Spiritual Revolt: Learning from Albert Camus

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IN PROPOSING the theme of spiritual revolt in two of Camus' best known novels, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, I am conscious of the danger of repeating ideas that may not be new to people who are well-acquainted with his oeuvre. Because, for all that he is a prominent light in the French existentialist movement, Camus possesses a strong spiritual dimension that has been well documented by critics such as Jean Onimus who examined in detail the links between the writer and Christianity. While acknowledging that there is not the slightest trace of 'formal' religion in the writer/philosopher, Onimus still maintains that there beat within him elements that show that he was a searcher after truth and a man who had known pain in his own life. I quote the critic:

But there is in him the trace of a scar, even an open wound, precisely that which occurs in every lucid consciousness in the wake of 'the death of God'. The 'heart of the problem' in Camus is 'religious' if one refers by this term to what is at the origins of religions: existential anguish, the sense of guilt, the horror of death, the atrocious experience of the Absurd.¹

The reasons why Camus chose to say No to God are not simple, as we shall see. His spiritual revolt was conditioned to some extent by his conviction that an all-loving and all-powerful God could not allow the suffering and death of little children. When Dr Rieux in *La Peste* is asked by Tarrou why he doesn't believe in God, he replies: 'that if he believed in an all-powerful God, he would stop curing patients, and leave that task


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to the Almighty.' This view closely resembles that of Camus himself who was not interested in doctrines, dogmas or systems but rather in finding a way to live in the midst of despair. In 1943, he noted that his problem with Christianity was that it was 'a doctrine of injustice' and he added:

I am not a philosopher. I do not believe enough in reason to believe in any system. What interests me is how a man can carry on when he doesn’t have faith in God or in reason. 3

In l’Homme révolté, he made the point that a revolution is always accomplished against the gods: 'The notion of a personal god-creator, and therefore responsible for all things, alone gives meaning to human protest. Thus one can say, and without paradox, that the history of revolt in the western world is inseparable from that of Christianity.' 4 Many historians would accept those sentiments. Jean Onimus gives his interpretation:

Was not Christianity itself in its origins animated by the spirit of revolt? Better still, it had favoured the sudden appearance of individual consciousness by locating the source of salvation within the soul and promoting the notion of personal responsibility; it helped our lucidity to mature. 5

Several committed Christians – and in this they resemble Camus – had, and have, their doubts about organised religion, just as they are uncertain about what role spirituality should play in governing our behaviour or existence. Revolt for the mystic is an almost daily occurrence. It is a feasible argument that without this movement of revolt it is impossible to live an authentic Christian life. Georges Bernanos’ characters, even his saints – some might say particularly his saints – often rebel against the silence of God. This might surprise some people with only a superficial knowledge of his writings, and who know him simply as being one of the great defenders of Catholicism in France. When you love a cause, as

2. La Peste, in Albert Camus: Théâtre, récits, nouvelles, Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1962, p. 1322. Quotes from The Stranger and The Plague will be from this edition. The translations will be my own.
3. Ibid., p. 1937.
5. Ibid., pp. 39-40.
Bernanos loved Catholicism, it gives you a special insight into its inadequacies as well as its strengths. What disturbed Bernanos above all else were people who were lukewarm in their spiritual allegiance, those who didn’t burn with inner fervour. Mystics have to come to the painful realisation that God becomes presence in his absence.

I view revolt in Camus in a positive light. Jean Grenier, in his Introduction to the Pléiade edition of Camus’ plays and novels, makes the following observation:

If his opposition to faith was absolute, it should nevertheless be borne in mind that this opposition constituted a homage to faith itself. It also revealed that the writer took seriously, or rather tragically depending on the circumstances, the problem posed by suffering and death ... It should be said first and foremost that if what is referred to as religiosity has no place in his work, there is nevertheless an intense attachment to the sacred.  

Camus was a believer in the grandeur of man, a grandeur that was poignant because of the fragility and precariousness of the human condition. According to him, man strives towards love and life, a quest that is condemned to failure because of our mortality. He finds himself engulfed in a void or a vacuum from which he cannot escape. Rieux observes in a tone that echoes the approach of Camus: ‘I am in the dark and I’m trying to see clearly.’ (The Plague, p. 1322) The novels are one of Camus’s ways of trying to ‘see clearly’; and we will now turn our attention to two of them, The Stranger, and The Plague.

**THE STRANGER**

The Stranger is a novel whose main character, Meursault, is a child of nature, a man given to hedonistic pleasures. He has no religious convictions whatever, no sense of sin or guilt. In his Preface to the novel, Camus stated that his character is condemned in a court of law, not necessarily for the crime of killing an Arab under a blinding North African sun, but rather because he refuses to play the game. He remains aloof from the preoccupations of those who are judging him, is incapable of lies and deceit and remains on the margins of what would be referred to as ‘re-

spectable' society. He shows no remorse for his crime even when the *juge d'instruction* tries to convert him by dramatically drawing attention to the figure of the crucified Christ. The magistrate is flabbergasted by Meursault's statement that he doesn't believe in God:

He told me that that was impossible, that everyone believed in God, even those who turned away from His face. That was his firm conviction and it ever came to pass that he came to doubt it, his life would no longer have any meaning. (*The Stranger*, p. 1175)

It is clear that the magistrate is searching as much for his own spiritual comfort as to save the prisoner. When his attempts at proselytising fail, he automatically assumes that he is dealing with a hardened soul, a man therefore without emotion or remorse. For example, when asked by the magistrate if he regrets what he has done, Meursault replies 'that what I felt was less regret than a kind of annoyance.' (*The Stranger*, p. 1176) This is the type of reaction that gets him into hot water. At his mother's funeral, he doesn't cry or appear crestfallen. The day after the burial he meets Marie when out swimming and later she and he go to see a comic film. They then spend the night together.

With these examples of indifference to his mother and lack of respect for her memory, the prosecution case will consist of proving that Meursault showed himself to possess a criminal soul in the lead-up to the shooting. His lack of dissimulation leads ultimately to his execution. In the early days of his incarceration, he misses his cigarettes, sexual contact with Marie, the smell of her hair, the dresses she wore, the sea and the sun. But he does not display any regret about his crime.

His moment of revolt comes when the prison chaplain refuses to leave him alone. Three times, Meursault refuses to meet him on the eve of his execution - I wonder if there is some analogy here with Christ's three falls on the climb of Calvary. When he discovers that his appeal has been rejected, his reaction is to state: 'Everyone knows that life isn't worth living.' (p. 1206) We all have to die at some stage and Meursault's view is that entering eternity a bit sooner than expected doesn't really matter too much. He seems reasonably prepared to meet his fate until the arrival of the chaplain finally ruffles his calm exterior.

Again, the priest wants to talk about God and will not accept the con-
demned man's total lack of faith in an after-life. The hero, or anti-hero, firmly believes that there is nothing, no afterlife, no divine presence after death. There will only be silence and sleep. All goes reasonably well until the priest has the temerity to say that he will pray for the prisoner. Something snaps in Meursault at this moment. It might be his annoyance at the way his trial took place without any real reference to him; the way they constantly underlined his insensitivity to his mother or how they portrayed him as being an unfeeling monster. He probably has had his fill also of people like the magistrate and the chaplain trying to convert him. A torrent of invective issues forth:

I unleashed on him my most heartfelt bile in a manner that brought me a mixture of joy and anger. He was so sure of himself, wasn't he? ... What did I care about other people's deaths, the love of a mother? What had his God got to do with me? What difference did it make to me what sort of lives other people led, the destinies that befell them? After all, my destiny was already decided upon, along with those of billions of privileged people who, like him, declared themselves my friends. (The Stranger, pp. 1210-11)

It is significant that after this interlude he gains a certain peace. He thinks of his mother who, with death so near, must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom. He feels that way himself now: it's as if the torrent of anger has somehow purged him of all fear, filled him with a heightened appreciation of the beauty of a nature that he is soon to leave behind. And so he notes: 'For the first time in my life, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the outside world.' (The Plague, p. 1211)

Meursault does not particularly want to die but he is enabled to do so with dignity by his recall of the happy moments he has lived; the time spent in the company of Marie and of his mother, the walks on the streets when he was able to observe the daily routine of life, the rays of the sun reflecting on the sea. His stoicism and courage in the face of death are most admirable in one who has no obvious religious beliefs. Were he a believer, we might speak of grace. It may be appropriate to call it thus in any case.

When Camus, in his Preface to the American edition of The Stranger,
stated that Meursault was the 'only Christ that we deserve', he was not casting aspersions on his character or on Christ. No, he was merely pointing out that contemporary civilisation was not capable of accepting someone who deviates so far from the norm.

Meursault appears to be more noble – certainly more honest – than those who sit in judgement of him. The magistrate and the chaplain seem to be part of a group of people who look on religion as a safeguard against suffering and despair. In the end, they are perceived to be the weak ones, they who have never questioned the basis on which their faith rests. Meursault disturbs them in their complacent approach to life and religion. They are moved to ask themselves if by some horrible miscalculation on their part, he could be right.

Camus was very aware of the questions his book posed to those who take the safe option. By drawing a parallel between his character and Christ, he was provoking a reaction from his readers, forcing them to consider other possibilities than those determined by appearances. Revolt plays an important role in bringing about a spiritual peace in his hero before he mounts the steps to his execution where his wish is 'that there will be plenty of witnesses ... and that they'll greet me with shouts of hatred.' (The Stranger, p. 1212) All of which reinforces the link to Christ, whose own execution is explained in the following manner by the French priest-writer, Jean Sulivan:

The fundamental reason why Jesus has to die makes the question of responsibility for his assassination pointless. Every society, Jewish or Gentile, that is founded on money, power and law, condemns him. He puts people first, making economics and politics less important than men and women. In contrast, society, even when it says the opposite, ... considers individuals simply as a means. 

7 Morning Light. The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sulivan, (Trans. Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally), New York: Paulist Press, 1988, p. 75. It is intriguing to see how the tone you come across in Camus and Sulivan is so similar. Maybe the fact that they were born in the same year, 1913, and lost their fathers in the trenches of World War I, lived through the tumult of France during and after the second War, led them to think along the same lines.
The Plague provides more obvious references to spiritual revolt than The Stranger does. Its theme is more universal, involving the citizens of a city and not just one individual. The disease that grips the inhabitants of Oran is a metaphor for the ennui that lay at the heart of Vichy France. There are arguments as to the cause of the plague: is it a punishment visited on the population by God, as is argued by the Jesuit priest, Paneloux, in his first sermon after the outbreak has assumed significant proportions? Dr Rieux, who is to the forefront in the struggle to contain the outbreak – it also transpires that it is he who narrates the story – notes that the first thing the plague brought to the town was exile: ‘Yes, it was unquestionably the feeling of exile – this sensation of an inner void that never left our bodies, the unreasonable desire to go back in time or else to speed up the passage of time along with the burning darts of memory.’ (The Plague, p. 1276) Unlike Paneloux, Rieux doesn’t see the plague as a punishment.

The contrasting views of the doctor, the man of reason and science, and the Jesuit, the representative of religion, are of the utmost importance in understanding the positions dramatised by Camus in the novel. For all that the priest is an honourable man, and an intelligent one, he doesn’t carry the same moral authority as Rieux. The doctor is pitted against the ravages of the disease on a constant basis. He is at people’s bedsides when they take their last breath. He sees their ravaged faces, smells their putrefying bodies and feels helpless. As a man of science, he seeks out the medical causes for the plague and urges his colleagues to find an antidote. He accepts that religious belief might aid in the fight against death. At no stage, however, does he contemplate believing in a God who refuses to intervene to put an end to human suffering.

It is when a significant struggle to save the life of the Othon boy fails that he turns to Paneloux for some explanation of the horror of this death. Shortly before this key episode in the book, Rieux had stated: ‘Maybe God is better off that we don’t believe in him and that we struggle with all with all our might against death without once rising our eyes towards heaven, where he observes our efforts in silence.’ (The Plague, p. 1323) But there comes a moment when all you can do is hope for some sort of miracle. Paneloux had prayed to God to save the child – Rieux
had heard him. After seeing the small mouth fouled by the sores of the plague and hearing the angry death-cry that emanated from it, the priest, like all those witnessing the spectacle, is shaken to the core. Rieux cannot stem the anger within him and says: ‘That child was innocent and you know it!’ *(The Plague, p. 1396)* It is an unfair verbal assault on the priest who is as shaken as everyone else at what has happened. Rieux apologises subsequently for his outburst, offering the following explanation: ‘Please forgive me but tiredness makes me say foolish things. For the last number of hours in this blasted city I can feel nothing but my revolt.’ *(The Plague, p. 1397)*

His revolt at the injustice of what happened to the child brings the doctor to the edge of despair that marks an important stage in the spiritual itinerary of those mystics who experience the dark night of the soul. In *l’Homme révolté* Camus observed that for God to be man he had to experience despair: ‘He would have had to endure very little agony if there was always in the background the certainty of eternal happiness.’

*The Plague* traces the growing paralysis of all but a few of the inhabitants of a city that is under siege. Some people show an admirable ability to fight the spread of the contagion with no thoughts for their personal safety. Despite his moment of despair, Rieux manages to overcome his fatigue and to carry on the fight. Paneloux says to him in relation to the death of the child: ‘Maybe, just maybe, we have to love what we cannot understand.’ *(The Plague, p. 1397)* In a subsequent sermon he notes that, while people might be able to justify that a libertine be struck down, very few could find any good reason for a child’s suffering.

Camus does not highlight such profound spiritual issues without having thought about them deeply. He knew that his was the type of question to which no answer exists. His life, like that of many artists, was a quest which involved much searching but without the reward in significant discoveries. ‘Loving what we cannot understand’ is perhaps the essence of faith. Rebelling against injustice in all its guises shows a depth of feeling, a passion of the kind that animated and inspired a writer like Bernanos.

The crunch comes for Paneloux when he is struck down by the plague.

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In a first draft of the novel, Camus depicted him losing his faith. In the completed version, however, Paneloux undergoes a feeling of abandonment and disbelief but holds on to his religious convictions. The words of a sermon he had preached a short time before now assume a particular resonance for him, however: 'My brothers and sisters, the time has come. We need to believe in or deny everything. And who among us would dare to deny everything?' *(The Plague, p. 1402)*

Such a Pascalian wager, however, may not be fully reassuring when you are placed in the position of knowing that you are going to die. Rieux asks if he can help in any way and the priest replies: 'No, thank you. Priests have no friends — they have placed all their love in God.' *(The Plague, p. 1402)* He then asks for the crucifix and turns his head away to contemplate it. The priest reaches a reasonable level of acceptance that his fate is the will of God.

His decision to hold the crucifix shows Paneloux to be aware of the important role suffering plays in the life of all Christians. Injustice is also at the centre of the Christian experience — the crucifixion of its Founder was not in any way fair, after all. The paradox of becoming poor to be rich, of dying in order to live, of losing in order to gain, is at the heart of the Gospel message also.

The teaching that the Son of God became man and went as far as to suffer a human death in order to save the world, requires a significant leap of faith to be accepted and believed.

It didn’t all quite add up for Camus who was unfortunate to come to Christianity through figures such as Augustine, Pascal and Kierkegaard — none of whom is renowned for his joyful approach. Camus was a man with a zest for life and was never so happy as when engaged in physical activity. He was clearly fascinated with the tenets of the Christian faith but saw too many uncertainties for him to commit to it. He had the same problem with any system of thought or belief. After all, he recognised that existentialism tended to glorify that which crushes man by using reason to present an absurd view of existence.
Camus always preferred experience to reason, and it may have been this that led him to have Rieux note towards the end of *The Plague*: ‘This night was one of deliverance and not of revolt.’ *(The Plague, p. 1473)* He sees an end to his revolt and, like Meursault, achieves a certain feeling of peace, of calm after the storm. The mood of the last lines of the novel is positive with regard to the ultimate goodness of humanity. Rieux can thus say ‘that there are more things to admire than to disdain in Man-kind.’ *(The Plague, p. 1473)*

**SOLIDARITY**

The sacred, as pointed out by Jean Grenier and Jean Onimus, is ever-present in Camus’ writings. Revolt for him cannot be dissociated from love and passion. To be a blasphemer requires you to have spiritual convictions deep within you. What Camus rails against is a complacent brand of Christianity, one that is designed to make people feel comfortable, good about themselves. Camus has the ability to see beyond darkness to the light at the end of the tunnel. His restless soul is aware of its exile in an absurd world and it seeks out reasons to go on living.

Though Camus never embraced the formal rituals of religious practice, the spiritual revolt that occurs in some of his novels marks him out as a man of compassion and courage, a writer who almost unconsciously evokes the Absolute. Once more, the sentiments expressed by Rieux—he is having a discussion with Tarrou about how one can be a saint without believing in God—capture the essence of Camus’ philosophy:

> Do you know something: I feel more solidarity with the defeated than I do with saints. I have no real affinity, I think, with heroism or sanctity. All I’m interested in is how to be a man. *(The Plague, p. 1427)*

It is no small task being a man in a society racked by doubt and uncertainty, anguish and revolt. Rieux only managed it through maintaining confidence in a humanity that was weak, fragile and yet also capable of great deeds when people are rallied behind a worthy cause.

I will conclude with a quotation from a letter that Camus addressed to Roland Barthes after the publication of *The Plague* in which he attempted to enlighten the critic about some aspects of the novel. In his view, *The Plague* shows the evolution from individual revolt to a sense of solidarity.
with our fellow human beings:

Without any possible doubt, compared to *The Stranger*, *The Plague* marks the passage from an attitude of solitary revolt to a recognition of a community whose struggles one must share in. If there is an evolution from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it manifested itself in a feeling of solidarity and participation.\(^9\)


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**Teaching convincingly on sexual morality** – Even within the church the use of argument is important, since even those who accept the church’s authority must be convinced that the church’s teaching is rational if their conscience is to be formed aright. As far as concerns sex, this use of argument is particularly vital nowadays, when many people who in general accept the teaching authority of the church find they cannot do so in the sphere of sexual ethics, where what the church teaches on, say, extramarital sex or contraception or homosexuality seems to them so plainly wrong. To be so in disagreement with a church of which one wishes to be a loyal member is to be in an awkward, sometimes painful position. Such people are not helped by a simple re-assertion of the church’s authority to teach, or by repetition of the disputed teaching. For those in difficulties authority is not enough. They may be clear about what is taught, and they know that the teaching body claims authority, but their difficulty expresses itself in the question why it is taught. They need to be convinced. They may in the course of time be convinced by their own experience of life, but meanwhile arguments – from scripture, reason and observation – are an essential tool of persuasion.

Gareth Moore OP, *The Body in Context: Sex and Catholicism*