

# CENTRO PRO UNIONE

N. 56 - Fall 1999  
ISSN: 1122-0384



## semi-annual Bulletin

### In this issue:

- Letter from the Director* ..... p. 2
- The Organization of Jewish Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean World.*  
*Leadership and Authority*  
by Isaiah M. Gafni ..... p. 3
- Ecumenismo: profezia della vita religiosa*  
di Enzo Bianchi ..... p. 9
- The Fatherhood of God. Authority and Gender in the Year of the Father*  
by Janet Martin Soskice ..... p. 14

**Centro Pro Unione - Via S. Maria dell'Anima, 30 - 00186 Rome, Italy**  
*A Center conducted by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement*

# Director's Desk

In this issue we are pleased to present three of the lectures given at the **Centro** during the first part of this year. Rabbi Isaiah Gafni of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem explores what the structures of Jewish communities, especially those of authority, would have been like in the Second Temple period. His lecture "The Organization of Jewish Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Leadership and Authority" attracted much interest from both the Jewish and Christian participants.

The first in a series of lectures honoring the memory of Fr. Paul Wattson and Mother Lurana White, co-founders of the Society of the Atonement was given by Enzo Bianchi, prior and founder of the Monastic ecumenical Community of Bose. His lecture "Ecumenismo: profezia della vita religiosa" illustrates the long history of the role that religious life played in the Gospel project, namely, proclaiming, witnessing and incarnating the Good News by the *sequela Christi* in the world. This conference marked the conclusion of the centennial celebration of the founding of the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement. Once again our good friend Seguej Diatchenko helped us to conclude our celebration by organizing an exceptional musical event —the performance of Paganini's 24 Capricci for solo violin. The extraordinary artist who performed this amazing work was Pasquale Farinacci.

The third text in this issue, considers the question of authority from a female theologian's perspective. Dr. Janet Martin Soskice, University Lecturer in theology at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Jesus College, presents a penetrating study on "The Fatherhood of God. Authority and Gender in the Year of the Father."

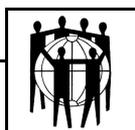
This year's activities will present some interesting encounters and reflections. First we will have an evening with two of the protagonists in the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, Bishop Walter Kasper, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and Bishop Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. Their task is to help us understand the ramifications of this document for the life of our two churches. Then David Carter, a member of the British Methodist-Catholic Dialogue, will speak on "Can the Roman Catholic and Methodist Churches Be Reconciled?". To round out the Fall's lecture series, we have invited Sarah Coakley, Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, to present the second annual Fr. Paul Wattson and Mother Lurana White lecture. Dr. Coakley will speak on "The Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality. A Neglected Nexus in the Fathers and Beyond". As with last year, the conference will conclude with a concert given by Pasquale Farinacci who will present the technically demanding "Six sonatas" of Eugen Ysaÿe composed at the beginning of this century.

Several groups are scheduled to visit the **Centro** this Fall, including a group of Danish theological students from the University of Copenhagen, a group of Swedish Lutheran pastors and a group of students from the Ecumenical Graduate school at Bossey (Switzerland).

I would like to bring to your attention two programs that we have organized for the Summer this year. The first entitled "*Jerusalem 2000. Jews and Christians Rooted in the Word of God in Relationship with One Another*" is jointly sponsored by S.I.D.I.C., the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion and the **Centro** and will take place between June 16-23, 2000 in Jerusalem. The aim of this study session is to introduce the participants to an ecumenical and interreligious experience of relations between Jews and Christian and to explore the relationship of the Christian faith to its Jewish roots. The deadline for registration is March 1, 2000.

The second is our annual Summer course: "*Introduction to the Ecumenical & Interreligious Movements from a RC Perspective*" which will be held from June 26 to July 14, 2000 in Rome. This course offers a unique experience whereby the participant is introduced to the meaning of the ecumenical and interreligious movements through lectures and on-site visits to important offices in the Vatican and other institutions in Rome such as early Christian sites, the synagogue and mosque of Rome. Deadline for registration is March 31, 2000. Flyers for both programs are enclosed in this issue. For more information visit us at: <http://www.prounione.urbe.it>

James F. Puglisi, sa  
Director





# CC

Centro Conferences

## The Organization of Jewish Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean World Leadership and Authority

Rabbi Isaiah M. Gafni  
Professor of Jewish History, The Hebrew University (Jerusalem)

(Conference given at the **Centro Pro Unione**, Thursday, November 12, 1998)

Some two thousand years ago, the well known historian and geographer Strabo of Amaseia (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE — 1<sup>st</sup> century CE), in describing events that took place in Cyrene at the time of Sulla (86 BCE), made a sweeping statement regarding the vast dispersion of the Jewish people: “This people has already made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt”<sup>1</sup>.

Our late twentieth-century minds, conditioned by unfortunate events and statements over the past centuries, naturally tend to interpret the last clause in a decidedly negative manner, but this is probably not the case regarding Strabo. The predominant attitude towards the Jews in his writings is sympathetic<sup>2</sup>, and while various interpretations have been given to “ἐπικρατεῖται ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ”, what is probably before us is simply an exaggeration of the pervasiveness of the Jewish community.

Whatever Strabo’s intentions, the fact that he could identify a Jewish presence in every city clearly suggests some sort of organizational presence which could contribute to their inordinate influence. Indeed, in the very same passage Strabo goes on to describe how the rulers of Cyrene and Egypt encouraged the expansion “of the organized groups of Jews, who observe their national Jewish laws”. “In Egypt, for example, territory has been set apart for a Jewish settlement, and in Alexandria a great part of the city has been allocated to this nation. And an ethnarch of their own has been installed, who governs the people and adjudicates suits and supervises contracts and ordinances, just as if he were the head of a sovereign state”<sup>3</sup>.

Much has been made of this text, although the unanswered

questions still abound. While Philo also claims that two of the five districts of Alexandria were set aside for Jews<sup>4</sup>, there is absolutely no proof to sustain a claim forwarded by certain modern scholars to the effect that Jews were confined to a compulsory Ghetto<sup>5</sup>. As for an ‘ethnarch’, it is far from clear whether that official ruled over all of Egyptian Jewry, or only over the Alexandrian community. Earlier sources know nothing of an ethnarch in Alexandria, but describe the local Jewish community as organized along the lines of a ‘*politeuma*’<sup>6</sup>. By the time of Augustus we hear of the appointment of a ‘*gerousia*’ (=council of elders)<sup>7</sup>, which might have weakened the status of a monarchical ethnarch. And yet we continue to hear of some sort of jurisdiction maintained by Jewish courts in Egypt, and even of the existence of a local Jewish archives where one Theodorus deposited his will in 13 BCE<sup>8</sup>. My point in all this is obvious: Jews of the diaspora went to great lengths to maintain organized communal frameworks, and the Jewish influence referred to by Strabo and others throughout Late Antiquity did not derive from any hidden and secretive clannish bond, an invisible pulling of strings or some ancient version of more modern claims to “Jewish control of the media and banking system”, but rather derive from a visible and legally recognized framework.

To be sure, how different authors and personalities inter-

<sup>4</sup> PHILO ALEXANDRINUS, *In Flaccum*, 55.

<sup>5</sup> See M. STERN, *GLAJJ*, I: 399, the allotment of special districts appears to have been a favor to the Jews who were interested in living in proximity to one another, and the one exception is Flaccum of Egypt, who in the days of Caligula confined them to their quarter.

<sup>6</sup> Letter of Aristeas, 310.

<sup>7</sup> JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities* 19:283.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. V. TCHERIKOVER & A. FUKS, eds., *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), vol. 2:#143. Hereafter cited *CPJ* followed by volume number and document number.

<sup>1</sup> Hist. Hypomnemata, apud JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities* 14:115; M. STERN, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976), vol. I: *From Herodotus to Plutarch*, 278. Hereafter cited *GLAJJ* followed by volume number and page.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. STERN, *GLAJJ*, I: 264.

<sup>3</sup> JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities* 14:116.

preted the influence enjoyed by this Jewish communal organization depended on the personal proclivities of each author, as well as the circumstances in which various statements were made. Thus, for example, the Jewish community in Rome seems to have been the target of disparaging remarks by Cicero in his famous defense of Flaccus in 59 BCE. As with Strabo, Cicero also alludes to the influence of the local community: “You know what a big crowd it is, how they stick together, how influential they are in informal assemblies”<sup>9</sup>. Cicero has been exonerated by modern scholars from embracing specific anti-Semitic sentiments, inasmuch as his denigration of opposing witnesses and their national character was a common judicial practice, and if anything Cicero was equally bigoted towards all non-Romans. But what does come through in his statement, as in the case of Strabo, is the existence of a visible communal organization of Jews. It is this organizational structure, its internal hierarchy and types of leadership that I propose to take up in the following pages.

But any discussion of *local* communities in Late Antiquity — both before and after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE — must always approach the problem on two distinct levels. Just as we strive to identify the various bodies and hierarchical organization within the local community, we must constantly also keep in mind the ties between the various communities, and even more so — the links and expressions of communal control issuing from the Jewish center, and *its* authority structure, in the Land of Israel. As we shall see, at certain stages the two hierarchies were intrinsically linked, and surprising as it may sound, these bonds may have even been strengthened in the decades and centuries following the destruction of the Temple.

I make this point as part of a general analogy between Second Temple times and the current Jewish situation. These are the only two chapters in Jewish history wherein we confront a unique duality of Jewish communal existence: on the one hand a large, politically assertive and at times independent Jewish community in the Land of Israel, and at the very same time a large and thriving Jewish diaspora defined both through its ties with that center as well as by its local institutions and lifestyle. And so while we run the risk of anachronism in our modern attempts at analyzing that duality of Jewish life, we might also be in the unique situation today of being more sensitive to questions confronting that ancient Jewish community, and more qualified than earlier generations to appreciate

the dilemma of Jewish self-identity in Late Antiquity<sup>10</sup>.

Before we get to the institutions and offices of Jewish communal leadership, we would do well to understand the underlying assumptions that enabled Jews to set up these structures and to enjoy the support of the various ruling empires, be they the neo-Babylonian or Persian kingdoms in the East, or subsequently the Hellenistic and Roman empires of the West. The guiding principle in almost all cases was the wish and interest of the various ruling forces to insure the support of the vast numbers of Jews in their domain, by granting them the right to live according to their laws. Legal and practical precedent was crucial, and so it is not by chance that Josephus notes that it was already Alexander the Great that allowed Jews to live in accordance with the laws of their fathers (*χρησασθαι τοῖς πατρίοις νόμοις*), and that this permission was granted by him not only to the Jews of Palestine but to those of Babylon and Media as well<sup>11</sup>. A letter from Antiochus the 3<sup>rd</sup> to one of his governors confirms the Jewish right to “use their own laws”<sup>12</sup>, and years later it was Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, son-in-law of Augustus, who granted the Jews of Ionia the right “to use their own customs”<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, this right appears as a common clause in numerous official edicts<sup>14</sup>, and frequently included the right to keep the Sabbath and holidays — a practice that often was impeded either by forced military service or the need to appear in court on the Sabbath.

The recognition of the Jewish communal right to maintain a unique way of life often resulted in the establishment of specific institutions for that purpose. The most obvious was of course the synagogue. The precise origins of this institution have been at the center of a debate that has raged for years, and while I have a definite opinion on this, will spare you the details<sup>15</sup>. Suffice to say that the institution went by a variety of names. It was commonly referred to as ‘*proseuche*’ (place of prayer) in Egypt, as far back as an inscription relating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE in which the Ptolemaic monarch granted the

<sup>10</sup> Thus, for example, I would not be surprised if certain Jews of Alexandria might have defined themselves as Judaeans (or Jews) residing in Alexandria, while some of their brethren would have considered themselves proud “Alexandrians — of mosaic persuasion”. Indeed, certain prominent Jewish thinkers of 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany often pointed towards the ancient Alexandrian community as a model for Jewish integration into the social and cultural fabric of the lands in which Jews resided.

<sup>11</sup> JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities* 11:338.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:150.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:126; 16:28, 60.

<sup>14</sup> See the long list of edicts cited by JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities* 14:185ff.

<sup>15</sup> For a recent summary and one scholar’s unique approach see, L.I. LEVINE, “The Nature and Origin of the Palestinian Synagogue Reconsidered”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, 3 (1996) 425-448.

<sup>9</sup> CICERO, *Pro Flacco*, 28:66.

Jewish institution the right of asylum<sup>16</sup>. In Egypt we also find ‘*eucheion*’<sup>17</sup>. Other names are ‘*sambatheion*’ (in Lydia)<sup>18</sup> as well as ‘*Ebraike*’ (in Cyprus)<sup>19</sup>. The common term for the institution in Palestine and gradually throughout the Hellenistic-Roman diaspora was of course synagogue. The various political powers continued to recognize this Jewish institution, and thus we read in an edict of Augustus to Asia Minor that “if anyone is caught stealing their sacred books or their sacred monies from a synagogue or an Ark (of the law), he will be regarded as sacrilegious and his property shall be confiscated to the public treasury of the Romans”<sup>20</sup>.

Beyond the synagogue, the communal establishment of the Jews was recognized by the permission it received to maintain an autonomous judicial system, at least in most matters not involving capital punishment. In a letter from the Roman governor Lucius Antonius to the magistrates of the city of Sardis, the governor notes that the local Jews “have had an association of their own in accordance with their native laws and a place of their own”<sup>21</sup> in which they decide their affairs and controversies with one another; and upon their request ... I decided that these might be maintained”<sup>22</sup>. This internal Jewish legal autonomy certainly is evident in the Book of Acts (18:14-16), but what is of particular interest there is the assumption that the High Priest in Jerusalem could grant Paul permission to take action in the synagogue of Damascus against those perceived as acting improperly<sup>23</sup>. The links between the Palestinian center and the diaspora communities would also be expressed by the permission granted to Jews throughout the Empire to send money to the Temple at Jerusalem. The destruction of the Temple (70 CE) did not bring about the cessation of this practice, which would be re-established by the Patriarchs (*nesi'im*) and collected by their agents (*apostoloi*) centuries after the destruction, and until the early fifth century<sup>24</sup>. The other side of the same coin was the Jewish tax (Ἰουδαϊκὸν τελεσμά) imposed by Vespasian upon Jews throughout the Empire in the

aftermath of the Jewish defeat in Judaea. Thus, both Jews and Romans recognized and in their own way even encouraged a perception of inter-relationship between the Jewish center and the local communities of Jews. Any discussion of Jewish communal structures in Late Antiquity must always keep this factor in mind.

The communal organization and leadership structures in Jewish communities such as those of Rome appear to have been transmitted from the communal realities of the Hellenistic east. This is certainly the case regarding certain official titles, such as *archontes*, *gerousia* and *gerousiarchs*, *presbuteroi* and of course *archisynagogos*. I will touch on the meaning of some of these terms momentarily, but would also point out that Jewish communities in Rome were ultimately also influenced by the reality of *collegia*, and the terminology linked with these groups (*mater collegii*, *pater collegii*, *patronus*) found its way into Jewish communal life as well. There is, in fact, scholarly discussion as to whether the Roman administration could relate to the Jewish community as a type of *collegium*, in which case the prohibition of Julius Caesar relating to these bodies would have regarded the Jewish *collegia* as one of the “ancient” ones that were granted exemption from Caesar’s decree. Some scholars, such as J. Juster<sup>25</sup>, considered the Jewish community to be *sui generis* in the Roman world, but whatever the case, the permission granted to Jews to live according to their laws in effect granted de facto recognition to their communal structures as well.

The most common title in Jewish communities was the ‘*archon*’. These officials, alongside the ‘*gerousia*’, were the effective leaders of the community. This is a classic example of the transfer of eastern-hellenistic terminology, and the constitution of the ‘*politeuma*’ as well, to the West. Some fifty inscriptions in Rome mention *archons*, and they represent eight of the communities known from the catacombs (most are from Monteverde). Since they are mentioned in funerary inscriptions they usually appear by name alone, without a description of the administrative body in which they functioned. But we do know they were elected in yearly elections, some more than once (e.g. twice, three times and even for life). ‘Past’ and ‘future’ *archons* are mentioned, but only in one case is the archon also a priest. Clearly we have before us a wealthy aristocratic class, and this would explain the phenomenon of a child being called archon<sup>26</sup>. As is common with official titles, we also encounter ‘*archon alti ordinis*’ or ‘*archon pases times*’, i.e. an honorary archon (“archon of all dignity”).

*Archons* were apparently also members of the *gerousia*, but at times also possessed other titles, such as ‘*phrontistes*’ (some

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J.-B. FREY, ed., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum. Recueil des inscriptions juives qui vont du III<sup>e</sup> siècle avant Jésus-Christ au VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle de notre ère*, (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1952) #1149: *asulia*. Hereafter cited *CII* followed by document number.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *CPJ*, 2:#432.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *CPJ*, 3, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> *CII*, #735.

<sup>20</sup> JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities* 16:164.

<sup>21</sup> I feel that this was probably a synagogue.

<sup>22</sup> JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities* 14:235.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 9:2.

<sup>24</sup> See. H. MANTEL, *Studies in the History of the Sanhedrin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965) 190-198.

<sup>25</sup> J. JUSTER, *Les Juifs dans l'Empire Romain, leur condition juridique, économique et social* (Paris: Geuthner, 1914) vol. 1, 418-424; cf. H.J. LEON, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960) 167-170.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *CII*, #120; J.H. LEON, *The Jews...*, *op. cit.*, 281. Cf. also *CII*, #505 and J.H. LEON, *The Jews...*, *op. cit.*, 339.

sort of financial supervisor, either for the synagogue or the community at large) or ‘*archisynagogos*’. To be honest, we have no real indication as to what the practical functions of the *archon* were. Some<sup>27</sup> claim that in Rome each community was an independent body with its own governing body of *archons*, while others (Juster) maintain that the various congregations were linked to one gerousia comprised of *archons*, with each community appointing its archons to that central body. As for the community in Rome there is no real proof that the various synagogues were in fact linked to one central body, in a manner similar to the organization at Alexandria. And thus when Paul (Acts 28:17) meets with the chiefs of the Jews after arriving at Rome, there is no compelling reason to believe that they were members of the central organization of Roman Jewish communities. Whatever the case might be, there is no indication linking the office of ‘*archon*’ to a specifically religious function or institution.

This may not be the case regarding one of the most widespread Jewish titles: the *archisynagogos*. We find this title throughout the Jewish diaspora (with the exception of Egypt and Cyrene), as well as in Palestine. Not only men, but women as well were mentioned in inscriptions as bearing this title<sup>28</sup>. In numerous cases *archisynagogoi* are mentioned in inscriptions as those who contributed to the building of a synagogue. In Palestine the most noted of these is Theodotus the son of Vettenos, who was also a priest. But again, we are not totally sure whether the *archisynagogos* was the head of the synagogue (*rosh ha-knesset*) or in fact the head of the congregation or the community<sup>29</sup>. We would do well not to expect a common and singular use for the term *archisynagogos* throughout the Jewish world and for all periods. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century *archisynagogoi* are mentioned in Imperial legislation together with priests (*hierios*) and ‘fathers of synagogues’ (*patres synagorum*) as those devoted to the service of the synagogue<sup>30</sup>. In yet another law the *archisynagogos* is mentioned together with the elders (*presbuteris*) and others as “devoted to the religious cult” (*religionis sacramento*) of the Jews, but what is no less noteworthy in that law<sup>31</sup> is that these officials were subservient to — and apparently appointed by messengers of — the Palestinian Jewish Patriarch, known in Hebrew as the *Nasi*.

Another office mentioned in Jewish inscriptions at Rome is

<sup>27</sup> E.g., E. SCHÜERER, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. Ed. G. Vermes et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 95 (and n. 29 for further literature).

<sup>28</sup> E.g., CII, #756 from Mindos.

<sup>29</sup> We are also not sure at all what the precise function or meaning of the term ‘*patros synagogos*’ — as well as ‘*mater synagogos*’ — both found in Rome — came to signify.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Codex Theodosianus* 16:8:4 from 1 December 330.

<sup>31</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 16:8:13 from 397.

the ‘*grammateus*’ (scribe), and apparently each community had its own scribe. Rabbinic sources mention the scribe (*lavlar*) as one of the ten institutions absolutely necessary for organized communal life, and this is not merely a result of the fact that not all Jews knew how to write. Scribes were responsible for a whole range of documents for which very specific legal and technical knowledge was required: they produced scrolls of Torah and other religious texts, deeds of divorce and numerous other documents. Here too the title became an honorific, and thus we find “future” scribes as well as child scribes.

There is no uniformity of titles in the various Jewish communities, and offices found in some communities are lacking in others. Thus, for example, the title ‘*presbuteros*’ is common in inscriptions and papyri. As far back as the Letter of Aristeas we encounter ‘*presbuteroi*’ as members of the *gerousia* of Alexandria, and the title appears throughout Asia Minor (Smyrna, Hyllarima, Bithynia and more), Cyprus, Dura Europos, Sicily, Venosa and Spain. And yet in Rome, where we encounter more than fifty *archons*, there are no *presbuteroi*, save for one very doubtful inscription<sup>32</sup>. In certain cases, however, the absence of a particular office may not be due to its nonexistence, but simply to the fact that it was not sufficiently important to be noted on a funerary inscription. This may be the case of ‘*hyperetes*’, found only once in all of Europe<sup>33</sup> and which was equivalent to the Hebrew and Aramaic ‘*hazzan*’ or ‘*hazzan ha-knesset*’, a relatively minor official that probably served as an aid to the *archisynagogos*, caring for sacred scrolls. We are reminded of the *hyperetes* in Luke 4:20, who receives the scroll of Isaiah from Jesus after its reading was concluded<sup>34</sup>.

In summarizing what we have seen up to now, two things stand out. Our knowledge of communal structures in the West is based almost solely on epigraphical evidence, which inherently assumes that the reader of the inscription knows much more than what appears in the text, inasmuch as his or her presence assumes a degree of awareness, if not actual involvement, in communal activity. This is totally different from literary descriptions such as those that we encounter in historiographical accounts, which by definition were produced to meet the needs of those who were not present at the events described. So in the Western Mediterranean area we encounter lists of titles, but have no way of knowing what these really meant, unless we refer to literary texts, which — as in the case of portions of the New Testament or the Talmud — were produced elsewhere. Momentarily I will argue that these texts should nevertheless be introduced into our discussions of Jewish communal structures in the diaspora, if for no other

<sup>32</sup> For an index of the titles found in the Rome inscriptions see, D. NOY, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe* (Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1995), vol. 2: *The City of Rome*, 538-539.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:251.

<sup>34</sup> The term also appears in the New Testament as an officer of the High Priest and Pharisees who arrested or detained prisoners.

reason than the fact that we can prove the active involvement of certain Palestinian Jewish officials, most notably the Patriarch, in the activities and officialdom of Jewish communities far removed from Tiberias in Galilee.

But before stressing that point, another observation can be made, based on what we have already seen. In our discussion up to now we have yet to encounter what might be described as a decidedly spiritual office or function within the local Jewish community. To be more specific, we have encountered nothing remotely similar to what might be described as the local rabbi, an office which in later times came to be known in Aramaic as *'mara de-atra'*, i.e. 'the master of the place'. To those that would claim that this absence possibly reflects the existence of a more secular oriented Jewish community, rather than an idealized rabbinic one, I will now add an even more surprising fact: the office of 'local rabbi' is absent not only in epigraphical evidence and papyri, but in the rabbinic model of the local community as well! Nowhere in the monumental corpus of talmudic literature do we encounter a local communal structure incorporating the rabbi as an absolute necessity for communal life, and as a designated official operating alongside the *hazzan*, *rosh knesset*, or other local offices. We have, in fact, a list of the ten institutions that, in rabbinic eyes, constituted the absolute minimal prerequisites for communal life, and the list is extraordinary both for its contents as well as what's missing:

"It has been taught: A scholar (literally a disciple of the sages) should not reside in a city where the following ten things are not found: A court of justice that imposes flagellation and decrees penalties; a charity fund, collected by two and distributed by three; a synagogue; a public bath; a convenience; a doctor; an artisan (i.e. bloodletter); a notary; a slaughterer; and a school-teacher"<sup>35</sup>.

This list contains three distinct portions or components: 1) Institutions (court; charity fund); 2) Buildings (synagogue; bath house; convenience); 3) Functionaries (doctor; bloodletter; notary; slaughterer and schoolteacher). These ten factors, in rabbinic eyes, were not based on some ancient or preconceived idyllic image of the perfect city, a sort of Jewish *'polis'* built physically along Hypodamic lines and institutionally representing a perfect political entity, but were simply the factors that enabled a Jew to live as such from earliest childhood. Of course a court system assumed the presence of a qualified rabbi for certain functions, but in fact arbitration using three laymen was probably far more practical, and was recognized by the rabbis themselves as being a legitimate system for adjudication<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 17b.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. G. ALON, "Those Appointed for Money", *idem.*, *Jews and the Classical World. Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple and Talmud* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977) 374ff.

Similarly, a rabbi might be asked to deliver a sermon in the synagogue, but it was not his presence that rendered the synagogue operative, but rather the presence of ten ordinary Jews. They represent the sanctity of the synagogue and effectively render it a *"kehilla kadisha"* (=sacred congregation), rather than any sacred artifact such as the Sefer Torah or the Holy Ark. Consequently, when a Palestinian sage was asked how one knows that God's presence may be found in the synagogue, he replied: "The Lord standeth in the Community of God"<sup>37</sup>.

Of course, there was a hierarchy even in such communities and the officialdom we have encountered up to now was part of it. But even this hierarchy was projected within a behavioral context rather than a constitutional framework when discussed by the rabbis:

"Our masters taught: Let a man sell all he has and marry the daughter of a scholar. If he does not find the daughter of a scholar, let him marry the daughter of one of the great men of the generation<sup>38</sup>. If he does not find the daughter of one of the great men of the generation, let him marry the daughter of the head of the synagogue (*'rashei knessiyot'*); if he does not find the daughter of a head of a synagogue, let him marry the daughter of the charity treasurer; if he does not find the daughter of the charity treasurer let him marry the daughter of the elementary-school teacher (*'melamdei tinokot'*); but let him not marry the daughter of an *am-ha'aretz* etc."<sup>39</sup>

The sages could not deny the highest spot on the communal totem-pole to a representative of their spiritual milieu, but at the same time were fully aware of a communal officialdom, titles and all. And yet what is striking is the centrality of the members of the community: their organization does not exist to further some higher cultural goal, but simply to enable Jewish life on the local and most basic level.

Moreover, the rabbinic understanding of the legal status of this community was not that of a corporate entity, but rather a partnership in which all have equal say and an equal vote. The 'seven first-citizens' (*shiv'a tuvei ha-ir*) can sell the synagogue deemed the property of all the city's taxpaying residents —

<sup>37</sup> Ps 82:1; Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot, 6a.

<sup>38</sup> In rabbinic parlance "great men of the generation" — *gedolei ha-dor* — refers to civil leaders of the community.

<sup>39</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim, 49a-b; *'am ha-aretz'* in rabbinic literature no longer refers to 'the indigenous population' as in the Bible, but takes on a decidedly negative connotation, either as one lax in the keeping of certain laws, or in general a boor who also represents the social opposition to rabbinic authority; see A. OPPENHEIMER, *The Am Ha-Aretz. A Study in the Social History of the Jewish People in the Hellenistic-Roman Period*, *Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des Hellenistischen Judentums*, 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

only in the presence (or acquiescence) of all the townspeople (*ma'amad anshei ha-ir*)<sup>40</sup>. The idea of a municipality legally representing the townspeople was not yet formalized in rabbinic times, and for them the entire membership of the community was equally involved in all legal activity. The practical applications of such a perception appear in a variety of legal discussions. Thus, for example, if a scroll of Torah is stolen and the thief apprehended, he must be judged in another town, inasmuch as any judge in the local community would be party to the stolen goods and thus ineligible to provide impartial judgement<sup>41</sup>. Or, if one takes an oath to refrain from deriving any benefit from a particular fellow-townsperson, he is forbidden not only from entering that person's house and partaking of his food, but also from sitting in the synagogue, inasmuch as all townspeople share equal ownership in each seat of that particular public building<sup>42</sup>. A resident actually assumed formal citizenship in this community according to the rabbis, but in contra-distinction to the Greek *polis* this derived not from social status, pedigree or recognition for some philanthropic deed, but simply as a consequence of ongoing residence: "How long must he be in the city to be considered as one of the city? Twelve months"<sup>43</sup>.

What is striking is that these concepts of communal organization do not emerge in rabbinic Babylonia, but rather in Roman Palestine, notwithstanding the fact that the rabbis in Palestine were surrounded by examples of the Greek city, and indeed in certain major cases such as Sephorris and Tiberias even lived within the confines of recognized *poleis*. For these sages the communal structure was a means towards assuring ongoing religious life, and not an end unto itself and the fulfillment of some idealized polity. And so while we encounter a long list of communal laws and functions, these regulations do not appear in a talmudic tractate of their own, but rather are dispersed throughout the various tractates. Laws of communal charity might be found in Tractate Megillah, for on Purim we are required to give gifts to the poor. Titles of communal officials are scattered throughout the laws dealing with synagogue procedure and prayer, charity collection and mourning; and the establishing of public schoolhouses — among the laws of neighbor relations (the question being: can a private citizen set up a school-house in his yard, to the dismay of the neighbors).

Can we use this information in determining the communal organization or concepts in the western Jewish diaspora? Obviously not in its entirety, but I do think that up to a degree we might nevertheless answer in the affirmative, for the links between the Palestinian communal leadership and its diaspora

counterparts are well documented, and not only in rabbinic literature. Messengers dispatched from the Judaeian center to the diaspora, for a whole range of functions, are well known to us not only from the days of the Second Temple, but for generations after the destruction as well. At times these *apostoli* might have been the bearers of information regarding ritual affairs, such as the intercalation of the calendar, while in other cases we hear of those sent to the diaspora to gather funds — whether in the form of temple-oriented shekalim before 70 CE, or funds for support of the rabbis in the post-Temple period<sup>44</sup>. We hear of rabbis in the late 1<sup>st</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries who visited the Jewish community of Rome and delivered sermons while there. One sage, R. Joshua, actually identified Jewish children in the streets of Rome through the games they played: approaching them he noticed that they would make large mudpies or other such heaps, and then would remove sections of the larger heap into smaller portions. Upon coming even closer to them he overheard one child saying: This is what our brethren in Eretz Israel do: they call this portion a tithe, and this one a second tithe etc. Of particular interest for our discussion is the involvement of the patriarchate in the appointment, and removal, of local officials in the Jewish communities abroad. Epiphanius describes in picturesque terms how Joseph the Comes, before his conversion to Christianity, was one of the Patriarch's apostles, sent out to gather funds as well as to "depose *archisynagogoi*, priests, *presbuteroi* and *hyperetoi*"<sup>45</sup>. As noted before, various laws cited in the Theodosian Code also allude to these *apostoli* dispatched by the Patriarch, and this reality of patriarchal influence in diaspora communities, is confirmed by one of the many letters written by the noted rhetor of 4<sup>th</sup> century Antioch, Libanius. In a correspondence from the year 364 CE addressed to Priscianus, at the time *Consularis Palaestinae*, Libanius believes that the local 'archon' of the Jewish community in Antioch, an unpleasant fellow previously deposed, is about to be re-appointed because of pressure being placed by the Jewish "archon of archons", i.e. the Palestinian Patriarch<sup>46</sup>.

The conclusions emerging from this reality are crucial for a true understanding of Jewish self-identity in the diaspora. Local leadership and organization certainly contributed to the cohesiveness of the widespread Jewish nation. But to assume that the impetus for the creation of the local community, the *kehilla*, was dispersion *per se* and the need to create — in hostile surroundings — a Jewish city within a city, is a popular misconception. Local Jewish organization has its roots in the Land of Israel, and derives not from a particular political need,

<sup>40</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Megillah, 26a.

<sup>41</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra, 43a.

<sup>42</sup> Mishna Nedarim, 4:4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Mishna Bava Bathra, 1:5.

<sup>44</sup> There are beautiful tales on this theme, such as the story of one Abba Yehuda in Antioch who would regularly contribute to the messengers sent out by the sages, and his consternation in the wake of his becoming suddenly destitute; cf. Palestinian Talmud, Horayot, 3:48a; Leviticus Rabbah, 5:4, ed. Margaliyot, p. 110.

<sup>45</sup> EPIPHANIUS, *Panarion Haer.*, 30.3.4.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. M. STERN, *GLAJJ*, vol. II: *From Tacitus to Simplicius*, 598.

but rather as a means of assuring a viable Jewish lifestyle for the community at large. In that sense it was the *people* who rendered the community a “*kehillat kodesh*”, and if organized properly this community might also serve as God’s residence,

for as we have noted: אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדָה אֵל — “The Lord standeth in the Community of God” (Ps. 82:1).



# CC

Centro Conferenze

## **Ecumenismo: profezia della vita religiosa**

Prima conferenza annuale in onore di Padre Paolo Wattson e Madre Lurana White  
fondatori della Congregazione Francescana dell'Atonement  
Trentennale della morte di Thomas Merton e Karl Barth

Enzo Bianchi

Priore della Comunità monastica di Bose

(Conferenza tenuta al **Centro Pro Unione**, giovedì, 10 dicembre 1998)

Quando, in vista di questa relazione, ho iniziato la ricerca e la meditazione sul rapporto tra vita religiosa ed ecumenismo ho subito percepito la novità del tema. Cent'anni or sono, quando padre Paul Wattson e madre Lurana White davano inizio a una *forma vitae* segnata dall'ansia ecumenica, si sarebbero potute raccogliere solo rarissime testimonianze di riconciliazione e di unità da parte della vita religiosa in seno alla chiesa.

Da circa un secolo non solo l'ecumenismo è apparso come via possibile di comunicazione tra le chiese ed è stato accolto dalla vita religiosa come un segno dei tempi, ma la vita religiosa, soprattutto quando ha assunto forme inedite attraverso nuove fondazioni, ha sentito l'ecumenismo non come un'opzione possibile tra le tante, ma come istanza con la quale si è intrecciata in modo radicale e indissolubile, a tal punto che, in molti dei suoi protagonisti, sarebbe difficile fare distinzioni tra testimonianza di vita religiosa e di ecumenismo.

Il titolo della mia relazione indica l'ecumenismo come "profezia della vita religiosa", ma certamente non vuole significare che l'ecumenismo sia la sola valenza profetica possibile della vita religiosa, né tanto meno vuole leggere questa vita, così com'è vissuta realisticamente e quotidianamente, come vita profetica. Non voglio pormi nel novero di quei religiosi che parlano sovente con entusiasmo della qualità profetica della loro vita per sentirsi investiti di un ruolo, per attribuirsi di diritto un'identità che invece può derivare solo dall'autenticità del loro essere e del loro vissuto quotidiano. Per questo, pur convinto che la vita religiosa è chiamata a essere profetica, nell'itinerario che vi propongo vorrei evidenziare anche le contraddizioni, le inadeguatezze che vanno assunte come peccati, anche se sovente peccati inconsapevoli, come tradimenti di quel Vangelo che si è scelto come "guida": *per ducatum Evangelii*<sup>1</sup>, affermava Benedetto, e gli fa eco il documento del Vaticano II sulla vita religiosa: "essendo norma fondamentale della vita religiosa il seguire Cristo come viene insegnato dal Vangelo, questa norma deve

essere considerata ... come regola suprema"<sup>2</sup>.

### **I. Una lucida confessione**

Ritengo e spero di non essere facile alle mode e dunque non voglio entrare nel coro di quelli che ricercano quasi per vezzo le colpe antiche ma, semplicemente come amante della verità, devo acconsentire alla lettura della vita religiosa del passato, soprattutto del monachesimo, come vita segnata da contraddizioni gravissime allo spirito di comunione e di riconciliazione. La vita religiosa si è trovata sovente compromessa nella mischia, nelle battaglie degli scismi e delle eresie e, in nome della verità, per servire la pretesa verità cristiana, ha usato anche le armi della violenza, della persecuzione dell'altro, del disprezzo e della negazione della diversità. Senza la vicenda monastica la storia delle divisioni non sarebbe intelligibile e ancora oggi sono sovente i monaci a opporsi a tentativi di riunificazione o riconciliazione. Si potrà dire che quelli erano altri tempi, che tutte le chiese erano coinvolte in atti e comportamenti che noi oggi capiamo come contraddicenti il Vangelo, ma io credo che una lucida confessione sia necessaria, a partire da questo interrogativo fondamentale: qual era quella "verità" cristiana – o quella concezione di verità – che accettava di lasciarsi servire dalla violenza? Quanto avvenne va letto come una ferita inferta al "veritatem facere in caritate" di Ef 4, 15, al rendere ragione della speranza che abita il cristiano con franchezza, con dolcezza e con rispetto verso tutti, con retta coscienza, come dice l'apostolo Pietro (1Pt 3, 15-16) alle comunità cristiane in diaspora nel mondo.

Già al fiorire del monachesimo nel IV secolo, il grande padre con cuore ecumenico, Basilio il Cappadoce, evitava il termine "monaco" non solo perché lo sentiva come una possibile ferita all'unità del pleroma ecclesiale, ma anche perché quel termine indicava asceti con atteggiamenti di intolleranza e di violenza, uomini più fanatici che zelanti, che

<sup>1</sup> Regula Benedicti, *Prol.* 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis* 2.

facevano opera più di divisione e di disprezzo dell'altro differente che non di koinônia.

Ma ancora oggi, sarebbe inutile tacerlo, ci sono ambienti monastici che resistono all'ecumenismo, soprattutto nell'oriente cristiano. La certezza di essere la vera chiesa toglie il desiderio di poter ricevere qualche dono dalle altre tradizioni cristiane e coltiva una diffidenza verso ogni tipo di incontro, di confronto, di dialogo e di possibile cammino verso l'unità. Certamente occorre comprensione perché si possono dare diverse spiegazioni a questa diffidenza che a volte giunge anche ad atteggiamenti di aperta ostilità verso l'ecumenismo. Durante i settant'anni della cattività comunista l'attività ecumenica delle chiese dell'est era uno strumento usato dal potere statale che si serviva del dialogo tra cristiani sulla pace per un'operazione di propaganda e di immagine ad uso esterno: in certi ambienti quindi "ecumenismo" è oggi un termine infangato, carico di significati ambigui. Inoltre i cristiani di quelle chiese, nel riscoprire oggi le proprie radici, subiscono la tentazione di riaffermare un'identità del passato, sovente etnica e confessionale nel contempo, un'identità "contro"; di conseguenza finiscono per sentire l'ecumenismo come modernità portatrice di sincretismo, come un prodotto dell'occidente che invade le loro terre. E tuttavia a questi monaci – sovente infatti, come in Georgia e in Grecia, sono i monaci i protagonisti di questa ostilità verso l'ecumenismo – va ricordato, pur comprendendo le loro ragioni, che un'attitudine difensiva e negativa verso l'altro fratello nella fede contraddice l'agape, il grande e nuovo comandamento lasciatoci dall'unico Signore.

Per quel che riguarda la vita religiosa in occidente un'opposizione netta e chiara all'ecumenismo è rara, patrimonio solo di poche comunità legate al cattolicesimo post-tridentino assunto come "norma immutabile", le quali temono l'ecumenismo vedendo in esso un irenismo che minaccia l'integrità del dogma cattolico. Tuttavia dobbiamo confessare che molte comunità religiose semplicemente ignorano questa via di riconciliazione, la considerano un optional, un carisma specifico, proprio delle comunità ecumeniche, e comunque progettano la loro *forma vitae* senza tener conto delle altre confessioni sia nella vita spirituale, sia, soprattutto, nella loro missione e nella loro presenza. Si pensi a quante congregazioni religiose, dopo la caduta della cortina di ferro, hanno trovato naturale lanciarsi in iniziative in territori in cui non erano presenti fedeli cattolici bensì chiese ortodosse sorelle: questa loro presenza, caratterizzata da efficienza, organizzazione, mezzi economici consistenti, appoggi sovranazionali, nei fatti non si sottrae all'accusa di proselitismo.

Ma se questa è una confessione doverosa per non leggere in modo idilliaco il rapporto tra ecumenismo e vita religiosa, occorre ora mettere in evidenza ciò che noi oggi – grazie al Vangelo che comprendiamo meglio di ieri e grazie alla storia in cui Dio continua a operare – riusciamo a comprendere della vita religiosa come luogo ecumenico o di ecumenismo.

## II. Vita religiosa come luogo ecumenico

Una premessa è necessaria: la vita religiosa, e in particolare il monachesimo, costituisce un *fenomeno umano* prima ancora che cristiano. Presente in tutte le grandi religioni, anche in quelle come l'islam che hanno cercato di negarlo di fatto, si nutre di un'antropologia propria: il celibato, la vita comunitaria o la solitudine, la ricerca dell'assoluto, l'ascesi nelle differenti forme sono tutti elementi di una vita così segnata nella carne, nel corpo, in tutta la persona, che di fatto inducono alla consapevolezza di una somiglianza, di una "monotropia" tra quelli che li vivono pur in contesti religiosi differenti. Non a caso Thomas Merton poteva dire di sentirsi più vicino a un monaco buddista che a un ecclesiastico dell'apparato cattolico... Proprio per questo il dialogo interreligioso è praticato soprattutto nei monasteri e a partire dalla seconda metà degli anni sessanta (è del 1968 il convegno monastico interreligioso di Bangkok nel corso del quale Merton trovò la morte proprio in questo 10 dicembre) cresce e si intensifica in modo poco appariscente ma reale, soprattutto attraverso la pratica cortese dell'alterità e degli scambi reciproci di soste in monasteri e di condivisione della vita quotidiana. Non è forse anche per questa ragione antropologica che il monachesimo e la vita religiosa sono restati a lungo presenti nelle chiese della Riforma nonostante l'avversione dei riformatori, fino a riapparire – timidamente nel secolo scorso e con sempre più forza in questo – come *forma vitae* avente pieno diritto di esistenza e a raggiungere un irradiazione sorprendente?

a) Limitando tuttavia il nostro esame alla vita religiosa presente nelle diverse chiese d'oriente e d'occidente, le ragioni che la fanno luogo ecumenico sono diverse e non possono essere eluse, pena il tradimento del Vangelo, regola ultima e ispiratrice della vita religiosa.

Innanzitutto la vita religiosa – e in particolare la sua forma più antica, il monachesimo – *risale a monte delle divisioni della chiesa*: le sue radici si trovano addirittura nella *ecclesia ex judaeis*, presente in Siria come erede diretta delle comunità giudeo-cristiane neotestamentarie. È infatti in seno all'unica chiesa nel III e IV secolo che la vita religiosa è nata e ha assunto quei tratti essenziali e definitivi che la costituiscono. Di conseguenza nella vita religiosa restano come impressi indelebilmente i caratteri della chiesa indivisa: sovente caratteri liturgici e teologico-patristici, ma anche ecclesiologici. Come dimenticare, per esempio, che la testimonianza carismatica della vita religiosa nei tempi della chiesa indivisa era inserita nella *koinônia* della chiesa locale, il cui cuore era l'eucarestia presieduta dal vescovo? E come dimenticare che la vita monastica era vita di semplici battezzati, nient'altro che una *diaconia* tra le diverse presenti in una chiesa, una diaconia i cui membri si professavano impegnati semplicemente a vivere e sviluppare la vocazione battesimale, senza bisogno di definirsi "consacrati" né di vantare una specificità che non può aggiungere nulla al battesimo e che rischia di offuscare l'unità del *pleroma* ecclesiale? Come tacere che il monachesimo

occidentale ha sempre riconosciuto la sua fonte in quello orientale dei padri del deserto, di Pacomio, di Basilio, percependolo sempre come *orientale lumen*? Esiste dunque questa prima ragione per fare della vita religiosa un luogo ecumenico, ed è una ragione iscritta nella sua origine, una ragione che porta ogni comunità a dire alla chiesa unita: “in te le nostre fonti” (Sal 87, 7). Vale la pena di ricordare a questo proposito la finale della Regola di Benedetto che invita il monaco che vuole progredire oltre lo stadio del principiante ad abbeverarsi alla “regola del nostro santo padre Basilio” e agli insegnamenti dei padri orientali contenuti nelle *Collationes*, nelle *Vitae* e negli *Instituta*<sup>3</sup>. Pierre Miquel, abate benedettino e profondo conoscitore della patristica, ha potuto affermare: “È nei monasteri che si può ritrovare meglio che altrove la chiesa indivisa”<sup>4</sup>. Del resto, nel corso della storia, le principali riforme della vita religiosa hanno cercato un ritorno alle fonti, alla “*forma primitivae ecclesiae*”, alla comunità degli Atti degli apostoli, contrassegnata innanzitutto dalla koinônia.

b) La vita religiosa, non va dimenticato, è sorta in vista di una radicale sequela di Cristo, dunque come *via di santità*, ed è certo che la santità perseguita nella vita religiosa anche se in confessioni diverse è azione di unità anzi, usando l’espressione di san Bonaventura, è “*sursum actio*”, l’azione per eccellenza, quella più efficace in vista dell’unità. Chi ricordava questo con forza profetica e autorevolezza carismatica era Matta el Meskin, il padre spirituale del monastero di San Macario in Egitto, in un famoso scritto del 1967: l’unità vera della chiesa dev’essere perseguita innanzitutto nella vita spirituale come cammino che accetta la debolezza della croce in cui può trionfare la forza di Dio, come santità plasmata da Dio sul volto dei cristiani; è da rifuggire invece un’unità fondata solo sulla spinta affettiva, vissuta come protagonismo oppure come coalizione di forze “contro” qualcuno o ancora come desiderio di accrescere il numero e la forza<sup>5</sup>. Questa coscienza che la santità unisce al di là delle barriere confessionali è condivisa da tutte le chiese e tutti sottoscriverebbero le parole del metropolita Eulogio: “Uomini come san Francesco d’Assisi e san Serafim di Sarov nella loro vita hanno compiuto l’unità delle chiese”. Di fronte alla santità ci si accorge che i muri confessionali non salgono fino al cielo e che la *paradosis* del carisma monastico, vera trasmissione dello Spirito santo, è passata nelle diverse chiese. Le comunità religiose di tutte le chiese sono un eloquente segno dell’azione dello Spirito santo sempre all’opera e della grazia che malgrado le divisioni continua a dimorare in ciascuna di esse, segno questo della santificazione in atto.

Oggi poi, in questa fine di millennio, siamo sempre più sovente testimoni della santità dei martiri sotto i regimi totalitari,

e tra essi numerosissimi sono i religiosi. Giovanni Paolo II nella *Tertio Millennium Adveniente* auspica un martirologio ecumenico, strumento di consapevolezza di un’unità vissuta più in profondo di quanto ci si potesse immaginare: in quel “libro dei testimoni” di tutte le chiese gli appartenenti alla vita religiosa sono una presenza narrante il dono della vita per Cristo, ben al di là delle divisioni confessionali.

Santità allora come forza di convergenza, di comunione e di lode comune: chi può dimenticare, per esempio, ciò che rappresenta in occidente – nell’occidente cattolico e riformato – un santo come il monaco Silvano dell’Athos? E come dimenticare che nella chiesa ortodossa della “Panaghia Kera” di Creta si può ammirare un antico affresco raffigurante Francesco d’Assisi con la scritta “O Aghios Franziskos”? Se il monaco e il religioso rispondono davvero alla loro vocazione di unificazione interiore, di comunione vissuta, di riconciliazione sempre rinnovata, di misericordia continua – solo di questo infatti si deve nutrire la loro vita quotidiana – allora saranno servitori di unità, ministri e servi della comunione anche ecclesiale. “I santi – diceva ancora il metropolita Eulogio – sono cittadini della chiesa una e universale e abbattono i muri di separazione eretti da cristiani non fedeli al comandamento nuovo”.

c) Un’altra ragione che fa della vita religiosa un luogo ecumenico, ragione a mio parere non sufficientemente rilevata, è il dato che la vita religiosa si vuole in ogni tempo *vita di conversione*, di ritorno alle fonti, al Vangelo. Non è un caso che si attribuisca ad Antonio, il padre dei monaci, un apoftegma in cui il santo afferma: “Oggi ricomincio!”. Proprio per questa dinamica la vita monastica, in oriente come in occidente, è caratterizzata dal sopraggiungere di “riforme”, come se la sua identità consistesse in una successione di riforme senza fine. Conversione e riforma fanno parte del cammino personale e comunitario della vita religiosa sicché questa deve essere costantemente rinnovata. È vero che l’adagio suona “*ecclesia semper reformanda*”, ma questo si è concretizzato poche volte nella storia della chiesa, e a volte con una lentezza tale da vanificare gli sforzi. Nella vita religiosa invece si può dire che ogni secolo – e a volte addirittura ogni generazione – ha conosciuto una riforma in cui si è cercato di ripartire da capo, di ricominciare in un’obbedienza e fedeltà al Vangelo più profonda e rinnovata. Sì, nella vita religiosa, nonostante le contraddizioni dei suoi membri, lavora il fermento della parola di Dio, così, di riforma in riforma, il carisma e la diaconia della vita religiosa accompagnano la chiesa. Noi chiamiamo “fondazioni” queste dinamiche perché amiamo enfatizzare la persona dei fondatori, ma in realtà sovente essi sono solo “riformatori” perché la vita religiosa, e quella monastica in particolare, è *paradosis*, “tradizione” e non fondazione di qualcosa di nuovo. Basilio riforma il monachesimo eustaziano esistente, Benedetto riforma la vita monastica presente nella regione di Roma, Romualdo, Bruno, Bernardo riformano un monachesimo già strutturato... Analogamente in oriente in ogni

<sup>3</sup> cf. Regula Benedicti 73, 4-6.

<sup>4</sup> *Lettre de Ligugé*, n. 219 (1983) 1.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. “L’unità dei cristiani” in: Matta EL MESKIN, *Comunione nell’amore*, (Magnano: Edizioni Qiqajon, 1999<sup>2</sup>) 275-287.

monastero è sempre un uomo pneumatico che, senza bisogno di nuove “regole”, fa ripartire con rinnovato vigore la carovana monastica nel deserto...

Questo dinamismo della riforma non risponde a quello stesso dinamismo presente nella vicenda delle chiese che, appunto, si dicono “della Riforma”? Il primato della parola di Dio – ascoltata, cantata, ruminata, vissuta – non è lo stesso fermento che impone un cambiamento di quelle forme di vita che, assunte, si sono indurite e svuotate della loro qualità evangelica? Se oggi le chiese della Riforma hanno accolto nel loro seno comunità di vita religiosa e monastica è forse proprio perché hanno intravisto nel loro sorgere quella stessa causalità che sta all’origine delle proprie identità ecclesiali. Per la centralità della parola di Dio e la conseguente dinamica della riforma, i religiosi possono essere autentici interlocutori con le chiese della Riforma, nativamente capaci di parlare lo stesso linguaggio.

Non sorprende allora che uno dei massimi teologi riformati del nostro secolo – quel Karl Barth di cui per singolare coincidenza ricorre proprio oggi il trentesimo anniversario della morte – abbia potuto affermare: “L’esistenza monastica sussiste per il fatto che il Signore vuole questa vita, la fonda e la modella in ogni epoca e in ogni situazione, e per il fatto che l’esistenza monastica è sempre aperta al nuovo, disposta a vivere della libera grazia del Signore e a obbedire al suo libero comando”<sup>6</sup>.

d) Infine scorgo un’altra ragione che fa della vita religiosa un luogo ecumenico, ed è quella dell’essere un’*epiclesi*, un’*invocazione continua dello Spirito*, vissuta nelle chiese. Questa definizione di monachesimo come “epiclesi” è propria di Paul Evdokimov, ma sovente la si ritrova sotto la penna di Olivier Clément; sì, la vita del monaco o religioso è incastonata nel risuonare della parola di Dio durante il giorno e la notte e la comunità religiosa è innanzitutto un luogo d’ascolto: la stessa Regola di Benedetto non si apre forse con “Auscolta, filii...”<sup>7</sup>? Ora, questo ascolto richiede una risposta: innanzitutto l’obbedienza della fede, accompagnata dalla confessione di fede, dalla lode e dall’intercessione per la chiesa e per il mondo. È qui che avviene l’epiclesi, l’invocazione della discesa dello Spirito santo che come nella Pentecoste è forza di unità plurale, comunione nella distinzione dei doni e nelle differenze delle energie. In questa epiclesi – in cui nessuno è escluso, in cui si prega perché tutti gli altri fratelli e sorelle ricevano lo Spirito per essere più fedeli a Cristo e raggiungere la statura del cristiano maturo – l’anelito, il desiderio di comunione non può essere assente. Desiderio di unità, preghiera per l’unità che viene vissuta quotidianamente soprattutto attraverso l’accoglienza, l’ospitalità. Se il monachesimo è “accoglienza di Cristo che viene” (O. Clément), questa non si esaurisce in una dimensione soltanto escatologica, ma si inverte nell’accoglienza di colui che

viene: “ero forestiero e mi avete ospitato” (Mt 25, 35). Accoglienza di chi giunge anche inaspettato, non annunciato, accoglienza di chi diventa fratello anche se per la sua provenienza fosse ostile, accoglienza che non chiede la confessione di appartenenza... Le comunità religiose non dovrebbero forse avere impresse sulle loro porte e nei cuori dei loro membri quelle parole scritte da Angelo Roncalli nel 1934 quando era nunzio in Bulgaria: “Se qualcuno passa dinanzi alla mia casa di notte, costui troverà alla mia finestra un lume acceso: bussa, bussa! Non ti domanderò se sei cattolico o ortodosso, fratello: entra! Due braccia fraterne ti accoglieranno, un cuore caldo di amico ti farà festa”? In quegli anni forse i religiosi non erano sentinelle vigilanti, ma Dio preparava chi li avrebbe svegliati e invitati a scorgere i nuovi segni dei tempi: papa Giovanni!

Accoglienza dell’altro, del diverso, dello sconosciuto, e riconoscimento della sua qualità di fratello nella fede quando è cristiano sono attestati ovunque oggi nella vita religiosa. Si avvera quello che diceva nel 1968 – lo stesso anno della morte di Merton e Barth – padre Paissios, il grande carismatico dell’Athos: “Quando dei monaci latini verranno all’Athos, vengano qui: ci capiremo subito!”<sup>8</sup>. Davvero quando dei monaci di diverse confessioni si incontrano in fraternità, sovente accade l’evento della comunione: ci si sente uno, non esistono più barriere confessionali, ci si sente monaci cristiani che condividono la stessa esperienza e si riconoscono, nel senso forte del termine, in una stessa grazia, in uno stesso spirito, in una stessa ricerca con uno stesso fine: l’acquisizione dello Spirito santo per essere trasfigurati in Cristo e prendere parte al regno di Dio. Sì, i monaci che si incontrano in verità si scoprono fratelli mai separati e, anzi, vicinissimi.

### III. La profezia dell’ecumenismo nella vita religiosa

Sul tema specifico dell’ecumenismo come profezia della vita religiosa ribadisco di voler restare discreto perché con troppa enfasi in questi ultimi decenni – in realtà segnati proprio dalla crisi della vita religiosa – si invoca questa qualità profetica per ritrovare un’identità in molti casi smarrita. I religiosi non hanno qualità profetica “ex officio”, ma la loro testimonianza può diventare profetica se è in obbedienza al Vangelo e ai segni dei tempi manifestatisi nell’oggi. Quando i religiosi non pretendono di camminare alla luce della visione (cf. 2Cor 5,7) ma sanno vivere con speranza, quando riguadagnano la consapevolezza della provvisorietà e dell’incompletezza di ogni *forma vitae*, quando hanno l’audacia di far prevalere sempre l’agape e la riconciliazione nei conflitti in cui sono implicati, quando accettano la loro marginalità e la loro debolezza come un dono e non come una perdita da saturare al più presto, allora appare anche in loro la profezia.

Paolo VI nella *Evangeli nuntiandi* (n. 69) indicava nell’incarnazione radicale delle beatitudini il carattere profetico

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Aa. Vv., *Visioni attuali sulla vita monastica*, (Montserrat: s.n., 1966) 44.

<sup>7</sup> Regula Benedicti, *Prol* 1.

<sup>8</sup> Cit. da André LOUF in *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, (1970), I, 56.

della vita religiosa, ma questo significa vita religiosa povera, umile, mite, affamata di giustizia, operatrice di pace, perseguitata a causa di Cristo... E Giovanni Paolo II indica come profezia dei religiosi anche “l’esplorazione di vie nuove per mettere in pratica il Vangelo nella storia in vista del regno di Dio” (*Vita consecrata* n. 84), arrivando ad affermare che “la vita fraterna stessa è profezia in atto” (n. 85). Sì, occorre essere chiari: la vita religiosa può ricevere e vivere il dono della profezia come tutte le altre vocazioni ecclesiali. Sta a ciascuno dei suoi membri nella conversione quotidiana aderire a una via che – attraverso il radicalismo evangelico, il celibato che annuncia che questo mondo passa e la vita comune che dà un segno della comunione del Regno – ha qualità escatologica e si vuole profetica: ma il dono della profezia è grande e fragile!

Con questa premessa, anziché vantare una qualità della vita religiosa, vorrei mettere in evidenza che in questo secolo che volge al termine l’ecumenismo è certamente stato profezia in alcune forme di vita religiosa nate per la risposta obbediente a Dio e ai segni dei tempi da parte di alcuni uomini e donne che, da vere sentinelle, hanno atteso, spiato, destato l’aurora. Non posso far altro che pronunciare nomi e nulla più, ma il semplice nominare questi testimoni adesso significa renderli presenti in mezzo a noi: essi sono nella comunione dei santi e con essi noi viviamo l’ecumenismo. Senza di loro l’ecumenismo praticato oggi sarebbe più povero, più azione diplomatica, più competenza delle autorità ecclesiastiche, e certamente meno audace. Ascoltiamo i loro nomi: p. Paul Wattson e m. Lurana White, dom Lambert Beauduin a Chevetogne, l’abbé Couturier e il suo “monastero invisibile”, Antoinette Butte a Pomeyrol, sr. Geneviève a Grandchamp, m. Basilea Schlink a Darmstadt, frau Vera a Imshausen, p. Sofronio a Maldon, p. Amphilokios a Patmos... Alcuni, come fr. Roger di Taizé o fr. Cesarius di Ostenback, sono ancora in mezzo a noi: con loro siamo avvolti da una nube di testimoni ecumenici che hanno rinnovato la vita religiosa, *semper reformanda*, ascoltando i segni dei tempi che chiedevano riconciliazione. Qui si ha vera profezia della vita religiosa, nel nascondimento di sr. Maria Gabriella Sagheddu o nell’irradiamento mondiale di fr. Roger...

Ma ora, a conclusione di questa relazione, non posso non indicare un orizzonte profetico per la vita religiosa, un orizzonte tanto più urgente quanto più “invernale” si è fatta la situazione ecumenica: è l’orizzonte della condivisione di vita religiosa da parte di appartenenti a confessioni cristiane diverse non ancora riconciliate. Per questo è necessario sì tanto coraggio, audacia evangelica, parresia, ma anche tanta capacità di spoliazione delle ricchezze confessionali non essenziali alla *sequela Christi*, molta sottomissione reciproca, capacità di fare due miglia con chi ci chiede di farne uno, ci vuole il fuoco interiore, la passione della comunione che cerca l’unità plurale, indicando in avanti un’unità che va raggiunta *insieme*.

Il sinodo sulla vita religiosa aveva ricevuto tra le proposizioni per la discussione l’invito a considerare questa eventualità di comunità religiose interconfessionali. Nessuna risposta è venuta, né nelle proposizioni finali né nell’esortazione “*Vita consecrata*”, eppure qua e là questa vita interconfessionale inizia a mostrare un volto in cui l’ecumenismo diventa di nuovo profezia della vita religiosa in una nuova forma: vivere insieme la stessa vocazione, lo stesso ministero, anche se le chiese cui si appartiene non vivono ancora la comunione visibile...

Che lo Spirito santo susciti questa nuova Pentecoste per la vita religiosa: allora ci sarà profezia per la chiesa e per il mondo!



# CC

Centro Conferences

## **The Fatherhood of God Authority and Gender in the Year of the Father**

Janet Martin Soskice  
Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

(Conference given at the **Centro Pro Unione**, Wednesday, April 14, 1999)

Let me remind you where we are — where we all are as Christians:

what you have come to is Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem where the millions of angels have gathered for the festival, with the whole Church of first-born sons, enrolled as citizens of heaven. (Hebrews 12:20)

We are all come to Zion where everyone is a first born son — the author of Hebrews is glossing that passage in Exodus 19 where Moses and the people of Israel come to the holy mountain. He employs a self-subverting metaphor, a whole community of ‘first born sons’ is strictly a contradiction in terms. Let’s keep this verse in mind as we consider the topic before us — authority and gender in the year of the Father.

The paper is a ‘follow on’ from a series of lectures on Petrine primacy and ecumenism given at this Center. When approached by the organizers to make a contribution on the topic of ‘Women and Petrine Primacy’ I must admit that my first reaction was to ask what possibly women (as women) might have to say on this particular question? Are not women, for this purpose, just Christians like everyone else? There isn’t, after all, a ‘women’s perspective’ on everything — a women’s view of the Bernini colonnade, or complex hydrocarbons, or of the relative merits of Matisse and Morandi. Women do not, after all, constitute a different species. The invitation was then glossed for me in this helpful way: one of the questions asked by the Pope in *Ut Unum Sint* ‘how might the papacy serve the unity of the Church’. This unity must be not only that between the various Christian denominations, but also that unity of women and men within the Catholic fold. Where does the Catholic church stand on this issue at the brink of the new millennium? This is the questions I mean to pursue here and, since 1999 has been designated by the Pope as the ‘Year of the Father’, I mean to do so by reflecting on the Fatherhood of God in our time.

First some basic considerations on the community of women and men in the Church. We are all called to Zion,

where everyone is a first-born son.

Christianity is an egalitarian faith, famously (if not always consistently) neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. What this has meant in the history of Christian life and thought is that women are the same as men, except when they are different. Women, as well as men, have understood the Creedal ‘for us men and for our salvation’ to include all. There have been tricky moments... Patristic exegetes struggled with 1 Corinthians 11:7 ‘But for a man it is not right to have his head covered, since he is the image of God and reflects God’s glory, but woman is the reflection of man’s glory.’ Does Paul mean women are not as fully in the image of God as are men? John Chrysostom takes this to refer to matters of civil authority which, after Eve’s disastrous mistake, women no longer have. Origen surmised that women (holy women) would become men in heaven having cast away (as would holy men) all that is weak and womanly in their nature. These are not silly or even aggressively misogynistic positions for men of their times to take but attempts in every way to be obedient to scripture and to discern how it might be that Jesus (undoubtedly male) is the true image of all that we will be. Out of this exegetical underbrush Augustine emerges as a hero, insisting that the female sex was not a deficiency and that, yes, women will be women even in the resurrected state, although without inciting lust. (Whether this represents a change in men or a change in women is not clear). Overall the idea that women were as truly Christian, as truly and wholly in the image of God, triumphed. This spiritual egalitarianism was not seen, before our time and even in it, as implying a social and political equality. Women — and slaves — might be equally loved by God, equally our brothers and sisters, but this was not understood to imply that they should be able to vote, or own property, or decide whom they wish to marry, or study at universities or practice law or medicine. In a curious fashion this ‘flat’ equality (all the same before God) made women invisible. Since women and men were felt to be ‘the same’ it was not felt necessary to have women in law courts or parliaments or theological seminars since men could speak for women — could speak for all with one neutral voice.

This neutral voice is now contested and we recognize that we stand at the end of 2,000 years (or 3 or 4, 000) in which theology, jurisprudence, ethical and political theory has been written by men and from men's perspectives. Sometimes the contemporary female reader of the texts of theology may get what we might call a 'gender shock'. This happens for instance, when reading Exodus 19, to which I have already referred, when God tells Moses to summon all Israel to meet him on Sinai.

YHWH then said to Moses, 'I shall come to you in a dense cloud so that the people will hear when I speak to you and believe you ever after.'.....

YHWH said to Moses, 'Go to the people and tell them to sanctify themselves today and tomorrow. They must wash their clothes and be ready for the day after tomorrow; for the day after tomorrow, in the sight of all the people, Yahweh will descend on Mount Sinai....'

So Moses came down from the mountain to the people; he made the people sanctify themselves and they washed their clothes. He then said to the people, 'Be ready for the day after tomorrow; do not touch a woman.'

All has gone well thus far, as we read of God's plan for *all the people*, until one realizes that 'all the people' does not, in this passage, include the women. 'Do not touch a woman' — as a woman reader this seems to involve leaping out of your skin. Suddenly you — or your kind — are not one of 'those addressed'. You are not the supposed reader or actor but rather an adjunct or even a problem. Sometimes the shock is overt — for the texts of historical theology are rife with accounts of women's mental and moral limitation, their 'natural subordination', weakness of will and even (in the case of the great Anglican divine, Richard Hooker, their 'imbecility').<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the surprise is more subtle. I recall reading a detailed account of the loyalty a theologian owed to his Church. This was developed in terms of the imagery of son and mother — the solicitude a good son (theologian) applies to his mother (Church). The imagery of Mother Church is ancient and venerable, of course, but as this writer developed the comparison it became no longer possible to substitute 'daughter' or even 'child' for 'son' in it. He was most certainly writing about sons and mothers. What differences does it make to the understanding of 'Mother Church' have been developed almost exclusively by men who occupy the 'son' position — and almost never by women writings as daughters? Maybe no difference; maybe a great deal of difference. How do women find themselves in Christian texts and traditions as actors and not as objects of legislation. As the Jewish theologian, Judith

Plaskow, asks how do we 'stand again at Sinai'?<sup>2</sup>

Looking back at the 20th century historians of the future may well say that the greatest revolution was not effected by the bloody struggles of Lenin or Pol Pot, but the quiet revolution that has transformed the status of women — not just in the west but world wide. The Christian churches have not seen to be in the vanguard of these changes — often the opposite. Churches were fearful of suffragettes and the 'women's' movement. Clerical bodies asked 'why should we be concerned with so-called women's issues when the poor are starving and slain?' In this area the United Nations and other aid agencies were first to recognize there is not conflict between helping the poor and helping women. Women are the poorest of the poor. Even in countries where household wealth is felt to be adequate, closer studies revealed female poverty and high morbidity rates. A decade ago the Nobel laureate economist, Amartya Sen, in his article 'One Hundred Women Million Women are Missing' observed that if we calculate from normal birth rates of male and female babies there are one hundred million fewer women in the world than one would expect. Why? Not because of death in childbirth or infanticide of female infants, though both these occur. It is because in many countries and cultures women and female children still suffer from systematic discrimination or neglect. Where there is food male children are fed first, where there is medicine they receive it, where education males get it.<sup>3</sup> 'Sexism' is a harsh word, but no harsher than the reality. Sexism is not something that hurts women's feelings — it kills millions and millions every year. Were the same neglect, exploitation and violence found in certain countries meted out to minority groups the churches would be up in arms.

Most Christian churches acknowledge today short-comings in their past treatment of women, and this is why the issue of women has relevance to Christian unity. Many of our sister churches, for I speak as a Catholic, had made structural changes which allow women a fuller involvement in decision-making. Some have reconsidered sacramental practice. Some have made women ministers and priests. As we well know the Catholic Church does not feel authorized to ordain women but this does not mean — 'business as usual'. On the contrary, the pressure is all the greater on the Catholic Church, especially with regard to ecumenism. For while our sister churches do not, and cannot, demand that we ordain women, they can and do ask, with increasing urgency, what the Catholic church — and what the successor of Peter — are doing to ensure that women's voices are heard. 'If you are not going to ordain women, then how do you intend to involve them?', might be the form of the question. Where, in the last analysis, does the Catholic church stand on women? Separated brothers and

<sup>2</sup> Judith PLASKOW, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Amartya SEN, 'More Than One Hundred Million Women are Missing', *New York Review of Books*, 20 December, 1990.

<sup>1</sup> See Bishop Stephen SYKES entertaining article in, *After Eve: Women Theology and the Christian Tradition* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990).

sisters may indeed wonder whether we have all come to Mount Zion where everyone is a 'first-born son' or whether, in the case of Catholics, only the men have been permitted to ascend to the top while the women, as always, remain below in the day camp washing the clothes and baking the bread.

The Pope has desired that 1999 be, for the Church, 'the Year of the Father', following two years on the Spirit and the Son. I wonder if the Papal pen quavered just a little before he signed the proclamation? It is a brave thing to call the last year of the old millennium 'the year of the Father' — a potential public relations disaster. Fathers, of any sort, get almost exclusively bad press these days. My husband, himself a father, has pointed this out to me. Fathers — as fathers — only to appear in the British press if associated with criminal violence of a sexual, physical or psychological sort (usually all three) towards their nearest and dearest. Or else they appear as absent. Fathers aren't around. Single parent families are overwhelmingly led by women while 'fathers' can't be found, or won't be found or start up new families with someone else. Even when fathers are good they are frequently absent. Children in Florida a few years back were posed with the question, 'If you had to choose never again either to see your father or to watch T.V., which would you choose?' A poser, admittedly for anyone but it's not surprising most of them elected to keep the television and ditch Dad. After all they see the television between 4 to 6 hours a day.

In the New Testament, calling God 'father' is a sign of great intimacy, of new relation, of hope and of love. No divine title has been more central to Christian thought and worship than that of 'father' yet it seems now, for not a few people, to be vexed. The modern period has seen real concern amongst theologians and the Christian faithful about the symbolic and psychological outworkings of the 'fatherhood of God'. These criticisms are associated now with feminist theology but antedate it considerably: David Hume in the eighteenth century and Freud in the twentieth painted grim pictures of the 'Divine patriarch'. In this century Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* is a *locus classicus*: Daly writes, "The biblical and popular image of God as a great patriarch in heaven, rewarding and punishing according to his mysterious and seemingly arbitrary will, has dominated the imagination of millions over thousands of years." While Daly notes that 'sophisticated thinkers' have never identified with God a Superfather in heaven nevertheless '...if God is male, then the male is God. The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination.'<sup>4</sup> Carter Heyward sketched an 'idolatrous' God in even stronger terms as an 'impassive unflappable character who represents the headship of a universal family in which men are best and women least.....the eternal King, the

Chairman of the board... the Husband of the Wife..<sup>5</sup>

Shades of Freud are not far off. Indeed it is unclear in such analyses whether the suggestion is the 'monstrous father' is the product of Christianity or the reverse — that Christianity the product of the 'monstrous father' lurking in every human psyche. Consider this remark of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan,

The boy enters the Oedipus complex by a half-fraternal rivalry with his father...But the father appears in this game as the one who has the master trump and who knows it; in a word, he appears as the Symbolic father....In all strictness the Symbolic father is to be conceived as 'transcendent,' as an irreducible given of the signifier. The Symbolic father is the one who is ultimately capable of saying 'I am who I am' — can only be imperfectly incarnate in the real father. He is nowhere...'

(Lacan, Seminar of March-April, 1957)<sup>6</sup>

The God of Exodus, of Moses, is in bad company — or perhaps **is himself** the bad company here. At the gate of psychic maturity and, for Lacan, of language stands the Oedipus complex and the law of the father, which every child must accept (even if boy children and girl children negotiate it differently) in order to be mature and non-psychotic.

Behind Lacan Freud, and behind Freud — the Book of Exodus. A series of Chinese boxes. But which should interpret which? We are presented with what seems a 'universal symbol' of fatherhood in terms of power, unassailable authority, psychological violence and emotional indifference.

Lacan was pleased enough to call his theory 'myth' — a myth of psychoanalysis. But we tend to literalize. Freud, we say, has told us 'the truth' behind the story of Moses and his famous encounter with God in the burning bush. It is a God of law, who has the power to name things (including himself), who sets himself up as the fixed point to which all must relate. This, we read into our Bible as a father-God of law and guilt. We readily forget that Freud, a great midrashist, is not telling us 'the meaning' but a myth that suits his therapeutic needs.

The problematic status of calling God 'father' is identified by Bishop Walter Kasper in *The God of Jesus Christ*

the statement, so central to the New Testament, that God is the Father of Jesus Christ and the Father of us all, has today become difficult for many to understand and assimilate.

<sup>5</sup> I. Carter HEYWARD, *The Redemption of God. A Theology of Mutual Relations*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982) 156.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Anthony WILDEN, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) 271.

<sup>4</sup> Mary DALY, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Women's Studies. Philosophy, Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 13, 17, 19.

He continues,

This observation is all the more momentous since ‘father’ is a primordial word in the history of cultures and religions. In the course of history down to the present, ‘father’ in this context has been understood as meaning far more than simply ‘begetter’. The father is the creative source and at the same time the protector and nourisher of life. One’s life depends on one’s father, but at the same time the father makes this life something independent and accepts it as such. Thus the father represents the binding order of life. He represents power and authority as well as gift, goodness, solicitude and aid.<sup>7</sup>

Bishop Kasper acknowledges the debates engendered by Freud, feminism, the breakdown of the family, and so on and continues,

The father is essentially the source on which the child indeed depends but to which it also owes its existence. He is the source that renders the child an independently existing entity and justifies that existence. The father-child relation is thus a symbol of the human condition as such; it gives expression to the fact that human freedom is a conditioned and finite freedom....

Since, however, the father-child relation is not only an inalienable aspect of being human but also cannot be replaced by other relation, ‘father’ is a primal word in the history of humanity and religion; it cannot be replaced by another concept and cannot be translated into another concept. It is against this background that the full extent of the present crisis becomes visible.<sup>8</sup>

In his account of ‘father’ as ‘primordial word’ Bishop Kasper renders a far more positive account of the father symbol than those of Freud or Lacan, as we would expect from a Christian theologian. However, there is a real sense in which Kasper’s account has also ‘bought in’ to those reigning theories. This shared element is a ‘paternal essentialism’ — that is, there is a presumption shared that ‘fatherhood’ carries some universal and cross-cultural weight of meaning, found as readily amongst the bushmen of the Kalahari as the Cathars of medieval France. But this thesis is highly contestable, even at the empirical level. The very breakdown of the family to which Bishop Kasper alludes shows that, except in a crudely biological way, the father relationship is, sadly, highly alienable. If we are looking for an ‘inalienable’ relation at some psychic level, the mother is

at least as, if not more, likely candidate — as she is for that ‘source on which the child indeed depends but to which it also owes its existence.’

The point here is not, however, to quibble about the symbolic resonances of fatherhood in different times and places. Rather the main short-coming of ‘paternal essentialism’ lies in its suggestion that we come to the reading of scripture with an understanding of ‘father’ (as culturally constant, or as ‘primal word’) first found in the world and all its peoples, and then discovered in Christian texts. This misses what is revolutionary about the Bible, and what is revolutionary about what Christian tradition has to say concerning the Fatherhood of God.

It is a surprising and illuminating that Hebrew bible is astonishingly reserved in the matter of calling God ‘father’. Far from there functioning as a ‘primal word’, amongst the plethora of divine ascriptions in the Hebrew Bible ‘father’ is by no means privileged. On the contrary it is rare. While God is spoken of as in some unspecified parental relationship to Israel, and sometimes by an adoptive one (in Exodus as ‘the God of our fathers’), God is directly styled as ‘father’ only eleven times in the Hebrew Bible and never invoked in prayer in this way. This is in sharp contrast to the Christian gospels where Jesus calls God ‘father’ over 170 times, teaches his disciples to pray to God as father and nowhere, with the exception of the cry of dereliction from the cross addresses God by any other name.

Why this reservation in the Old Testament? Some have suggested that this reticence is precisely tied to the fear of idolatry. The God of the Exodus narrative is identified through historical association rather than by some mythological biology which might appear to suggest that God or the gods are the biological fathers of mankind. The main relation of God to the people in Exodus is in covenant and not kinship — adoption of Israel and not her biological generation. Paul Ricœur suggests that the title, ‘father’, makes its tentative emergence is in the prophetic literature, looking forward to a moment of future intimacy which Israel will enjoy with her God. He cites the extraordinary Jeremiah 3.19-20 where God speaks to his faithless children thus,

‘I thought: you will call me Father  
and will never cease to follow me.  
But like a woman betraying her lover,  
House of Israel, you have betrayed me’  
(Jeremiah 3:19-20)

Here the name ‘father’ holds out the promise of intimacy, an image which is then ruptured by the spousal imagery of faithless wife.

Much has been made in the scholarly literature in recent years of the fact that Jesus used the Aramaic ‘abba’ in addressing God — an intimate title. But any invocation of God as father — personal father rather than father of the people Israel — was, in all likelihood, a striking element of his

<sup>7</sup> Walter KASPER, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1984)133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

teaching. Perhaps other teachers were doing so at this time but we no evidence for so exclusive and intimate a preference of calling God 'father' in Jewish writings ante-dating the first Christian texts. Whether this means that Jesus was *the* pioneer, or simply one of the pioneers of move towards calling God 'father' we don't know, for God's fatherhood and nearness became an important feature of Rabbinic teaching, too, in the 1st-5th centuries of the current era.

Whatever may be the case, it is evident that Jesus' particular way of calling God 'father' suggested more than intimacy. It suggested his followers, and to some antagonists, a claim to a special relationship. It suggested that this man claimed to be, in a way no other could be, 'the Son of God'.

The New Testament writers and theologians of the early church made such an observation. Writing in the third century, Origen remarks that nowhere in the Old Testament is God prayed to as 'father'. He also notes that in John's gospel it is only after the resurrection that the disciples are told that the father of Jesus is to be their father, too. In some of the earliest Christian writings Paul expands upon the idea that the Christian is no longer slave but a son of God, "the spirit of adoption, enabling us cry out, 'Abba, Father'" (Romans 8.15; see also Galatians 4.4-6). The extension of the familial metaphors, begun already by Paul, suggested to early theologians a nexus of familial metaphors in which Christians are 'children' or 'sons' of God by virtue of being one with Jesus, for whom God was 'Father'.

None of this bears up the suggestion that 'father' is a primordial word' across cultures and history and thus as found Jewish and Christian scripture. On the contrary it would seem to underline Ricœur's contention that "the father figure is not a well-known figure whose meaning is invariable and which we can pursue in its avatars, its disappearance and return under diverse masks; it is a problematic figure, incomplete and in suspense."<sup>9</sup>

To summarize, we must not bring predelineated notions of paternity to our scriptures but rather learn the Christian grammar of the Fatherhood of God from those scriptures. Christians must learn how to call God 'Father' from the practice of the Son — from the one who taught us to call upon God in this way.

What can we learn of the fatherhood of God from the Gospels? Jesus' use was above all affective, and suggested an intimacy which the Christians were to enjoy as a new family of God, not by blood but by Spirit. As such this new family was subversive, as various early martyrologies attest, of the loyalties of the biological family and the biological father.

There is in this New Testament use, and unlike that of the Platonists, no correlative and subordinate female principle (akin to matter) over and against which the male creative and generative principle is contrasted. 'Fatherhood' does not then set up a binarism in which a subordinate female principle is implied.

And finally, developed Christian theology, 'father' must be seen as above all a Trinitarian title. 'Father' is the New Testament's preferred title for God not because inherited from Judaism, but because the teaching of , and concerning, the 'Son'. Over and against early subordinationist tendencies to make the Father superior to the Son, Christian orthodoxy insisted on the equality and co-eternity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The titles 'father' and 'son' are relational. As Origen pointed out, if there is eternally the Father there must eternally be the Son, for the Father is not Father without the Son. The Father *cannot be* within the Trinitarian economy a sole and solitary ruler or an autocratic emperor without collapse into monarchianism.

Curiously, my own experience of motherhood brought me a more lively understanding of these matters. When pregnant I knew that, if all went well, I would give birth to a child. What I did not realize is that the child would 'give birth' to me. The 'me' that was, before the child, was no longer the 'me' who followed her birth. For if 'I' (my body? God?) made the child, the child — a person yet unformed — made me a mother. In even a purely technical sense one is made a mother (or a father) by the child. Without children there are no parents, and after children one is never the same person again.

And so I understood something more of the formulations of the early church which sometimes seem dry and remote — that is the Son by virtue of whom the Father is the Father. That, if it is true there is no Son without the Father, then also there is no Father without the Son. The Father is 'eternal Father' because eternally father of the Son. And while we say in our Creeds that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, it is true that the Father eternally becomes/is the Father of the Son. Perhaps we can also say that if the Father eternally 'begets' the Son, the Spirit in whom Christ was raised to new life eternally gives birth to the Church — and to all the new family of God.

Let's hope that the new millennium sees a restored understanding of the 'fatherhood of God' as a Trinitarian title — not a title of dominance but of gift, mutuality and life. And let's hope that we are better able to respond to God's invitation to us to share in the life of the Trinity through our new birth — the birth effected by the Son. For it is as children of a new birth that we are all come to Mount Zion, where everyone is a first-born. Perhaps a fuller sense of this gift of love and life can lead us forward ecumenically, and as the community of women and men in the Church.

---

<sup>9</sup> Paul RICŒUR, "Fatherhood: From Phantasm to Symbol" in D. Ihde, ed., *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Northwestern University Studies in Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) 468.