

Redemptive Suffering: Catholic-Shia Muslim Conference at Heythrop June 2003

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In her study of Johann Sebastian Bach's six sonatas and partitas for solo violin, Professor Helga Thöne proposes that these works progress thematically in pairs according to the great feasts of the Christian year: from Christ's birth (Christmas) to his death and resurrection (Good Friday and Easter) and finally to his sending the Holy Spirit upon the Church (Pentecost):

Christmas:	Sonata no 1 (G minor)	Partita no 1 (B Minor)
Passion/Easter:	Sonata no 2 (A minor)	Partita no 2 (D Minor)
Pentecost:	Sonata no 3 (C Major)	Partita no 3 (E Major)

Her argument that a religious structure underpins these purely instrumental works is based upon the large number of chorale quotations in the movements, their relationship to the liturgical calendar and the numerological analysis (*gematria*) of notes and letters in the works. In particular, the Chaconne of the Partita in D Minor, which she interprets as Bach's musical epitaph in memory of his first wife, Maria Barbara, and appropriately one of the Passion/Resurrection works, evokes the melody and text of Martin Luther's Easter hymn, 'Christ lag in Todesbanden':

'Christ lay in death's bondage/ Given up for our sins.
He is raised/ And has brought us life...
No one could subdue death/ Among all the children of men.
Our sin caused this./No innocence was found then.
That is why death came so quickly to dominate us
And hold us captive in its power.'

If Professor Thöne is right, the instrumental music of the Chaconne, dependent upon coded religious meanings, is a transcription of teachings about Christ, sin and death that come to light only when the invisible and inaudible religious structure, the template which Bach devised first and then concealed, is restored to the music. This is music that was heard only once before: in the mind of Bach as he composed it. What Bach gives us in the score is a concealed theology in notes and numbers inspired by orthodox Christian teaching about Christ's death and us. In the resultant music religious insights are hidden, coming to light only when its religious structure and character are made explicit for the hearer.¹

Before that point, one is aware only of an astonishing violin piece (the Chaconne is one of the most remarkable of Bach's compositions), but once the elements of its underlying religious structure are restored, the music is then heard in relation to the creative intelligence which produced it and hid itself within it. Like God and the creation, one might say: the creation does not give irrefutable signs of divine presence – the world conceals at the same time as it manifests God – but there are moments in the world's history when the truth about God's action towards us is glimpsed, in ways which, preserving the mystery of the oneness of God, compel faith and submission as the proper human responses. When those moments happen, a yoke is laid upon human being, the

yoke of obedience and submission before the ineffable and merciful God because we are then in touch with how God has chosen to bring us into contact with himself. To this, Islam and Christianity bear witness. We are communities created by God's address to humanity, by God's Word spoken to all.

The Christian and Moslem traditions have different accounts of the underlying structure of the divine action in the light of which the world is to be 'heard' or interpreted. Our linked traditions are ways in which we express how we see the divine action that makes possible the 'music' of the world. What is worth noting is an isomorphism in both Catholic Christianity and in Shi'i Islam, a similarly shaped account of the death of a holy man for the sins of others. There are significant parallels between Jesus and the grandson of the Prophet, Imam Husayn who, faced with a battle at Karbala with fellow Muslims which he could not avoid, accepted his fate for the sins of those who had been unfaithful to the teachings of the Prophet. For both traditions, the self-sacrifice in death of a holy man for the sins of others is a central feature of how divine mercy comes to the world. This is brought out in a recent book:

Jesus and Husayn each can be described as the 'martyr of martyrs' in their respective religions. It is in this sense that Husayn, not the Prophet Muhammad or Imam 'Ali, is best compared to Jesus Christ. As martyrs par excellent, Jesus and Husayn offered themselves for the reception of sinners. Each hero foresaw his fate as martyr. Each had the choice of passing up this painful role. Each feared the suffering that such a role entailed. And each chose death, apparently for similar reasons. Each understood that this kind of gesture, the ultimate sacrifice, would leave a lasting legacy while serving to atone for humanity, which had lost its way.... Both Jesus and Husayn stand as central suffering figures whose violent deaths at the hands of ruthless temporal adversaries have been interpreted by their followers as universal redemptive acts. Both deaths represented the climax of a terrible period of passion and suffering that helped cleanse the world of injustice, tyranny, and corruption and set a great example to their followers... Each is a powerful intercessor: Jesus, 'seated at the right hand of the Father, receive our prayers,' and Husayn dispenses the waters of the Pool of Kawthar and is granted the keys of the treasury of intercession.²

If I have understood the parallel correctly between Jesus' death and Husayn's death, both offer themselves for those who are caught in their sinfulness. Imam Husayn, as one of the Twelve Imams, and Jesus are sinless: only a person who is not as divided and affected by sin as we are can act effectively on our behalf. The themes of sacrificial death, intercession for sinners and the power of martyrdom as a witness to God's truth are features common to both traditions. Finally, it may be no accident that the day on which Imam Husayn died, 10 Muharram 61 (October 10, 681), was also the date of the Jewish Day of Atonement, the Moslem and Jewish calendars being still aligned with each other.³ If so, then the themes of the Day of Atonement shape Moslem interpretation of the death of Imam Husayn, and as we shall see, those same Atonement rites flow into Christian interpretation of Jesus' death. These parallels are important and will be the focus of further discussion between Catholics and Shi'i Moslems. My role here is to offer some reflections on how these themes of death, sacrifice and sin are dealt with in how Christians understand Christ's work.

I return to the analysis which Helga Thöne gives of these Bach violin pieces. She also proposes that, in addition to the Christ-focused sequence of Christmas, Easter and

Pentecost, the violin pieces also relate to a Latin Trinitarian formula found on German tombstones:

Ex Deo nascimur (From God we are born)

In Christo morimur (In Christ we die)

Per Spiritum Sanctum reviviscimus (Through the Holy Spirit we live again)

The prepositions carry all the weight in this sequence: *from, in, through*, all of them applied to different aspects of God's action towards us and all three of them having an irreplaceable significance in this formula of who we are in relation to God. There is also the sequence of verbs: being born, dying, living again. In the first phrase, there is a double reference: first of all, to our coming from the creative source of divine life, the Father, 'the fountain and source of divinity' (*fons et origo deitatis*) from whose expressiveness all things come.⁴ The second reference is to the spiritual rebirth that Christ brings: in the Gospel of John, it is said that 'to all who received him (Christ), who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1.12-13). It is as though we come afresh from God in a 'second birth' that completes the dynamic of creaturely identity: it is what we are made for.

The third phrase relates us to the work of the Holy Spirit in raising Jesus from the dead. The important teaching, of course, is given by St Paul:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Rom 8.11)

We can understand the verse in these terms: since the power and love of God has taken Jesus from death into the life of God, there is sure hope that this same power will bring us too into the divine life. We too will 'live again' in the second birth that is the resurrection. So both the first and the third phrases refer to a second birth, the first of which follows on faith and the second of which follows on death.

The central phrase will be our concern: 'In Christ we die'. I take it to mean that all human death takes place in the context which Christ creates, a context so intimately determinative of human identity that our deaths – the deaths of all – can be regarded as taking place *in* Christ. His mission is 'for all', culminating in his self-offering to God in death; he died and was raised from death 'so that he might establish his Lordship over both the dead and the living' (Rom 14.9). The value of his death is particularly for those who have set themselves against God; it is a sacrifice 'for sinners' or 'for sins'. We shall come back to this theme when we consider how Christ understood his death, but for the moment, let us keep to the theme of being 'in Christ'.

This phrase is the Christian equivalent of the *umma*, the community of believers in Islam. It identifies you who you are, where you are, where you belong, where your identity is most deeply established. Before I am a member of a particular political community or nation, my primary identity is that I am 'in Christ'. The theme of being 'in Christ' occurs most strongly in the letters of St Paul:

In Christ Jesus you are all sons and daughters of God, through faith. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free; there is no male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3.26ff)

Being in Christ means the dissolution of the distinctions between Jews and non-Jews, the elimination of the hierarchical division of social power and powerlessness and the abolition of the Adamic burden of being men and women subject to futility and death. Christ changes everything by being the one in whom human identity is reconfigured and fulfilled in relation both to God and to others.

I want to approach this theme with the help of a comment by Michel de Certeau: 'Christianity was founded upon the loss of a body, the loss of the body of Jesus Christ' after his burial.⁵ Because the body of Christ is lost in the resurrection, de Certeau suggests, the early believers in Christ are pressed to recover, find, construct a body that will be the focus of their newly emerging religious identity. They come to be excluded from the body of Torah-observant believers in Israel and they establish the conditions of their survival as a different community by creating a body, the body of the Church, that is configured as the spiritual body of the physically risen Christ.

No longer needing the rituals of the Temple because Christ himself is now their Temple (Jn 2.21; 1 Cor 3.16), the early Christians construct their life as a body of believers around a *baptismal ritual* that they interpret as a symbolic immersion into Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6.3; 1 Cor 12.13) and an *atonement ritual* that is a contact with the body and blood of Christ offered to God on the Cross. Within a few decades of Christ's death, Paul can write about the significance of this ritual:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (I Cor 10.16-7)

The Eucharistic acts of drinking the covenantal wine and eating the sacred bread gives the Christian a share in the blessings of Christ's death. It is difficult to exaggerate the continuing importance of these themes for the Church because the Church is constituted by the rituals of sharing in Christ's life, death and resurrection. The Catholic concentration on the sacramental celebration of Christ's presence flows from the sense that both the Church and its Eucharist are the modes in which the body of Christ continues to be formed as the body of believers. Christ dies for sinners, and the effect of this is that sinners, called to be believers, come to be part of him. The word 'incorporation' ('inbodying') of sinners into the body of Christ describes it simply and perfectly, and that is why if our human life is now 'in Christ', our death too is 'in Christ'. No one dies alone: all who die are touched by Christ's presence in death.

This brings us to the question of how Jesus interpreted his death. At the heart of Christian faith is the belief that Jesus willingly offered himself to God in death for the sins of humanity. He charged his death with meaning, a universal and decisive meaning. In the earliest traditions Jesus refers to the oracles of two prophets in relation to his death. 'The Son of Man,' Jesus says, 'came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10.45). With this phrase, he evokes the suffering of the Servant of God who 'has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; smitten by God and afflicted, he was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities; upon

him was the chastisement that made us whole... and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors' (Is.53.4ff, 12). Every Christian, hearing these lines, sees the face of Christ.

At the final meal with his disciples, Jesus evokes Jeremiah's oracle about the new covenant that God will make: the wine that they will drink will be the his blood of the new covenant that will bring God's love to climactic realisation. Before this, in the cryptic riddle, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will rebuild it', he identifies his mission as that of building the Temple, the dwelling place of God, that will replace the Jerusalem Temple which is about to be destroyed. Jesus conducts his mission with a prophetic sense that judgement is coming upon Israel and that Jerusalem and its Temple will be destroyed, but also with the conviction that through him God is acting to make Israel the light of the world, the Temple and dwelling place of God to which all the nations of the world will come in pilgrimage to worship God. His summons to Israel is to become the eschatological Temple, the final dwelling place of God in the world, the definitive community of salvation.

It is intriguing is to ask about the connection between Jesus' understanding of his mission as the building of the final Temple and the theme of making atonement for sins. After all, the Jerusalem Temple was the location of the ritual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to atone for sins. This ritual rendered the Temple, the land and the people holy to God. It seems to me that Jesus consciously understood his death as the sacrifice that rendered the community he was gathering holy and worthy of bearing the divine glory. He was to enter the divine presence bearing not of the blood of sacrificed animals, but offering himself 'for all', so that all would become the holy dwelling place of God. This flows into the Church's sense of being made holy by the self-sacrifice of Christ in death: that is why Catholics go to Mass.

We do know that in a creative interpretation of profound importance for subsequent Christian belief, the earliest Christian community came to understand that the events on the Mount of Calvary should be viewed in the light of the priestly atoning ritual on the Mount of the Temple. The earliest testimony to this insight probably comes in Paul's quotation from an earlier, presumably Jerusalem, tradition: he speaks of

Messiah Jesus whom God put forward as the expiation (*hilasterion*) in his own blood for the remission of sins committed in the time of God's forbearance (Rom 3.25).

The Greek word *hilasterion* translates the Hebrew *kapporeth*, the 'mercy seat', the throne of the divine presence, the place where the Lord appeared (Lev.16.20), which is sprinkled with blood by the High Priest. In Paul's dense formula, the implication is clear: the blood of the crucified Messiah on Golgotha is to be viewed as the blood shed in the presence of God for the atonement of sins. The crucified Messiah, who has entered behind the veil of creation into God's presence, is now the mercy seat, the true locus of expiation, prefigured in the atoning rites of the Temple. It is only a short step from this to the Epistle to the Hebrews which presents Jesus as the High Priest who enters the divine presence, taking with him his own blood as an offering to God, there to be received by God and to become the source of the world's final atonement. Christ's self-offering in death comes to be seen as the unique and unrepeatable priestly atonement at the heart of human history, endowing all human beings with mercy. This insight,

relating Jesus' death to Temple ritual, more than any other, is the generative core of Christian faith.

Catholic Christianity is a conscious affirmation and transformation of these features of Temple religion in which the Jewish tradition of sacrificial offering for sins is not abandoned but re-worked and reinterpreted in relation to Christ and his continuing presence in the Church.⁶ Catholic Christianity retains a stronger legacy of Biblical and 1st Century Jewish religion than Rabbinic Judaism which focuses on Torah-study, prayer and works of charity as ways in which Jewish life without a Temple was to be lived. It is a culmination of the religion of Biblical Judaism in which priestly access to the divine presence is extended to all by their Eucharistic union with the sacrificial death of Christ.

The effect is to flood the practices and imagination of Catholic Christianity with religious categories drawn from the Temple: the Eucharist becomes indelibly sacrificial; a spiritual participation in Christ's atoning sacrifice for sins becomes a core feature of Catholic spirituality; priestly mediation, intercession, a ritualised pattern of worship, blessings, sacred space and cultic ministry come to characterise Christian ministry; it retains in its churches an altar (not a table) on which the sacrifice of Calvary is re-presented; medieval piety will develop a worship of the Blessed Sacrament, the sanctified bread of the divine presence, and revere it as the presence of the Risen Christ in ways which evoke the Biblical Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies. Catholics have a deep sense of themselves as defined by Christ's sacrificial death. This theme is the invisible structure, like Bach's template for the Chaconne, which makes the world a place of wholeness, defined ultimately not by its sin and evil, but by divine mercy. Only God resolves the enigmas of human freedom, and God uses the self-sacrifice of Christ for all as the medium by which mercy and truth come to the world.

When a Catholic discovers that in Shi'i Islam, within the proper boundaries of the great Islamic religious tradition, what Christians say about Jesus is echoed in what is said about Imam Husayn, it is as though one discovers an unknown brother whom one recognises as within the same family of faith. Recognition of a bond, certainly, but also a question about what purpose there might be within God's guidance of our communities that there should be such resonances and similarities. We can ask such a question and with God's help we may answer it.

¹ Thöne's research has been dramatically presented on *Morimur*, a recent CD by the Hilliard Ensemble and Christoph Poppen of the chorales and the D Minor Chaconne: singers intone the single verses of the 'hidden chorales' and hymnic fragments alongside the virtuoso violin part. (ECM New Series 1765 461 895-2). The accompanying booklet introduces the theories of Helga Thöne which I present here.

² J.A.Bill & J.A.Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims: Prayer, Passion & Politics* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 49-50.

³ Bill & Williams, *op.cit.*, 39

⁴ Christian theology strongly affirms the direct connection between God and the world he sustains. St Thomas Aquinas speaks of God being directly present to the creation 'by essence, presence and power': in other words, no intermediary stands between God and the world he makes; our existence is directly contingent upon God's continuing to make us be.

⁵ M.de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* Vol. 1, (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 81.

⁶ The religious category of priesthood and High Priesthood, redundant in post-70 Judaism, is boldly revived by Christian Jews who apply these roles to Christ himself, even they know that he is not of a priestly family (Heb 7.14). No less boldly, Catholic Christianity revives cultic terminology in applying the category of 'priest' also to those who minister liturgically and pastorally in the church as presbyters, co-

workers with bishops. Like Christian life as a whole, ministry in the name of Christ comes to be seen as a 'ministerial priesthood', a participation, centred on the Eucharist, in Christ's priestly work.