

Cornelia Connelly's Bold Vision

Radegunde Flaxman. *A Woman Styled Bold*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991. (Available in USA through SHC) PUBLICATIONS, 4724 Cedar Ave. Philadelphia, PA 19143).

by Joann Wolski Conn

Flaxman, a British Sister of the Holy Child Jesus, tells the extraordinary life story of the foundress of her congregation, Cornelia Connelly (1809-1879). It has all the components of great drama: love, betrayal, heartbreak, scandalous

lies, tragic misunderstanding, magnanimous dedication; it also has all the elements of profound holiness: ongoing conversion, total self-gift to God and to others, passionate love, gentle care, humility, fidelity to one's vocation in the face of impasse and spiritual darkness. Sketching this fascinating story will be the first step in evaluating the strengths and limitations of Flaxman's book for projects in the study of Cornelia Connelly's spirituality.

In barest outline, Cornelia Connelly's life sounds like a script for television's Masterpiece Theater. It encompasses youth in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Wilmington, Delaware as Presbyterian and then Episcopalian; adulthood as the wife of Pierce Connelly, an Episcopalian "minister" (Flaxman's term), who gradually drew Cornelia with him into conversion to Roman Catholicism; motherhood of four children, including a daughter who died at birth and a son who, at age two and a half, burned to death in an accidental fall into a pan of boiling juice. She struggled with the consequences of her husband's judgment that he was called to be a Catholic priest and, therefore, be permanently separated from his wife and their young children. While only legal separation was required, Pierce, who wanted to be a Jesuit, urged Cornelia to enter religious life in England, where he had moved

the family. Cornelia's own religious vocation emerged in this painful context, and the second half of her life was spent as foundress of a religious society that educated children and prepared teachers to work in anti-Catholic England at the time of the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy, and as a mother who bore the suffering of the loss of contact with her pre-adoles-



cent children because of Pierce's deception and secrecy.

The turning point of these two "acts" of the drama was her husband's reversal. After his Catholic ordination and Cornelia's period of novitiate, Pierce discovered he could no longer visit his wife and children whenever he chose nor could he control their future as he desired. This

led him to denounce Catholicism and sue in the English courts for restoration of his conjugal rights. Cornelia (then a vowed religious in the society she founded) and her children were regarded in English matrimonial law as the property of her husband, who was the only legal "person" in the marriage. The case dragged on for years, involved press accounts in which Pierce distorted every aspect of the situation and went so far as to describe Cornelia's convent as a "brothel," generated such anti-Catholic fervor that Cornelia dared not leave the grounds for fear of being removed by force, and was settled only because Pierce's inability to pay final court costs resulted in dismissal. Then, without informing Cornelia, Pierce took the children and left England. Cornelia was never publicly vindicated.

While the legal battle was the most public drama, the tragedy continued. In the second "act," the protagonist, Cornelia, was plunged again into conflict with superior forces. This time it was not the anti-Catholic legal system but the power of the English and Vatican hierarchy who refused final approbation of her Society, the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, for reasons they either withheld from her or used as a "catch 22." That is, Cornelia obediently followed a Vatican directive to begin a new religious congregation and, therefore, used initiative, made complex financial decisions, and exercised leadership. However, bishops interpreted this initiative and leadership as being "bold" and "independent," and, therefore, suspicious. Although Cornelia showed and taught deep respect for bishops and for the Holy See, neither they nor Rome realized this. In the isolated English Catholicism of her era, Cornelia was seen as a foreign convert, a separated woman, a focus for scandal. Because this suspicious attitude was conveyed to Rome, Cornelia died without any sign that her life's effort would ever be sealed with the security of Vatican approbation for her Society.

Several qualities make this book useful for the academic study of spirituality. It makes judicious use of all available documents: 55 volumes of the "writings" of

Joann Wolski Conn teaches at Neumann College in Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Spirituality and Personal Maturity (Paulist)*.

Cornelia Connelly and 85 volumes of documents in SHCJ, and 117 other archives. It describes the persons and events that shaped Cornelia's experience of God's presence and direction in her life. It offers very cautious speculation regarding events that are sparsely documented. It presents a balanced view of persons who caused great suffering to Cornelia. Here, for example, is Flaxman's comment at the point in the story when Pierce initiated legal proceedings to get his wife back:

Whatever psychological theories or nineteenth-century legal or social assumptions can be adduced on behalf of Pierce's conduct, and however one may compassionate a man so reduced [in influence and finances], the fact remains that both [Cornelia] and her children were victims of his faithlessness, itself servant apparently to a need to dominate (p. 136).

Nor does Flaxman idealize Cornelia. Accusations against Cornelia as despotic and ungovernable are renounced as "false . . . But not entirely" (293). Flaxman interprets this interpersonal dynamic as the outcome of Cornelia's experience of betrayal and terrible loss. This created a profound (unconscious) anger and a need to control the present (293).

While focusing primarily on the plot of Cornelia's life, Flaxman systematically includes data useful for grasping her spirituality. Here, for example are four character-

"At age thirty-one, immersed in a happy marriage and family, Cornelia experienced a profound desire to give love for love without counting the cost."

istics of it that I noticed.

First, the great formative experience of Cornelia's life was a four day retreat (December 1840) based on Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. At age thirty-one, immersed in a happy marriage and family, Cornelia experienced a profound desire to give love for love without counting the cost. (Years later, when asked about the Ignatian prayer to suffer with Christ suffering, she answered that, from the first, the prayer came from the depths of her heart involuntarily [71].) A month after the retreat, while surrounded by the beauty of her Louisiana garden and the laughter of her children, she felt impelled to pray, "Oh my God! if all this happiness is not for Thy greater glory and good of my soul, take it from me. I make the sacrifice (73)." The next month her youngest child burned to death and Cornelia's personal notebook at the time records her awareness of being drawn, through this human anguish, into the sacrificial love of God incarnate and his mother.

Second, Cornelia's surrender to what she discerned as God's will was accomplished by contemplating Jesus in his sufferings through the eyes of his mother whose compassion Cornelia desired. Constantly, until her death, she turned to Our Lady of Sorrows at every crisis.

Third, Cornelia's identification with Mary, the sorrowful mother, was rooted in her own experience of mothering. Through deception and secrecy, her children were taken from her and indoctrinated with such anti-Catholic sentiment that they saw Cornelia's action as abandonment of them. The schools Cornelia founded were homes filled with gentle love, art and music, trust, and a sense of honor rather than suspicion. In contrast to other English boarding schools at the time, the atmosphere in SHCJ schools was delightful, according to the pupils' own testimony. When asked whether the school's children reminded her of her own, Cornelia answered, "The thought of my children never leaves me (239)."

Lastly, Cornelia's spirituality was rooted in an experience of simultaneous death and new possibilities. For example, on October 13 (St. Edward's Day) of the same year that her youngest child burned

"The schools Cornelia founded were homes filled with gentle love, art and music, trust, and a sense of honor rather than suspicion."

to death, Pierce told Cornelia he was sure he should seek ordination and, therefore, they should now abstain from sexual intercourse. Implicit in this declaration was a plan for future permanent separation. Years later, Cornelia told her earliest biographer and close confidante that "the feast of St. Edward was the beginning of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, and . . . it was founded on a breaking heart" (78).

What are the limitations of this book for a project in the spirituality of Cornelia Connelly? Its aim is narrative history, not the multidisciplinary field of spirituality; therefore, it describes basic persons and events and suggests motive, insofar as autobiographical documents reveal it. Its immediate readership is English; therefore, it develops that cultural context and merely sketches the Connelys' early United States' religious context. Its focus is on Cornelia's emerging religious vocation and founding of the Society of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus; therefore, other issues are beyond its scope. For example, Cornelia's views of spiritual development, of spiritual childhood, of spiritual darkness and self-emptying, and of apostolic ministry are merely glimpsed.

Flaxman's work surely suggests other projects such as the study of Cornelia's psychological insights regarding a path of Christian *kenosis* or emptiness. An exploration of the way Cornelia's female experience of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* compared or contrasted with contemporary men's experience would be another fascinating possibility. ■



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Spirituality and the Process of History

by Philip Sheldrake, S.J.

Who is permitted to have a history and who is not is a vital issue because those who have no memories or story have no life. In André Brink's powerful novel *Looking on Darkness*, the South African "Colored" actor Joseph Malan,

awaiting execution for the murder of his white lover, recalls his own life-history and that of his family. He is proud because they have a story—so many "Coloured" people do not. Joseph has vivid memories of his mother's firm views on this matter. "You must look up, Joseph. Remember your Fa'er and his peoples. I'm nothing, I'm an orphan born and bred. But he's different, he's got hist'ry jus' like enny white man. Don't forget that." But there is another side to this story. While recalling the poverty of his ancestor Dlamini, who struggled to survive as a blind musician in the last part of the nineteenth century, Joseph reflects, "Strange to think how little of the country's official history appears in my chronicle as if we've always existed apart from it." During Dlamini's lifetime all kinds of "significant historical events" took place—for example the Great Trek, the Zulu Wars, the evolution of the Cape from representative to responsible government, the first Boer War . . . yet, "Of all that there is no mention in my chronicle. It surrounds our story but forms no part of it. For my tale is not

history, but, at most, the shadow side of history."

Joseph's dreams graphically illustrate the difference between a universal histori-



cal process, which involves everyone, and recorded history in which only some people are active participants. Recorded history, imposed from above, is controlled history beyond whose boundaries are silence and

darkness. The bias of traditional history towards the viewpoint of the powerful, and the fact that the values of these elite groups gain the greatest exposure, has led some contemporary historians to seek to retrieve the story of those who are overlooked in traditional history and to offer a substantial revision of our perceptions of particular periods or movements.

These considerations have a number of consequences for the study of spirituality. First of all, we need to come to a realization that all human attempts to respond to the initiative of God, that is the different spiritual traditions, are to some extent limited by particular historical, social and cultural contexts and that spiritualities embody specific social values and commitments. For example, the emergence of mendicant spirituality in the thirteenth century represented both an evangelical and a social reaction to the wealth and power of society and of a Church that all too frequently aped the values of 'the world.' Francis of Assisi's choice of radical poverty as the gospel value was not a-historical but was a rejection of what were understood to be the characteristic sins of his time. Without entering into the debate about the originality of Francis's vision, it seems fair to say that Francis's vision is symptomatic of a wider spiritual movement in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, known as the *vita apostolica*. The emphasis on poverty, as the literal imitation of the poor and homeless Jesus, was central to this. The mendicant movement also reflects a partly conscious and partly unconscious attempt to break free from the dominance of a monastic elite in spirituality. 'Flight from the World' had already, by the early thirteenth century, begun to move outward from the stability and separation of the cloister into a broader unsettlement of cru-

continued page 3

Philip Sheldrake, S.J., is co-editor of the journal *The Way*. He teaches at Heythrop College in London and at Cambridge University.

From the Editors

The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality

The *Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* exists to promote research and dialogue within the growing interdisciplinary field of spirituality. The *Society* traces its origins to 1982 when a Consultation on Spirituality was established as a program unit of the American Academy of Religion. Following this, a Seminar on Modern Christian Spirituality was formed and ran for the standard five year period. Some of the papers from this Seminar were edited by Bradley Hanson and published by Scholars Press as *Modern Christian Spirituality: Historical and Methodological Essays*.

At the 1991 AAR Meeting in Kansas City a number of interested persons met to discuss strategies for establishing spirituality as a regular part of the AAR program. It was decided that the best way to meet the needs of those interested in pursuing the academic study of spirituality on an ongoing basis would be to form a distinct society dedicated to that end. The *Society* received recognition from the AAR as a Related Scholarly Organization in May, 1992, and held its first annual meeting in San Francisco on November 21, 1992. The next annual meeting will take place in Washington D.C. on November 19th and 20th, 1993.

The *Society* is *ecumenical* and strives to be inclusive of the widest possible range of expressions of Christian spirituality. It is *interdisciplinary* and welcomes the application of diverse disciplines to the study of spirituality. While the emphasis of the *Society* is clearly on *Christian* spirituality, it seeks to foster creative dialogue with other traditions of spirituality.

The Christian Spirituality Bulletin

At the 1992 meeting of the *Society*, the members present expressed a desire to found a new interdisciplinary journal devoted to issues in Christian spirituality. The demise of the journal *Spirituality Today* and the increasing level of interest in the academic field of spirituality in this country makes this an opportune time for launching such a project. Further discussion among members of the steering committee led to the suggestion that the needs of the *Society* and of the wider academic community could best be served by publishing a biannual *Bulletin*.

The purpose of the *Bulletin* is twofold: (1) To provide a place for discussing substantive matters relating to the study of Christian spirituality. This will be accomplished primarily through reviews and review essays of recent literature in the field of Christian spirituality. (2) To keep members of our *Society* apprised of upcoming events and meetings in the field of Christian spirituality. This will include reports from the annual meeting, discussion of related regional conferences or meetings and any other "news" relating to the study of Christian spirituality.

Our hope is that the *Bulletin* will provide a forum for dialogue among members of the *Society* and among the growing number of scholars working in the field of spirituality. We encourage correspondence and will publish it, space permitting. Also, any responses, suggestions, criticisms relating to the *Bulletin* itself are most welcome.

Subscription information can be found on page 19 of this issue. For those who joined the *Society* in 1992, please use the subscription form to *renew* your membership. Your prompt response is greatly appreciated. For those who are new to the *Society*, consider joining us.

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continued from page 1
sade and pilgrimage. Francis embraced this instability of life on the road. The phrase in his *Later Rule*, 'as pilgrims and strangers in this world who serve the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go begging for alms with full trust', expresses an understanding of discipleship that accords substantially with the evangelical and penitential movements of his age.

A revisionist approach to history also underlines the need for a critical awareness of the way in which traditions, as they develop, often spiritualized and formalized the original values and treated the structures that expressed them as absolute or normative. For example, we would have a quite unhistorical picture of the origins of the Franciscan movement if we accepted, in an uncritical way, St. Bonaventure's portrayal of St. Francis's decision to lead a life of radical poverty as solely the result of

a sudden inspiration at mass while listening to a reading of Matthew, chapter 10.

A further issue is that certain individuals are given star quality in traditions as they develop not merely in accordance with spiritual criteria but also for more worldly motives—for example, they support an acceptable understanding of the tradition. Thus, while, at first glance, our spiritual inheritance may appear to offer impressive variety and breadth, there is in fact an 'underside' to that history. We are largely unaware of this because it has been screened out as traditions establish themselves and move in particular directions rather than others.

There seem to me to be certain fundamental priorities which have to a great extent controlled the development of spirituality and how it was viewed or recorded. One overall priority really summarizes the remainder—that of the *institution and au-*

thority structures. However, it is possible to distinguish some subsidiary features. Firstly, the value of *orthodoxy* frequently meant the priority of majority over minority, 'winners' over 'losers', those who get their ideas across over the less articulate. *Conformity to the centre* valued uniformity over pluralism, Establishment over new ventures, a universal culture over local experience. Finally, the *clerical-monastic* tone gave priority to special 'ways' over normal Christian life and spiritual over material reality. These priorities point to a number of questions about history which may help us to focus our attempts to look more critically at the past and to revise our vision of it. Who was holy and what was holy? Who creates or controls spirituality? What directions were not taken? Where are the groups that did not fit? Taken together, these questions focus on one basic issue: the ways in which certain groups become insiders, and others outsiders, in the history of spirituality.

The pages of Christian history are strewn with marginalized people and traditions as well as forgotten or disparaged ideas. Allowing for an inner weakness in some of them, it seems nonetheless fair to say that many have been left behind or actively repressed in the name of progress, institutional development or orthodoxy. Equally, dominant traditions have usually developed from early flexibility and fluidity to a greater institutionalization, characterized by structures and clear formulations of the spiritual vision. The proponents of dominant forms of spirituality would claim that ultimately both processes were in the name of truth. However, in our own century such cataclysmic events as the Holocaust have caused much heart-searching about Christian history and have heightened our consciousness of its ambiguity. More recently our sensitivities have been finely tuned by the awareness of the effects of patriarchy and other forms of exploitation to which feminist and liberationist movements draw our attention. It seems that we can no longer avoid the need to approach even our cherished spiritual traditions and their history in a much more critical fashion. [From *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* by Philip Sheldrake, S.J. Copyright (c) Philip Sheldrake, 1991. Reprinted by permission of The Crossroad Publishing Company.] ■

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Spirituality and the Process of History <i>by Philip Sheldrake, S.J.</i>	1
Apostolic Religious Life: Recovering a Lost Spirituality SHELDRAKE, <i>SPIRITUALITY AND HISTORY</i> <i>by Mary Milligan, R.S.H.M.</i>	4
Spirituality and the Particular SHELDRAKE, <i>SPIRITUALITY AND HISTORY</i> <i>by William Short, O.F.M.</i>	6
Spirituality and History: Keeping the Conversation Going <i>by Philip Sheldrake, S.J.</i>	8
Christian Spirituality and History <i>by Rowan Williams</i>	10
The Call of Love: Medieval Readings of the Song of Songs MATTER, <i>THE VOICE OF MY BELOVED</i> <i>by Elizabeth Dreyer</i>	11
Cornelia Connelly's Bold Vision FLAXMAN, <i>A WOMAN STYLE'D BOLD</i> <i>by Joann Wolski Conn</i>	14
Saving the Soul from the Discard Pile MOORE, <i>CARE OF THE SOUL</i> <i>by Michael O'Laughlin</i>	16
Exploring Prayer FOSTER, <i>PRAYER: FINDING THE HEART'S TRUE HOME</i> <i>by Bradley C. Hanson</i>	18
Letter from Waco: Millennial Spirituality and the Branch Davidians <i>by Bill Pius</i>	19

Friday Evening, November 19: *Experience and the Study of Spirituality*

Janet Ruffing, S.M., Fordham University: Moderator/Facilitator

Belden C. Lane, St. Louis University: *Galesburg and Sinai: The Researcher as Participant in the Study of Spirituality and Sacred Place*

Douglas Burton-Christie, Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley: *The Cost of Interpretation: Sacred Texts and Ascetic Practice in Desert Spirituality*

Saturday Morning, November 20: *Anthropological, Historical and Theological Approaches to the Study of Spirituality.*

Joann Wolski Conn, Neumann College, Presiding

Bradley Hanson, Luther College, *Theological Influences on Spirituality--Lutheran Spirituality.*

Walter Principe, University of St. Michael's College: *What Contexts Need our Attention as We Read Historical Works in Spirituality?*

Sandra M. Schneiders, Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley: *The Field of Christian Spirituality within the Global Horizon of the Academy*

Philip Sheldrake, S. J., Heythrop College, London: Respondent.