

World Religions and Christian Theology—II

by Cornelius Ernst, O.P.

Every genetic moment is a mystery. It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love. It could be said that Christianity is the consecration of the genetic moment, the living centre from which it reviews and renews the indefinitely various and shifting perspectives of human experience in history. That, at least, is or ought to be its claim: that it is the power to transform and renew all things: 'Behold, I make all things new' (Rev. 21, 5).

But, it will be said, even supposing your interpretation of Christianity is just, that at its centre is the genetic moment, the holiness of the new, could not the same claim be made for other traditions, for which, say, the experience of enlightenment is the heart? Either Christianity is merely an instance of a universal type of the humane, whether communicated by religious tradition or not, or your version of Christianity is merely parasitic on some generally available truth about human experience, which historical Christianity as a matter of fact has successfully smothered for centuries of institutionalized timidity, boredom and repression.

I want of course to argue that the Christian experience of the genetic moment is the critical instance, the touchstone of the new. But this is not to say that Christian self-understanding in theology does not allow of exploration of its crucial sense of the genetic moment in terms of other insights into genesis, birth from above and anew. There is at least one aspect of the genetic moment which I should like to explore, within the general interpretative categories of Christian originality and preordained multiple echo.

On the view of Christianity proposed above, Christianity as pneumatic power to transform cultural traditions, evinced in linguistic transformation, there seems to be a disconcerting absence of an identifiable centre, a 'primitive Christian creed', or indeed lofty words of wisdom as a testimony of God. Instead there is only Jesus Christ and him crucified, as a demonstration of Spirit and power. There is nevertheless a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification (cf. 1 Cor. 2: *theou sophian en mustêrio, tèn apokekrummenên*). There is, if you like, a hole at the centre of the genetic moment, a void, which turns out to be plenary, superabundant: a radiant darkness. What I am trying

allusively to suggest is that the Christian experience of the genetic moment is at once an experience of the creatively new become manifest in human articulation, and an experience of an ultimate source, the hidden God, *Deus absconditus* who has made his transcendence known in the darkness of a death. If the experience were not *both at once*, it would split apart into an insipid humanism of progress (or a revolutionary arrogance), or an esoteric mystique of world abnegation.

It cannot be said that the Christian tradition has always been very clear about this pregnant junction in the genetic moment. The negative theology of the *Deus absconditus*, for instance, dominated in Eastern and Western traditions by the Pseudo-Dionysius, seems not to have always let the uniqueness of the biblical disclosure show through the neo-Platonist categories used to interpret it. The God who hides himself, *él mistattér*, of Isaiah 45, 15, becomes in the Vulgate the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God. In the Isaian passage, the prophetic writer appears to be reflecting on the distance between present oppression and desolation in exile, and the future glory of the victorious manifestation of Yahweh when Israel will triumph over her oppressors. 'Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.' The presence of God in his people need not be a manifest one; God may hide himself from his people, to show himself eventually through their victory, which is then his own victory and glorious manifestation. God's presence to his people is assured by his covenant with them, but in one way or another the visible token of his presence may be withdrawn—the capture of the ark, the loss of the promised land, the destruction of the Temple, the success of false prophets, the presumption of apostate rulers, the 'abomination of desolation'; and it is then on the word of God's promise alone that faith and hope can stand firm.

For the Isaian passage, then, and, I shall argue, for the Bible as a whole, God's presence is a presence-in-absence; God may hide himself because without ever wholly rejecting his people, he retains his freedom in his gift of himself to his people: because he bestows himself freely, he may freely withdraw himself. Even though his freedom has committed itself in the elective form of covenant, that form must be understood against the background of a limitless freedom which gives the finite form its infinite value. God must hide himself even when he gives himself and even precisely when he gives himself, so that his presence may be recognized as sovereignly free and transcendent gift. In the tokens of his gift we must be able to feel ourselves drawn out beyond them into a reaching out for the surpassing abundance of the giver.

It seems to me that this Isaian reflection on the God who hides himself finds its ultimate validation in the Christian experience of the genetic moment, say, as 'justification by faith'. The crucified Christ, Jesus dead on the Cross in failure and ignominy, his ultimate

abandonment ('My God, why have you abandoned me?', Jesus calls out, quoting the psalm) is the paradigm case of the God who hides himself; but, in terms of the passage from 1 Corinthians alluded to a moment ago, the hiddenness of God in the crucified Christ is also the mode in which God shows himself in Spirit and power. God reveals himself in his hiddenness because the hiddenness is the testimony (ambiguous, of course) to the limitless freedom out of which he bestows himself. In another place, speaking out of a sensed identity with Jesus in virtue of his Apostolic function, Paul can say, 'So death is at work in us, but life in you' (2 Cor. 4, 12). In the earlier text Paul speaks of a hidden wisdom of God *en mustériō*, the word *mustērion* here having its accustomed sense of a hidden purpose and plan; hence Paul speaks of a wisdom 'decreed before the ages'. It is by an internal and inscrutable purpose of God's free decision, finding its ultimately valid expression in the hiddenness of abandonment and death, that God gives us the new birth celebrated by Christians as a liberation into the freedom of the children of God (cf. Rom. 8, 23).

The hiddenness of the God of Christianity is a hiddenness of transcendent freedom, self-bestowal in freedom, *agapê*, love. The Christian experience of the genetic moment is the individual and communal discovery of the communicability of this creative freedom issuing from its hidden source. The historical particularity of the death of Jesus is the ordained condition of the transcendent liberation of newness of life in the Lord: Jesus is Christ, is Lord. It is hardly an accident that the noun *agapê* (as opposed to the verb *agapaō*) is found almost exclusively in biblical Greek. The transcendence of this *agapê* is very well brought out in the text from Ephesians where Paul asks that his hearers may 'know (*ginōskein*) the love (*agapê*) of Christ which surpasses all knowledge (*gnōsis*)' (3, 19). Christian gnosis is the experience of the mystery of love freely bestowed, freely generated; and this central experience is the critical instance of all genesis and enlightenment.

That this central Christian experience has not always found adequate expression in Christian tradition has already been suggested. It is for various reasons convenient to illustrate this from some texts of Renaissance Platonism drawn from Edgar Wind's fine book, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*. In his final chapter, 'The Concealed God', Wind puts together a text from Nicholas of Cusa with one from Erasmus; both play with the notion of the seed. The first, from Nicholas of Cusa, runs:

Elementary forces, according to Aristotle, have the smallest extension and the greatest power. . . . The force inherent in a spark is that of the whole fire. . . . A small seed has the strength of many grains. . . . The core of the apparent is in the occult, the outward depends on the inward.

The second text, from Erasmus, runs:

Thus the most important is always the least conspicuous. A

tree flatters the eye with flowers, and foliage, and exhibits the massiveness of its trunk: but the seed from which these have their strength, what small thing it is, and how hidden! . . . And in the universe the greatest things are invisible. . . . And the supreme among these is furthest removed . . . God, unintelligible and unthinkable because he is the unique source of all.

It is not without interest to note that the image of the seed, developed in a rather different way, also occurs in the Chāndogya Upanishad, where the sage Aruni, after telling his son Śvetaketu to divide first a fig, then one of the fine seeds, asks what his son sees there. Śvetaketu answers, 'Nothing at all, sir'. Then Aruni says to his son:

Verily, my dear, that finest essence which you do not perceive—verily, my dear, from that finest essence this great sacred fig-tree thus arises. Believe me, my dear (or, as Zaehner suggestively translates, 'Have faith'), that which is the finest essence—this whole world has that as itself. That is Reality. That is Atman (the Self). That art thou, Śvetaketu.

All these texts seem to be practising a dialectic of the Great and the Small, which inverts the familiar order for religious purposes. Perhaps the two Western texts have a sharper sense of limits, that between the limited and the Unlimited there is a jump, while the Eastern text is more absorbed in the pervasiveness of the Unlimited. Perhaps the Western texts play with the notion of the seed more self-consciously, giving it value as a simile; perhaps the suggestion of the Eastern text is that the virtue of the seed is at one level an actual embodiment of Reality. But leaving aside these doubtful comparisons, we may simply note that in all three cases we are dealing with a parable: the dialectic gets its force from the concrete universality of its starting-point, archetypal it may be. And in fact the terminus of the dialectic, the moment of insight, is no more than an acknowledgement of the typical character of the universality—not only this seed, but all seeds; not only seeds but the small universally; not only the cosmic small but the small absolutely. The dialectic evokes and exhibits an intuition already latently there; the transcendence pointed to never escapes from the virtualities of the given. Unless, that is, the whole process is embarked on in a context of some other affirmation of transcendence, in our case, the affirmation and the surrender of faith in response to a love beyond gnosis.

We return, then, to the question raised earlier, whether the account of the central Christian experience in terms of the genetic moment, in its double aspect of plenitude and emptiness (void), life and death, radiance and darkness, is merely an illegitimate appropriation to Christianity of a universal human experience. I do not doubt that reflection on the genetic moment might be of the same typical universality as reflection on the seed: in fact, the one is not far from being a transposition into subjectivity of the archetypal value of the cosmic instance, the genetic moment as seed of enlighten-

ment. But again the force of the instance depends on the use which is made of it, just as the force of Christian language is the transformation of sense which it effects.

It is, I suggest, a matter of faith that the transcendence disclosed by religious dialectic is no more, within the ascending movement generated by that dialectic itself, than an explication of the virtualities of the given. Further, for Christian faith, a transcendence of freedom and freely bestowing love relativizes the given by claiming for it the unique status of personal *gift*. If this is so, then the universal instance may serve as the point of departure for a two-way process of interpretation: for what is universally human, while remaining universal, becomes particularized as an expression of grace, freely bestowing love. The Christian experience of the genetic moment is seen to be capable of assuming and transforming the universally human; and secondly, the universally human is rediscovered at the heart of the Christian experience. This relativization of the transcendence of the universal by the transcendence of the particular would seem to be an implication of Incarnation as the presence of the Giver in his created and historically bestowed gift.

Perhaps one should add a final note here about the Christian claim to be opened up to a unique (a transformed) transcendence through faith. I do not know how far Professor Zaehner's translation of the text from the Chāndogya Upanishad ('Have faith' instead of Hume's 'Believe me') is justified. But in Gonda's admirable account of Indian religions we find it stated that later Hinduism 'knows of no way of faith apart from the three ways of *jñāna*, *karman* and *bhakti*. Faith does indeed form the presupposition for every intellectual, emotional or ritual relationship to God or salvation; but it is not this relationship itself. It is an "external means", not a "theological virtue" (*Die Religionen Indiens*, II, p. 62, referring to Lacombe). This is far too complex a subject to be more than mentioned here; and Gonda himself gives a different picture of *śraddha* for the Vedic period. It has also to be remembered that the whole discussion is on the level of articulate doctrine; I find it easy to suppose that faith could play a constitutive part in the religious life of many people for whom articulate doctrine has no particular significance; the great majority of Christian believers, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, would be sufficient witness to that.

To conclude, then, the purpose of this paper has been to present a thesis about Christianity as part of a theological self-understanding of Christianity in response to its interrogation by other world religions. The thesis has been that the genetic moment in Christianity, disclosed in its transformation of religious traditions contemporary with its historical origins, may serve as a critical instance for its inward understanding of other religions. The thesis is open to criticism both as an interpretation of Christianity and also as an invitation to followers of other ways or of none to find some way of entry into

discussion in the terms proposed. If Christian theologies tend to fall into either a Pauline or a Johannine pattern, the present paper seems to me more Johannine than Pauline; the attempt has been less to survey the history of the world and of salvation from some elevated standpoint of God's eternal, mysterious purpose, but rather to convey, as a 'concentration of multiple meanings' (to use A. C. Graham's phrase about the poetry of the later T'ang), some sense of what it might be to go on being a Christian while remaining open to other sorts of solicitation.