

# Correspondence

*Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 3. (Summer, 1968) © World Wisdom, Inc.  
[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com)

Sir,

Concerning the recent article by Philip Sherrard, on "Man and the presence of Evil in Christian and Platonic Doctrine," there are certain important matters of principle, which I think demand attention. Firstly, there is his assertion of a contradiction between the Platonic idea of emanation and the Christian idea of creation. Now if this supposed contradiction is admissible, it could only be with regard to a most narrow and scholastic kind of Platonism. In itself, however, it will be found to be quite unreal, as soon as all the essential doctrine is taken into account. Most important in this connection is that of the Pralayas, represented in Hinduism as the "day" and "night" of Brahman. Properly understood, this completely does away with the contradiction between the idea of God as free and purely transcendent, and God as emanating the manifest under sheer necessity. Subject to this doctrine, there is no question of a creation existing as it were "in parallel" with God. Periodically, it vanishes in its entirety, (the Apocatastasis, in Christian terms) to leave God "all in all," but for as long as it exists, it does so according to all the necessity asserted by the Platonists.

This supra-temporal periodic appearance and disappearance of ever-different creations gives to both sides all they require. To the Christian side, it ensures the freedom of God before the complete contingency of the creation, and to the Platonist side, it admits of the whole ontological rigour by which the creation exists, *in so far as it does exist*. The periodic cessation of the creation, by the way, was by no means unknown to the classical Platonists, as it was taught in the Orphic Tradition. According to Erigena, the four divisions of Being were between the Untreated, creating and not creating, and the created, creating and not creating likewise. The first pair constitutes the metaphysical reason for the universal Substance and Essence: Substance exists because God is eternally non-creative (the "night" of Brahman), and Essence because He is eternally creative under the opposite aspect (the "day" of Brahman). The fact that these two aspects are separate for us at all is due only to the conditions of our own manifest state, and in no way to that of God.

Secondly, the assumption that Platonism does not admit of anything supreme over intellect flies in the face of the express teachings of both Plotinus (Enn. III, tract. viii) and Proclus. In dealing with all the inward powers of the soul, Proclus places the power of the pure intellect subordinate to the highest of all. The latter, he asserts, is "above intellect," and that whoever energises according to it "will understand how the Gods alone ineffably know all things, according to *the one* of themselves." (On Providence and Fate, 24).

Finally, it must be made clear that the ideas of emanation and creation are in no sense equal alternatives, as would appear from the above article. While both have their own truth, the idea of creation relates to an altogether more relative point of view than that of emanation; it considers things from the substantive pole, in which created forms really do appear as if out of nothing, like images on a screen. But this obviously cannot conflict with the idea of emanation, which simply gives expression to the point of view of the Principle itself. (The other idea, that the One

does not admit of complexity, is simply incredible, in view of the fact that the Orphic-Platonic pantheon is developed on the trinitarian principle through and through).

Although these questions can only be dealt with in summary fashion in this space, there is still one more metaphysical principle which must absolutely conclude the present issue, and that is the "irreversibility" of all relationships between the Infinite and the finite. Briefly, this means that while the Infinite exists for the finite being, the latter *does not exist at all* for the Infinite. (Also called the One, or the Godhead). This is because even the greatest finite being is still as much "zero" in relation to the Infinite as the least, or otherwise the Infinite could be approached in finite steps, and so not be itself. Consequently, no property of the finite could possibly affect the Infinite as such, as its very existence does not.

Even though this may sound dogmatic to some readers, I would like it to be appreciated that the purpose of these indications is only to help make it understood that true metaphysics admits no real contradictions when complete principles are possessed.

In the second part of the same article, the same desire to find contradictions leads to yet other important doctrinal questions, but which can still be settled by reference to the traditional knowledge available to us. After an account as to how and why evil is inevitable according to Platonic theory, there follows the illogical (and unscriptural) conclusion that, if evil really was inevitable, man could have no responsibility for any of his misdeeds. This involves firstly the comical fallacy according to which a criminal might try to justify his crime on the grounds that statistics showed that a number of similar crimes must have been committed by that time, anyway; or a murderer, on the grounds that the victim would have died sooner or later in any case! At the same time, the Gospels plainly teach the inevitability of evil also, as in "It is impossible but that offences must come," while adding: "but woe unto him through whom they come!" (Lk. 17 v. 1). Thus the necessity of evil *in general* is just as Christian a concept as individual responsibility, (See also Rom. 9, vv. 15-24), and to this, Platonism simply supplies the necessary background of theory.

The next question arises where it is asserted that Christian doctrine teaches that a created world free from evil is possible, and was so intended from the beginning; that Adam of his own free choice fell from it, and that Christ on earth actually achieved it. The trouble here is a basic defect in terminology: in discussing the "evil" nature of matter, or finitude, Mr. Sherrard completely ignores the fact that in this instance "evil" must not be understood in its usual human sense. If it is so understood, there will certainly be no difficulty in making it seem against commonsense to ascribe such a quality to creation as such. However, the essential reality of evil (albeit negative) lies in the separation from God which creation or manifestation necessarily involves. In this, all creation is ontologically "evil" in itself, no matter how free it may be from everything usually denoted by this word. This truth is also implicit in Christ's reply "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God." (Mt. 19, v.17). Of these two senses of the word evil, it is the ontological one which must be given precedence here, because it contains the other, and is self-sufficing; while this order of evil prevails uncompensated, the absence or removal of what is only humanly evil has no spiritual importance.

Another misleading word here is that of "freedom," which is used purely in its popular sense, as the ability to do either right or wrong equally; thus evil is said to begin through a misuse of Adam's freedom. When used in this sense, however, "freedom" really means "freedom of indifference," which would certainly be opposed to necessity, were it not that this kind of

freedom can belong only to God, and never to any finite being. Actually, the only generally valid definition of freedom is "absence of constraint," implying the possession of a degree of unity which contains, rather than confronts, all otherness. In this case, the "freedom" to reject God (Unity itself) must really mean no more than the possibility of *losing* freedom. But this purely negative possibility, being just the opposite of true freedom, Adam's fall comes about by reason of the presence in him of this same ontological "evil" which characterises all creation. (Correlatively, one might also ask who would count the possibility of losing money as a kind of wealth?) If Adam had been absolutely free, he could never have fallen, but in that case he would have been God; as it was, he fell because of the one respect in which he was not free. Thus the idea of freedom can only be found to contradict the principle of necessity when it is understood in its popular and quite erroneous sense.

Furthermore, it cannot be maintained, as it was in this article, that Christian doctrine implies that the creature cannot or does not participate generically in Being. The short answer to any such statement would be that any entity which did not participate in Being would simply be a non-entity, a sheer illusion. The principle of Being is essentially unique, whence no real existence can have any sufficient reason in anything else. This fact can easily be overlooked when the principle of creation, with its implied "independence," in the creature is believed to be metaphysically on the same level as that of emanation. But in reality, the creationist point of view is too partial and relative in relation to that of emanation to be able to lend any validity to the independence of the creature.

Lastly, to say that it is man's destiny to share God's uncreated life without becoming other than what he "essentially" is, is perfectly true in itself, but quite false if the essence of human nature is identified with man's mortal and limitative conditions, as it so often is. Man's essence resides in God, whose "image" he bears, and there is no orthodox doctrine which teaches that his actual state adds anything to this. Thus the more he sheds the forms of his finitude, the more he becomes truly himself, because he only came to be in his actual mortal state through a profound obscuration of his real essence in the first place, as both the Bible and Platonic theory teach in their own ways. Allied to this, the transposition of time, or temporality, into eternity is also unintelligible, since time contributes nothing to manifestation except the greater part of its limitations.

I am only too aware that all these points do not seem to allow much room to balance with an appreciation of the merits of the article in question, which are certainly not to be denied. But if this addition to the foregoing should seem over-long, I only hope that the inherent interest attaching to these principles brought into consideration by Mr. Sherrard will atone for it to some extent.

**Coventry, 25.6.68.  
R. BOLTON.**

## CHANGES IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Sir,

In the Winter 1968 issue of *Studies* there is a letter from Lois Lang-Sims describing "what is

at present going on within the Roman Catholic Church." The tone of the letter is largely critical, and while I agree with some of the comments, I feel that the letter as a whole gives a false perspective.

Let us agree that many Catholics have almost lost sight of the goal of human life, diluting their faith by trying to compromise with the spirit of the world, which is essentially anti-religious. The Christian who ignores the words "seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven," even though it be in the interests of some high-sounding idea like "involvement," is building his house on sand and will be in serious danger when a major trial comes. But also let us remember that the Christian who *does* seek the Kingdom of Heaven will find all the means to hand in the Church. The text, so little quoted these days, still means the same: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The Church, and the papacy on which it is founded, will remain to the end of the world, and will not fail to provide true doctrine and the means of sanctification. It is under these two aspects of method and doctrine that I wish to discuss the present position of the Church.

The channel through which grace flows most abundantly to the Catholic is the sacred liturgy—the Mass, the Sacraments and the Divine Office (the last, incidentally, sadly neglected by the layman). It is hard for the mind to grasp the immense power of these things—for example, that in receiving Christ in the Eucharist it is only our own unfitness that prevents us achieving perfect union with Him there and then. But even a partial understanding is sufficient to make irritations about such matters as posture or language take on a secondary importance. The Christian who is eager to grow in the love of God will go even to a "guitar Mass" if nothing else is available. Of course, he must be concerned about matters such as shoddy translation, but he will never let these issues obscure his main goal.

It is true, as Lois Lang-Sims points out, that devotion to the Blessed Virgin is out of favour with many "progressive" Catholics. According to the testimony of many saints this is an indication that they are wandering from the way, and is sufficient ground to cast suspicion on the rest of their thought. However, these people have no mandate for their attitude from the Second Vatican Council and furthermore, in my experience, their attitude is not shared by the humble, "ordinary" Catholic. An appropriate response is to redouble one's own devotion to Mary, and to help the unfortunate "progressives" to a truer view of things if at all possible.

Now let me turn to the question of Catholic doctrine. Readers of *Studies* are familiar with the idea of a sacred tradition, in which every aspect and action of human life has a ritual character, opening possibilities of spiritual development to members of the tradition. They are also aware of the extremely destructive effects which western civilisation has whenever it comes in contact with such a tradition, often obliterating everything holy, precious and beautiful. Principal agents of the destruction are modern science, technology and industry. Yet recent papal writings, and the documents of Vatican II, disregard the maleficent aspect of modern civilisation, and propose "co-existence" with it. For members of other traditions this can amount to a formidable stumbling block in understanding Catholicism. How can the Church be infallible?

(First, and observation: God does not leave Himself without witnesses. Even in this dark age the message of salvation must be preached, and in a language which is comprehensible to the men of our time. Thus there must be accommodations of language and thought providing always that truth is safeguarded.)

Now it is not true that these things, modern science, technology and industry, are essentially

false and evil—such a thing is not even possible. Stripped of false interpretations, applications and abuses there remains a residue which is true and good, even though its significance is much less than modern man supposes. If they appear to be inherently destructive in the face of the ancient traditions it is because, firstly, they are often promoted with a deliberate anti-traditional intention, and secondly they are not compatible with those traditions and so cannot be assimilated. Christianity, on the other hand, is compatible with whatever is positive in them. (This is illustrated by the fact that questions of science are excluded from the scope of ecclesiastical infallibility, except in special cases. The Christian revelation does not imply any specific type of science.) Thus it is possible to conceive of a Christian technological society in which human activities are sanctified by the intention with which they are performed rather than by any explicit ritual. Such is the goal set before us by the Church; and indeed there seems to be no other way in which a Christian society could now be set up in the West. But let no-one be deluded. It could not happen without the most far-reaching changes in our society, so deeply ingrained by ignorance, prejudice and all manner of vices. And though the task of conversion is impossible by human standards the Church must continue striving to perform it according to the will of God, as Christ Himself did not cease in His efforts to convert those who opposed Him.

**Woodville, South Australia, 1.7.68.  
JOHN SANDERSON**

Sir,

As a Roman Catholic myself I have much sympathy with the letter from Miss Lois Lang-Sims (in the Winter, 1968, issue of your journal) regarding recent changes in the Roman Catholic Church, but there are a few comments I would like to make.

Firstly, in common with Miss Lang-Sims and many other Catholics, I regret the change from Latin to the vernacular for the Mass, as much of the original beauty has inevitably been lost; but this has *not* invalidated the main purpose of the service, nor, incidentally, does it affect the validity of the priesthood. All the precious sacraments of the Church, including the mysterious "Presence" in the Eucharist, are still there and available to all the faithful. To suggest, as she does, that the English translation of the Mass is "unbelievably shoddy" is surely exaggerating her case; it is true that the beauty of the service depends, rather more than previously perhaps, on the way the priest conducts it, but, even now, it *is* possible to be deeply moved by the sheer beauty of the service. It should also be mentioned that the High Mass is still sung in Latin.

Secondly, some of her statements are surprising if not actually misleading. For example, I have consulted a number of Catholic friends and we have none of us at any time seen any need for "many communicants" to "have to leave the church (or get themselves walked over) immediately after returning from the altar." One may regret the changes she mentions, but there is still adequate time between the end of the Communion and the final prayer and end of the service. Again, although a few "progressives" may disapprove of the "Adoration of Our Lady," we feel that among most of the faithful there is still very great devotion to Our Lady; there is also, in general, still great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

Thirdly, although the forces of evil are at work, as in *all* traditions at the present time, we must not forget the promise of Our Lord to Peter when, speaking of this Church, he said: "... the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"; surely we must *believe* this promise? The tone of Miss Lang-Sims's letter seems to imply that all is lost; but the "progressives" though they are very

vocal, do *not* rule the Church, and this is shown by the very recent statements of Pope Paul, at the service on 30th June last which marked the beginning of his sixth year as Pontiff.

On that occasion the Pope criticised those Roman Catholics who showed a "passion for change and novelty" and he stated quite emphatically that the traditional doctrines of the Church *still* stand. Among other things, he said "We believe in the infallibility enjoyed by the successor of Peter when he teaches *ex cathedra* as pastor and teacher of all the faithful. We believe that Mary is the Mother who remained ever a virgin... and that by reason of this singular election she was in consideration of the merits of her son... preserved from all stain of original sin. We believe that the mysterious presence of the Lord (in the Eucharist) is a true, real and substantial presence..." (from *The Times* of July 1st). Finally, in a special message to priests, he reaffirmed the importance of the celibacy of the priesthood.

**London, 11.7.68.**

**F. W. MCMORRAN.**