



Soul Music

Some years ago it was reported that a man tried to sell his soul online. The man, living near Shanghai, listed his soul on China's top online auction site. He attracted bids from 58 potential buyers before the posting was pulled, reported The China Daily.

"We reviewed [our] policies and realised we had no specific policy on the selling of souls," said a spokesman for the company, adding that they were not opposed in principle to the idea, but wanted more proof that the seller had ownership of the goods being offered.

The spokesman added "After some discussion, we decided [to] allow the man to sell his soul on (our site), but only if he can provide written permission from a 'higher authority'".

It's a strange world. And the Christian explorer – in the midst of it and terrifyingly and wonderfully a part of it – needs as much a sense of irony and humour as critical judgement in navigating it. It's the only way to remain remotely sane and human.

This story of online soul-selling is interesting for at least a couple of reasons: one is the idea that our soul might belong exclusively to 'a higher authority' and not to us at all; another because, well, we humans are busy selling our souls all the time and have been doing so long before eBay and its equivalents appeared on the scene.

I think I understand why the Christian tradition speaks of the soul not being ours but being God's: for we dare to believe that this mysterious configuration of unique identify, consciousness, self-awareness, grace, grumpiness, corruption and sheer

puzzle (- that's you and me, by the way -) is called into being, and out of nothing, by this God who is simply an irrepressible creator.

The one who calls you into being has – so the thinking goes – a continuing claim upon you; a claim we express in various ways, not least liturgically in the words sometimes used at the Offertory of the Eucharist - 'all things come from you, and of your own do we give you', and at death where we commend the soul on its return to God's estate.

But an exclusive claim? That's an interesting question. Might we have some claim upon our own souls, some shared equity, a minority or even controlling interest in it perhaps? After all, we don't want to infantilise ourselves or one another in the way that Christian practice sometimes has when it portrays God as the all-seeing and all-controlling one, even, some would say, possessive.

Far from that domineering image of God, it appears to many that God is in fact vulnerable, for love's sake, and that the continuing business of creation requires our participation in some essential, indispensable way. The instrument we have is that of our very selves: our bodies and minds; the work of our hands, the objects of our care, the use of our time; in short who we are and who, by our efforts and by God's grace, we may become.

That's a pretty exciting possibility. It is not to say there are not difficulties in this life – there are for most people serious difficulties at different stages, unless, perhaps, sleep is chosen in preference to life. It is perfectly possible to sleep-walk through this life, or large chunks of it. This kind of sleep is not of

the restorative eight hours-a-night variety. It is a disconnectedness, a spiritual condition, a sclerosis of the heart and of perception which is far more dangerous than the kind of explicit sin or indulgence we seem to get so bothered about.

And some of those who sleep walk through life in this way are, outwardly, amongst the successful, the impressive, and the magnetic. Strange but true.

The image – the accusation – of ‘being asleep’ is a common one in the Christian tradition (and beyond, of course). And the message is that we are to awake, to shed the false protection of this kind of spiritual coma and instead shoulder the responsibilities of being alert; of being soul-keepers not only of ourselves but of each other. Now, you may think that sounds a little dramatic. It is, because that’s not an unreasonable way of viewing this short and precious life: as a drama – a drama of our creation and redemption, involving risk and possibility. And that is how the Gospels sound if we are able to hear them as if for the first time.

I was born into a moderate, muted and well-behaved family. Sleep-walking was taught from an early age. It was years later that I began to discover other ways of seeing and participating in what revealed itself to be a far more exciting world than I had been allowed to imagine. And of all the encouragements in that awakening, I found one Christian agitator to be a tremendous help, and still do.

Some of you will know of Kierkegaard, born in Denmark in 1813. He viewed the comfortable Christians of his day as fast asleep, in a state of church-sanctioned coma and repose. His aim was to awake them from their slumber, for their souls’ sake. His work – chiefly his writings - caused great scandal.

In Kierkegaard’s view, truth is found through subjectivity, through our individual, unique apprehension of things. He said that we do not find truth through a detached

‘objectivity’ but through a serious and personal engagement with the world. An engagement that often leaves us bruised. He thought that there was a terrible and widespread condition, an epidemic in fact, which he called ‘a sickness unto death’ and which for him was a sickness of the spirit. When people found the courage to begin to address that in themselves they often experienced a sense of despair – dreadful, of course but something he regarded as sign of true hope, a first potential step towards recovery.

Kierkegaard was deeply intolerant of lazy spirituality and believed that the church of his day was guilty of taking the Gospels and turning them into soporific babble.

He insisted that God was wholly ‘other’ and that a huge and infinite gap existed between a human person and God. In consequence the only thing to bridge that chasm was a ‘leap of faith’ – a phrase he first used in a key text published in 1846. Like any leap over a yawning chasm there is risk and uncertainty, with everything of value staked upon it.

One consequence of his emphasis on the relationship between the individual and God was his very deep suspicion of the crowd. Indeed, he wrote of the crowd as being ‘untruth’ and thought that we surrender our individuality whenever we submerge ourselves in the crowd or tribal mentality. He’d give the same warning today about identity politics. Who can doubt his view when we consider the demonic aspects of some mass movements, the madness that overtakes some crowds or when we accidentally come upon an episode of the X Factor? The crowds in the Gospels are spectacularly hopeless at discerning truth, and terrifying good asserting untruth.

Kierkegaard is awkward. His mix of bluntness and irony and apparent intolerance annoy some but for others blast a hole in stultifying approaches to faith and life. He would have understood the claim made by Paul [in today’s first reading] that we have this

treasure (of our lives) in clay jars, earthen vessels. The treasure is to be sought, and, as befits treasure, treasured. Not in any prissy way. This is our soul, and though it may be God's gift and though it may be something we hold in trust for the duration of our lives, we yet have a serious responsibility towards it. And to the nurturing of others' souls.

Who knows what the Shanghai man thought he was doing when auctioning his soul. Maybe he was broke and needed to make some cash. Maybe it was a joke. Maybe he is a Zen Master employing a modern idiom to teach an important lesson. We should be grateful to him as we should to awkward souls such as Kierkegaard and those of our own acquaintance who seek in whatever way to awaken us from sleep.

Life is short, and too precious a gift to only drift through it half awake at best. Whether you think you are the keeper of your soul - your essential self - or its outright owner, it remains a mysterious, wonderful and sometimes frightening faculty. It is not to be sold, traded, loaned, abandoned or ignored.

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