

# "In Him was Life"

## Biblical Theological Meditations on the Theme of Life

PAULOS MAR GREGORIOS

### 1. Life has a source—the Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ

Life is not self-created; nor is it the fruit of "hazard" or chance. This Christians affirm—over against people like Jacques Monod and the Marxists.

It is important in our time to affirm this. The Christian faith has lost some of its grip over the minds of men. As a result ancient pagan beliefs are reasserting themselves in the cultures of the world which were once pervaded by the Gospel of Christ.

For Plato, matter seemed to be eternal. The Christian writer, Origen of Alexandria, seems to have affirmed the co-eternity of the universe, for logical reasons. If God is a Creator, he would argue, he was always a Creator, this means that the Creation was always there. Thus for Origen, as for Plato and Plotinus, the universe is eternal, though Origen would affirm that the universe is not self-existent but created by God.

At our Assembly of the WCC in Vancouver in 1983, it seems all important to reaffirm this basic Christian conviction that the universe is not self-existent, or self-creating: that matter as well as life are both created. By this we mean that matter and life do not have their origin in themselves, nor can exist by themselves, but are dependent, contingent, upon the Will of God. This means we have to resist the temptation of certain secular theologies to give the secular world an autonomy which it can never have.

Our age revives the basic pre-Socratic secular temper of the Greek Naturalists, who found the origin of all things in one or more *things* rather than in God. For Heraclitus, everything, including life, begins from fire. For Thales, it is water; for Anaximenes, air, for Empedocles the four elements—air, water, earth and fire. For the atomists like Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus, the indivisible atoms (*atomos* - indivisible) are eternal and the source of everything.

For Plato, who would propose a divine Artificer or *demiourgos* as bringing design and order into a chaotic universe, matter, though without much value, is still eternal—at least was there when the *demiourgos* began his work. For Aristotle too the world is eternal

and uncreated, though he would say that all things which came to be have also to cease to be (*de Caelo*: L: 12, 20). Marxist philosophy also follow this line of Plato, Aristotle and the Pre-Socratics.

The Spirit of our age basically assures us that the universe is self-existent and autonomous; even Christians who advocate a "secular Christianity" affirm that though the world was created, it is now autonomous and can live without reference to God.

If our reflections at Vancouver do not question this basic attitude, then life, the life of the world, and the life that Jesus Christ gives, will not be seen in its proper light.

"Do not imagine then, O Man,  
that the visible world is without  
a beginning.....That which is  
begun in time is destined to  
come to an end in time.  
If there has been a beginning,  
do not doubt that there is also  
an end."

St. Basil of Caesarea, 4th Century  
*In Hexaemeron* 1: 3

Yes, this universe is not eternal; it is not self-existent or autonomous. Hence life is not self-existent or the result of chance. Life as we know it in this universe, has begun; it will also end. Natural life is a precarious, fragile phenomenon. It is passing away. One cannot cling to it.

Life comes from God. Life is now in the hands of God. The destiny of life is also not in itself but in God, or alternatively in death.

We do not know this by scientific reasoning. "By faith we know that the ages (*aiona* = aeons or cosmic ages) were established by God's word, so that the visible universe came out of the unmanifest" (Heb. 11: 2).

And yet there is another sense in which true life is eternal.  
For,

"In him (the logos) was life;  
and this life was the light of  
human beings" (John 1: 4)

The source of life is in God. And God is always alive, without death. In this sense life has no beginning or end.

But these are two different types of life; though related to each other. God's life is eternal; human life has a beginning and an end. God's life is self-creating; human life is other-derived. God's life is holy, perfect, sinless; human life is unholy, imperfect, sinful.

The life of the logos—the light of humans, however, is now the life of the logos made flesh. This means that the Logos incarnate, Jesus Christ, who as God has life in himself like God the Father has now *as an incarnate human person* “life in himself” (*echein zoen en heautoe*—John 5: 26).

There is thus now a new kind of human life, the human life of a unique human being, who has now life in himself, and that too eternal life, as a human being. This particular human life has also certain qualities: unlike the life of the Father, it is a life that has been lived in a body and tasted death.

It is this new phenomenon, the consequence of the incarnation, death and resurrection of our Lord, this human eternal life that has triumphed over death, that is now proclaimed, as “Jesus Christ, the life of the world.” It is eternal life in Him that we proclaim to the world. This life is logically different from the life that the Logos had with the Father from the beginning, because now it is an *incarnate* eternal life.

It is bodily life, life that has tasted and overcome death, and it is eternal life; it is in Jesus Christ the incarnate human being. He is now the source of it for all creation. “In Him was life” from the beginning; but the life that is now proclaimed and offered is the life of the Incarnate One, who died and rose again, the life that was and is in the living God.

If Christians were to see life only as an offshoot of matter in evolution, they would be denying the life of God as true life. For that life “pre-exists” matter.

This primordial character of life should not be played down in our time. In fact it is the most important thing we have to say at Vancouver; and it is from this affirmation that all affirmations of the dignity and value of all life—human and non-human can arise.

## 2. The New Life is a Bodily Life

This new life of the Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ is a life *lived in the body*, and can be lived in death bound body as well as in a risen body which is deathless. As St. Paul says:

“We always carry around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. We the living are always being handed over to death for the sake of Jesus, in order that the life of Jesus can be manifested through our death-bound bodies.” (2 Cor. 4: 10-11)

and again

"In my body Christ shall be magnified—whether by life or by death." (Phil. 1: 20)

Matter shares in this new life, though the matter that shares in life will have to be transformed through death and resurrection if it is to do so permanently. Flesh and blood as we know it cannot inherit eternal life (1 Cor. 15: 20). But "my flesh is true food, and my blood true drink" (John 6: 55) and it is through this material-spiritual reality that the new life is sustained and nourished.

It is extremely important to affirm this at Vancouver, for the temptation for Christians is to think of eternal life as something divorced from material reality and from the life of the body.

The Fathers of the Church saw the levels of reality in creation as always comprehending lower ones—the rational nature of human beings includes the animal, the vegetative and the inorganic lower levels; the life which God gives, according to these Fathers proceeded from the bottom up. Gregory of Nyssa would put it thus:

"For this reason the Human Being was shaped last—after the vegetable and the animal, nature progressing by a graded course to its perfection (in humanity). This rational animal, the human being, thus seems to be composed of all the different forms of living beings (i. e. vegetable and animal). His nutritive system is according to the nature of other animals. To his power of growth (like other animals), the aesthetic or sense-knowledge faculty was then added, as something in between the purely intellectual and the purely animal or material—in a measure coarser than the first, but in the same measure more refined than the latter. Then takes place the indwelling and commixture of the one in and with the other—the intellectual being with the more subtle and enlightened element of the sense-nature, so that the human being is thus constituted of three elements. As we learn the same thing from the Apostle, who in his writing to the Ephesians, says that he is praying that their whole being—body, soul and spirit—may be preserved by grace till the coming of the Lord; the body denoting the vegetable or nutritive part, the soul the animal or sense-nature and the spirit the higher intellectual or rational."

(*de officio hominis* PG. 44: 145 B, C, D)

Human life is thus related to other life and matter—not only in its dependence on them, but also in its incorporation of them within itself. The points that need to be affirmed are:

- (a) life is always a bodily life;
  - (b) human life is dependent on other bodily life;
- and (c) human life incorporates within itself the bodily lives of the vegetable and animal kingdoms and is integrally related to them.

The Body-Life-Mind-Spirit relation is one that should get particular attention at Vancouver. We live in a culture that falsely separates matter and spirit, body and soul, this worldly and the other-worldly, Church and State, political-economic and religious.

The integral connection between life and body, between the so called horizontal and vertical, between the ordinary life of human beings and their "spiritual" life, between human lives and other lives—these connections should be specially stressed at Vancouver, if we are not to fall into the usual traps in discussing Jesus Christ as the life of the world.

Incidentally the relation between body and mind remains a central problem of our civilisation. The problem is most clearly evidenced in modern medicine, which has amazingly brilliant achievements to its credit, based on the completely unsupportable notion that the body is to be understood on the model of a machine, whose parts can be repaired by doctors, or foreign bodies ejected from it by surgical operation or chemical drugs—without giving sufficient attention to three facts:

- (a) the subtle and not-easy-to-define, but certainly reciprocal relation between body, mind and spirit in the aetiology and cure of all disease;
- (b) because the body is integrally related to the mind, and because minds exist only in relation to each other, the body does not exist as an isolated entity, but only in relation to other bodies and minds, and healing has to do also with this relationship;
- (c) that the human body and life has an incorporative and mediative role in relation to other bodies and lives—including not only bacteria, but also plant and animal bodies and lives—life is a single bundle.

These factors have direct relevance not only to our understanding of health, healing and medicine in relation to life. They are of the utmost significance in relation to that other major or central interest of our culture—sexual relations. The body as an isolated piece of machine or instrument has dominated our understanding of human sexuality. Our civilisation cannot be redeemed until a more deeply interpersonal social and spiritual understanding of sexuality is introduced into the consciousness of human beings. The concept that the body belongs to each individual separately and that the individual

has sovereign right on that body, seems to rise again very strongly in a decadent culture. It seems very important today to help people to see all life as one and our bodies as various interrelated and interacting manifestations of the same life-phenomenon.

This has also strong ecological implications. Not just the biosphere, that imaginary thin film that envelopes the earth and supports life-but the whole cosmos is one integrable whole, in which every part can holographically reflect the whole, and the whole is composed of integrally related and interacting parts. The incarnation of Jesus Christ has to be seen also in this cosmic sense, that God the Word has united himself not to just one human body, but to the spiritual-material cosmos as a whole.

Here the main points to be stressed in treating the theme Jesus Christ the Life of the World are:

(a) All life as we know it in creation is bodily life, and the body as the carrier, shaper and propagator of life should be studied more deeply in studying the theme of Jesus Christ-the life of the world;

(b) a life cannot be understood simply in terms of the single body that carries it; it exists only in relation to other bodies and other lives, no life is an isolated entity, but a relational entity, and should be studied in integral relation to other body-lives;

(c) body-life of human persons cannot be studied only in terms of human interrelations; it must be studied in its relations of dependence, incorporation and transforming power, to other non-human life, such as vegetable and animal life;

(d) the material cosmos as a whole is integrally related to this life, and the role of matter and what we regard as the inorganic realm in generating, sustaining and propagating life should also be studied.

### III. God created life-Can we create life?

This is an important question facing our civilisation. There are Christians who think that creating life is an exclusive prerogative of God, and that human beings are not allowed to create life. Other Christians fear that if human beings are able to create life from recombination of matter, this would be a sacrilege, and an offence to the unique glory of God as Creator.

On the other hand there are people, especially among biologists, who think that just as it is the normal function of man to take nature and transform it by culture, (art, agriculture, technology), so also it is a normal function of human persons to transform life, to create new life forms, by synthetic processes. This claim seems to disquiet many Christians. We need before Vancouver to seek answers to the following questions;

- (1) So far man has not been able to create anything ex nihilo; but he has created many things by recomposition of matter—paintings, sculptures, gardens, farms, bridges, dams, factories and so on. It thus seems humanity's normal vocation to transform "nature" into "culture". Recently human beings have created new breeds of plants, bacteria and even animals, by crossbreeding, miscegenation or genetic manipulation. It has become conceivable that new living beings can be created by human beings through genetic and other manipulation of existing species and matter. If we manage to do so would it in itself be an offence against the laws of God? What are the moral implications of creating new forms of life?
- (2) It seems now again conceivable that certain physical and mental traits of human beings can be altered by genetic manipulation. Such transformations can be limited to the particular person whose genes or body material is altered, but could also be genetically programmed to be transmissible to subsequent generations. Human beings have a vocation to change their own life endowment by training, asceticism, worship, prayer etc. They are allowed to have also surgical operations of the body, transforming the shape and function of organs with which they are born (plastic surgery, for example). What are the moral implications of transforming one's genetic endowment by artificial means?
- (3) Whether in creating new life, or altering life, the question is directly related to quality—the quality of that which is created, and the measure of the improvement in quality of life that is sought by the transformation of genetic or biological material. This question forms the most important theme for the consideration of the Vancouver Assembly.

#### IV. Life and the Question of Quality

All life is created good; but it is capable of becoming evil. And God's law demands that that which is evil cannot be for ever. So life when it becomes evil, becomes subject to death. Life, as we now experience it, is in all cases subject to death. The presence of evil in our world has affected human life as well as non-human life; for the latter too is subject to death.

Being goes with the good; non-being dogs that which is evil. And as evil grows, life becomes feebler. Not all life is good: though created good, it can become the opposite, and thereby lose its being itself.

The answer to the question whether life is a value in itself seems already implied here. Yes, created life has value in itself; but it can lose its value and become deserving of being cast forth and trodden down. So if we are truly to cherish life as a value, we must also cherish its quality as good.

This is why survival by itself cannot be regarded as a high value if what is to survive is largely evil. Only that which is good has the right to survive.

But if it were a question of right none of us as persons have any right to survive, since we have become so tainted with evil. And yet even while we were sinners, the Son of God died for the ungodly.

So God does grant even to the sinful the free grace by which to survive. But what survives is not the evil, but the recipient of grace purged of all evil, and endowed with the good gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Christians have to be careful that they do not simply ask or strive for survival as a value in itself. Even in the case of a possible nuclear holocaust, we have to do more than seek to avert catastrophe. We have to seek seriously and determinedly to make our world more just. Only a just world is worth conserving. The same applies to the possibility of an ecological catastrophe which can make life impossible on our planet. Only if that life which seeks to avoid catastrophe is good enough to have something in it worth conserving, would the question of avoiding catastrophe have any meaning. If life is to be cherished justice is the precondition. I hope the Vancouver Assembly will affirm this point.

In the creation of life as well as in the mutation of natural endowment, it is the same question of quality that should be at the centre of concern. God is not so small as to be jealous about humanity acquiring any sort of power, including that of synthetically creating life or inducing mutations in human nature by genetic technology. The issue is quality, purpose, intention, if the quality of love and compassion leads us to seek to create new life, God is not going to be angry. But in every new creative possibility for humanity, the possibility of greater evil is also inherent. That fact, however, should not by itself constitute a deterrent from seeking such creative power. The fact that our present science / technology has given us the power to destroy ourselves, to destroy civilisation, and possibly to destroy all life on our planet, does not by itself make science/technology evil. But the responsibility to handle that power for the good and not for evil, can be immense; in fact it already is.



In the case of creating life and of manipulating the natural endowment of humanity, the only question is one of time-scale, i. e. whether humanity has become mature enough to handle such power. The presence of huge injustice in our present societies is a sign of a very low level of maturity in humanity. A higher level of maturity demands social justice as a precondition. Perhaps also personal holiness.

Jesus Christ cannot be the life of an evil world. Only as the world grows away from that evil can the life become more abundant and flourishing.

