

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

The Self Transformed: The Rediscovery of a Doctrine

THE ENGLISH IN GENERAL are not given to historical commemorations. Historical dates lodged in the national memory are few: 1066, the Battle of Hastings; 1588, the Spanish Armada, and very few more. Two dates in May however have acquired a certain renown at least amongst those for whom life in the Spirit remains a reality; both have appeared in the Calendar of the Church of England's Alternative Service Book. One is May 24th 1738 when, in a room in Aldersgate, John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed at the reading of Luther's commentary on Romans. The other, earlier in the month on May 8th, commemorates the day in 1373 when a woman in Norwich felt that she was dying, and had the first of those visionary experiences which over the years were to give rise to a book which has been more widely read in the past decade than it ever was in the preceding six centuries. *Revelations of divine love*, the title of Julian's book, would also do as a heading for Wesley's growing experience. Revelations which begin with a vision of the crucified Christ in which, as Julian says, 'The Trinity is understood'.

What is not so often remembered about the events of May 24th is the text which John Wesley read in the early morning, and by which in a sense he tuned the day;

Whereby there are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.
i.e. 2 Pet 1,4.

This verse provides the hidden content within the dynamic of the day. The change of heart which took place in the evening involved nothing less than a change of nature, a change from earth to heaven, from human to divine, a transformation in which men and women become by grace partakers of what God is, not only of what God has.

This is the way in which the Christian tradition has in general understood the transformation of the self. The classical doctrine of deification, that by grace we become what God is by nature, implies a transformation of the human person in its entirety. In its developed form, in a writer like Maximus the Confessor, this doctrine maintains that in Christ's people as in Christ himself,

there is a movement of mutual interpenetration (*perichoresis*) between divinity and humanity; not that the natures are confused

or mingled, the acts (*energeiai*) of both interrelate and human nature is transfigured by being permeated with the loving, self-giving action of God.¹

If for us the words 'change of heart' have become suffocatingly banal, we only need to look at them more closely to see how strangely they correspond to the theme of 'transformation of the self'. For in the Judaeo-Christian tradition from the Old Testament onwards, the heart has been understood as the innermost centre of the human person taken as a psycho-somatic unity. To have the heart strangely warmed is for the innermost self to be released from the paralysis of death, to come from death to life. At the heart of the Christian faith, at the heart of Christian life there is this mystery of co-inherence and exchange, this mutual indwelling in love. The heart is opened to receive the transforming love of God, given in Jesus Christ, made present in the coming of the Spirit. This mystery is expressed by St Paul in excessively familiar words, 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost', which three, as Hooker says, 'St Peter comprehendeth in one, "The participation of the divine nature"'.²

This participation, as Hooker clearly implies, is a participation in the Trinitarian life of God. It is an incorporation into Christ through the activity of the Holy Spirit. It means to relate to God as Father, in the way that Jesus did, through the gift of the Spirit of Jesus. That certainly is how John Wesley understands it. For him the initial act in which in the beginning God breathed his life into humankind is an act which is constantly, continually being renewed. 'God is continually breathing, as it were upon the soul', he writes. But this action is reciprocated. To the action of the divine Spirit there responds an action of the human spirit:

God is continually breathing, as it were upon the soul, and the soul is breathing into God. Grace is descending into the heart, and prayer and praise ascending to heaven; and by this intercourse between God and man, this fellowship with the Father and the Son, as by a kind of spiritual respiration, the life of God in the soul is sustained; and the child of God grows up, till he comes to the full measure of the stature of Christ.³

It is striking to see in this passage echoes of two of the fundamental ideas in the collect from the Sarum Rite which Cranmer put at the beginning of the Holy Communion service. The heart is open to God, and open to the operation of the Holy Spirit within it. The consequence of that operation is our growing up into the stature of Christ, into that perfection of love which became such a theme in the Wesleys' preaching. For the Wesleys this inter-relationship of God and man, the descent of

grace into the heart, the ascent of praise to God, is focussed in the Eucharist, a sacrament which they celebrated daily in the octave of the great feasts and frequently throughout the year. But it is to work itself out in a life of continual prayer, a life in which the precept 'to pray without ceasing' has been fulfilled because prayer has established itself in the depths of the heart.

This is a total transformation of human life, 'a change wrought in the whole soul', as Wesley goes on to explain.

From hence it manifestly appears what is the nature of the new birth. It is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life, when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is a change wrought in the whole soul by the Spirit of God, when it is created anew in Christ Jesus', when it is 'renewed after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness'.⁴

As a contemporary American Wesley scholar puts it, 'A Christ-centred trinitarian pneumatology becomes the heart-beat of Wesley's understanding of a believer's relationship with God. At every point it is life in and from the Holy Spirit . . .' It is the Holy Spirit himself who is the agent of this change in the whole human person.⁵

For John Wesley, as for the Christian tradition as a whole, this change grows and is strengthened as human beings grow in the basic virtues of faith and hope and love, all of which make them participants in what is divine. This is particularly so in the case of love. We are to grow in love for God and in love for all our fellow men and women. We are to love God above all, and paradoxically in doing so we shall find that we can love God in all, and so can love others as ourselves. The change wrought in the whole soul affects the active and outward dimensions of human life no less than its inward and contemplative ones. Our social existence is transformed no less than our personal existence.

So Wesley can say that to be a child of God is,

to love God who hath thus loved you, as you never did love any creature; so that you are constrained to love all men as yourself with a love not only ever burning in your heart, but flaming out in all your actions and conversations, and making your whole life one labour of love, one continual obedience to those commands, 'Be ye merciful as God is merciful', 'be ye holy as I the Lord am holy', 'be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect'.⁶

It is striking in this passage that John Wesley insists that we are to become *as God is*, holy as he is holy, perfect with his own perfection,

merciful as he is full of mercy. The human heart, the human person is made *capax Dei*. It is empty and unfulfilled until it shares in the divine life. When the heart becomes full of compassion, it is nothing less than the compassion of God which fills it, transforming the limitations of the human heart with the dynamism of the divine life.

A quotation from an author of a time and place very different from Wesley's may be illuminating here. In a passage which has become well known through Vladimir Lossky's use of it in *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, Isaac of Nineveh asks, What is a compassionate heart?

It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person's eyes overflow with tears owing to the vehemence of the compassion which grips his heart; as a result of his deep mercy his heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on any injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation. This is why he constantly offers up prayers full of tears, even for the irrational animals and for the enemies of truth, even for those who harm him, so that they may be protected and find mercy. He even prays for the reptiles as a result of the great compassion which is poured out beyond measure, after the likeness of God, in his heart.⁷

Here again, in a very different idiom, is the same point. The human heart is to be transformed by the presence in it of divine compassion. This transformation alters our relationship not only with our fellow humans beings but with all creation. There is a difference of emphasis here between the seventh-century Syrian and the eighteenth-century Englishman. The cosmic dimension is much less stressed in Wesley than in Isaac, though it is interesting to note that Wesley was one of the few teachers of his time who insisted that the whole creation, including the animals, was to be included in God's promise of restoration. But the universal, human dimension, including the love of enemies, is common to them both.

We have seen this teaching as it occurs in the standard sermons of John Wesley, the most heard of all eighteenth-century sermons, and since then part of the foundation documents of the Methodist Church. Let us look at it for a moment as we find it in Charles Wesley's hymns, perhaps the most sung of all eighteenth-century hymns, and still, at least in fragments, part of the basic liturgy of English-speaking Christians.

In Charles Wesley no less than in John, it is clear that it is the total transformation of the human self which is in question in the doctrine of salvation. For him as for his brother this work is understood in strictly Trinitarian terms. It is the Spirit who is the witness of our sonship, who

engraves pardon on the human heart, who is the earnest of divine love and the pledge of heaven. In the coming of the Spirit there is an anticipation, a partial realization of what will be known in its fulness hereafter. It is the work of the Spirit to bring about a constant growth, a gradual and progressive change in the human condition, as the comparatives in the following verse indicate:

Come then, my God, mark out thine heir,
 Of heaven a larger earnest give,
 With clearer light thy witness bear,
 More sensibly within me live.
 Let all my powers thine entrance feel
 And deeper stamp thyself the seal.⁸

God stamps his seal on the human heart. All human powers, intellectual, volitional, affective, active, are to feel the entrance of God. He enters into and transforms the whole soul, to use John Wesley's phrase, a phrase which may be taken to imply body and soul together.

The work of the Spirit is to bring us into union with Christ, so that we may grow up into his likeness. So in another hymn Wesley prays boldly,

Heavenly Adam, Life divine
 Change my nature into thine,
 Move and spread throughout the soul,
 Actuate and fill the whole,
 Be it I no longer now,
 Living in the flesh, but thou.⁹

Body and soul, flesh and spirit are to be united and transformed. This is not a teaching reserved for a few. In a children's hymn Charles Wesley will pray,

Loving Jesus, gentle lamb,
 In thy gracious hand I am,
 Make me Saviour what thou art,
 Live thyself within my heart.¹⁰

The Pauline experience expressed in the words 'I live, but no longer I, Christ lives in me', is to be the experience of every Christian.

One focal point in this whole process of transformation, a privileged means for the action of God's grace, is the Eucharist. In the Wesleys' experience, as in that of a great Anglican evangelical like Charles Simeon, the Eucharist is known as 'a converting ordinance', a sacrament of

transformation. In it, it is the participants who are converted or transformed rather than the elements. As Richard Hooker had suggested in the first period of post-reformation Anglican theology, we should seek for the real presence of Christ in ourselves rather than in the elements. In both cases I say *rather than*, not *not*. A mysterious change in the bread and wine themselves is not excluded, as we can see in Charles Wesley's somewhat impatient verse responding to the more determinedly negative of his contemporaries,

Oh tell us no more
The spirit and power
Of Jesus our God
Is not to be found in this life-giving food.¹¹

But what is essential is that in the Communion we are given a foretaste of eternity, a touch of heaven made known now:

The light of life eternal darts
Into our souls a dazzling ray,
A drop of heaven o'erflows our hearts
And deluges the house of clay.

Again we notice that the action of God enters into the innermost centre of our being, our heart, and that both soul and body are overwhelmed by the generosity of the gift. Charles Wesley goes further in the following verse:

Sure pledge of ecstasies unknown
Shall this divine communion be,
The ray shall rise into a sun
The drop shall swell into a sea.¹²

The Wesleys—for they published their hymns together though Charles wrote the vast majority of them—did not use words at random. In the introduction to *The large hymn book* of 1780, John Wesley wrote,

Here are no cant expressions, no words without meanings. Those who impute this to us know not what they say. We talk common sense both in prose and in verse, and use no word but in a fixed determinate sense.

As I have argued elsewhere, the words 'common sense' in this passage, as in eighteenth-century usage in general, have a far less reductive tone

than they have in our common parlance today. Common sense, *sensus communis*, involves a judgement which is open to all, verifiable by all. Charles Wesley's language is poetic, but it is not vague or sentimental, still less is it private, esoteric or sectarian.

So, in this verse, when he speaks of ecstasy he means as in the original Greek *ekstasis*, something which carries us out of ourselves, beyond our present situation. The Eucharistic communion does this for us already here on earth, being a means of our going beyond ourselves into God, our being transformed into God. But in eternity this process will be carried forward in ways which are altogether beyond our present understanding. Heaven itself is a progress into God, which we can only guess at now, but which we can guess at because of our present experience of God's grace. The idea is finely expressed in Gregory of Nyssa. The Wesleys were acquainted with the idea, still more with the experience which lies behind it. So, in lines which could be suspected of pantheism if we did not know the solidly orthodox nature of Charles Wesley's thought, the transformation of the human into the divine is spoken of in terms of the ray being absorbed into the sun, the drop into the sea. Surely both are images which speak of union and of the intimacy of union.

If we go from the first generation of Methodism in England to the second or third generation in Wales, we shall find the same thing. Here is Ann Griffiths, riding back over the Berwyn hills to her home at Dolwar Fach, after a Communion Sunday at Bala, one day in the first years of the nineteenth century. She is meditating on the experience which has been hers at Holy Communion, and looking forward to that final day when God will be all and in all.

O blessed hour of eternal rest
 From my labour, in my lot,
 In midst of a sea of wonders
 With never a sight of an end or a shore;
 Abundant freedom of entrance, ever to continue,
 Into the dwelling places of the Three in One;
 Water to swim in, not to be passed through,
 Man as God and God as man.¹³

Again the image of the sea is used to suggest the immensity of the divine being, though here there is an allusion to the passage of Ezekiel where the prophet sees the river flowing out of the temple, a river which gets ever deeper and broader till it can no longer be passed through. For Ann, it is a sea of wonders. In another place she cries, 'Oh to pass my life amid a sea of wonders'. It is a sea without end or shore, and we have abundant freedom of entrance ever to continue into it. Again, there is the suggestion that we are to penetrate further and further into the

mysteries of the divine life. The last line of the verse is in the Welsh even more striking than it appears in English. It could as well be translated, 'Man being God, God being man'.

Behind Ann we find the greatest scholar and theologian of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodism of the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Thomas Jones of Denbigh. In the pages of the periodical which he published with Thomas Charles of Bala in the years 1799-1800, *Trysorfa ysprydol*, *Spiritual treasury*, which we may be sure Ann had read, we can see something of the theological hinterland which lies behind the ecstatic utterance of her verse. To Thomas Jones the image of the river flowing out from the presence of God, whether in the vision of Ezekiel or of the Book of Revelation, is particularly dear. It is for him an image of the free grace of God which streams out of the good purpose of the Trinity. As we shall see, in this gift of grace God gives himself utterly. If we use the terms of the earlier controversy between Christian East and West, it is uncreated grace, God giving himself wholly in his energies, which is in question here. But let us hear what Thomas Jones will say:

Salvation in Christ is a feast and it is a river; a river of virtue and strength. In it, the frail believer has all the *promises* of God, and all the *properties* of God, all that God has, and all that God is, as a living water to quench his thirst, and as a strongly flowing stream which carries him on its current to the sea of his endless delight. In a word, here is the complete treasury, the refuge, the tent of meeting, the feast and the river, and whatever else you have need of; 'all things are yours'. Through the Gospel of God's grace, all the fulness of God is the inheritance of the saints. Well then, hide yourself in it, feed on it, yes, cast your frail vessel into the quiet stream of this blessed Gospel. Let your whole spirit unite with it, swim in it, drink from it, take it as your life and your nourishment.¹⁴

The word deification is never used in these pages of Thomas Jones, but how otherwise are we to understand his language? We are to entrust ourselves wholly to this stream of God's grace, we are to hide in it, to swim in it, to let ourselves be carried down in it into the sea of God's endless delight. We are to unite our whole spirit with this stream which flows out from the heart of God, carrying in itself not only all the promises of God, but also all the properties of God. Here is a transformation of the self indeed. Here is the theology which lies behind Ann's prayer, no less than behind Charles Wesley's when he asks, 'Make me Saviour what thou art, Live thyself within my heart'.

If we ask ourselves why it is that the full force of this teaching seems to have been notably absent from much of our Church life and thought

in the West in the last one hundred and fifty years, we must say that one of the reasons lies in the failure to understand the full theological and anthropological presuppositions on which it rests. If the formulas of classical Christology have seemed increasingly untenable it is at least in part because they have not been seen in their full context. Incarnation and deification belong together. Both require a living Trinitarian theology at the divine end of the scale, a view in which God gives himself wholly in the Son and in the Spirit, and a view of human nature at the other end of the scale, which sees humankind as at once flesh and spirit, at once of time and of eternity, made for union with God, a nature which finds itself in going beyond itself into God.

Although the phrase about our participation in the divine nature occurs only once in the New Testament the vision to which it points is to be found everywhere in both the Johannine and the Pauline writings. It is a vision in which God and man are wholly reconciled and at one. It speaks of a relationship which like all interpersonal relationships is dynamic, changing and developing, constantly taking us further into a discovery of the divine-human co-inherence, the mutual participation and exchange between man and God. It was this vision which the whole theological effort of the Church in the first ten centuries, and in particular the Church of the eastern Mediterranean, was intended to affirm. 'The ancient church wrestled for centuries with what the prologue of John's Gospel really implied', as Lars Thunberg puts it. The background to the sermons and hymns of the Wesleys is the teaching of an Irenaeus, an Athanasius, a Gregory of Nyssa, a Gregory Nazianzen, a Maximus the Confessor.

Lars Thunberg, the greatest authority on Maximus in the English-speaking world, summarizes the whole development like this:

From Chalcedon on incarnation was to be understood as the hypostatic (personal) union of what is divine and what is human, both in their full capacity, without any false mixture between them or any destruction of either part. Incarnation then is this 'theandric' paradox or mystery, together with the implications it may have for the understanding of humanity's status and destiny. It is precisely this doctrine that also confirms human beings in their image character and opens up the road to its realisation in the full development of their likeness to God. And it is the same doctrine that seems to bind God in a perpetual salvific intercourse with human beings, a personal 'I-Thou relationship', that can have no other worthy end and fulfilment than in mystical union.

Of course there is paradox here, supreme paradox. The distinction between creator and created, between eternal and temporal, between infinite and limited remains. And yet there is more that must be said:

The paradox contains the conviction that human beings, in spite of their limitations, may enter into such a relationship with God that they, without losing their proper nature, may be in full communion with the divine reality. In doing so their likeness to God is fully realized, and at the same time the full implications of their being persons are manifested. Human beings are drawn into the dynamism of the divine Trinity, and that dynamism becomes manifest in the life of the Church, as the fulfilled life of humanity.¹⁵

That we need in the late twentieth century to rediscover, to rethink, to reformulate the doctrine of the Incarnation may very well be true. But as we do it, let us be aware of all that the classical Chalcedonian formulas imply for a dynamic living divine-human interchange in Christians no less than in Christ, a mutual interpenetration, a co-inherence and exchange in love and self-giving. Incarnation, deification, participation in the life of God the Trinity, are things bound inescapably together in Christian experience as well as in Christian theology. To sunder them impoverishes the Church's life and prayer no less than its teaching and doctrine.

But while it is true that this teaching has its roots in the theology and spirituality of the Fathers of the Church, it is also true that it has made itself present and active in times and places much nearer our own. This is why I have chosen to present it primarily in the teaching of the early Methodists, both in England and in Wales. In them we see clearly the nature of this belief in the transformation of the self, which leads the believer to say with Paul, I live, yet not I, Christ lives in me. It is nothing esoteric or marginal in the history of the Christian tradition.

It is true that it would have been possible to present more extreme and striking expressions of this teaching from other parts of the Christian tradition, from the work of the Rhineland mystics for instance, and in particular from Meister Eckhart. Those expressions are I believe a precious part of the Christian tradition, not least because in this century, they have spoken eloquently to non-Christian scholars, and particularly to some Japanese Buddhists, of a kinship between Christianity and Buddhism, or at very least a point of meeting and interaction where the two traditions can enter into fruitful contact with one another. It is surely to the good that in many places at the present time, and in a great variety of ways, channels of communication are opening up between different religions which before have had little or no contact with one another. This begins to be a more and more reciprocal relationship in which the initiatives are not all on one side. We are beginning to learn from one another in ways which in the past would never have been considered possible.

In this context it seems to me certain that Christians have very much to gain in their understanding of what God has been saying to them

through their own tradition, through listening to the other religious traditions of humanity, some of which have an extremely rich experience of the transformation of the self. It seems clear, for instance, that in both Hinduism and Buddhism, the inner possibilities of the human spirit have been realized and explored in ways which have no parallel in the Christian tradition. It seems equally clear that the one God has been at work in the history of all the great religious traditions, drawing out from men and women through many centuries an amazing quality of response. From our contacts with the other religions we shall be able to return to our own tradition, recognize its human and cultural limitations more clearly, and also discover anew the implications of what God has been saying to us through it. The mystery of Christ, if it is to be understood more truly, needs the light which can come from all human prayer and longing after God. A fearful and defensive shutting off of themselves on the part of Christians from the experience and wisdom of the other religions could only lead to a further narrowing and impoverishment of our hold on Christian faith and life. It is through new forms of inter-relatedness with others that we shall rediscover our own true selves, as one is able to see in writers as various as Louis Massignon, Thomas Merton, Kenneth Cragg or William Johnston.

But the limitations and impoverishment of our Christian life and understanding, of which we are acutely aware at the present time, are I suspect more typical of the last two hundred years than they are of the earlier period of Christian history. When we penetrate back beyond the age of Schleiermacher, we find a confidence and richness both in teaching and in living which can sometimes astound us. The call to men and women to go out from themselves into God was present not only in the great mystics of the Middle Ages and Counter-Reformation, not only in the monastic teachers of Mount Athos and Moldavia, but also in the lands of the Reformation, through the Wesleys in the England of Dr Johnson and Horace Walpole, or indeed, through the lives and teaching of Keble, Pusey and Newman, in the England of Victoria.

This teaching as we have seen, was anything but esoteric. It was spread through this country in the eighteenth century by two of the greatest communicators this land has ever known, in impassioned preaching and enthusiastic hymnody. It was not then, and it is not even now, the preserve of a few. More than fifty years ago, Robert Newton Flew wrote of the way in which in Methodism this teaching had become part of the faith and experience of a multitude of people:

One illustration must suffice. A distinguished Anglican scholar, who had retired from a professorship to a country living, once told the present writer of a dying woman in his village parish. One verse was constantly on her lips. She returned to it again and again.

Thy love I soon expect to find
 In all its depth and height;
 To comprehend the Eternal mind
 And grasp the Infinite.

‘What a magnificent verse,’ said the scholar, ‘for a peasant woman to die on . . .’ On such hymns generations of ordinary believers have died, and by such hymns they have lived.¹⁶

The singer looked through death and beyond death to a final transformation of the self, the discovery of an infinite love, to the grasp of an infinite mind. Faced with the final and starkest of human limitations, the fact of death, faith and hope and love were not quenched. Approaching the boundary line between this world and the next, heart and mind came together in a moment of transcendence, a movement beyond the limitations of this life. In spite of our death, give us your life. The human person is made *capax Dei*, apt for God. There is a rumour that the process of growth has only begun. There is talk of a change from glory to glory in the love of the Lord who is Spirit, Breath, Life now and in eternity.

A.M. Allchin

NOTES

An open lecture given in the Divinity Faculty in Cambridge University, on May 24th 1989. Part of a Buddhist and Christian series entitled ‘The Transformation of the Self’.

¹ Article on ‘Deification’ by R. D. Williams in *A dictionary of Christian spirituality*, ed G. S. Wakefield (London, 1983), p 107.

² Richard Hooker: *Laws of ecclesiastical polity*, V.1vi.7.

³ John Wesley: *Standard sermons* (London, 1921), Vol 2, p 234.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ ‘Wesleyan theology’ by Melvin E. Dieter in *John Wesley, contemporary perspectives*, ed John Stacey (London, 1988), p 171.

⁶ *Standard sermons*, Vol 1, p 294.

⁷ In the translation of Sebastian Brock, in *Heart of compassion*, ed A. M. Allchin (London, 1989), p 9.

⁸ Quoted in A. M. Allchin: *Participation in God* (London, 1988), p 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 79.

¹¹ *A rapture of praise*, eds H. A. Hodges and A. M. Allchin (London, 1966), p 147.

¹² *Participation*, p 30.

¹³ A. M. Allchin: *Ann Griffiths: the furnace and the fountain* (Cardiff, 1987), p 16.

¹⁴ Thomas Charles and Thomas Jones: *Trysorfa ysprydol, 1799-1800*, pp 259-260.

¹⁵ Lars Thunberg: ‘The human person as image of God’, in *Christian spirituality, origins to the twelfth century*, eds Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq, (London, 1989), p 308.

¹⁶ From an article in *Northern Catholicism*, ed N. P. Williams, (London, 1933), pp 521-2.