

INCURABLY HUMAN: *The Ache and Hope of Life on Earth*

Preface

This is a book for broken people living in a broken world. That includes all of us, of course. So perhaps it's more accurate to say that this is a book for broken people who recognize their brokenness living in a world they recognize is broken. It is a book for people with blistered souls, a people sensitive to a permanent ache deep in their hearts. A people who, despite the presence of that stabbing pain, also welcome now and again fleeting tastes of the divine, tastes that remind them that there's more than sadness and longing on their journey toward a new day, a new earth, the New Jerusalem, the Heavenly City, the kingdom of God—our destiny.

This is a book for stumblers and dreamers, a book for those who long for something more, eager to see themselves and the world change, and who desperately desire to be caught up in God's universal program of all-inclusive love, redemption and restoration. It is a book for people destined for glory but mired in the mud, who realize deep down in their bones that, despite feelings of profound longing, disappointment and sadness, they have been created for joy, and who feel compelled, in the words of Bruce Cockburn, to "kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight".

This is a book for a peculiar people, a people who do not deny the sadness of the world but who choose not to be mastered by it. This is a book for a paradoxical people, a people who feel the weight of the world but also the weight of glory and gratitude, who see here and there glimmers of light and love, and when they do, find welling up from deep within—from nerve and gland and gut—an irresistible urge to shout, and to rejoice with reckless abandon. This is a book for people who do not deny their own sadness, or the sadness of the world, but who desire to transform their sadness into fertile soil where hope and celebration can take root and flower.

This a book for people who are first of all reflective and sometimes confused. It's for people who not only don't have all the answers, but who are suspicious of those who think they do. It's a book for those who find themselves disturbed, uneasy, and deeply grieved by such realities as these: that ours is a world chock full of suffering and evil, a world where babies are born without brainstems, young children succumb to malignant tumors and starvation, marriages and other significant relationships fragment and fail, where love is lost and sometimes never found; that ours is a world teeming with deep religious and political diversity that sometimes manifests itself in cruel ways, a world where human beings are tortured at the hands of other human beings; that ours is a God of all-inclusive love and compassion, and yet, ours is a faith that includes a doctrine of hell and divine punishment for those of God's human creatures who fail to embrace God.

This is the book I've always wanted to write, but thought I couldn't. Now it seems I not only *can*, it seems I *must*.

Laying my cards on the table

Let me make clear my intentions in writing this book. I do not intend to solve any philosophical problems, settle any theological debates or speak authoritatively on any of the topics I take up in the following pages. This book is offered rather as an invitation to join me on a journey, a journey characterized by pain and sadness, but also, for those who desire it, hope. It is equal parts spiritual autobiography, philosophy and theology. If it is nothing more, I hope it is nothing less than honest.

Where I'm Coming From

Any reader has the reasonable expectation to know where the author of the book they hold in their hands is coming from. So let me tell you where I am coming from. I am a philosopher, by both training and profession, even if not also by disposition. (By disposition I think I'm not much of a philosopher, at least not in the sense that I was trained and have practiced it professionally.) My hope is that I won't here write like one. In this respect, I would rather be like William James, the philosopher who wrote like a novelist, than like his brother Henry, the novelist who wrote like a philosopher. It is up to you, the reader, to judge whether and to what extent I succeed.

I am also a Christian. As such I accept particular and peculiarly Christian religious beliefs. For example, I believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, that Jesus from Nazareth was, in some mysterious way, both human and divine, and that in some equally mysterious way his incarnation, life, death and resurrection are an ointment that has seeped deep into humanity's wounds, initiating a process of healing, forgiveness and wholeness, and that this divine medicine has also seeped deep into the cracks and crevices of the whole earth, bending it toward a glorious future. I am aware, of course, that many who share this planet with me do not share my peculiarly Christian beliefs. Do I, therefore, believe I *know* something that these others don't? Well, yes, I suppose I do. But mightn't I be the one with blind spots? Mightn't I be mistaken and the Muslim, for example, right about Jesus? Of course I could be mistaken. Even so, insofar as I am a Christian, I believe the Christian story is true, even if I also recognize that I might be mistaken, and even if there are patches of life that baffle, depress, confuse, disappoint or sadden me.¹

I tell you this because I want to be clear up front: if taking postmodernism seriously means having to give up my concrete Christian beliefs, or having to shave off all their particularity in favor of some gaunt and bland "spirituality" or "religion without religion", or having to shy away from or be embarrassed by claims to religious knowledge, then I am no postmodernist. My own view, however, is that to take postmodernism seriously does not require any of this. One of the things that postmodernism does is to remind us of what we all already know, despite the inflated

¹ I'll have more to say about religious pluralism in chapter ????

pretensions of certain so-called “modernist” thinkers; namely, that we are thoroughly embodied and embedded beings, radically situated, that we live and move and have our being embedded within stories or ways of seeing the world, and that we can never get outside the grander stories we find ourselves in to adjudicate among them in terms of which is true.²

As I say, I think most of us already knew that. But to read some postmodernist philosophers of religion is to believe the situation is more troublesome for faith. Some postmodernists think that a recognition of our finitude and subjectivity means that we must be religious skeptics, bereft of concrete beliefs like those that characterize the Christian story. These thinkers are also, not surprisingly, allergic to claims to religious knowledge.³ Among the mistakes I think such philosophers make is to unwittingly accept some elements of the very *modernism* they claim to reject. For example, their aversion to religious knowledge rests on something that looks an awful lot like Cartesian epistemology (theory of knowledge). These postmodernist philosophers of religion set the epistemic bar so impossibly high that lacking a kind of Cartesian-like certainty is sufficient for eschewing claims to knowledge. Since I believe that there can be knowledge without Cartesian-like certainty, knowledge with what we might call *epistemic humility*, I reject the claim that postmodernism entails religious skepticism. It doesn't.⁴ I also know from personal experience that commitment to religious belief, including Christian belief, can coexist (however unhappily) with anxiety, bafflement, sadness, doubt and confusion.

What to Expect (and what not to expect) from this book

As you read through this book, expect to think through difficult issues, and expect to disagree with me at various points, sometimes perhaps vehemently. Expect to be pushed down paths that you might not be used to traveling and on which you might not be terribly comfortable. Expect to be challenged to re-conceive and re-imagine elements of your faith that have become indistinguishable from your particular understanding or interpretation of those elements. Don't expect to be a passive receptacle into which I, the author, will deposit “truths” from on high. And don't expect to be entertained or mollified. Expect to be engaged and to engage in a conversation, a dialogue, a narrative journey through the wild, the confusing and the mysterious. For this, I am discovering, is the nature of the life of discipleship.

Given the aim and nature of this book I have decided to keep footnotes to a minimum, using them only to add clarity, elucidate a point when that seems necessary or to point the reader elsewhere in the book where a related theme, topic or thought is addressed. At the end of each chapter I will include a bibliography of sources that the

² Some of these stories have a very wide scope indeed; these are the so-called meta-narratives or grand stories like the Christian story or the atheistic, naturalist story of our origins and destiny.

³ I'm thinking here of such philosophers as John Caputo. See his.....

⁴ My colleague Jamie Smith, a card-carrying Continental philosopher of religion seems to agree with me here. See his *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Baker Academic, 2006), especially chapter 5.

interested reader might want to consult if she wants to delve more deeply into the topics covered in that chapter.

If you're interested, I invite you now to join me on a spiritual pilgrimage through a world that is at once sad and sonorous, wild and wonderful, beautiful and mysterious, dangerous and delightful. This is a world, and this the unfolding story, as I have come to know and experience it.