

Olga Elsbach

Divine Presence in George Herbert's "The Sacrifice"

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Having entered *The Temple*, we immediately hear a voice asking for our attention: "Oh, all ye, who pass by, whose eyes and mind / to worldly things are sharp, but to me blind" (lines 1–2), which is then followed by a question that will be repeated over and over again: "Was ever grief like mine?" (4). Although the lines may sound like God's accusation of man who is the source of his distress, with the final question stressing the overwhelming difference between man's and Christ's suffering, a deeper analysis of the poem will show that it is God's need to be as close to man as possible that makes his suffering unique. The fact that the poem draws on biblical lamentations stresses the physical aspect of Christ's suffering. The suffering flesh is of great importance to post-phenomenologists, such as Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry, and their philosophy may shed some light on the corporeal character of Christ's suffering. This, in turn, makes it necessary to relate to the mystery of the Incarnation and its interpretation in Christian theology. All of the poems in the cycle "The Church" seem to be connected, not in a merely repetitive manner, but each seems to provide a deeper insight into the matter touched upon in the others. Thus, by examining "Marie Magdalene" and "Love III," we may deepen our understanding of the image of God that Herbert draws in "The Sacrifice."

The second poem of George Herbert's masterly sequence, "The Church," which constitutes the main part of *The Temple*, is thematically linked with the preceding visual emblem: "The Altar," and bears the title "The Sacrifice." The principal poetic device used in this piece, prosopopeia, serves as a means of strengthening the dramatic appeal of the poem. Its theme is directly connected with the liturgical Reproaches for Good Friday and the reader can have no doubt that on this occasion the voice of the other in *The Temple* belongs to Christ. It may be argued that the question repeated after each stanza (except for the last one, where it turns into an affirmative sentence), being an echo of Job's lamentation, "Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed" (*King James Version*, Job 6.2), refers to Christ's measureless and unique Passion (Wilcox 104 n4), as if to stress that no human being can imitate him or participate in the propitiatory sacrifice of the Son of God. Yet at the same time the question sounds very human, not to say banal. It reveals a distinctive feature of the experience of suffering, namely its incommunicable, incomparable and "unsayable" character. The contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion takes up this problem in his seminal essay "Flesh or the Givenness of the Self":

[in suffering] I can no longer make a retreat into a more withdrawn tower: once the enclosure has been invested, I am definitely invaded, taken, done. Suffering rivets me to myself as one rivets something to the ground – by earthing. [. . .] It is made of the impossibility of fleeing and recoiling. [. . .] I must deliver myself to it without condition or delay or distance. (92–93)

In other words, the philosopher contends that suffering is so particular to a person in pain, not only because we can neither defend nor distance ourselves from it, but also because it cannot be expressed in any way, just as it cannot be tamed or controlled in language. Suffering remains known only to the person involved and cuts this person off from the rest of the world as effectively as death.

The seeming defencelessness of Christ, God made man, against suffering and death has been interpreted as scandalous. In an article on the influence of the Greek understanding of the godhead on early Christianity, Richard Bauckham points to the Greek notion of God's *apatheia* and analyzes the meaning of the related concepts of *pathos* and *paschein*:

Pathos, which the divine *apatheia* excludes, means both "suffering," in our sense of pain or calamity, and also "passion," in the sense of emotion, whether pleasurable or painful. The connecting thought is passivity. Suffering is what comes upon one, against one's will. It is something of which one is a passive victim. (7)

For the Greeks, states Bauckham, a god cannot be subject to suffering for he is "absolutely self-sufficient, self-determining and independent" (7). It therefore seems impossible that the Almighty God agreed to be humiliated, tormented and killed by those who are finite and inferior to him. Such an objection also affected the crucial dogma of Christianity, that is the mystery of the Incarnation. And this is precisely where the contemporary phenomenology of the flesh revives interest in ancient theological debates.

Michel Henry, whose analysis of human corporeality is closely connected with the phenomenological insights of Jean-Luc Marion, draws an important distinction between the body and the living flesh. The body is one among many other objects in the world. It can be studied by an anatomist, yet it is incapable of feeling, that is, it fails to mediate between the subject and the world, or as Henry puts it, it does not enable life to come to us. The living flesh, on the other hand, cannot escape feeling; it is subject to life and whatever comes with it – joy, pleasure, or suffering. Thus, the living flesh is inherently passive and subject to both external and internal stimuli. In his book-length study of the Incarnation, Michel Henry recalls the ground-breaking argumentation of Tertullian against the Marcionian heresy (232–236), which is also thematized in Eric Osborn's book on Tertullian. For Marcion, the Nativity and the suffering of Christ were irreconcilable with his divinity: "Christ performs his own deception and pretends to do the physical things (meeting, touching, eating, drinking and working miracles) which his flesh appears to do" (qtd. in Osborn 107). Such a phantom-like revision of the idea of the Incarnation allows Marcion's God to escape the humiliating suffering on the cross. Moreover, this God does not need to be "stained" by the dirt of the woman's womb, for his is a non-earthly substance. By way of contrast, Tertullian argues that such a pretended incarnation would be incompatible with God's love:

Christ, there is no doubt of it, did care for the sort of man who was curdled in uncleannesses in the womb, who was brought forth through organs immodest, who took nourishment through organs of ridicule. For his sake he came down, for his sake he preached the gospel, for his sake he cast himself down in all humility even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. (Tertullian 4)

Taken further, Marcion's idea of "pretended" incarnation turns Christ's suffering into a lie: a mere spectacle devoid of its redemptive power.

In Henry's account, the subject is passive to the self-affective life, which may come only through the living and passible flesh. The philosopher highlights the fact that every single life is immersed in "Life," which for the philosopher is another name for God. Thus the human nature of Christ – his fleshliness – so fiercely defended by Tertullian, is a condition for man's being rooted in divinity.

After this philosophical detour, we can now return to the analysis of Herbert's poetic meditation on Christ's Passion. The extended and detailed description of Christ's mortal agony in "The Sacrifice," written in the spirit of the late medieval *devotio moderna*, asks its reader to relate personally to the Passion of Christ. The human character of Jesus's suffering cannot, however, be separated from his godly power as Creator: "The Princes of my people make a head against their Maker: they wish me dead, who cannot wish, except I give them bread" (6–7). The poet's focus on the gift of "bread," or in another stanza "breath," which is given daily, can be interpreted here from the perspective of Henry's comment on Christ's well-known retort to Pontius Pilate: "Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above" (John 19.11). For Henry, it is not political power that Christ has in mind, but the sheer ability to live and act. Thus, the statement "I can" refers above all to the whole spectrum of possibilities which come from Life. "[W]hat hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Cor. 4.7).

Herbert develops the concept of the givenness of life in the most interesting manner. It is, for instance, excellently elucidated in the line which refers to the moment of arresting Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, at night, and in the hour which is the hour of darkness also in a metaphorical sense. Christ complains then, "How with their lanterns do they seek the sunne!" (35), and "the sunne" refers not only to him as the Son of God but also to the Sun, the source of life-giving light. Thus, Herbert's use of the well-known pun once again reminds the reader that each life is rooted in Christ and immersed in the Father-child or the Giver-recipient relationship.

In Herbert's poem, this link between the Maker and his creation is forcefully stressed, and, when juxtaposed with the Greek understanding of the Godhead, it takes a paradoxical turn. Already the very first stanza makes us remember that God, who at first created man in his image and likeness, then voluntarily assumed flesh made vile by sin and thus accepted the conditions that bind his creation. When Christ introduces himself as someone "who took eyes" in order to find sinners, he says that he entered the reality of the flesh, constraining thus his godly power. The "taking of eyes" points to the dogma of the Incarnation and touches upon its greatest paradox, that is the mystery of *kenosis*. In assuming the flesh, the Almighty God agrees to constrain himself, to accept the frailty of "dust," in the poet's idiom. In the Incarnation the infinite God assumes finitude. Thus, when Henry writes about the passibility of the living flesh, he points to its being rooted in Arch-Passibility. Contrary to the Greek understanding of divinity, the Christian God is presented therefore as the root of the living, feeling and therefore also passible flesh. "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for *my strength is made perfect*

in weakness" (2 Cor. 12.9; emphasis mine). Accordingly, the strength of God voluntarily seeks to redeem the weakness of the human, mortal flesh.

This conclusion has an important bearing on yet another poem included in *The Temple* and devoted to the female figure of "Marie Magdalene." The speaker ponders, "She being stain'd herself, why did she strive / To make him clean, who could not be defild?" (7-8). One could, however, reverse this question and ask why Jesus allowed the stained woman to wipe his feet with her tears. With Henry's interpretation of Arch-Passibility in mind, it becomes clear that Mary Magdalene recognizes in Christ what the philosopher would have called "originary passibility." It is a point where two sources of suffering are brought together – God's constricting his power in the reality of the flesh meets with the premonition of his suffering and death.

Yet it remains to be explained why the Incarnation happened at all. The answer is implied in the first stanza of "The Sacrifice," where God takes eyes, so that he can find his people. I wish to refer here to an article written by Adolphe Gesché, where he argues that the Incarnation is God's answer to human suffering. The theologian notices that the presence of God in the world in the Old Testament was characterised by control or intervention. Taking flesh, he chose to go through the human experience in the substance of which people are made. The message of the Word made flesh is no longer one of admonition against sinfulness and summons to repentance, but a voluntary decision to share the conditions of the life of those who are sinful. Gesché invokes in this context the well-known passage from the Gospel of St. John: "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1.29). He contends that the word *airo*, which is often translated as "to take away," in fact, has a much broader meaning. The critic juxtaposes the quoted fragment of the Gospel with a quotation from the Book of Isaiah: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53.4). He finds a similar intuition in Matthew's Gospel: "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities (*astheneias*), and bare our sicknesses (*nosous*)" (Matt. 8.17). Thus, *airo* may be understood also as "to take upon oneself and carry what has been raised, to bear," and for this reason, claims Gesché, it may also mean "to take away, to remove." Similarly, the word *hamartia*, which is most often translated as "sin," is semantically close to *hamartema*, which means "error" as well as "weakness, sickness" (85). In the light of this evidence, the emphasis in the Gospel of St. John shifts from accusation to compassion. God wants to be *com*-passionate, to feel with those who suffer and this, in turn, excludes the Greek *apatheia*.

In the account by the fourth Evangelist, the "ungodly," human weakness of the flesh thus becomes a meeting place for God and man. This is also confirmed in another episode narrated by St. John. Having entered Sychar, a city in Samaria, Jesus, wearied by his journey, sat down close to Jacob's well; it was there that in his conversation with a woman of Samaria he introduced himself as the spring-well of Life (or, in Henry's terms, the Arch-Life itself): "whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4.14). Most interestingly, it is Christ's tiredness that is shown here as the condition for his revealing himself as the source of life. In this way the Incarnation

is defined as assuming the weakness of the flesh. St. Augustine in his commentary on the Gospel gives us the following explanation of this paradox:

Thus then was Jesus weak, wearied from the journey. His journey is, (sic) the assumption of flesh for us. For indeed, how can He be said to have a journey, Who is present every where, absent no where? Whither goeth He, or whence, save that He could not come to us unless by assuming the form of visible flesh? (233)

The motivation for this divine quest is, as we have already noticed, the desire to meet with humans and share their predicament: "He made us by His strength, He sought us by His weakness" (233).

It can be no surprise then that the last poem of "The Church" is devoted to divine longing. In "Love III," the Incarnation and the Passion meet in time and space. The interlocutor perceives himself as unworthy of God's love: "I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear, I cannot look on thee" (9–10). Rosemond Tuve rightly notices that Christ's witty retort, "Who made the eyes but I?" (12), which echoes the first stanza of "The Sacrifice," "simply removes the question of 'worth' from the relation of love between Creator and creature, as the next question, 'know you not [. . .] who bore the blame?' removes the burden of shame from the creature who 'marr'd' those eyes" (318). Thus Herbert's vision of godly love removes "every obstacle to a return-obligation, inequality, deserts, mastery-or-servitude, disproportion" (318). Such love is not only welcoming, but also seems to be asking for our willingness to participate in the holy fellowship. Herbert's God is not demanding, controlling, or punishing; instead, he asks "the unkind, the ungrateful" to come in and dine with him at one table. This invitation may remain unanswered, and therefore is passible, just like the flesh which Love assumed to seek humankind.

It may prove worthwhile to return at the end of this analysis to the notion of God's welcoming presence, outlined in two previously mentioned poems. In the last line of "Mary Magdalene," Herbert provides a peculiar answer to the question posed in the poem: "And yet in washing one, she washed both" (18). The adulteress cannot wash her sins herself, but it is her tears and the fact that she recognizes Christ as the originary passibility that are an answer to God's welcoming forgiveness, and thus her tears are not wasted. Although our attention focuses on the woman and the observer, perhaps even a voyeur, who tries to understand the meaning of this scene, the actual drama is played out between the main protagonists of the poem, i.e. Mary Magdalene and the silent Christ. As in "Love III," the poet seems to suggest that the miracles of meeting (communion) and forgiveness must take place beyond words.

The preliminary condition for such a meeting is of course Christ's forgiveness, as it in fact always precedes repentance. This reflection brings us back to "The Sacrifice," which strikes its reader with its emotional power, expressed not only through the repetition of the question, but also through a detailed description of Christ's torment. Similarly to the Biblical Lamentations, the poem points to evil as the source of the suffering. As Marion argues in his book *Prolegomena to Charity*:

For if evil's first effect is suffering, its second is the demand that the suffering cease, at any price and at once. [. . .] The logic of evil thus puts forth its first necessity by arousing in me,

who is suffering, the desire for another evil: to destroy the cause of the evil that is destroying me, to return to the evil its hurt, and to attack the attack. (2)

The passage quoted above perfectly describes the victim's reaction to suffering, just as it was also presented in the Book of Lamentations: "there is none to comfort me: all mine enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that thou hast done it: [. . .] Let all their wickedness come before thee; and do unto them, as thou hast done unto me for all my transgressions: for my sighs are many, and my heart is faint" (Lam. 1.21–22). In the poem, as in the descriptions of the Passion in the Gospel, there is, however, no call for revenge. Instead, Herbert seems to highlight Christ's self-effacing presence. The humble gesture of embracing the cross is powerfully contrasted with the noisy cries of the crowd. And although in the poem we do hear the victim's complaints for those who watched Jesus die on the Cross, he was a silent, passive and defenseless victim, the true Paschal Lamb. As if in a theatrical aside directed to the audience, Herbert's poetic persona confides to us: "My silence rather doth augment their crie; / My dove doth back into my bosome flie, / Because the raging waters still are high" (93–95). The image of the dove, which on the surface level is associated with the Old Testament, the story of the Flood, is also wonderfully suggestive of the Holy Spirit who stands for the gift of Divine Presence, which gives itself and is at the same time constantly rejected by the raging crowd at the scene of the execution.

Viewed in this light, the second poem of "The Church" seems to be an excellent poetic rendering of the mysteries of the Incarnation and Passion. By choosing the Biblical Lamentations as an inspiration for his poem, Herbert stressed the human aspect of Christ's suffering. Although by assuming the flesh, God agreed to take the burden of whatever comes with it, that is, the possibility of being rejected and hurt, his Passion surpassed all human suffering; in the end, however, it paved the way for the miracle of Redemption.

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Streszczenie

Wiersz George'a Herberta „The Sacrifice”, będący częścią cyklu *The Temple*, jest lamentacją cierpiącego Chrystusa, a jego bezpośrednim źródłem są lamentacje biblijne, które można zdefiniować jako zwrot do Boga o pomoc w niedoli. Poprzez zakorzenienie wiersza w tej tradycji, podkreślony zostaje ludzki wymiar cierpienia Chrystusa. Ponieważ Pasja wydaje się być kulminacją Wcielenia, odwołując się do post-fenomenologii Jean-Luca Mariona i Michela Henry'ego, postaram się przyjrzeć, jaka wizja Boga wyłania się z wiersza, w którym paradoks Wcielenia obecny jest już od pierwszej strofy: „Ten, który dał nam oczy, przyjmuje je po to, by odnaleźć zagubionego grzesznika”.