

Values to Live by: A Study of Dependence

By Rev. Bruce Reed

Develops the thesis of the Dynamics of Religion

Many of us instinctively resonate with John Donne's "*No man is an island...*" We accept that all human beings are linked together in a mysterious and cosmic process. But how does this relate to everyday life? In this paper we suggest that an understanding of dependence can explain much of our experience as human beings.

If we consider how much we need to sustain our existence, beginning with parents, air, food, drink, we appreciate that it is natural for human beings to be dependent on other people and things. We probably take them for granted, but if we pause to examine our experience of being dependent, we will discover we have mixed feelings. Sometimes we feel helpless, sometimes strengthened; sometimes fearful, sometimes trusting; hating, or loving, guilty or affirmed, depressed or rejoicing, contemptuous or overawed -- emotions which can combine in unpredictable ways.

Because some activities give us a feeling of well-being, and others a bad feeling, we develop a sense of values. This is the most basic or primitive experience of values -- worth and worth-less experienced in terms of feelings of pleasure and pain which are unattached to the experience of the object that is the source of such feelings. Some things become more important to us than others, and we reject other things as having no positive values. As life goes on, I learn that I value things differently from the way other people value them. The first time we appreciate this difference is a great discovery. People grow up differently, do different things, have different feelings, live and die in different ways, and hence have different values¹. In order to understand these differences in values we wish to focus on two constellations of experience in particular.

First, there are occasions when we look to persons, events, objects for support, encouragement or approval. In looking outwards in this direction we may sometimes be disappointed and feel let down, be discouraged or be under judgement from those we trust. Secondly, at other times we look inside ourselves for strength, certainty and direction. We refuse to rely on anyone else; we want to go it alone and are prepared to take the risk of experiencing failure, confusion and fragmentation. The looking to others is clearly the acceptance of being dependent: the looking to oneself, by contrast, is claiming the right to be autonomous. As we hope to show later, these are not unrelated experiences and can both be viewed as types of dependence.

When we depend on someone/thing external to ourselves, we are acknowledging that it is their values which are important to us. Young children generally champion their parents' attitudes. If love and kindness is dominant in family life, the children will start off from that position in making relationships with others. We want to become *like* those on whom we depend. The process also operates in the reverse direction. We want those upon whom we depend to be

like us, even though they are not *just* like us, and also to like us - to approve of what we do, even how we think and feel. From ancient times men have made gods in their own image and attributed to them their own human qualities and limitations. Dependent relationships are characterised by the wish to be like others, and others to be like us, ie to be incorporated and collectivised. The major error people in this condition can commit is to break this bond and exhibit different behaviour and values, which are felt to threaten the survival of the group: - family, tribe, church or state.

While we have used religious terminology in describing the experience of dependent relationships, the experience applies to all collective and corporate activities, families, clubs, professions, businesses, political parties and nations. It is a natural social process, but like all living things in nature it can be distorted, misshapen and diseased, for example, when incorporation involves homogenisation. To identify its normal functioning we need to discuss the second constellation of experience.

In my seeking to be autonomous, I am implying that I accept that other people will be different from me and that they will allow me to be different from them. In this condition I need to draw on my own capacities, skills and past experience and to fashion these ideas, values and norms into a desired path of action. Whereas in the dependence-on-externals state I am glad and relieved to conform, in this state any pressure from others to conform causes me to feel threatened. In the dependence-on-externals state I take for granted that other people in my group will like me, and I am shocked if they do not: in the autonomous state I do not take their attitudes for granted. I am prepared even to reject them, to fight them, or when it suits us both, to work together as long as our objectives coincide.

The major threat to this autonomous condition comes not from outside but from my own inner world. If self-questioning and self-doubt erode my self-confidence and exhaust my strength, I may crumble. What if I am mistaken in my goals and misjudge the context in which I am living and working? If to the outside world I appear to be independent, I know that I am dependent upon something within, internal to myself, for when I ponder the depths of my inner world I do not 'see' me but objects I have internalized in relation to me. It is on these objects and their qualities that I depend. In my autonomous (literally, self-regulated) state, I can only function to the extent that my inner resources hold out.

This is the language of competition, of pacts and coalitions. It takes us into the market-place and the political arena as well as the battlefield. But the experience of autonomy is also a phase in a natural social process. It is the drive towards a society where human beings can be free to be themselves: it is the struggle which completes the creative cycle and the emergence of scientific understanding. The disease of this autonomous phase of experience is 'independence'.

What is the relation, if any, between these two constellations or modes of experience? Do they point to different types of human beings or to different experiences for the same people? Numerous responses come from a great

variety of cultures, disciplines and civilisations. In this paper there is only space to sketch our own approach.

A) Our thesis is that all human beings are continuously engaging in a process of oscillating between two modes of mental activity or experience, whether or not they are conscious of it.

These two modes are dependence-on-externals and dependence-on-internals. Human development takes place not through a *lineal* progression from dependence to autonomy, from ignorance to knowledge, weak to strong, but through a *cyclic* process whereby human beings individually and collectively are having to relate their inner worlds, their 'me-ness', to their immediate and ultimate contexts, their 'other-ness'.

The mechanics of the oscillation process can be outlined in four recurring phases. Being cyclic, the starting point of the process is arbitrary.

1. We commence where the individual or group is experiencing dependence on something external: a person, idea, dogma, myth or object - a dependent leader, eg a child with its mother. This is the mode of dependence-on-externals (or for convenience, **extra-dependence**). In this phase those who are dependent feel secure, safe and are able to play, to dream, to imagine and to idealise. The relation of the follower with the dependent leader can be either trusting or fearful, or a combination of both in awe and wonder. When this experience is ritualised religiously, it can celebrate a wide range of feelings and attitudes of awe, fear, love, guilt, suffering, pain, anger towards gods who protect through their love, who pronounce judgement, who suffer, who are destroyed and rise again. The experience can be generated in mass political rallies and demonstrations of national fervour to powerful leaders. This phase concludes in a variety of ways which in turn influence how individuals and groups experience the other phases of the cycle. It may draw to a close slowly as the dependent followers gradually assimilate a view of the outside world from their leader and are ready to venture forth. They have internalised the leader and his values and norms. Some rituals ease the transition by symbolically uniting the leader and the followers, eg in the Christian Eucharist or by sexual acts with servants of the god. Or the first phase may finish abruptly when the music stops at the end of the ritual, as if a parent had died, leaving the followers exposed, numb and feeling stranded.

2. The second phase is the **transition towards the autonomous mode** which can either be one of inner transformation through which the individuals or groups assimilate the value of their dependent leader, or be nothing more than the 'going back to work on Monday morning' feeling where everything seems to be the same. The duration of any one transition may be brief: only after many transitions may its nature become obvious, in its effects on the third phase.

3. The third phase of dependence-on-internals, or **intra-dependence**, is where the individuals or groups have to draw on their own resources to face the facts of everyday existence - working with other people, raising a family, and taking part in running the world. The experience is of being on one's own. This feeling may result in a surge of power and confidence which may or may not be justified by circumstances, which could in fact be threatening. But whether the

individual feels strong or vulnerable, there is some awareness of the need for autonomy, of wanting to manage one's own destiny. Whereas in extra-dependence the feeling of weakness is acknowledged without being dehumanised, in intra-dependence the sense of weakness is deprecated and attempts are made to prevent it or even to conceal it from oneself.

We need to be careful here to distinguish the mode of extra-dependence as a mental activity from the *state* of being a dependent person. An extreme instance points up the distinction sharply. A worker may be dependent upon his employer for his job, ie in the state of dependence but when he functions as an official of a Union, he will not be in the extra-dependent mode, but will behave with regard to his boss in a manner which shows he is in the intra-dependent mode - his internalised leader is *not* his boss but some other: the justice of his cause, his union. But where employers create a total environment for their labour force, providing housing and jobs for life, then work fosters the extra-dependent mode - the company becomes a religious community.

The feeling of being one member of a collective in extra-dependence shifts to feeling an autonomous individual in intra-dependence. At first the aloneness may be exhilarating, particularly if one's colleagues also behave as autonomous individuals. As time goes on, the boundaries around the individual are breached by the confusion, alienation and hostility of the complex world of reality. The 'other-ness' has begun to intrude in the 'me-ness'. Now the individual is on the verge of moving into the fourth phase.

4. The transition from intra-dependence will be variously welcomed, feared or discounted.

Those who have been brought up in a powerful, cohesive culture will have ritually engaged in forms of extra-dependence in religious, family, social or political gatherings without needing to acknowledge, even to themselves, whether or not they have experienced any transition from intra-dependence. The cycle of oscillation is closed, isolated from the surroundings as in a ghetto-static survival behaviour

As groups and individuals become aware of the erosion of boundaries around 'me-ness' and their inner worlds are beginning to crumble, they will react according to their expectations of finding external help. At one extreme are those who have high expectations because their previous experience of extra-dependence is conscious and coherent and they know what to do. They will not be afraid of the regression to child-like dependence. They will not resist the inner fragmentation but utilize the occasion to reflect on their feelings about their behaviour in relation to their own values and the values of their society. As well as sorrow and perhaps grief, there will generally be satisfaction and joy. Beyond that, (despite the fear and anxiety of the unknown) the expectation of the care and security of extra-dependence makes the transition welcome, since it offers the promise for coping with the harsher life of the intra-dependent phase which will follow inevitably. They are expressing the faith that out of chaos comes creation.

Between this extreme of high expectation and the other extreme of nil expectation, there are countless gradations ranging from those whose trust in

their cultural cohesion enables them to manage the uncertainty of the transition, and extending to those who feel alienated from their fellows as they experience disintegration and lostness. When there are no expectations there is a feeling of horror, of falling into the pit and individuals manage their extra-dependence by dulling their sensibilities with drugs, superstitions, or endless quests for holy grails. Their eventual return transition from extra- to intra-dependence will have all the heaviness of a hangover, or the desperate hope of the inveterate gambler.

But there is always the possibility that the unexpected will occur and radically change the attitudes of people, whether individually or in groups, towards the *transition to extra-dependence* - making a new family, joining a church, a fatal accident, or a betrayal by a friend could reverse their attitudes and skyrocket their expectations and welcome their immersion in extra-dependence.

With this fourth phase, one cycle has passed and the oscillation process continues.

B) Oscillation theory maintains that in this alternation between extra-dependence and intra-dependence the members of a society evolve the values by which they live, collectively and individually.

To illustrate the theory we take the example of the growth of a child into maturity. In the extra-dependence of family life the child follows the norms of its parents and, as it ventures forth from the shelter of the family, its behaviour reflects the values it has internalised at home - the child experiences incipient intra-dependence as it experiments in making choices in that wider world. As the child becomes an adolescent, the relation of this wider world causes him/her to question the internalised family values and this may cause problems with parents. The parents as guardians of the family ethos can then allow the newly learned values of their adolescent children to modify the family myth and ritual, or they can refuse to allow them to be questioned. In the former case, as the myth is adapted, the values are renewed and parents and adolescent test out these values by seeing how they translate into norms of behaviour. The process develops until the family myth settles down to monitor and be monitored by the experience of its members in intra-dependence.

If the parents do *not allow* the family values to be questioned, then the family myth no longer can provide a secure experience of extra-dependence for the adolescent son (or daughter). He begins to develop his own myth from which he excludes his parents. As the myth develops, it affirms values which the adolescent internalises and constantly revises as he interacts with the realities of everyday life and engages in his own oscillation.

His autonomy is derived from the strength and coherence of these values which he has evolved in rituals (probably with others) celebrating the myths in extra-dependence. If a hostile world rejects those values and norms, he has to choose whether to revise his myth or face being a victim or a martyr for his faith. He may seek to set up a new community/society with others who share that myth, and so new families and ultimately new tribes are formed.

From this simple example we can conceive how values which are implicit in the extra-dependent mode interact with values which are realized in the intra-dependent mode and become incorporated into everyday existence. A genius, a

prophet or an incarnate god may express new ideas and visions which evoke new values for living. These values are processed in extra-dependence as their disciples incorporate them into their own mythology. The disciples then act on the internalised values from a revised outlook.

C) Oscillation is a source of renewal in a society insofar as its underlying values are subject to scrutiny.

By being so, that which undergirds the laws and policies by which we live is tested over against what we understand by values like justice, equality, peace and love. In most societies religion is the institution which performs this function by binding its citizens together in the extra-dependent mode, which as we have seen fosters corporateness. Those who formally engage in religious rituals do so, therefore, not only for themselves but also as representatives of their society. The symbols, myths and rituals embody and subject to scrutiny the values upon which the society is built. In this sense, religion constitutes and reconstitutes society.

We would define religion as the institution which gives coherence to society by celebrating myths which mediate between the nameless unknowns of existence, and the particular and partial life of its members, as they move through the oscillation phases. Rituals and ceremonies are evolved through the myths to foster and facilitate the members of a society to engage in extra-dependent experiences in anticipation of the realities of intra-dependence.

Potentially at least, oscillation between so-called sacred activity and profane activity can imbue a society with the possibility for transforming itself to meet the challenges of a changing world. At the same time, an oscillation process which clamps a whole society into a mechanistic ritual, or loses touch with the realities of life can hold society in stagnation or misdirect it in ways which ultimately bring about its destruction.

The history of Israel is an interesting example of a society which was able to change its ideas in such a way as to cope with the necessary new insights of the developing nations surrounding it. Whereas other tribal religions were capable of doing little more than preserving the status quo - their image of god was self-protective - the Jews were able to develop their understanding of God in the light of historical events - to *test* but not to doubt, cf the enlightenment of Job. Thus, in contrast to the static posture of other religions, they were able to see God as using other nations to chastise them, and thereby to develop an understanding of a God of the whole world. Because they kept in touch with the real world, the prophets were able to interpret the experience of Israel as insights/revelations into the nature of God. Thus experience was tested against the values and the values against the experience in such a way that transformation could occur and the society could develop and change. This process was not a painless one. It entailed political risks and courageous prophecy, usually unacceptable to those confronted by them.

D) A corollary to the oscillation theory is that there is a direct relation between the moral and ethical values of a society and the manner in which its members manage their oscillation.

E) A second corollary is that the oscillation process is effectively managed where myth and reality are differentiated and rituals enable men and women to celebrate the myth while remaining in touch with reality.

Jesus, from the point of view of his followers, *embodied* (incarnated) the values they could associate with God. Consequently they understood themselves, their world and God more completely through their association *with him*. He was the 'new humanity'. He, as it was said, 'spoke with authority'. He became for them someone on whom they could depend. When they were in touch with him, they felt in touch with reality. This was the experience of the apostles, but it has also been the experience of many of his followers since then.

Let us, in conclusion, consider the four phases of the oscillation process from the point of view of how Christians may experience it - possibly and ideally.

Extra-dependence. Christians in this mode view themselves as representatives of humanity, primarily by acknowledging that they themselves are fully implicated in its affairs: they pull no rank. Representing others as they do, they feel not only their own sense of inadequacy, but also that of their fellow citizens in their society - they are, to use Saint Augustine's phrase 'the resident stranger', *civitas peregrina*.

They seek something external to themselves on which to depend, a secure environment in which they can allow themselves, as humans, to be judged by God. The symbols, myths and rituals of worship embody the values against which they and society may be judged.

Transformation. Holy Communion epitomizes both extra-dependence and the beginning of transformation. It is simultaneously the external sacrament of the One on whom Christians depend and the means by which they assimilate new humanity. In terms of mental disposition, transformation means taking authority for what one has experienced in extra-dependence. But the worship service provides no guarantees; there may be no transformation, merely a transition. The experience of a transforming insight may be infrequent, it will only occur as worshippers *own* their experience as they wait upon God, and even when it happens, it will not generally be dramatic. However, evidence that it has occurred is shown where Christians develop a new way of looking at life, they have a vision of the Kingdom where human beings begin to realise their potential and go about ordering their affairs in readiness because Christ reigns within them.

Intra-dependence. Having experienced transformation through the renewal of values, Christians re-enter the structures of society, fully identifying themselves with its work but acting upon values internalised in extra-dependence, taking full authority for the various roles they occupy. Justice, peace, freedom, love and righteousness are no longer mythical notions but norms to live by. In extra-dependence Christians represent humanity and express themselves Christianly; in intra-dependence they represent Christ and express themselves humanly.

Regression. As Christians consciously enter the regression phase it is experienced not so much as a desperate act as an invited opportunity to rethink their world and their relation to it, their 'me-ness' and their 'other-ness'. Yet, they

will probably experience a sense of fatigue and confusion associated with the exigencies of sharing in running the world. They may also experience the sense of awe of being challenged by the gospel just when they are at their most vulnerable. They are called to seek One on whom they can depend, who provides the security for this task, and be ready to submit themselves to Christ, to be forgiven, to be renewed, and to be remade whole in union with him.

We have considered how fundamental the concept of dependence is for human beings: it defines us and is that which relates us to those outside ourselves. We are one of another. What we have called oscillation is a process human beings go through naturally, whether or not they are aware of it. We oscillate between moments of extra-dependence and intra-dependence. Groups and societies oscillate corporately through representatives who engage in it on their behalf. Religion is the primary social form of extra-dependence (as far as we know) in all societies. Christians, therefore, have a special vocation for consciously participating in this process. Through them their society has the opportunity for renewing its values and its practices.

Footnote

1. 'Values' here represent a more complex experience than at the 'primitive' level - not just what is worth more to me (economic values) but what is worth more from me (values to live by). The distinction is between satisfaction and aspiration. Satisfaction need imply nothing more than a narcissistic personality organisation. Aspiration implies much more an object related organisation.

Bruce Reed
© The Grubb Institute, 1994