



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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It's time for good news. Political leaders' failure to make the sacrifices necessary for a new global vision transcending the ancestral egotism of nations. The Irish Church's continued self-erosion and its betrayal of the grace of kenosis. An unrepentant greed from those who make money out of nothing at the expense of those who have been fooled into trading in their citizenship for consumerism.

The uncomfortable question of why years of prayer and devotion can reinforce rather than dissolve an innate narcissism.

It is easy to justify pessimism. The Bible is full of it. And it can almost be a relief from the facile optimism peddled by those looking just for another term of office. When the scriptures step into the abyss of darkness and failure, however, they tip into the light. There we find grace in a totally new way that makes hope unavoidable and unpredictably revives and evolves our knowledge of the mystery of God that dissolves every previous idea of God we had clung to.

In *Clockwise* John Cleese plays a militaristic headmaster whose life, in less than a day, unravels with the fatalism of Greek tragedy and the humour of Monty Python. In one scene he despairs and joins a monastery of caricatured misfits, refugees from the real world. He relaxes in a bath, relieved by the absence of hope, till he hears the sound of a car outside and realises he has another chance. 'It is not the despair that hurts?', he complains, 'it's the hope.'

When the media plays with the fire of pessimism it merely flirts with it. We are not given the opportunity to be serious. When the news gets too bad the newsmakers begin to entertain us. Distracted from the truth that lies in the dark corners we turn to feel-good stories and stories of philandering golfers and other peoples' marital woes. Thank God for the weeklies, for the *Tablet* even, who retain our trust in ways that the instant newsmongers and the Big Events can no longer do.

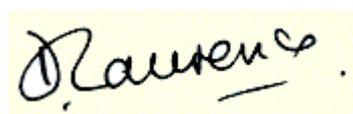
The failure of Copenhagen followed soon after another global event with a less specific agenda that received much less attention, the Parliament for World Religions. Held in a huge conference centre in Melbourne representatives from 230 religions - who would have thought they were so many? - came together at great expense and, yes, with carbon footprints the

size of a yeti ? mostly to talk. It was a visual feast too ? costumes and rituals on display ? and made one love the human race more because it seemed to be God's playground and box of colouring pencils. Egotism was tucked under the robes as usual and demands for global action were hurraed. The Iranians were caught photographing the Bahai, but otherwise it was all good-natured. The networking and idea-spinning, especially among the young participants, promise benefits. It was difficult to evaluate but overall it seemed that religion, despite the people promoting it, was a good thing, a sign of radical human innocence, even a well of hope in a world run dry.

But after the last day I was pleased to step into a taxi to the friendly Catholic Cathedral presbytery that was so graciously accommodating me. I asked the young Indian cabdriver to take me there. He looked evasive. He had no idea what or where the cathedral was. I had forgotten the street name but tried other landmarks which also drew a blank. After a few phone calls and precise directions we set off but my universal good will had haemorrhaged. I tried hard not to vent my irritation but felt it must be obvious. He was looking at me in the mirror and seeing my monastic habit he said "I'm sorry to trouble you sir but are you a kind of priest?" The question hit me hard, as a rebuke, because of my uncharitable mood, but it was not intended.

He was Hindu, deeply religious but now unable to practice because the temple was far away and he had to work all hours. He wanted to know about confession in the Catholic Church and was amazed at the idea. "People can really just go in and talk to a priest about anything?" When we reached the cathedral we stayed talking in the carpark. He told me how worried he was about his mental state and inability to concentrate and his loss of a spiritual life. No, he had never meditated, he said, and he seemed grateful when I explained how he could worship interiorly in the temple of his heart. I gave him the Indian prayer beads someone had given me at the Parliament.

I stepped out, humbled by the epiphany, hope restored, grateful to have felt the gentle breeze of God passing through the realms of the local. The global is sometimes just too big.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, followed by a period.

Laurence Freeman OSB

Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk of the Congregation of Monte Oliveto and also Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation (www.wccm.org)

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