PSALMIC ODES FROM APOSTOLIC TIMES

Teresa White

FRANCIS ACHARYA OCSO was a major twentieth-century pioneer of modern Christian monasticism in India. Born in Flanders in 1912, Francis became a monk in the Cistercian abbey of Scourmont in southern Belgium. In 1955, seeking to promote a meaningful encounter between Christianity and Hinduism, he left the Scourmont daughter house in Caldey, Wales, where he had been novice master, and, with the blessing of his abbot, set out alone for India to set up a Catholic monastic community which would be rooted in the ashram tradition. In 1958, he founded Kurisumala Ashram in the mountains of Kerala, where other men, including Bede Griffiths OSB from England, soon came to join him. Forty years later, Kurisumala, which follows the Syro-Malankara Catholic rite of the eastern Church, was fully affiliated to the Cistercian order. Francis, a keen student of Syriac, remained abbot of this community for 43 years. He died in India in 2002.

In 1990, the prominent US professor of New Testament language and literature J. H. Charlesworth sent Francis a copy of what were then called *The Odes of Solomon,* written in Syriac, together with an English translation of the poems.[1] Francis appreciated Charlesworth's scholarly work on establishing the Syriac text, but felt that his translation did not do justice to the mystical nature of the odes. He believed that, like the biblical Psalms, they are not only beautiful poems, but also heartfelt prayers. So, he decided to do his own English version, with the explicit intention of making the odes more widely accessible, and hoping also to encourage their use in prayer and contemplation. Having completed his translation of the poems, he wrote a general introduction to the book, but died before he could finalise his commentaries. In

[1] Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jesus, is a member of the wider family of Semitic languages.

2018 the editor Bernard Kilroy, relying on Francis's meticulous but unfinished notes, published the project as *Psalmic Odes from Apostolic Times*.

Although the manuscript of the odes came to light only in 1909, the poems themselves almost certainly date from the early second century AD. Some or all of them may, in the early years, have been translated into Greek, but it is thought that they were originally composed in Syriac. Since in style and tone they are reminiscent of both the *Book of Psalms* and the *Song of Songs*, they have sometimes been confusingly referred to as the 'Odes of Solomon'. However, as Father Francis says in his overview of the book, the content demonstrates that 'salvation through the Messiah is now something real and fulfilled, not just obscurely foreshadowed in symbols'.[2] Further internal evidence indicates that the unknown author was a Jewish convert, clearly familiar with the Hebrew Bible, but reading its message through the eyes of a fervent disciple of the Christ, whom he calls 'the Lord'. Hence the attribution of authorship to the biblical Solomon, son of David, clearly follows the eponymic tradition of attributing a text to someone significant and revered.

As I began to read this book, I was reminded of one of Rilke's poems, in which God is portrayed as a near neighbour: yes, God lives next door, but between us there is a wall that keeps us apart.[3] Slowly, pondering these beautiful odes, I found myself drawn into a world where there is no wall, no dividing line, between the sacred and the secular, the human and the divine. The odist senses God's nearness, recognises God as the mystery in human experience, and looks beyond the visible horizon of life as we know it and live it.

He is a genuine mystic; he keeps God always in sight; he sees the divine radiance shining in our world. He seems to walk in that place where soul meets soul, where 'deep calls to deep' (Psalm 42:7), and he responds intuitively to the voice and touch of God. The soul craves depth of reflection, and it is a cosmic vision of salvation that the odist shares in these poems. He seems, like Paul, to recognise in Christ 'the image

[2] *Psalmic Odes from Apostolic Times: The 'Odes of Solomon'. An Indian Monk's Meditation*, translated by Abbot Francis Acharya and edited by Bernard Kilroy (Bangalore: ATC, 2018), 87 (subsequent references in the text).

[3] 'Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manchesmal', in *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 52.

of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (Colossians 1:15). And he reaches out to God, seeking the tranquillity and order that exists deep down, beneath the apparent chaos on the surface of life.

At their best, all artists are drawn into this contemplative search for the meaning of existence, and in so doing they discern the footprints of God on the road of life, listen for the sound of heavenly harmony in the cacophony that pervades so much of human life and history. Through their poetry, their music, their pictures, they in some way make the presence of the divine visible, audible, tangible. Knowingly or unknowingly inspired by the Holy Spirit, they communicate aspects of God's eternal involvement in the work of salvation in our world, our universe. They summon us to pay attention, to pause, to pray and reflect, to encounter the transcendent in the everyday reality of our lives. The author of this little book is such an artist; he invites the reader to respond to the voice of God, to the touch of God, and to perceive those glimpses of eternity that are offered, as Jesus said, to those who have 'eyes to see and ears to hear'.

To encounter the transcendent in the everyday reality of our lives

In the original manuscript, the odes are untitled. In this edition, however, to aid the reader, brief titles have been suggested by Bernard Kilroy, which supplement the longer titles that had been added by Father Francis. The odist offers a vision of Christian faith and experience in poetic language, and his verses speak to heart and soul and mind. At times, they are endearingly intimate, for he is sharing his spiritual experience as a follower of Christ, as a believer. He has 'put on the love of the Lord', and there is a mutuality in this love: 'I would not have known how to love the Lord,/If he did not continuously love me' (Ode 3: 'The Embrace').

These psalmic odes are filled with symbols; they are truly 'sacraments', outward signs of inward grace for those who reflect on them and pray with them. Most of the images have strong scriptural resonances, yet the author has crafted them in such a way that they possess an originality and freshness that is all their own. Among them, I would like to comment briefly on three odes whose imagery was, for me, particularly striking. In each case, I found the spiritual significance of the poems movingly intensified by the meditative black-and-white drawings ('illuminations') offered by the Anglo-Indian artist-theologian Jyoti Sahi, a long-standing associate of Kurisumala.

Ode 6: The Harp

The first stanza runs:

> As the breeze moves through the harp
> And the strings speak,
> So the Spirit of the Lord speaks through my members,
> And I speak through His love. (10)

In these lines, the odist seems to be describing an instrument which, in the world of Greek mythology, was known as an aeolian harp. This was a stringed instrument that produced musical sounds not by the movement of the fingers of a human hand, but when Aeolus, the ancient god of the

wind, blew on them. Here the odist is recounting a parable: as the strings of a harp vibrate in the wind, so the song of the Spirit, the breath of God, may be heard in our lives. If this is to happen, if that deeper music, the heart's song, is to become audible, we must tune the instrument, 'tune' the members of our bodies so that they become taut, vibrant, alert to the touch of the Spirit. We do this 'tuning' by turning to God in prayer and quietly listening, as the harpist is doing in Sahi's picture. Then we can sing with David: 'My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make melody. Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn'. (Psalm 108: 1–2)

In the notes to his picture, the artist says that in the Bible the harp is regarded as a sacred instrument, an instrument of transformation. He recalls the story of Saul who, tormented by an evil spirit, grows calm when he hears David playing on his harp (1 Samuel 16: 23). He suggests also that the odist, who was almost certainly Jewish, may have been inspired here by some lines from the Talmud: 'David hung his harp above his bed and, when midnight arrived, the north wind would blow upon the harp, making music'.[4] Sahi continues:

> David's strings sing of Creation outside in the wild, of the heart not the head, of praise and not ideas, of harmony with nature and the cycle of it, not our domination of it. Thus, he sings of the divine Cosmos, finding God in woodland and streams …. (113)

These thoughts and reflections are superbly expressed in this image, where the peaceful harpist, eyes closed, encircles the harp with his arms, gently plucking the strings of his instrument. He is making music, but he is also praying, listening intently in order to hear the whisper of Elijah's gentle breeze. The artist says that the harpist's hand gestures are symbolic: they 'speak out and contain, challenge and reassure' (113), and in times of struggle, they enliven and bring stillness. In the picture, the Spirit appears as the sacred Swan of the East (replacing the more familiar Dove of Peace of Western art) which whispers into the ear of the harpist, while 'the flowing circles of the forest and its animals embrace within the music the whole of Creation' (113). Here, again, the artist wishes to communicate something of the odist's cosmic vision:

[4] Talmud Berakhot 3b.

God speaks to us through the creatures of the earth, in the song of birds and the whispers of animals.

Acclaiming the harp as the instrument of divine music, the odist sings in praise of the Spirit of the Lord, who floods the world and sweeps away everything that is alien. It is this water that fills the earth with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.[5] In prophetic language reminiscent of Isaiah (44:3–4), he declares that the water of the Spirit, the water of eternal life, cannot be restrained: it 'spread over the surface of all the earth,/And it filled everything' (12). And he says that the ministers, 'those who have been entrusted with the water of the Lord', are truly blessed. They have refreshed the parched lips of the thirsty soul; they have brought healing to the sick and the dying. Those who have drunk of this water, those who have followed Christ,

> … have strengthened their steps,
> And have given light to their eyes.
> And everyone knew them as the Lord's. (12)

Ode 13: The Mirror

The thirteenth ode, 'The Mirror', consists of two short stanzas which, like St Paul's famous words in his first letter to the Corinthians (13:12), draw attention to the common human experience of seeing a reflection of ourselves in a mirror. The original mirrors were doubtless smooth, tranquil pools of water, but for many centuries, long before the time of the odist, they would have been made of metal, probably of bronze. The owner needed to keep the metal well polished, otherwise, as Paul says, the reflection would be seen only dimly. Even today, we still have to polish our mirrors to ensure that the reflection is not distorted or obscured. In the days of the odist, most people probably did it, as we often do even now, by breathing on the surface of the mirror before rubbing it clean. This makes the mirror image even more meaningful, even more relevant to the life of a Christian: it is the Spirit, the breath of God, who helps us to polish our mirror, to refine the surface so that the reflection is more clearly visible. It is the Spirit who restores in us the face of Christ, and the mirror reflects the beauty of God in the face of the beholder.

[5] Compare Habbakuk 2:14.

It seems that in the early centuries of Christianity, the image of the mirror was widely used as a devotional aid, and preachers would discourse on it in their sermons. Mirror symbolism continued to appear in European religious art and literature until about the end of the fifteenth century when, in Renaissance Europe, a more secular interest in the human form was growing. The Church of that time judged that preoccupation with the human body was morally harmful, and the mirror, which could lead people to take excessive pleasure in their appearance, was condemned as a source of vanity. For this reason, its use in Christian spirituality declined rapidly in the West. Interestingly, the editor of this book, recognising the spiritual value of this image, wonders if it could be fruitfully reinstated. He suggests,

> … in prayer and meditation, we could once again ask ourselves, when we look at our reflection, whether we are being true to our real self, stripped of our psychological 'persona' or 'mask', and whether others would indeed recognise a reflection of the Word made Flesh within us (129).

Father Francis, in his commentary on this ode, cites some lines from a homily of the fourth-century monk St Macarius of Egypt who, he says, 'enriches the image of the mirror "in Christ"' (127). Macarius compares the believer to an artist who is engaged in painting a portrait of the king. If the artist does not constantly gaze at the king, he says,

> … the Lord will not paint His image with His own light. We must therefore gaze upon Him, believing and loving Him, throwing away all else, and attending to Him, in order that He may paint His own heavenly image and fix it in our souls ….[6]

According to Francis, for Macarius Christ is 'the true painter—one who, with his Spirit and the nature of light, can paint his image in us' (127).

Here the odist is telling us that when we look in God's mirror, we see ourselves reflected in it. In the accompanying picture, there is a woman sitting by a well, clearly reminiscent of the Samaritan woman in John 4, and the still water in the well shows a reflection of her face. The artist says:

> … the well is depicted as being fed by a stream (using John's frequent reference to the Holy Spirit as living water). The result creates in the image a tear-like form that reminds us that it is in the gift of tears of the heart that we discover the features of our true self, stripped of the mask which we normally present to the world. (128)

This beautiful ode, profoundly enhanced by Jyoti's illumination, invites us to see ourselves in the mirror of God's love, as the woman of Samaria did when she talked with Jesus and listened to him. When we look at that reflection, do we see ourselves as we really are? Do we see a fractured image, a broken, searching self, a painted mask? Or do we see, as God does, our graced self, the 'good aura'—the hidden goodness—that is within each one of us? In the picture, the gentle face of the woman assumes the features of the face of Christ.

[6] St Macarius, Homily 30.4, in *Fifty Spiritual Homilies of St Macarius the Egyptian*, edited and translated by A. J. Mason (London: SPCK, 1921), 225.

Ode 23: The Letter

'Odes of Rest' was an alternative title for this collection of poems (xviii), and the atmosphere of most is indeed restful and calming. Ode 23, 'The Letter', begins in the same vein with the odist quietly rejoicing in the joy and grace and love of those who 'walk in the knowledge of the Lord' (46). The language of the remaining stanzas, however, has a remarkable immediacy, and unlike that of the other odes, comes across as startlingly dramatic. Profoundly Johannine in character, the second stanza reads:

> His design came like a letter,
> His will descended from on high;
> It was sent like an arrow from a bow,
> An arrow shot with force. (46)

The arrow carries God's message—John, in the prologue to the fourth Gospel calls it 'the Word', adding that 'the Word was with God'. The odist's letter also has a divine origin: it 'descended from on high', and it contained an announcement. It would seem that Syrian Christians were familiar with the image of a letter—a written message, a scroll, an epistle—as God's way of communicating to humanity the divine plan of salvation. In his commentary, Francis notes that in the Syrian liturgy the hymn for Vespers on the feast of the Annunciation begins with these words:

> From the heights, Gabriel flew on the wings of the wind,
> And taking the letter of his Lord he offered greetings to Mary;
> He opened it before her and said to her … (138)

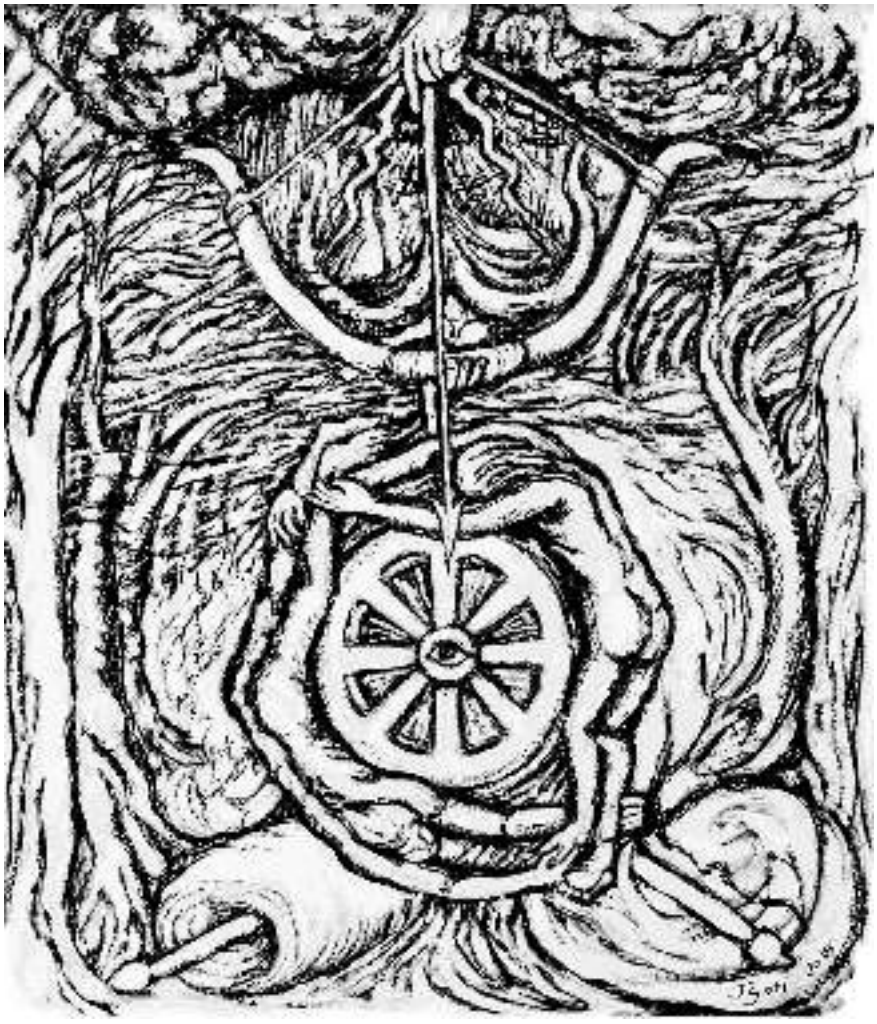
The odist uses the same image, saying that the letter arrived 'like an arrow from a bow … shot with force' from the hand of God. This letter brought the divine command, the divine teaching, to the people. The dramatic language continues:

> … many hands rushed to catch the letter,
> To hold it and read it,
> But it slipped from their fingers … (46)

These 'many hands' could be the hands of the unbelievers, who found it difficult to accept God's message—it had little meaning for them. But, as John says in his prologue, and as the odist knows, those who did accept the divine word became God's children. And God's word is love: 'Love is for the elect and who shall put it on/But they who possessed it

from the beginning?' (46) In the message of the letter, it is not difficult to discern an echo of the famous words from the fourth Gospel: 'for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16).

There follows a further image, and one that is, for many of us, less familiar: the wheel. The letter, we are told, sent like an arrow from the hand of God, came to rest on a wheel, 'a sign of kingly rule and dominion' (48). According to Jyoti Sahi, the wheel 'has a special significance in Indian symbolism' (139): it represents the eternity of God. Furthermore, in the East, in the early centuries of Christianity, the wheel was commonly used as an alternative image of the cross, and, like the cross, was seen



as an instrument of torture, as was the Catherine wheel. (Interestingly, both images, the cross and the wheel, are found in the writings of a contemporary of the odist, St Irenaeus, who was also deeply influenced by the thought and teaching of the Johannine community.)

More widely, the wheel is associated with world order, and with justice: those at the top fall, those below, rise to the top. There are echoes of this cyclic symbolism in prophecy of Isaiah, where he says: 'so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it' (55:11). These are even clearer in the *Magnificat*: 'he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty' (Luke 1:52–53).

In his introduction, the editor says that, for the odist, the doctrine of the Trinity is 'still fluid'. As a result, it is only rarely that the three Persons of the Trinity are unequivocally named in these poems. Ode 23 is an exception. In the eighth stanza, where the letter has become 'a large volume,/Entirely written by the finger of God', there is a clear assertion of faith in the Trinity:

> And on it [the 'large volume'] was the name of the Father
> And of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
> To rule for ever and ever. (49)

In these words, the odist brings to completion the image that inspired this ode: the letter is 'signed', as it were, by Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Putting on the Love of the Lord

We call the Bible 'the Word of God', but the book of Psalms consists mainly of words that express the human side of a heartfelt dialogue between the people of Israel and their God. The psalms are soul-prayers. They are not simply a polite exchange between well-behaved children and a parent who knows what is good for them; they engage God in serious dialogue about things that matter. And the dialogue is not one-sided. God's part in it is not always actually verbal, but God's presence, God's nearness, is tangible in all the psalms. For those who wrote them and for those who pray them today, there is a clear recognition that God is at the heart of human life, at the heart of the world and everything in it. The psalms are truly timeless.

Psalmic Odes from Apostolic Times is a fitting title, for these poems are, like the psalms, soul-prayers. Just as the psalms, no matter how vindictive their content, usually end with words of blessing, so these odes, all of them, conclude with a word of praise: 'Halleluiah!' They address God from the heights and depths of human experience. They take it for granted that 'putting on the love of the Lord' (Ode 3) and walking in God's way bring joy and hope. But that is not all: leading a 'holy' life, a God-centred life, enlivens the weary spirit, helps the believer to stand firm even though 'persecutors may come … even if the universe should be shaken' (Ode 5). The odist sees the earth as filled with God's presence. Knowing this, he is able to look beyond this visible world to a more 'real' world, where the soul meets soul, where there is the peace and light and love that only God can give.

Teresa White fcJ belongs to the Faithful Companions of Jesus. A former teacher, she spent many years in the ministry of spirituality at Katherine House, a retreat and conference centre run by her congregation in Salford.

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