitful dialogue with spirituality for they, too, often address deep matters of meaning and belief, in the context of the culture in which we hold our beliefs and exercise our religious faith.

This argument relates to my growing conviction, based on over three decades as a Methodist minister working closely with people in all manner of circumstances, in sadness and in joy and, most recently, in the extreme and discombobulating societal reaction to a new coronavirus, that humans are essentially spiritual beings.

As Cottingham in his philosophical essay on the soul said, it is a commonly held view among those who philosophise on the nature of humanity that it is 'of the nature of a finite creature to reach for the infinite'.[1] Whether or not we affiliate ourselves to any organised system of religious belief, we naturally think and behave spiritually; we reach out for something beyond ourselves that we cannot grasp. Although the concept of the soul is neither scientific nor orthodoxically Christian, some truth remains in the notion that human beings have souls. Souls are the essence of our being; they are who we are; they are what make us persons and individuals. I, therefore, want to be liberal in my working definition of spirituality for the sake of this book because, by being less definitive, we shall discover elements of spirituality in the practice of reading that might otherwise remain hidden. We shall find that reading is a satisfying food that replenishes the soul. We shall find a varied menu. Not all in this exploration will be to everyone's liking. What will offend the taste buds of one diner will delight another, and vice versa. Sauce for the goose may not be sauce for the gander!

My conviction that we are spiritual beings predisposes me to the idea that spirituality is something that flows through our religious impulses and experiences, as well as through our psychology, our social and political lives and our physical sensibilities, as Daniel Coleman describes it.[2] He sees spirituality as a driving force that looks beyond and outside ourselves in longing to be meaningfully connected to humankind and creation. It propels our imagination and connects and binds us to ourselves, the surrounding world and the divine. Spirituality is both our response to our awareness that we are creatures to whom life is a precious gift, and a generative inner longing that pushes us onwards and outwards. Following Ronald Rolheiser, Coleman says the beginning of our sense of spirituality is the recognition of our individuality, seeing whatever it is that has made us what we are. We progress from this initial awareness to aligning, and finding a place for, our unique individuality within the wider social and created order. Understanding spirituality in this way makes it more than an inner feeling or a psychic state because it is

1. John Cottingham, *In Search of the Soul: A Philosophical Essay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 133.
2. Daniel Coleman, *In Bed with the Word: Reading, Spirituality, and Cultural Politics* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2009), p.8.

always attentive to the direction and impulses of the world beyond our minds and hearts. For Coleman, spirituality is thus to do with the way we live out our lives in relation to the environment, other people and our hidden selves.

In his introduction to a collection of essays in which novelists reflect on their craft, Paul Fiddes defines spirituality as the reaching out of the whole person towards realities that transcend our senses.[3] This reaching out often involves certain practices of prayer such as contemplation, meditation and mysticism. Some consequently assume spiritual practice is nothing more than an alternative phrase to describe a believer's prayer life. Spiritual practice usually includes a discipline of stillness and receptivity of mind akin to that of the reader sitting book in hand. Such stillness makes one aware of 'the mysterious reality of love and justice'[4] and takes one on a journey of moral transformation. This journey heads towards the divine 'out there' and the God within, otherwise known as the 'true self'.[5]

One of the great classics of spirituality, one which has accompanied me in one way or another since my days in theological college, is what some regard as one of the earliest examples of autobiography, a classic of spiritual life-writing, Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions*. The young Augustine, who eventually became bishop of Hippo and one of the most influential theologians of all time, was famously converted to Christianity as a result of an invitation to read. He was also the first to develop a theory of reading, which merits attention in the early stages of this book because any spirituality of reading, in one way or another, builds upon this giant's foundations. He was the first to regard reading as a spiritual exercise.

Augustine's conversion to Christianity while reading in a Milanese garden in August 386 was one of two highlights in his life which associated reading with mystical experience. The second of these highlights came in the autumn of the following year in Ostia, the seaport of ancient Rome, and was part of one of the last conversations he had with his dying mother, Monnica. Experiences like these – a conversion and a final parting – are formative for most people. Few of

3. Paul Fiddes, ed., *The Novel, Spirituality and Modern Culture* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 12.
5. Nancy M. Malone, *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2003), p. 3.

us forget when we became committed to our faith and conversations with dying parents are cherished for ever. Such experiences have lasting effects on one's thinking. This was so for Augustine also. He recounted them in his spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, which he began to write in 397.

The better known of the two experiences is the mystical experience that resulted in Augustine's conversion from his early interest in the Manichee sect to orthodox Christianity. Two years previously, Augustine had become professor of rhetoric in Milan where one of the first people he visited was Ambrose, its bishop. He was a cultivated scholar fluent in both Greek and Latin, and well-versed in ancient and modern theology. Augustine, out of interest in Ambrose's oratory, went to hear Ambrose preach and found himself impressed. It seems that Augustine was already becoming sceptical about Manicheism, a scepticism that grew as he listened to a wise old presbyter named Simplician telling him the story of an eminent Roman orator-philosopher named Marius Victorinus. Study of the Bible had attracted Victorinus, a pagan by birth, to the Christian faith and he became a secret Christian. Offered a clandestine baptism to hide any embarrassment, he declined and went public. Augustine could easily see why Simplician told him this story: it was to advise him that he, too, should not be ashamed to lay aside the religious philosophy he had followed to that point.

Meanwhile, Alypius, a former student who became a life-long friend, another friend from Carthage named Nebridius, and his mother Monnica joined Augustine in Milan. *Confessions* gives the impression that by now there was a small coterie of young Africans in Milan with Augustine, each with great expectations and far-reaching ambition. Augustine, however, was not in good spirits. In fact, in August 386, Augustine felt very disturbed, describing '[his] inner self [as] a house divided against itself'.[6] There was a small garden at the house where he lodged which his absent host allowed him to use. Augustine reports that the tumult in his breast had become so oppressive that it drove him into the garden where, accompanied by Alypius, he hoped no one would interrupt his fierce inner struggle. He speaks of a great internal storm that bursts forth as a deluge of tears. At this point he chose to leave Alypius so that he could weep

6. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 8.8, line 1.

to his heart's content, believing that tears are best shed in private. *Confessions* book eight, chapter twelve tells of Augustine slumped beneath a fig tree wrestling with existential questions mainly to do with his overwhelming sense of sin. These reached a nadir in suicidal thoughts as he asked himself why he should not put an end to his ugly sins at that very moment.

Then, from a nearby house, he hears the singing voice of a child repeating again and again, 'Tolle lege', which translates from Latin as 'Take it and read it.' Because he cannot identify this refrain as being part of any familiar childhood game, he interprets this as a divine instruction to pick up a Bible and read the first passage on which his eyes fall. Having rushed back to join Alypius, with whom he had left his copy of Paul's epistles, he reads part of Romans 13:13-14 and feels his confidence restored and doubt dispelled. Alypius is also aware of the mystery and wonder of this shared experience and they hurry to tell Monnica, who is overjoyed because her son now stands 'firmly upon the rule of faith'. According to book nine, chapter four of *Confessions*, in the weeks that follow, Augustine and his saintly mother often walked in the villa garden reciting psalms.

By the autumn of the following year, Augustine had left his post as professor of rhetoric and was set on returning to Africa. However, while he and Monnica waited in the quiet port of Ostia for a ship, their plans were scuppered because civil war broke out and the sea was closed to all shipping. Matters worsened when Monnica became seriously ill with a fever. In her heart she knew she would not survive. Indeed, she lived only nine more days. Nevertheless, she died content, because she had lived to see her son baptised and she felt ready to say her *Nunc dimittis*.[7] In the final days of Monnica's life, a second auricular mystical experience helped Augustine to accept her death and cope with his grief. He and his mother were alone, leaning out of a window overlooking the courtyard garden of the house in Ostia in which they were staying. They shared what he calls a serene and joyful conversation, in which they speculated about the nature of the eternal life of the saints. 'We', Augustine says, addressing God as he does throughout *Confessions*, 'laid the lips of our hearts to the

7. Henry Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 38.

heavenly stream that flows from your fountain.'[8] Then he describes a sublime moment of spiritual ascent:

> As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the heavens themselves, from which the sun and the moon and the stars shine down upon the earth. Higher still we climbed, thinking and speaking all the while in wonder at all you have made. At length we came to our own souls and passed beyond them to that place of everlasting plenty, where you feed Israel for ever with the food of truth. There life is that Wisdom by which all these things that we know are made, all things that ever have been and all that are yet to be. … And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it.

This fleeting instant, or flash of thought, brought them in touch with the essence of their very beings as well as into an awareness of the timelessness of God, but it lasted only momentarily and they returned to the mundane sound of their own speech with all its limits and imperfections, bound as human speech is in a fallen world governed by time. What has happened in this mystical experience is that Augustine and Monnica have moved both upwards (beyond all material things towards God) and inwards, entering and, at the same time, transcending their minds, until they find themselves in 'a region of unending abundance' where past and future have lost meaning, 'a realm of pure mind'.[9] This great mystery brings Augustine to a point of self-understanding in relationship with the divine. In short, this mystical experience has brought him close to God. This informs the theory of reading which emerges in Augustine's extensive writing in later years, which describes reading as a spiritual exercise requiring

8. Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10, line 14.
9. Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 118.