



## **AND IF GOD WERE NOT PERFECT?**

### **towards a sympathetic spirituality**

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1. Tell me what God you walk with and I will tell you which way you pray and live
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Notes

The present Booklet is provocative. Some consider it partial, disproportionate in its contrast between what the author calls spatial spiritualities (which he denounces as evasive) and sympathetic spirituality (which the author sympathises with)

*Socially*, we live *light* times (to borrow the term used for so many global drinks). And *ecclesiastically*, we run the danger of seeking spiritualistic attitudes of questionable depth which may lead us to forget the “round-the-world trip” the Pentecost of Vatican II provoked among us. Metz has denounced as one of the great temptations of the moment the danger of creating for oneself a “god à la carte” or a “religion à la carte”.

The thesis (God is interior peace, salvation, life for man) is not difficult for us to accept, although we know that man is a being who can become miserable seeking his own happiness. The antithesis (God is not always comfortable, Jesus does not bring peace but discord, His Life passes through apparent deaths...) is much more difficult to understand. The objective will always be the integration of the two stances, or of the two extreme “attitudes”. And a spirituality for the fight for justice peremptorily needs this integration. And so it is good that we are reminded sometimes of the antithesis although this may have to be done in a pro-vocative way (the roots of the word provocative are very similar to those of the word pro-phetic). And the voice of prophets has never been comfortable.

We hope the discomfiture these pages may provoke in some readers may help to adjust all that is maladjusted in our search of God, and may serve to verify that this search leads us on – with the same passion – to the search of those brethren who are treated unjustly.

Christianisme i Justícia, for their part, would wish the reader to situate this Booklet in the horizon of three recent Booklets, namely “Inter-religious dialogue” (nº 97), “The Third Millennium – A Challenge for the Church” (nº 91) and “The Spirituality of the Servant” (nº 96, Ch. 6). The three analyse too the concern of the present Booklet and try to resolve it through a dialogue with the “world” and with “religions”.

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## **1. TELL ME THE GOD YOU WALK WITH AND I WILL TELL YOU WHICH WAY YOU PRAY AND LIVE**

“Put yourself in a comfortable position. Relax. Try to keep a blank mind. Banish all tensions and try to pacify your interior. Allow yourself to be flooded with the peace of God. Feel yourself welcome and rest in His lap...” It is too often that methods of prayer cramming the shelves of religious bookshops are found to limit themselves to the teaching of corporal and psychological techniques of interior pacification and unification, obviating the smallest theological reflection on the Absolute who our prayers are addressed to. Behind this reduction of spirituality to a mere “technical” problem lies the conviction that those who pray according to the same religious tradition share one and the same comprehension of God; do they not all name Him in the same way?

The intuition that inspires these lines has as a starting point the suspicion that though coinciding in the same vocabulary that we use to refer to the divinity, it may occur that deep down in our profound beliefs we may in reality be naming and adoring different gods. This question on the quality of our theological language would be a superfluous one if we did not believe that an erroneous comprehension of the God in whom we believe could have disastrous consequences not only for our ways of praying but also for our way of living and in the ultimate analysis, in our Christian commitment to the fate of the least favoured people: tell me which God you walk with.....

Prayer methods are not neutral. They all presuppose a pre-comprehension of the divinity; what is more, not seldom the god to who one prays is the unconscious projection of how one prays. For example, systems of oriental inspiration not only provide us with their valuable techniques of profound relaxation, silence of the heart, harmony, release from reality, etc., but also with a whole religious cosmo-vision that includes the affirmation of a God freed from reality, acting as a guarantor of harmony, silent and situated beyond all sensibility.

We do not question the benefits contributed by oriental wisdom to our stressed culture, nor its undeniable revaluation of the more passive and receptive aspects of spiritual experience which, despite their presence in our big mystic schools, have been buried under the ice of an excessively doctrinal and moralistic religion. Well, though admitting all these positive aspects we must ask ourselves about the “face of the eastern god” to avoid accepting perverse spiritualities that recognise the continuation of unjust social structures. We do not have anything against the search for interior harmony as a means to be connected to the “harmonious” Absolute; Christian spirituality admits without excessive problems “harmony” as an attribute of God. However, when in cultures such as the Hindu culture, this cosmic-social harmony supposes the

immutability both of the natural as well as the social order, one could end up legitimising the blatant system of castes as the materialisation on earth of divine harmony. It is in these cases where theological reflection in its strictest sense of the “discourse on God” should acquire its true dimension. Theology is no speculative game for idle minds but a responsibility demanded by millions of “untouchables” who, from all over the planet wonder why if every day there are more and more men and women concerned about developing the spiritual dimension of their lives, their particular fate of “disinherited people” does not appear to change ever. It is only by asking ourselves about the theological basis of our spirituality that we can avoid the dangers of disincarnated mysticisms that alienate individuals by introducing them into papier mâché paradises and convert our prayers into an offence against those brothers for whom day-to-day survival turns out to be their greatest adventure.

## **2. BE PERFECT AS GOD IS PERFECT?**

Mathew, the Evangelist, says clearly: “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5,48). In this sentence is condensed the aim of all spirituality that is none other than making ourselves similar to the Absolute to whom we pray. But what does this divine Perfection consist in? And why do we insist in questioning this perfection? Let us deal with this step by step.

By putting within question marks the Mathew-expressed imperative, we have no intention of contradicting the evident and denying “perfection” as essential to divinity. Everybody agrees to attributing to God the qualities of *perfection, omnipotence, order and immutability*. Our question then does not seek to question the divine nature but to call attention to our spontaneous use of religious language: What do we understand by perfection? What images do we project on God when we name Him as Perfect? On what we understand by “perfection” will depend not only a more linguistic precision in our desire to name the Unnameable but this understanding will also have ethical consequences; in order to be perfect as our Father in heaven, it will be convenient to clarify what type of perfection we are referring to. In the theological question about the perfection of God, religious men and women expect to find the answer that will help them to orient their lives.

Instead of getting into subtle speculations on the limitations of human language to name the Transcendent, let us stop to consider a few points on the practical functioning of ordinary language. It is not necessary to have recourse to semantics to know that words have many meanings, that is to say, words have a potential of different meanings depending on the discourse in which they are used: so for example the word “ant” acquires a different meaning in each of the following sentences: “The museum of natural sciences has a new collection of ants”, “in the city people live like ants”, “in this factory workers work like ants”. If somebody were to ask us for the meaning of the word “ant”, we would need to begin by knowing in what discourse the word is being used. It is only after delimiting the *semantic field* in which we talk of ants, will we be able to define these from the standpoint of entomology, urbanism or trade unionism.

This small consideration of the world of ants permits us to anticipate some conclusions that refer to our question about divine perfection. It appears obvious that the first step to take is to delimit the semantic field in which the evangelist Mathew speaks of Perfection; but before setting out on this task, I would like to consider the theological error that the rash use of language has led us to. The delimitation of words that in the first paragraphs have accompanied “perfection”: “omnipotence”, “order” and “immutability” created a semantic field that oriented the meaning of perfection in a particular direction. As we have just said, the functioning of language is “gestaltic” – we do not understand words as isolated elements but always belonging to a symbolic universe that gives them meaning and coherence. So, few readers would have been surprised on relating “God”, “perfection”, “order” and “omnipotence” since for the majority of us all these terms belong to the same region of an imaginary conceptual map. In the following chapter we will ask ourselves about the origin of our semantic fields applied to the Absolute; for the moment we will only insist in the case under study that the orientation of the meaning we have spontaneously attributed to perfection

can lead us to affirming a Father who is totally different from the face of God shown by the evangelist. Mathew speaks of divine perfection within a discourse that begins with the beatitudes, carries on with the stance of Jesus before the law (*You will have heard it was said before.... now I tell you*) and finishes with love for one's enemies as the sign of divine affiliation: "*Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. In this way you will be children of your Father in heaven, who makes the sun shine on both bad and good and the rain fall on both just and unjust*" (5, 44). The symbolical universe which orients the meaning of divine "perfection" reported by the evangelist Mathew has little or no relation with the solemnity of an order or the omnipotence that suggest a divine immutability before human avatars. The happiness of the dispossessed at the prospect of inheriting the land, the search for peace, persecution in the fight for the justice of the Kingdom of God, showing the other cheek in reply to violence, or giving the mantle to the one who wants to take your tunic, depict a divine perfection that is nearer to mercy than to omnipotence. In this sense, the parallel of Luke defines more directly and clearly the quality of divine perfection: "*On the contrary, love your enemies, do good and offer without hoping for anything in exchange. If you do this, your reward will be great and you will be children of the most High, who is generous with the ungrateful and perverse. Be merciful as your Father is merciful*" (1). (Luke 6, 35-36)

We have said earlier, that to put into practice the evangelical imperative: "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is Perfect", it is vital to clarify what that perfection consists in. It is not the same to discern life from the principle of "doing what God commands", where the Perfection of God coincides with the rigidity of an eternal and immutable moral code; or place oneself under the "principle of Mercy" where Perfection is at stake in the exercise of justice that, under certain circumstances can even end up questioning the validity of orthodox moral systems. Two approaches to the mystery of God that generate entirely different spiritualities and ethics: tell me which God you walk with....

### **1.1. HOW GOD CAME TO BE "PERFECT"**

What preconceptions do we have of God? Why do we spontaneously attribute to Him the qualities of omnipotence, the highest Good, omniscience, immutability or apathy? From what sources does our imagination draw when we think of the Absolute? To try to reply to these questions I would invite the reader to stretch himself out on the couch of a psychoanalyst and accompany Christianity in an exercise of gradual regressions until he has reached its infancy and heard how it has called its Father.

In its first baby babble, Christianity found itself obliged to explain its behaviour before the suspicions of the Roman authorities, and to justify its beliefs before the wise Greek world. Having to go out to meet the Hellens who had nothing else to do than talk about or listen to the latest novelty (cf. Acts 17, 21), the Fathers of the Church were obliged to use the language of their hearers. When going across to Aeropagus, the Christians found themselves in the world of philosophy. "*Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers too opened conversation with him*" (Acts 17, 18).

And in this dialogue, how could one not feel a certain inferiority complex when a jealous God who had to remember His divine condition in order not to vent His anger on men (cf. Os. 11,9) was needed to be introduced to a culture preoccupied with such elevated questions as Being and Becoming; or before the question about the unknown God (cf. Acts 17, 23). Would it not sound childish to present a God as a shepherd concerned about a lost sheep or a senile father who goes out every evening to wait for the return of a bad son? With this mixture of missionary impetus and low intellectual self-esteem, Christianity plunged into a tremendously complex intercultural dialogue, in which the “Jewish God” was soon adorned with the prêt-à-porter Greek concepts.

Already in Jewish apologetics one began to apply to Yahweh expressions which up to that time were used to refer to the philosophical absolute; and so *Filon of Alexandria*, using an Aristotelian and Stoic vocabulary, said that Yahweh was “uncircumscribable”, “indescribable” and “unattainable”.

In the Christian context very influenced by the environment of Platonism, *Clement of Alexandria* when affirming that God had no birth or corruption did nothing else than apply to God the terms that Plato had used to characterise intelligible realities as opposed to sensible realities. In this line of opposition between what is sensible and what is intelligible with disastrous consequences for spirituality as we shall see later, *Albinos* writes: “God is ineffable and can be attained only by the spirit, since He has no genus, nor species, nor specific difference”, which is none other than the almost literal application to God of what Plato said of Being: *Being has no birth nor destruction, is invisible and imperceptible to any sense; only the intellect has received the power to contemplate it*”. The convert *Justin* too spoke of God in the same terms that the Platonic school used to designate that which had no beginning nor end (2)

The same Hellenisation that occurred with the Father took place with the Son. In a culture more concerned with cosmology than with soteriology, the mission of the second person of the Trinity would be that of order and maintenance of the nature of created things. The Son of God was identified with the “Soul of the world” of Plato.

The proposed examples speak for themselves. Let us stop now to draw some conclusions from the intercultural dialogue which we have just witnessed. The first consequence is situated at a linguistic level: The “philosophical” characterisation of God does not suppose an aseptic translation of Jewish concepts into Greek ones but a moving over to a totally different cultural universe; as *J. Danielou* (3) remarked: “For a Jew to say that God is transcendent is to say that He is incommensurable to all created reality, and, therefore, incomprehensible by a created spirit; but at the same time, it supposes the affirmation that His *existence* can be known. For a follower of Plato to say that God is ineffable is to say that He is beyond all representations that the spirit can make, starting from the sensible world; but it is saying too that, if the spirit can succeed in divesting itself of all representation, it will be able to apprehend *the essence*. The iconic language used by the Bible to report the existence of Yahweh will be supplanted by a digital language more concerned with delimiting the nature of the divine Being. This slow conceptualisation of language will have its theological consequences when

Christianity in its adulthood tries to present in a systematic way the content of faith in the credos that every week we proclaim in the Sunday liturgy. But let us not deviate from our spiritual search and let us formulate some questions: the “Greek God” who will be characterised as *perfect, uncircumscribable, unspeakable, inapprehensible, without origin or beginning, without birth, incorruptible, not engendered, invisible, imperceptible*, etc, is this the same God that Jesus called “father” (Abba)? What spiritual way will lead to the God we have just defined? And, taking the questions to their ultimate consequences, will the resulting spirituality still remain Christian?

## **1.2. SPATIAL SPIRITUALITIES**

On the crossroads of a theology which identified the philosophical Absolute with the Jewish-Christian God and a Platonic anthropology regarding the human soul as a two-storied house: reason in the top story and emotions in the lower one, a spiritual road of access to God characterised by the Stoic belittlement of all emotion was gestated. *Clement of Alexandria* was said to have said that to be completely free from passion would be equivalent to being almost like God, Who is impassive. The perfect man and woman are above all feeling: courage, tears, happiness, anger, envy or love for creatures (4)

If the “perfection” of God is situated on the side of impassivity, of imperturbability and of order, the religious man and woman will strive to dominate the feelings that cloud reason and their supreme moral task will be guided by the attainment of *ataraxia* (mental imperturbability), *apátheia* (absence of feeling and passion) and *autárkeia* (independence, self-sufficiency).

History which in Biblical mentality is the place par excellence for the revelation of Yahweh will give way to interior roads that endeavour to escape from time as a condition of possibility to the attainment of mystical contact with God. It is to these spiritualities that raise themselves above “sinful human nature” in order to associate themselves with an a-temporal and a-historical Absolute that I apply the denomination “spatial spiritualities”.

But let us go back to placing Christianity on the couch so as to trace the origin of these spiritualities. This time the regression will take us back to the “first systematic theologian”: Dionisius the Aeropagite. Pseudo-Dionisius will admit how right our proverb (“Tell me how is your God and I will tell you how you pray and live”) is when after recognising the impossibility of speaking about a transcendent God, above all essence, he ends up proposing a spirituality marked by the overcoming of the human condition; but let us leave it to him to speak for himself.

In the first chapter: *The divine names*, of *Mystical Theology*, we come across what may be termed “apophatic theology” according to which it is not possible to affirm anything about God: “*Since, in the same way that the intelligible cannot be captured nor contemplated by the senses, so too, simple and non-modulated objects cannot be apprehended by what has form and shape, and since nobody that is equipped with the shape of a body can touch the incorporeal nor schematise what has no shape, according to this true reasoning, every essence is transcended by the superessential Indefinite, just*

*as all intelligence by the Unit which is above intelligence, and no discursive reason can ponder about the One that surpasses all discourse nor can any word express the Good that is above all words”.*

In its desire to conceptualise the Absolute, not only does apophatic theology confront the problem of inadequacy of language but it also lays the foundations of a spirituality that postulates the overcoming of our human condition in the measure in which it situates God above all essence, thought or sensibility; Pseudo-Dionisius is tremendously coherent in his mystical proposal: *“Such is my prayer for you, dear Timothy. Exercise yourself unceasingly in mystic contemplations, abandon intellectual operations, cast away all that pertains to the sensible and intelligible, dispossess yourself of no-being and being, and raise yourself in this way, as much as you can, until you unite yourself in ignorance to Him who is beyond all knowledge”.*

This road of ascent up to a God who is totally alien to the world will be a common topic for all later mysticism. We will not insist on the marked neoplatonic character of these paths, nor will we start analysing the ecclesiological consequences that are entailed by putting in second place – if not explicitly denying – the mediation of the church “to relate ourselves” with God. We only wish to highlight the great difficulty that these spiritualities have to introduce temporal/historical dimensions in their systems. And so, one of the great representatives of German speculative mysticism of the XIII century, *Master Eckhart* turned out saying. “Time prevents us from reaching the light. There is no greater obstacle to God than time. And not only what is temporal, not only what are temporal things but also temporal affections; and not only temporal affections but also the infection and nuisance of time” (5)

Without going to the heretical extremes of Master Eckhart, I do believe that I am not wrong in affirming that we are in an era of dangerous “spatial spiritualities”. The New Age with its divine energies and its “Cosmic Christs”(6) the proliferation of aesthetic liturgies, the over-dimensioning of contemplative moments disconnected from all action or the privatisation of religious practices, not only condemn Christianity to the ambit of interiority, “agnosticising” our daily lives, but also end up disfiguring the face of the God of Jesus for who history is the only possible sphere of meeting with man. At the end of time the quality test of our prayer will not be determined by our spiritual consolations or desolations, nor by our hardened stoicism in the overcoming of all sensibility, but – paradoxically – by the glass of water given to the thirsty, the food offered to the hungry, the welcome given to the foreigner, the dress given to the naked or the visits to the sick and imprisoned, because *all that you did to one my least brethren, you did it unto Me*” (Cf. Mt. 25,31ss). If the ultimate end of mysticism is union with God, here we are before a mystic text: “... you did it unto Me”; nevertheless, the road proposed is light years from a “spatial intimism”, and sounds different from the common discourses about access to God through the “silence of the heart”.

The prayer that wishes to call itself Christian affirms not only the necessity of an explicit contemplative moment where the more passive dimensions of spiritual experience come into play but also the necessity of an action directed at incarnating the Kingdom of God in social structures. The lack of one of these two moments converts prayer into a narcissistic and heretical exercise. But let us not unnecessarily anticipate events. Let us calmly open the window to allow the air of history freshen up our spirituality.

### **3. PRACTISE JUSTICE AS GOD IS JUST**

*“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3,6)*

As the rabbi Abraham J. Heschel (7), the expression “God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob” is semantically different from an expression like “God of truth, goodness and beauty”; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not principles to be understood but existences to be perpetuated.

Yahweh is the God of the Alliance. In the comprehension of this there exists a theological pre-eminence of the events regarding the “logos”. Yahweh is *“The clement and merciful One, patient and abounding in indulgence and truth, who conserves indulgence up to the thousandth generation, who forgives iniquity, crime and sin, but in doing so, He does not leave these without punishment; on the contrary He will punish the iniquity of the parents on the children, and on the children of the children and on the children of the children up to the third and fourth generation!”* (Ex. 34, 6-7), *Yahweh has for name “Jealous”*: *“He who is Jealous”* (Ex. 34, 14)

For the biblical mentality, reflection on God did not start from abstract philosophical premises but from a historical experience of liberation: *And when your son asks you tomorrow saying: “What does this mean?” you will tell him: “With a strong hand, Yahweh took us out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”* (Ex 13, 14). Yahweh is a God of Presence and not of essence. The revelation of Yahweh is not a *dis-velation* (taking off the veils that hide the depth of reality so that reality appears as it is), but a *relation* that we are informed about. Truth in Greek is *a-letheia*, disappearance of the hidden, apparition of the objective outside and in front of us. Truth in Hebrew, of the same root as *amen*, is a subjective relation, an acceptance of the fact that God supports this reality for us, and we notice Him in action in how He works and not in how He is(8)

Referring to Yahweh in “such human” terms as clemency, mercy or patience, does not mean anthropologising God using a pre-logical language with little capacity of abstraction but it does imply the only way of referring oneself to a God who has taken the initiative in His relation with man. None of the words used to refer to God “fixes” the content of the divinity; the holiness of Yahweh, His transcendence, will always be affirmed. The ban to build images that represent Him or the fear of pronouncing His Name (YHW) in vain (cf. Ex. 20, 3ss) are expressions of a God situated farther than all thought. But, contrary to spatial spiritualities, this affirmation of the transcendence of God postulates at the same time the possibility of having relations with Him in the historical action.

The theophany of Sinai is a clear reflection of the paradox of a God who is at the same time transcendent and committed to mankind. There the “essence” of God remains hidden in cloud, fire and smoke; Yahweh Himself warns about the danger that the people and priests would be exposing themselves to if they attempted to approach Him. *“Well, go down and later come up accompanied by Aaron. But do not let the*

*priests and the people force their way up, trying to ascend to Yahweh, lest He open a gap among them*” (Ex. 19, 24), however, while His essence is hidden His Word is pronounced; a Word that will involve the people: “*Moses then went and called together the elders of the town and explained to them all the words that Yahweh had ordered him to communicate to them. The whole town replied in unison: All that Yahweh has said, we will do*” (Ex. 19, 7-8).

A God transcendent in His “essence” and near at hand in His way of acting (Word made history) makes it unthinkable to conceive of a mystical experience that has for its objective “to dwell in God”, and insinuating such a possibility would almost seem to approach blasphemy: “*You will not be able to see My face, because man cannot see Me and live*” (Ex. 33, 20). From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, the fact of God saying a Word introduces the individual in a relation of otherness, constituting a community and a relational history that is to be built, in contrast with religions of a mother pining for a primary state of fusion in which all relation with reality disappears, or at least no correspondence exists between what the subject lives in his interior and what happens in the outer world (9). The Word of God converts the believer into a historically responsible subject. Prayer, far from distancing him from reality and taking him back to infantile regression, pushes him forward to looking for God in the avatars of daily life.

### **3.1 PASSIONATE GOD**

Divine Perfection proclaimed by the evangelist Mathew acquires its true dimension within a semantic field in which God is clothed with clemency, mercy, forgiveness and jealousy. *Abraham J. Heschel* encloses all these relational terms within the category of *pathos*. Referring to the Biblical God as the *God of pathos* implies the negation of an impassive God vis-à-vis the historical action of man, in clear contrast with self-sufficient and apathetic divinities. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is affected by history, “the events and human actions awaken in Him joy or sadness, pleasure or anger. He cannot be conceived as judging the world and being separated from it. He reacts in an intimate and subjective way, and therefore determines the value of the events of life. As is evident from the Biblical viewpoint, the works of man do move Him, affect Him and make Him happy”(10). This notion of a passionate God Who can be intimately affected will generate spiritualities capable of integrating the emotive dimensions despised by neo-platonic ways as seen previously, and at the same time will demand action in favour of divine justice as a means of participating in the pathos of God.

Divine “passion” does not correspond to an irrational feeling of loss of control before any happening. Divine pathos refers to the implication of God in those situations in which the destiny of the most disadvantaged is at stake, in those actions in which justice is suspect. God is moved when He hears the groans of the children of Israel who, with a cry rising from slavery, cried out to Yahweh who “heard their lamentation and remembered His alliance with Abraham, with Isaac and Jacob”. Yahweh promises to “live” in the sanctuary if His people improve their behaviour and actions, if they practise justice among themselves; if abroad the orphan and the widow are not oppressed; then “I will dwell with you in this place, in the country that I will give to your parents, for century after century” (cf. Jr. 7, 5-7). The destiny of God is so

intimately linked with the destiny of the disinherited that an action against them would suppose a profanation of His Name: “*For three crimes of Israel and even for four there will be no revoking on My part: for having sold a just person for money and a poor person in exchange for a pair of sandals; for the action of those who trample over the heads of the weak in the dust of the fields or who change the course of the humble people, and for the action of a man and his father who approach the same girl, profaning in this way My holy Name*” (Am. 2, 6-7).

### **3.2. SYMPATHETIC SPIRITUALITY AND JUSTICE**

If one reaches the “essence above all essence” God by the overcoming of our human condition through an apathetic spirituality, then the God of pathos will be accessed to by a relation of sympathy.

Sympathy as a spiritual way supposes that one tunes in to the pathos of God. A small detour through the world of music can illuminate the content of what we understand by “sympathy”: in musical theory it is said that a cord is “sympathetic” if it vibrates not because it is played directly upon but as a consequence of the vibration of another neighbouring cord tuned to the same tone. The analogy is clear: the God of pathos “vibrates” with the historical events and the sympathetic spirituality means placing oneself between the two poles (God-history) to vibrate in the same “tone” as God.

The situational element: God-History, is determinant where prayer is concerned. Far from asking for a flight from the world, sympathetic spirituality demands a determined action. Isolation from reality to be better able to listen to God pacifically is not asked of the one who prays; this is not the type of tuning in that the sympathetic experience proposes. Its objective *is to participate in the ecstasy of God in history*. To know God is to participate in His Life, in His “vibration”, and this means situating oneself in the places where the cry of humanity rises up towards God and He feels compassion (Cf. Ex. 22, 20-26). The prophet Jeremiah is very clear when speaking of the knowledge of God:

*“Woe betide him who builds his house without justice,  
Storey by storey, iniquitously,  
Who makes his neighbour work in vain  
Without paying him a salary,  
He thinks: I will build myself a spacious house  
With airy rooms, I will open the windows,  
I will have it lined with cedar, I will paint it vermilion.  
Do you think you are king because you compete in cedars?  
If your father ate and drank and things went off well with him,  
It is because he practised justice and right;  
He did justice to the poor and needy,  
And this really is to know Me – oracle of the Lord. (Jer. 22, 13-16)*

To act according to *right and justice* is to know God. An action that does not rise from a categorical imperative or from mere ethical indignation, that would convert it into a praiseworthy moral act, but the “tuning in” to a just and merciful God, is what

converts it into a *mystical action*. Divine pathos is always related to justice touched with mercy (*josed*). God is not an impassive judge who applies blindly and rigidly an equitative justice (*misphat*); God is just (*tzedakâ*) (11) and for this reason His justice is always partial in favour of the needy person. Divine justice looks more at mercy than at legality.

Justice and right are converted into the catalysts of all in-depth readings of reality. This insistence on the pathos of God does not deny other “divine” dimensions such as omnipotence and omniscience, however it does affirm that the “Perfection” of God that we are seeking will be determined by the presence or not of the passion of God in history. So, for example, the definition of God as *Creator* dissociated completely from the divine pathos on account of His creation could well be applied without any problem to “the first intelligible nature” of Plato or to the “immobile motor” of Aristotle. We do not deny the truth of the affirmation: “the Creator God”, what we do deny is the validity of the abstraction. We are placing on the same level the omnipotence of the creative capacity of God and His “omni-concern” for the created work. The same God that at the beginning created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1,1), is the one Who walks through Paradise in the evening breeze (Gen. 3,89), and Who before the malice of men cordially repents of His work. It is the creative action in its totality and not the power of the first creative moment that reveals the “complete” face of God. What is truly astonishing is not the passage of nothing to Being but that already from the first moment God acts in favour of man.

From what has been said before, we can conclude that a prayer that is based on an admiring contemplation before the beauty and harmony of the universe, would reach just halfway if it did not see vaguely that *fidelity* (*èMuNaH*) *that keeps at bay the waters of the sea and assures the foundations of the earth* (cf. Prov. 8, 26-30) is the same that establishes the stability of the Alliance (cf. Psalm 89, 2-5) and which permits the proclamation of the mercy of the Lord (cf. Psalm 33, 5). Creation and Liberation are two inseparable sides of the same coin.

Spirituality is not a road of personal growth, it is a historic challenge. The spiritual man and woman place themselves on the crossroads between God and history; their target will be to articulate their action in the Action of God. One must suspect any spirituality that denies one of the two poles. A prayer that demands flight from the world affirms a divinity different from the God of Jesus. At the other extreme, not all action for justice is automatically a “sympathetic action”; to be able to speak of “mystic action” this action must be inserted in Divine Justice in favour of the marginalised. To put it bluntly: to make prayer depend on the capacity of isolation, interior silence or forgetting the world, is naming as experiences of God simple aesthetic consolations, intellectual illuminations or unconscious euphorias. We repeat again: there are prayers that constitute a true personal alienation and an offence against our “lesser” brothers.

## **4. JESUS AND THE HERESY OF ACTION**

Jesus was a doctrinally orthodox Jew although with certain clearly heretical actions. His preaching and prayer did not suppose any doctrinal novelty with respect to the religious discourses prevalent in His era. Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, all coincided with Him in the affirmation of a merciful, just and good God. On the other hand, the mission of Jesus was understood and lived in a prophetic key and, for this reason, His insistence on the inseparability between the cult of God and justice towards men did not differ from the discourses of the prophets of the Old Testament.

We have to look for what is specific of the spirituality of Jesus not only in the originality and depth of His relation with Abba, or in the coherence between contemplation and action, but in His proposal to implicate God in concrete human actions; this was the scandalous cause that led to His death on the Cross.

Using the example of the cure of the man with the paralysed hand (Mark 3, 1-6) that Christian Duquoc (12) puts forward to explain the novelty the way of acting of Jesus introduced in the concept of God, we have to coincide with him that if the debate was maintained on a doctrinal level: “Can one do well or badly saving a life or killing on the Sabbath?, the answer would have been unanimous: *Yahweh is merciful*. However, the Pharisees maintained silence because to show solidarity with the concrete cure achieved by Jesus would imply going against the sanctification of the Sabbath day (Cf. Ex. 20, 8) with the consequent tumbling down of the religious and social order. The moment the Law is suspected, what is suspected too are the legitimisations of the difference of classes and of the Jewish state itself; this perspective of the Law as the socio-religious foundation should not be absent from our reading of the miracles of Jesus and of His closeness to the marginalised (13). Miracles are not important as far as breaking of the laws of nature is concerned, but they are very much so when what is at stake is the breaking of cosmic-moral laws that legitimise suffering by converting it into deserved punishment.

But the actions of Jesus not only undermined a social ordering with its mechanisms of exclusion – actions that placed Him as a cultural heretic – but also implied a true religious heresy. To question the Law was to question Yahweh Himself. Israel was the nation consecrated to Yahweh by means of the Alliance; to obey the Ten Commandments was to enter “into communion” with Him and to be filled with blessings (cf. Dt. 7, 7-15). Jesus, by proclaiming the superiority of man over the Sabbath, curing the sick, eating with publicans, allowing Himself to be touched by prostitutes or forgiving sinners, was *compromising God in all these acts*.

The knowledge of God that we discover through Jesus is got through action. That Jesus should invoke God the Father is not something strange to the Jewish mentality, but that He should invoke Him in situations in which He does not hesitate to transgress the religious laws of the synagogue, traditionally considered as the expression of the will of God - in this lay the originality of Jesus (14). Defending the

honour of God outside the field in which it is exercised for good or for evil, for happiness or unhappiness, is an exercise of abstract theology, but if the proclaimed God does not free historically, that God cannot be identified with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The historical action in favour of the excluded is essential for a spirituality that calls itself Christian and cannot be substituted by “interior experiences” however intense and consoling they may be. If the danger of the amateur theologian is to search the Gospels for dogmatic affirmations regarding God, the danger of the “spiritualist” is to translate the historical events into “interior paths” that convert into “essence” reports that always respond to an “economy” of revelation. So, our question about “divine perfection” will be answered by an ascetic-spiritual proposal that is ignorant of the justice implicit in divine perfection. As an example of this translation to the interior space of spiritual experiences that, without denying the contemplative moment, demands a historical correlation, let us cite the “beatitudes of silence” that St. Ephrem addressed to the hesycasta monks:

Blessed the one whose heart is full of peace...  
Blessed the one who remained calm in silence.  
Blessed the one who was quiet and docile.  
Blessed the one who remained alone at home”(15)

Before the theologian and the spiritualist, Jesus does not discuss about the perfection “in itself” of God, but shows with His actions that the “perfection” of God is not understandable outside the liberating effect that it produces (evangelising the poor, freeing captives, giving sight to the blind). Proclaiming that God is perfect is void of meaning if the function played by His perfection is not made precise (16)

#### **4.1. PRAYER OF JESUS**

The prayer of the Christian should take for its model the prayer of Jesus and this, as we have just seen, cannot be understood unless related to a historical event which would lead Him to death on the cross. Jesus was not a “spatial mystic”, His teaching was not an esoteric way to dwell in the interior of God – an inconceivable thought for a practising Jew as He was.

On the other hand, to separate His moments of prayer (“He withdrew again alone to the mountain” Jn 6, 15b) from His historical activity (...Jesus, knowing that they were going to take Him away to make Him king” Jn. 6, 15), as though they were two spheres perfectly separable before which a Christian chooses one or the other depending upon whether his “sensitivity” is more contemplative or more active, is to be ignorant of the dynamics of the prayer of Jesus. We do not deny the contemplative moments of the life of Jesus, the Gospels bear testimony to His frequent prayers; however, the aim and ultimate content of His prayers were not to attain an intimate relation with God, but the search of His Will in respect of bringing about the Kingdom of God (17). So, for example, the prayer in the garden – synthesis of all Christian prayer -: “Father, if you wish, take this chalice away from me. However, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22, 42), cannot be read exclusively as stating explicitly a

privileged relation between God and Jesus, but as the culmination of a historical action that under the guidance of the Spirit led to His death on the Cross.

To try to participate in “union with God” avoiding historical and personal implications entailed in the practice of His Will is to deny the cross - a cross that cannot be understood from the viewpoint of personal asceticism or as a specific incident or mystery that projects mystically its effectiveness on the relations of man with God; but as the inevitable consequence of a spiritual path that implies solidarity with the most disadvantaged.

An essential criterion to check the quality of our prayer is to see if it anticipates historically the “Kingdom of God”, if it produces a real bringing about of the Word of God: “The blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, the Gospel is preached to the poor” (Mt. 11, 4-5). We have already said, the great temptation of spiritualism is to “spatialise” the Gospel through allegorical readings that translate in terms of interiority historical experiences narrated theologically. The Trinitarian God and the Kingdom of God are the two poles between which are situated all Christian prayer; and the Kingdom cannot be reduced to the sphere of interiority. When the believer prays “Thy Kingdom come” he does not ask “May Your spiritual consolations come to me”, but hurrying from the suffering of those condemned by the anti-Kingdom (structural sin), hopes for a new world for all. This “eschatological tension” is essential to the mysticism of action.

For the “spatial mystic” the Paschal mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ implies the ultimate situation in time in which he can fully participate: “*But God, Who is rich in mercy, on account of the immense love with which He loves us, even when we were dead on account of the offences, led us to life with Christ (you have been saved by grace), and He raised us to life with Him, and has seated us with Him in heaven, in Christ Jesus*” (Eph. 2, 4-6). For this theological conception, our attempt to make our access to God depend on the action for justice and right implies a judaisation of Christianity, a return to the Old Testament, since after the Resurrection the veil of the Temple was torn apart in two (Cf. Mark 15,38), opening for man the possibility of a direct relation with the Trinity. Paul, the “apostle”, was the first to put us on our guard against these “Corinthian” conceptions, according to which we are already living the last times, and he did so reminding us of the norm of *charity* and the *cross* of Christ: “*If I speak in the languages of men and angels but lack charity, I am like resounding bronze and a tinkling cymbal*” (1Cor. 13,1). “*And I, on coming to you, brethren, did not come to announce the mystery of God with the prestige of eloquence or wisdom, since I proposed to myself not to know among you anything that would not be Jesus Christ, and Him crucified*” (1Cor. 2, 1-2).

While the Resurrection should not be “spatialised”, cutting itself off from the historical process: Incarnation-Cross-Resurrection; the Incarnation, on the other hand, does not have its complete meaning in the mystery of a God made man, nor can it be reduced to a cosmological necessity that tries to assume all human nature in view of a universal redemption (cf. 1Tim 6; 2Pe 1,4). The Incarnation has to be understood as the manifestation of the highest point of God’s passion for man. The Christian Faith sees itself destined to recognise God in the passion of Jesus Christ and to discover the passion in God, that is to say, *to understand Christ’s suffering as the suffering of a passionate God* (18).

A contemplative in the action of God lives the eschatological tension of “already but not yet” followers of Paul (saved in hope). A realistic vision of the world painfully reflects to the contemplative that the Kingdom of God is not yet among us; his prayer will have as content the petition of “new heavens” and a “new earth” (cf. Is. 65, 17) for all men. Mystical action inasmuch as it is inserted in the Action of God will have for object the actualisation of the Kingdom, that is to say, to bring about here and now the de-legitimisation (already obtained by the cross of Christ) of a social order that *casts on men’s shoulders unbearable burdens*; it is only in this way that Christianity will be Good Tidings for the crucified of our concrete society. This does not mean reducing Salvation obtained by Jesus to social, economic and political dimensions, leaving aside fundamental aspects such as individual evil, the opening to what is beyond death, etc; however, Christian prayer includes as its priority content (fundamental option) the liberation of the most disadvantaged (19). In a society in which three fourths of humanity live in misery and in which wars are “our daily bread”, to present an individual spiritual experience of absolute plenitude and happiness not only could turn out to be an offensive act of insolidarity, but also an anti-Christian prayer.

It is not surprising that in a society characterised by its mental fixation in the present, where the future far from a place of promise is perceived as threatening (20), intimistic and free-from-commitment mystic religious practices find a convenient spot to thrive.

## **5. TOWARDS A SYMPATHETIC METHOD**

Having described the theological bases that justify the affirmation of a passionate God and His correspondence in the sympathetic action of man, we will explain some elements that should be present in whichever method of prayer that calls itself Christian.

### **5.1. PUT YOURSELF IN AN UNCOMFORTABLE POSITION**

We began our reflection questioning the methods of spirituality that reduced prayer to an apprenticeship of techniques of relaxation and interior pacification. As an example in point, I cannot resist the temptation of transcribing the index of a best seller of prayer found in a religion bookshop: 1. On the threshold of Profound Prayer; 2. Pacification of the body stratum; 3. Pacification of the sentimental-emotional stratum; 4. Pacification of the intellectual stratum; 5. Imagination in Profound Prayer; 6. Use of praying imagination; 7. “Prayer of Jesus; 8. Practice of the Prayer of Jesus; 9. Profound meditation of a symbol; 10. Profound meditation of an Icon. Running the risk of making an out-of-the-context criticism, I suspect that the prayer proposed in this book is closer to “spatial spiritualities” than the “historical” ones; in any case, it is amazing to note the absence of any reference to the historical commitment, and when this appears, it will be under the form of a consequence derived from personal harmony obtained at the contemplative moment.

Sympathetic spirituality does not absolutise interior silence or the search of harmony as means to the pacific and pacifying meeting with God. Without denying the necessary “technical” mediations that open up to us the passive dimensions of all religious experience, *sympathy demands a real geographical displacement towards marginalised society*. Taking as a starting point Jesus and His “kenotic” pedagogy: *Have among yourselves the same attitude of Jesus, the Messiah: He, in spite of His divine condition, did not cling to His category of God; on the contrary, He stripped Himself of His rank and took upon Himself the condition of slave, making Himself one of many*” (Phil. 2, 5-7), the desert as the place par excellence of spiritual combat and meeting with God cannot be identified allegorically with an interior place of emptying out and solitude, but as going outside the walls of the city to find ourselves with the crucified God Who died outside the camp (cf. Heb. 13, 12-14), there where the devils of poverty, exclusion and violence reside (21)

Marginalisation is the historical desert in which the person who prays should set himself in when he wishes to meet with the God of Jesus. Recognising the distance between us and the suffering places where Salvation is taking place, asking for forgiveness for our personal and institutional conveniences, and getting ourselves really and not just intentionally into action in our approach to marginalised society are the previous requisites of Christian prayer. Abba always de-centres.

## **5.2. ENTER YOUR ROOM AND LOCK UP**

Insistence on action does not deny the necessity of formal moments of prayer. Whether our prayer takes on the form of vocal prayer, meditation or contemplation, we need to enter our room and lock up to pray to our Father Who is in a hidden place (Mt. 6,6). Without this personal meeting with a God Who names each one in an original and welcoming way, our geographical de-centred movements and our actions in favour of the most needy will be good acts but not mystical ones. Only he who receives as a gift the contemplation of new heavens and a new earth (cf. Is. 65, 17) will have eyes capable of forecasting the pacific arrival of the Kingdom of God among the debris of history, there where others only see poverty and inefficiency. Only ears accustomed to listening to God in the whispering sound of the breeze will hear the slow sprouting of a tree capable of giving shelter to birds of all species (cf. Mark 4, 30-32), there where others only hear shouts of suffering and desperation. Only a mouth that has tasted the sweetness of the Word of God (cf. Ez. 3, 1-4) will be able to announce a land flowing in milk and honey (cf. Ex. 3,8), there where others only pronounce disenchantment and blasphemy. Only a sense of smell that has allowed itself to be impregnated by the perfume of spikenard (cf. John 12, 3) will be capable of recognising the “good odour of Christ” behind the saltpetre of misery and the gunfire of wars. Only the one who knows he is in the hands of God (cf. Is. 49, 16) will be capable of touching lepers so as to in this way – allowing himself to be contaminated – celebrate the Salvation of God from the stance of com-passion (= suffering with) that generates community and not from the stance of power that always implies inequality.

## **6. CONTEMPLATIVES IN ACTION FOR THE JUSTICE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

We will finish our journey trying to reach a formulation capable of synthesising in a sentence the sum and substance of our proposal of sympathetic spirituality: “Contemplatives in action for the justice of the Kingdom of God”. The expansion of the Ignatian slogan: “contemplatives in action” with the addition “for the justice of the Kingdom of God” is not a baroque caprice of linguistic embellishment, but a necessity to qualify the type of action we are referring to. We have said so earlier that not every action is susceptible of being turned into matter of Christian contemplation; in order to be so it must be inscribed within the historical pathos of the God of Jesus, of which the putting into practice of justice and right constitute an inexcusable reference.

Classical models of synthesis between contemplation and action stem from a supremacy of the contemplative moment over that of action. It is in prayer where the true meeting with God is produced and action will be but a second moment in which one tries to put into practice what has been previously contemplated “in its plenitude”. In contrast to this model, *Contemplation in action for the justice of the Kingdom of God* affirms that Christian action is an essential assumption of prayer, and not just an ethical demand deriving from an already constituted faith (22). Our action will lead us to ask ourselves about divine “perfection”. From the commitment we have as believers to the establishment of justice, the face of God will slowly be revealed to us – the face of a God always new, exceeding all our expectations, fears and self-sufficiencies.

Sympathetic spirituality is a risk and passion, the risk of setting out into the desert to fight against the devils that dehumanise humanity and the passion of meeting a God who, bumping Himself accidentally on us, protects us with His cloud, feeds us with His Word and gives us as a present the manna of shared bread.

Would to God that those who have been expelled to move about on the margins of our opulent societies, could have the joy of meeting on their way men and women of God, people of much prayer, and because of this, possessed of tons of commitment and mercy.

## NOTES

- 1 In the whole of the Old Testament literature there has never been applied to God the adjective *teleios* (=perfect) or the synonym *amómos* (=without defect), but we do come across *oiktirmón* (=merciful, compassionate), cf. Ex. 34, 6; Dt. 4, 31; Jl. 2, 13; Jon. 4, 2; Ps. 86, 15; 103, 8; 145, 8. Biblical language applied perfection (*tamim*) to “His work” (Dt. 32, 4), “His way” (2 Sam. 22, 31) and to the Torah (Ps. 19, 7), never to Yahweh.
- 2 For these and other examples of Hellenisation of the Christian message cf. Jean Daniélou, *Message évangélique et culture hellénistique (aux IIe et IIIe siècles)*, Desclée, Paris 1961, pg. 304-307.
- 3 J. Daniélou, *ibid.* pg. 309.
- 4 Cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *Los Profetas, T.II Concepciones históricas y teológicas*, Paidós, Argentina, 1963, pg. 1172-1177.
- 5 Cf. Alain de Libera, *La mystique rhénane, d’Albert le Grand à Maître Eckhart*, Seuil, Paris 1994.
- 6 Cf. Mathew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., New York, 1998.
- 7 Cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *Dios en búsqueda del hombre*, pg. 215.
- 8 Cf. Gregorio Ruiz, *Recuperar la palabra bíblica*, Sal Terrae, May 1982, pg. 373.
- 9 Cf. Tony Anatrella, *Psychologie des religions de la mère, la tentation fusionnelle en Kristus, Le Nouvel Age, Sortir de la confusion*, n. 164, pg. 128-131.
- 10 Abraham J. Heschel, *Los Profetas*, o.c. pg. 119.
- 11 *Misphat* is related to equity in the application of the law, *tzedaká* refers to the just man. In later Hebrew *tzedeká* will be associated to *jesed* (mercy). Cf. Jer. 9, 29; Ps. 36, 11.
- 12 Christian Duquoc, *Dieu différent, Essai sur la symbolique trinitaire*, Cerf, Paris 1978.
- 13 Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *La imaginación profética*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1986: Jesus never hesitated to eat with marginalised people (Mark 2, 15-7), which act was a threat to the fundamental morality of society. Marginalised people were the product of a legal ordering that determined what was acceptable or unacceptable, what was pure or impure, what was good or bad. To disregard the barrier between good and bad meant that when it comes to practising mercy, bad had as much right as good and consequently, all types of meaningful distinctions were eliminated”. pg. 101.
- 14 Cf. Christian Duquoc *ibid.* pg. 57-58.
- 15 García M. Colomba, *El Monacato primitivo*, t. II, BAC, Madrid, 1974, 328.
- 16 Cf. Duquoc, *ibid.* pg. 50.
- 17 Jon Sobrino, *La oración de Jesús y del cristiano*, Paulinas, Bogotá, 1986, The experience of God that e sus has got can be then resumed objectively in the tradition of the “kingdom of God”. This kingdom of God is the last otherness of Jesus; in respect of the kingdom, it points to real and historical love as the way of being, love in which there is exists a communion of the individual with other men, and of these others with their own origin and future, that is to say, with God; in respect of the kingdom of God, he points out to the intimate depth of the Kingdom” (...) “The sacrifice of the *ego* formulated in prayer in different ways, as confidence, as acceptance of the will of God is not merely an intentional sacrifice but is the expression of the real sacrifice of the *ego* in life”, pg. 53-54.
- 18 Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *La pasión de Cristo y el dolor de Dios*, Carthagesia 8 (1992) 641-665, condensed by Tomás Campan in *Selecciones de Teología* 129 (1994) Vol. 33.
- 19 Juan Luis Segundo, *Libertad y Liberación, en Mysterium Liberationis*, Trotta, Madrid, 199 “Well, isn’t *liberation* a modern socio-political concept, alien to the theological field? For the moment, it matters little whether it be so provided its content expresses even if it were in another way demands parallel to those found in the Gospel, that is to say, in whichever of the normative ways of the Christian message. But, to the surprise of many badly informed Christians, *liberation* is a key word in the evangelical proclamation. It forms, together with *salvation*, the cardinal terms to express divine action and, in the New Testament, especially the mission of Jesus, the purpose of His life, action and message.” pg. 378.
- 20 Cf. Joaquín García Roca, *Constelaciones de los Jóvenes, síntomas, oportunidades, eclipses*, CiJ, Barcelona, December 1994, nº 62, pg. 12-16, “According to the European Survey of Values, 37% of European youth consider that things will worsen in the future, 36% believe that things will remain the

same, and only 10% believe they will improve. The future, as a result, has got dissociated from the hope of better times, and the present loses its condition of transition towards something that will be splendid. In France, INSEE indicates that only 7% of youngsters between 15-25 years hope to find adequate employment, the remaining 93% are afraid. The uncertainty of not knowing what will become of them tomorrow has turned into a distinctive feature of a generation” pg. 12.

21 Cf. Benjamín González Buelta, *Bajar al encuentro de Dios, Vida de oración entre los pobres*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1998, pg. 13.

22 Cf. Jon Sobrino o.c. pg. 70-82.