



The Small God Limited Dharma Syndrome

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There is a major obstacle of ego that is rarely brought to our awareness. This is SGLD, the *small-god-limited-dharma* syndrome. It is the most pernicious manifestation of ego that so readily escapes our attention - this syndrome of the small god and the limited path of practice. We choose not to recognize our ego in it, yet this denial allows fundamentalism and conservative hierarchies to assume responsibility for our spirituality.

This is painfully pertinent for North American spirituality at this time. Bernard Law, erstwhile Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston may be remembered for the ultra conservatism he introduced and propagated throughout the Roman Catholic Church in America (Manning, 2002b). At one time seen as a natural successor to Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Law presented a wrecking ball to the reforms set in motion by the Second Vatican Council. Since the 1980's he very effectively stifled creative theological education in America's Catholic colleges and schools. This ultra conservative shift, following his donning of the Cardinal's robes, torpedoed the engaged agenda of the U.S. Catholic Bishop's conference. This was diverted away from peace and social issues into a doctrinal conservatism that was anti feminist at best, at worst it provided complicity and cover-up for the sexual misconduct of the Catholic clergy. With such conservatism and elevation of the church hierarchy onto insurmountable pedestals, the credo of the Roman Catholic Church of America in the latter part of the 20th century was that of face saving, cover up and complicity with respect to pedophile priests. With clear knowledge of their sexual abuse of minors the church hierarchy moved pedophile priests from one parish to another, knowingly exposing yet other communities of innocent children to sexual abuse. At no time did the Archdiocese deliver those guilty of criminal activity to the police.

In 1990 the Winter Commission prepared a report on large-scale sexual abuse in the Catholic Archdiocese of St. John's in Newfoundland. The revelations lead to the

resignation of the Archbishop. Dozens of Bishops and hundreds of their clergy were also drummed out of office by the courts over sexual abuse charges (Manning, 2002b). Yet the hierarchy of Archbishops and Bishops were re-assigned to other high-ranking posts within the church! Similarly Bernard Law, former Cardinal of Boston can look forward to a high-ranking appointment at the Vatican now that his resignation has been forced. However, he may also look forward to criminal charges for his complicity in the criminal behavior of his priests, and for his protection of them at the cost of abuse suffered by children.

In St John's, as in Boston, the Vatican conducted damage control and attempted to place responsibility elsewhere. The Winter Commission had pointed out very clearly that the causes of corruption, abuse and oppression in the American Catholic Church: "lie within the authoritarian, hierarchical and triumphalist male celibate culture that adamantly refuses to accept the fact that it is caught in a deadly time warp" (Manning, 2002b). These same sentiments were expressed in a much earlier report that had been kept secret for over thirty years. It was prepared by Dr. C. Baars for the 1971 Synod of Bishops at the Vatican. The unpublished report by Dr. Baars, a Catholic psychiatrist from Minnesota, states clearly the preponderance of "psychosexual immaturity" in 1500 priests whose records he had meticulously studied. His conclusions and warnings in 1971 were startling to the Vatican Synod of Bishops – they feared its challenge and totally suppressed it.

In his 1971 report, *The Role of the Church in the Causation, Treatment and Prevention of the Crisis in the Priesthood*, Dr. Baars pointed out in crystal clear fashion that there was a safety net within the Roman Catholic Church of only 15% of all priests in Europe and America. He meant by this, that only 15% of the clergy at that time were stable and sound in terms of emotional development, the rest were psychosexual time bombs waiting to explode. This highly prophetic work contained specific recommendations for reform and change to save the church. None were considered. None were implemented. Although Dr. Baars died in 1981 his work is now surfacing in the 21st century providing evidence that the culpability of the church hierarchy extends to the uppermost reaches of

the Vatican. The world's Catholic Bishops knew of the situation in 1971, as does the present Pope John Paul II, as he attended the 1971 Synod as Bishop of Krakow. They were clearly warned at that time that the majority of priests in America were "...suffering from psychosexual immaturity...and severe to moderate frustration neurosis" (Baars, 1971).

Cardinal Law's downfall in 2002 was at the hands of a lay Catholic group and a progressive priests' group from within the church (Manning, 2002b). This together with class action legal suits by the victims of sexual abuse may well bankrupt the Archdiocese of Boston. But more than that, there is clear indication that the conservatism of Cardinal Law and the 1971 Synod of Bishops is no longer acceptable in America, no matter what the Vatican attempts to cover up. Conservatism of this nature is out of step with modern times. Yet incredibly the sexual abuse of children was just an anachronism that the Roman Catholic Church in America was prepared to tolerate. The Cardinal and his Bishops not only turned a blind eye to criminal behavior, they were complicit in hiding the perpetrators of crimes against children. The general public feels differently and now holds both the pedophile priests and the church hierarchy to account.

How can anyone grow spiritually under the yoke of this kind of oppression? It is not only in the United States that the church hierarchy is being held to account. In Canada, the conservative religious elite who controlled the Residential School System for aboriginal children provided a license for physical, sexual and emotional abuse of native children who had been forcibly removed from their families. This is perhaps the blackest part of Canada's history and it is not yet over. While the schools have all been closed, there are class action law suits against the churches responsible for the abuse of children, which may have the lasting effect of several churches in Canada disappearing after they file for bankruptcy.

Conservatism and fundamentalism are replete in other religions that are part of the 21st century North American spiritual landscape. It is not that one religious tradition is more prone to abuse and oppression than any other – it is simply that the specter of

conservatism and fundamentalism provides the causes and conditions for abuse and oppression to flourish as a consequence of the *small-god-limited-dharma* syndrome. Conservative Buddhist hierarchies within America that protect elderly ethnic elites are similarly oppressive – whether the elite hierarchy originates from Sri Lanka, Tibet or Vietnam. Yet conservatism and fundamentalism are not specific to any particular zone of time and space. In the early days of Buddhism it took the brilliance and insight of the lay practitioner Vimalakurti to expose the limitations of exclusive monasticism. Furthermore the doctrine of a limited path of practice came under his withering fire. None of the Buddha's disciples could withstand the full force of Vimalakurti's insightful brilliance except Manjushri. Thich Nhat Hanh (2002) describes Vimalakurti's dialogue with Manjushri as:

..a kind of artillery, strong mortars directed to monasticism as an institution, directed against the conservative trend of Buddhism. The attack was merciless and monastics were presented as having very small insight, very small wisdom and very small liberation. Their Nirvana was very small.

Vimalakurti put conservatism within early Buddhism under such a fierce attack that a new form of sutra emerged – the Mahayana Sutras. They endeavor to reveal the best things in the Buddhist tradition, to manifest the flowers that have not had a chance to bloom due to the monastic community's conservatism (Hanh 2002). Vimalakurti declined to become a monk as he felt that a lay practitioner could achieve all that a monastic could. At the same time he opened wide the generous teachings of the Buddha so that ALL of the Buddha's followers – lay and monastic – could participate in the same practice. Furthermore, he made it clear that all practitioners could experience for themselves the full fruit of practice - to awaken to the Buddhahood within. He maintained that it was possible for him to practice as a lay person and become a Buddha (Hanh, 2002). Vimalakurti totally changed the conservative foundation that early Buddhism was settling into and his mortars into the small path/limited liberation of Buddhist form are reflected in the Lotus Sutra – the pinnacle of all Mahayana sutras.

Periodic challenges such as his are essential to every religious tradition. As Buddhism settles into North American soil which face will it reflect? The self-interests of

conservative, elderly ethnic enclaves who feel they have the only worthwhile expression, one that upholds their hierarchy – is that it? I do not think so. The face of North American Buddhism will emerge from teachers inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and other generous teachers who are willing to cross boundaries of habit, form and ethnicity. It will take a few lay bodhisattvas with Vimalakurti's brilliance and insight to step forward because conservatism is quite ruthless when challenged. Its natural reaction is to discredit or destroy anyone perceived as a challenge. Yet as the Archdiocese in Boston has discovered to its cost, this hierarchical form of reaction no longer works. Public accountability and transparency are the order of the day. Religious conservatism does not appeal to the North American mainstream. Young people in particular are opposed to the dubious authority and abuse they see emanating from religious conservatism. Former Catholic nun Joanna Manning (2002a) performs a parallel task with her book *Take Back the Truth: Confronting Papal Power and the Religious Right*. Also the progressive priests' group – Voice of the Ordained – have initiated a similar mortar attack on the conservative bastions within American Catholicism.

The conservative base of Islamic fundamentalism so distorts the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed that it becomes frightening how discourses from an awakened mind can be so manipulated to control, discriminate and oppress. Fundamentalist Islam has replaced Marxism as the predominant creed for those who feel alienated and dispossessed. As most of the globe qualifies with these characteristics, the distortion of Islam in the hands of fundamentalists can readily recruit soldiers and suicide bombers anywhere for its conveniently defined *jihad*. What is forgotten in the process is that the term *jihad* originally referred to an individual's engagement with his own spiritual darkness within. Just as the excesses of Marxism in the early 20th century, particularly under Stalin, made corpses and victims of millions, so also may fundamentalist Islam do the same for the early part of the 21st century. That is, until it is challenged and rethought by "Vimalakurtis" emerging from within Islam.

What I communicate to the reader about the state of American spirituality applies wherever conservatism and fundamentalism have taken root. Conservatism and

fundamentalism provide a license for oppression and create victims, all in the name of a different God – a small god - that has no resemblance to the teachings of Jesus, the Buddha and the Prophet Mohammed. It is all a pernicious and often undetected manifestation of the human ego searching for personal power and control, forgetting the reality of spiritual depth, which is the true *jihad*. As this book is likely to be read more widely in North America than elsewhere, I refer to the spiritual reality there, but must point out that the ego-laden spirituality of a small god is a dead end everywhere for anyone's spiritual journey. It is a brick wall that brings the meditative journey to an abrupt halt, as artifice, distortion and expediency become the attributes of faith rather than that of awakening and oneness with God. For progress along the path of understanding we require a spiritual tradition that is alive and expansive, relevant to the modern world through its ability to address current issues of suffering.

We must be very aware of the implacable forces of conservatism and fundamentalism, which place an iron grip round the neck of any spiritual tradition they dominate, stifling transformation both for the tradition and of the individuals who adhere to it. A tradition that encourages expansive insight supports an exit from the false comfort zone of conservatism and fundamentalism, putting the pilgrim on a path of full understanding. The religious expression that supports the full unfolding of the meditative journey is deeply rooted in the Ultimate Truth expressed through the awakened minds of the great Masters. This is not to be confused with later adherents to the faith who keep their flock bound with limitations, fearful of a small and vengeful god and who impose impossible restrictions on entering paradise, the Kingdom of God. The mind of love does not develop under these strictures. Furthermore, the possibility of everyone having the potential for enlightenment is not a currency the followers of the teachings are made aware of.

Under-achieving believers are the order of the day until fundamentalism and conservatism are cast aside as limiting conditions. For the truth is that we can all be Bodhisattvas and Buddhas – that is the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. This requires a generous and expansive tradition of dharma and practice to flower. Under a conservative

and fundamentalist regimen this potential flower withers away because of the limited consciousness and small path that is conveyed. This cannot water the seeds of the Bodhisattva who dwells in everybody's consciousness. The journey through the many levels of meditative experience can only run its course when supported by generous dharma and enlightened teachers.

A small god, a limited path of practice, a restricted dharma – they are not worth the effort.

This article is the last section of a chapter on Levels of Meditation in Ian's forthcoming book: "Living Breath: Stories, Essays and Meditations."

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