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The Johannine Christianity of Albert Camus

Although Camus never accepted the designation existentialist, for better or worse, his philosophical fate seemed destined to be ever discussed in relationship to Sartre. One of the stranger aspects of their overlapping destinies was the about turn that each had in relationship to religion. Sartre's case is the more well known. It involved Sartre's belated fascination with, and approval of Jewish messianism. In the wake of Levinas's and Derrida's popularity such a fascination would seem barely worthy of comment today, but when Benny Lévy published these revelations in *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews* (Sartre and Lévy, 2007:106–107) so incensed was Simone De Beauvoir that she thought this merely confirmed the onset of Sartre's senility (and Lévy's unscrupulousness); in fact, as *Bernard Henri-Lévy* has indicated in his biography of Sartre, it simply meant that Sartre had been receiving second hand instruction from Levinas (via Lévy, who would visit Levinas in the mornings before wandering over to see Sartre later in the day) (*Henri-Lévy 2003*: 301-306).

The story surrounding Camus is much more bizarre, and more difficult to authenticate. The story, while aired in a few North American Christian newspapers, generally slipped by without notice - none of the scholarly works written on Camus since its publication mention it. Perhaps that it is because it seems so improbable and the work so unscholarly.

The story? In 2000 a Methodist minister from Ohio by the name of Howard Mumma, then ninety years old, wrote a book entitled *Albert Camus and the Minister*. According to Mumma, Camus had been visiting the American Church in Paris to listen to the organist, Marcel Dupré, and during his attendance of the services he had become deeply interested in Mumma's sermons. After a few weeks he approached Mumma and a friendship between the two men developed. According to Mumma, Camus had never really *read* the Bible before their meeting - Camus apparently had a Latin Bible, which he would on occasion consult to check a point, but he had not actually read it in its entirety. The Protestant Mumma then bought Camus a French translation as a gift which he did read. As Mumma tells it, until that time, Camus had never

thought of the Bible as a composition in which allegory, symbol, metaphor and historical fact all weave seamlessly into conveying insights into the relationship between God and man which cannot simply be cashed out as empirical items. Mumma, in other words, showed Camus how to read the Bible like pretty well any educated theologian today would do. Of course, there are many millions of Christians and their critics who take the Bible literally and insist that this is how the book must be read (thus the American fundamentalist creationist and people like Dawkins, Hitchens are literally on the same page) and hence, today, these groups share little, if any, common orientation; whereas in Christendom, the pervasiveness of the common language meant that these types could form a kind of unity, but it is far from obvious that all interpreted their faith in the same literal manner.

Finally, after developing a serious interest in the Biblical orientation, at their last meeting, and shortly before his accident, Camus asked Mumma to baptize him (which, he regrets, he didn't do), making it clear he did not want to join a Church, but he did want to commit himself to God in a personal way.

We do not know if the story is true, but it may serve to highlight the fact that Camus's relationship to religion and Christianity is complex, and that complexity is born out by a number of Camus' own comments as well as his reception. Thomas Hanna, for example, quite rightly says, 'it is a curious thing about the thought of Albert Camus that he has not estranged himself from Christian readers'(Hanna 1962: 56), while David Walsh, in a reading of Camus that converges in important ways with this paper, has observed that 'To the multitude of lost and disorientated individuals for whom faith in all the gods, ancient or modern, is dead, Camus showed the way toward the recovery of transcendent spiritual truth' (Walsh 1990: 53). Certainly Camus has had been well received by Christian authors such as Jean Onimus (Onimus 1970) and Thomas Merton (Merton 1985) who have seen important areas of overlap between what Camus is doing and their own faith. Christian readers have also accepted that Camus has raised authentic criticisms of the wrongs Christians have often done (Merton 1985; Peyre 1958: 382). On the other hand, there are those like Avi Sagi who hold that 'Camus' repudiation of Christianity is radical and profound.' Camus, he continues, 'rejects it categorically and unreservedly, as a position that justifies suffering and evil, is impervious to the death of the innocent, and turns pain into a gesture of faith' (Sagi 2003: 153-154). As below shows, I do not agree with this line of argument. But it is true that Camus did indeed despise the pious fanatic whose own insecurities

and fears are the real forces driving their religiosity as in *The Plague's* Panneloux or the mad chaplain/ inquisitor in *The Stranger*. Furthermore, Camus did have to endure the self-righteous fanaticism of certain Christians —exhibited, for example, in one infamous public remark directed at Camus, ‘I have found grace and, you M. Camus, I am telling you in all modesty, have not.’ The attack reproduces the same kind of absolute certainty and hostility that Camus had to endure from communists, who were just as sure that the immanent God of history had delivered them their own personal salvation – and there are occasions, as in the following note, where Camus would put communists and Christians in the same camp, and criticize both for their smug sense of eschatological certainty, whilst positing a more cautious and humble optimism:

Christians and communists will tell me that their optimism is based on a longer range, that is superior to all the rest, and that God or history, according to the individual, is the satisfying end-product of their dialectic. I can indulge in the same reasoning. If Christianity is pessimistic as to man, it is optimistic as to human destiny. Well, I can say that, pessimistic as to human destiny, I am optimistic as to man. And not in the name of a humanism that always seemed to me to fall short, but in the name of an ignorance that tries to negate. (Camus 1998: 73).

Christianity has always taught that pride of the self and self-righteousness are sins, even if Christians have never been immune from them. Behind these ‘sins’ is the substitution of one’s own moral superiority and one’s right to judge (an all-too-human trait) for the commandment to love and not to judge the neighbor. Christianity is often taken for a moral teaching, but, even if this is widely thought to be the case amongst Christians, such a viewpoint overlooks something much more distinctly and significantly Christian, viz. the distance between God and men and women; only one man has been born who was not morally deficient, only one should be divinized, and that is because He is at one with His Father’s will, which is why Christians believe he and he alone is the savior of the world. In spite of Nietzsche’s mistaken and unfortunate conflation of Platonism and Christianity, Christianity is concerned with salvation not morality – the former involves a historically contingent act of divine sacrifice precisely because redemption is not possible solely through moral improvement. Camus’ claim that ‘I have

abandoned the moral point of view. Morals lead to abstraction and to injustice' (Camus 2008: 246) shares a deep affinity with the traditional Christian rejection of the idea of salvation through morality, and for much the same reason – that the concrete requirements of love cannot be compressed into a moral formulation; we might recall Camus' lament at the end of *The Rebel*, that work which is the elaborate defense of the note I have just cited – that 'the secret of the European is that it no longer loves life' (Camus: 1975, 269; cf. Walsh, 77). It was this very combination of lovelessness and moralizing that he noted against François Mauriac, 'Admirable proof of the power of his religion: he arrives at charity without passing by generosity. He is mistaken to continuously send me back to Christ's anguish. It seems to me that I have a higher reverence than he does, never having believed myself to be permitted to expose the torment of my savior, twice a week, upon the first page of a newspaper for bankers' (Camus 2008: 16) Mauriac is not a figure whose work should be dismissed with a brush of the hand, but in their dispute, Camus would later concede that on the specific issue about which they had disagreed, Mauriac had been in the right. But Camus was not wrong to call Mauriac on the manner of his invocation of Christ's name.

If, then, Camus often criticized Christians, what was central in his criticism, I think it fair to say, was the persecutory tone and gesture that blurs the boundary between Christian, fascist and communist fanatic. Thus, too, he could write with a combination of solidarity, disgust and insight that:

What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man, that they should get away from abstractions and confront the blood stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of men resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally. When a Spanish bishop blesses political executions, he ceases to be a bishop or a Christian or even a man; he is a dog just like one who, backed by an ideology, orders that execution without doing the dirty work himself. We are still waiting, and I am waiting, for a grouping of all those who refuse to be dogs and are resolved to pay the price that must be paid so that man can be something more than a dog (Camus 1961: 71-72).

The one constant enemy throughout Camus' life is the murderous substitution of abstraction for genuinely human relationships and solidarity, and it is his attack upon this process that stands at the centre of the work that he himself called his most anti-Christian book, *The Plague*. That statement so often repeated is, at the very least, disingenuous, and might be more accurately gauged if it is placed along a continuum with *The Fall*—written from within the fog and smoke of an inner circle of hell and saturated as it is in Christian imagery and a cry to an unknown God if ever there were one, which is why Marcel Arland could legitimately ask 'if in driving man to despair "this devil's advocate does not serve God's cause?" (Onimus 1970: 101). But is the leap between *The Plague* and *The Fall* any more startling than the movement from *Sisyphus* to *The Rebel*, a movement that seems a very clever contrivance—one is a question, the other an answer—but hardly one that represents an about-face? *The Plague* is, contra Camus' own public assessment, if not a completely Christian work, at least a work that has deep affinities with Christianity, that takes the sad example of a lost soul who is a priest wanting to tell others of the nature of God, but whose love for and understanding of God is blocked by the absolutist preoccupation with the future which involves forgetting the here and now, and in that very act of forgetting leaves his faith tottering like a top after its spin has finished. Paneloux is friendless and believes he must be so in order to love God; Jesus surrounded himself with friends—for this is what his disciples were. And one should not underestimate the importance of 'conviviality,' a concept which takes its direction from the spirit that existed between Jesus and his disciples and that was extremely important in the Middle Ages and which Ivan Illich has more recently attempted to revive (Illich 2005). I think it is this same concept that is so important to the relationship that exists between Rieux and Tarrou, and which is totally lacking in Paneloux.

I doubt if Camus really thought Paneloux the embodiment of *the* Christian position. Indeed Paneloux is something of a red herring on the question of how *The Plague* can be related to Christianity. The real issue, and what is so conspicuously Christian in the work, is the central theme of engulfing evil, and the importance of love and solidarity as response to it.

Of the three most significant characters of the novel Paneloux, Rieux and Tarrou, it is the priest who is the most tragic. His tragedy consists in his being consumed by his role, and his desperation manifests itself in the zealotry of his faith. But that zealotry is *the* symptom of his

lack of faith. All Christians are driven by lack, but when that lack conceals itself as the false plenitude of certainty, the opening to the mystery of God's will which is faith itself is locked tight. Paneloux is not a bad man, just one more sad creature who is caught between role and life, and who plays out his role in response to abstract and metaphysical issues. His life is graceless, and his faith is as grim as the world and the God whom he believes has total control over this world. The hiatus that ever exists between God, man and world which is so important to the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig, and which we take up again below, does not exist in Paneloux. And while it may well never have occurred to Camus, the fact is that the rational enclosure of what Rosenzweig calls the All which makes of the world but the ever controlled being under the sovereignty of a higher transcendent being is Greek (and Islamic) rather than Christian (and Jewish.) The idea of a God who has total control over His creation may be a position held by some Christians, but it ignores a more fundamental and again the more distinctively revelatory Christian and Jewish tradition in which the loving responsiveness of God and humanity to each other is the real meaning of revelation – God, it might be recalled, cannot force his creatures to love Him. In sum that hiatus between creature and creator, in which the creature has its own integrity (which is its free will), is essential to the Jewish and Christian view of life. Paneloux, though, is a creature who completely lacks awareness of his freedom because he has immersed himself into a phantasm of his own fears and speculations. He is the phantasmic Christian, the Christian whose faith and sustenance are purely abstract, and hence empty, and, most importantly, devoid, of the very loving relationship which gives faith its sole axis (see also Merton 1985: 211-213).

Tarrou and Rieux may not be believers, but their action is the confirmation of a faith that is far more faithful than Paneloux. The solidarity and love between Tarrou and Rieux and the sad isolation of Paneloux illustrate a point written down later in Camus' notebook: 'St. John; "The one who says that he loves God and does not love his brother is a liar; because how can he say that he loves God, whom he does not see, if he does not love his brother, whom he does see?" Compare with confused Mind which says: "If I do not love God, me (sic.), it is because I do not love men, and in truth why love them. (Camus 2008: 77)"'

Paneloux struggles with an abstraction, with words that leave him isolated and unloved, and, worst, of all unlovable. To Paneloux's rationalizations which are a vague attempt to defend what he takes as God's ways, Rieux responds 'No, father I have a very different idea of love.

And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture' (Camus 1970: 178). But Camus knows that this is not the Christian position, as is evident in his public denial that Christianity is a religion of resignation, where he responded to a question: 'can one put down this word for a St. Augustine or a Pascal? Honesty requires that we judge a doctrine by its summits, not by its sub-products. And in the final analysis, little though I know about these matters, I have the impression that faith is not so much a peace as a tragic hope' (Hanna 1962: 52).

That anyone could think that this was somehow a critique of the Christian position not only displays how ignorant they are, but also how confused Christians like Paneloux themselves can be when they are prisoners of their own abstractions. But anyone who thinks carefully about Christianity should know that Christians believe God responds to prayers, not to speeches about God made on His behalf—as if He needs them. But that a Christian should love a scheme of things which put children to torture, as Paneloux is represented as having to believe? Surely this is faith is in salvation *from the fall*, and a world that tortures children is a fallen world. Rieux's exclamation that 'salvation is too big a word for me' (Camus 1970: 178) is a nice rhetorical jab at Paneloux. However, salvation is precisely what Camus wants, salvation from all that requires acts of rebellion in order to put the world aright. What Camus doesn't believe is that we can have knowledge of an apocalyptic moment in which this is achieved. Which is to say, in spite of himself and what he often seems to be saying about history, what he needs is time to work out and to provide coherence for the rebellious acts so that the triumphs over injustice be integrated into the constitutive fabric (our language, sentiments and institutions etc.) and forms of mediation of humanity. Contrary to what one might think from his critique of Hegelian and Marxian readings of redemptive history, Camus really does want and need history to be meaningful, but not in the way that murder and torture still exist and are rationalized as the required step. His position is much closer to Benjamin, and indeed, to Judaism generally in so far as his position is one of awaiting and anticipation in the lack of certainty, but in the scope and depth of his hope – the hope is realized when history comes together, but we cannot know when that is until it is manifest in the presence of the kingdom itself. The danger is as Franz Rosenzweig said of those who await the coming of the kingdom is that they try to storm, to usurp the kingdom, which recedes in that very act. Thus the revealed commandment of love is violated – for the 'stormers' of the kingdom. As Franz Rosenzweig continues their blind love of

the future leads them to skip the neighbor – for the neighbor now is an obstacle that must be removed so they can get to the type they want to be the neighbor –whether it be the victorious proletariat or superman is all one.

This also stands in the closest relationship to the allegory at the centre of *The Plague*, an allegory which is also the renunciation of the idea of original innocence which Camus had previously espoused. I think it not exaggerating to say that *The Plague* is an allegory of original sin, at least if ‘sin’ is understood as ‘existential’ evil (and what else does it ever mean?), and Tarrou makes this explicit when he realizes that he has always carried the plague, and that all carry it, that all have it, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves. When he says he tries to be ‘an innocent murderer’ (Camus 1970:206-208) he has conceded that we don’t know the consequences of our actions, of our inevitable inattentions. We are all always weaving ourselves and our lives just as we are woven into a vast web of actions, where complicity is unavoidable, even if we are vigilant. To repeat, this is a very orthodox and well-put account of original sin. It is not a paean to Nietzschean innocence. As if to signal his own change, Tarrou announces ‘When I was young I lived with the idea of my innocence; that is to say, with no idea at all.’ (Camus 1970: 201)

The theme of the ubiquity of evil and love’s absence is also central to *The Stranger*, and its theological implications neatly converge with *The Plague*. Here, though, the focus is less upon the self’s reification but upon a more general social reification and the cold machinery of the state that is marshaled to execute Mersault, and that void is as much evident in the chaplain, who desperately consoles himself with the semblances and gestures of salvation—in vain trying with all his might to elicit a pathetic gesture from a condemned man—because the world in which he operates offers no real signs of it. Camus’ statement that Mersault is the kind of Christ our society deserves is a telling remark about the loveless world which condemns a man whose own lovelessness is infinitely more honest than the loveless world in which he must function. The world that condemns Mersault is itself but the alienation, isolation and emptiness writ large that constitutes Mersault. Except Mersault does not know how to lie. The society criticized by Camus, on the other hand, does not know how to be truthful. It requires office-bearers to protect the lie at its centre, and whereas Mersault becomes a murderer due to circumstances as contingent as preparedness to help a friend, the flicker of sunlight and the sweat of the moment, the social machinery of Mersault’s world reacts with rectitude and certitude to Mersault’s

refusal, or rather his complete inability, 'to play the game.' Mersault is really an opportunity for the monster which society domesticates to have its bloody feast in good conscience, to be a hissing spectator at a murder which has been elaborately and artfully contrived, and sanctified. (*The Stranger* is a most Girardian work.)

Of course, the bourgeois machinery of state murder dissected in *The Stranger* would seem to be the antithesis of the revolutionary justice required by communist messianists. But the divine commandment of neighbourly love is equally violated by bourgeois lovelessness and pseudo-messianic love of the next but one. Both fail to love the neighbour. In the case of that which sacrifices the present for the future, faith in the last battle—'once these people are slaughtered God's reign will be ushered in'—is to take into humanity's hands the grace that is God's. It is nothing but useless murder conducted under the auspices of a phantasm. This was, again, a central theme of *The Rebel*. And again the message was completely congruent with mainstream Christianity and Judaism. Also orthodox is to commit to resisting all that impedes the unity that God commands. Camus' position is a riff on permanent revolution. But it is ever concrete and ever directed to those impediments to unity in which the human can be fully human, or if we were to put this in theological language, in which a human being could again be a creature dwelling in a divine image, rather than a fallen one, severed from the gifts of the creator due to an impenetrable wall of its own restlessly tormented self.

Thus far I have suggested that Camus' attack upon Christianity in *The Plague* and the *The Stranger* are attacks upon phantasmic Christianity, which far from breaking with some core Christian concepts actually reproduce them. To be sure, Camus certainly saw Christians as particularly susceptible to the phantasmic, due, as *The Rebel* makes clear, to its susceptibility to inverse the apotheosis of God and humanity – this danger had also been identified by Rosenzweig as one of the intrinsic dangers of Christianity (Rosenzweig 2006: 424-425) . Certainly, though, Camus was also profoundly aware that the tendency to murderous apotheosis is deep within the human heart, and that deploying one amalgam of signs and symbols rather than another is not sufficient to save anyone. Thus too, when pressed, he eschewed the symbol of the atheist (Camus 2008: 110; Todd 1998: 359). Martin Buber, who wrote to Camus praising him for the importance of his stance and the value of his work, also once rebuked his student and

biographer, Maurice Friedman, who, thinking that he was saying nothing contentious, relates how he once called Camus an atheist. Buber chided him with the comment: ‘Don’t call him an atheist. He is one of those people I speak of in religion and philosophy who destroy the images that no longer do justice to God.’ And as Friedman continues, for his part Camus would say, with respect to Buber, ‘I do not mind being called religious in Buber’s sense of an I-Thou relationship (Friedman 1996: 11).’

Nevertheless, apart from Mumma’s unverifiable claim that Camus wanted to embrace the Christian faith, Camus generally made it clear that he could not become a member of that faith (Camus 1961: 69). And in a very late note he says: ‘The world moves toward paganism but it still rejects pagan values. They must be restored, to paganize belief, Graecize Christ and restore balance’ (Camus 1961: 269.) That note certainly expresses the point of view most consistent with his public statements about religion. But the claim is somewhat problematic as an accurate representation of what we might call the subterranean theological residues at work in Camus’ own corpus. Also problematic is Camus’ appeal to the pagan world, which is more difficult than Camus acknowledges to reconcile with his other recurrent and more urgent appeals and motifs, based as they are on a deep commitment to social solidarity fundamentally at odds with the general pagan acceptance of tribal warfare and slavery – of course slavery and tribal warfare have plagued the Christian world, but their very existence is intrinsic to the world that the earliest Christians sought to renounce in their pursuit of a world to come which would be free of such obvious symptoms of what Augustine called the earthly city.

A clearer nature of Camus’ faith can I think be gained by closer consideration of what Franz Rosenzweig had called a Johannine Christian position. That position involves faith in a non-denominational, wall-less Church, whose first modern father Rosenzweig says is Goethe (Rosenzweig 2006: 293 ff) —and we recall that it is precisely Goethe whom Camus singles out in ‘The Absurd man’ for having provided ‘the absurd speech’ in his statement ‘My field is time’ (Camus 1975: 64). The Johannine Church operates under the sign of ‘hope.’ And, as Rosenzweig points out, the modern prayer is one in which the individual’s own sense of mission is conjoined with God’s will. In other words, the Johannine Church is one which fuses the kind of decision about one’s life that Camus lays out in *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the commandment to love the source of the creation and one’s neighbor. In the Johannine Age even the name “God” loses its potency, and needs to be translated into non-denominational, even secular terms, much along the

lines that Feuerbach did – and this is more conspicuous in Feuerbach’s later work with its emphasis upon community as dialogue through love than the mere reversal of subject and object, God and man at the basis of *The Essence of Christianity*.

The Johannine Christian can be said to believe that it is ‘good’ that the world is created (as is taught in Genesis), that love is the secret meaning of life or creation, and life is fulfilled when its multifarious energies are reconstituted and coordinated by love (which is to say that the purpose of life is to redeem what deserves to live across the times – and love is the power which is, as Rosenzweig citing Song of Songs formulates it, “as strong as death”). The Johannine does not renounce the pagan as such – indeed Rosenzweig emphasizes that the pagan is the natural condition of humanity. Thus revelation is not simply about denying all that is pagan but reconstituting it so that it is worthy of eternal life. The Christian contribution to this Jewish view of life is the historical redemptive journey, i.e. the ‘resurrection’ of dead forms of life and institutions and their reconstitution on a plane governed by love of the neighbor, hope in a better future and faith that our loving acts fulfill their potential within creation. In this light the Christian teaching of God as trinity (which, not surprisingly, was not of particular concern to the Jewish Rosenzweig, but follows from applying his insights to Christian symbolism) is that the source of creation (the Father) (unlike the created creature) acts out of excess, the path of salvation or redemption requires overcoming suffering and death through unconditional love and that means all except one (the Son) are responsible for contributing to the death and suffering of the world, and this love is ever moving and changing its form (the Holy Spirit).

Rosenstock-Huessy, who also uses the same triadic division as Rosenzweig – and the division can be found in Schelling (Schelling 1977:314-325)- of the Church being a sequence of Petrine, Pauline and Johannine reminds his readers in his forgotten masterpiece *Out of Revolution*, that the wall-less Johannine Church had as its early forerunner Joachim of Fiore, who had signaled ‘a post-ecclesiastical, i.e., political, spiritual and cultural history for our millennium’ (Rosenstock-Huessy 1993: 691). Further as Bernard McGinn has pointed out in his excellent study of Joachim, ‘For the abbot of Fiore the list of history’s villains is nothing else than the sum total of literalist exegesis’ (McGinn 1985: 126). What he says about Joachim is itself true of the Johannine Church in general, i.e., that it does not read scripture literally, at least to the extent that its members are conscious of their Christian heritage infiltrating the symbols and directives behind the solidarity to build a better future in which they place their hope.

Merton has called Camus a post-Christian (Merton 1985: 118, 211, 218, 229, 232, 252), and in a sense the ‘post-Christian’ is the typical constituent of what Rosenzweig calls Johannine Christianity. But the important affinity between Camus’ ostensible paganism and the redemptive mission of Christianity becomes obvious when we bear in mind how much paganism was revived/ redeemed by Christianity. In other words, when Camus wants the loveless Europeans who are caught up in their abstractions to learn from the Greeks he was not doing anything that different from the Christian humanists who devoted themselves to recovering and teaching long forgotten works from antiquity. However, there is frequently a tension in Camus himself between his appeal to idealized paganism and the more fundamental appeal of human solidarity. Moreover, his idealization of paganism tends to go hand in hand with his prolonged ‘wrestle’ with Augustine. For his understanding of the Christian and the pagan can be readily seen to have the general shape which would remain in all writings from the reading of Augustine and Plotinus he undertook in his thesis.

There is a reason that Camus’ youthful thoughts on Augustine have not impacted on Augustine scholarship, and it is not because all Augustine scholars are believers – it is simply because it is not very deep. The thesis itself was given 28 out of 40, around a B. And that grade I think is a reasonable assessment of a work which shows great self-assurance (leading one of the examiners to say, what has remained the consensus in Camus reception, that he was ‘more a writer than a philosopher,’ (Camus 2007: 6) but not a very convincing or detailed argument. According to Camus, Augustine’s philosophical conundrums about evil and the soul find their solution in Plotinus, which he then appropriates. What is most conspicuous in Camus’ depiction of Augustine is the absence of, if we may use a phrase of Camus’ from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, ‘the prop of the flesh.’ Augustine is presented by Camus (and to be fair to him, he is not alone in this mistake) as if he is primarily seeking to convert university professors and candidates in philosophy. If Camus’ interpretation of Augustine is thin there, it gets no thicker elsewhere. Camus’ thesis manages to do four things simultaneously, which, I think, tend to remain a constant throughout his life when it came to reflecting on Christianity and paganism. First he emphasizes that Christianity is a way of life; secondly he sees it in fundamentally Greek terms (the centre-piece of the thesis: Augustine’s borrowings from neo-Platonism to save the project); thirdly he contrasts it negatively with paganism; and fourthly he leaves a tear in the fabric of the argument which makes possible a dialogue with Christianity.

Of these four aspects of his argument, his argument, already here as in his later writings, is strongest as a criticism of what I have called phantasmic Christianity, i.e. Christianity when it is pathological in its otherworldliness, and either indifferent, masochistic or destructive to the world. Camus' argument is extremely weak as an historical appreciation of Christianity as a process of continuing metamorphosis. The idea of metamorphosis is encapsulated in the understanding of the Holy Spirit, though it has different aspects and accentuations in the different phases and forms of Christianity. Thus it is most conspicuous in Johannine Christianity – which does not require commitment to any form or dwelling place of the Spirit-, very important to that Protestant wing of Christianity which emphasizes the invisibility of the real Church. Indeed both the Johannine and Protestant forms of Christianity are defined by their opposition to the ossification of form. But it is also wrong to see the Catholic Church as rigidly committed to the forms of its faith. Its break with the Orthodox Church owed much to what it saw as an anti-historical, institutional spirit of the Eastern Church (See Rosenstock-Huessy 1966).

The history of the Christian faith is not only a history of schisms and sects, but of the spread of a faith through a great diversity, development and hybridity of forms of life – this is in keeping with its original mission of redeeming pagan forms of life by infusing them with the commandment of love (even if the story is also inseparable from the more typically human power grabs). The weakness of Camus' position is exacerbated by the fact that his vision of Greek and pagan life is so manifestly idealized, more or less indifferent to the internecine warfare that tore the Greek city-states apart. Greeks did indeed speak of measure in various places—in tragedy and in philosophy and in law—and they spoke of it in much the same way and, it might well seem, for much the same reason that Foucault so rightly says about the way in which prison reform functions in the prison system: as a means of ensuring that the system continues as is. The point of all the talk about measure was due to how unmeasured the Greeks were. Thucydides shows this so patently by the Melian and Metilene dialogues: one lot is murdered by the Athenians, the other is spared, but in both cases it is the same calculating logic that rules (Thucydides 1972: 194- 211, 400-408). Consequences are expediency. Likewise, Thucydides shows the havoc caused by imperial overreach in the failed expedition to Sicily of Alcibiades. Yes, the Greeks constantly showed examples of what happens to men who failed to live by measure, and, yet, perpetually it bred just those very men – thus Nietzsche (approvingly)

cites from the apocryphal Platonic dialogue *Theages* the idea that each man longs to be a tyrant (an idea, of course, which Plato hopes to knock down) (Nietzsche 1967: §958). And Plato takes on the entire Greek world by showing how Socrates is the only hope of young Greek men finding a better alternative than tyranny, only also showing that Athens' demise comes from executing 'the best and wisest who ever lived.' Nietzsche argues, in *Twilight of the Idols*, that Socrates was the impure slave type who wanted to destroy what was best in Greece, and Platonism was but the infection of the noble by plebianism (Nietzsche 1990: 39ff). That Nietzsche equated Platonism and Christianity (Nietzsche 1990b: 31) and Judaism is as sorry a testament to his ignorance of the Jews as it is to his reading of the role of Christianity in Europe. But what I wish to emphasize is that Greece tore itself apart - and its paganism fuelled that tearing. Indeed, one major difference between Camus and Nietzsche's readings of the pagan world is how utterly unidealistic Nietzsche is - even if he is enthralled and bedazzled by it, he does not underestimate the role of violence and death in its perpetuity - which is why he finds in the Greeks a commitment to eternal return. Camus loved Nietzsche's genius, but little of his politics, and the dangerous delusions of his aristocratic distance. And whereas Nietzsche attacked Christianity precisely because of the various forms of solidarity it has engendered - its democracy, its socialism, its spawning of the women's movement, its intermingling of the races - these are precisely the forms of resistance which Camus sides with, as is evident in a statement that anticipates the emancipatory politics of the post-structuralists, who have generally ignored the fact that they follow in his political tracks:

The miner who is exploited or shot down, the slaves in the camps, those in the colonies, the legions of the persecuted, throughout the world—they need all those who can speak to communicate their silence and to keep in touch with them... I cannot keep from being drawn towards everyday life, towards those, whoever they may be, who are humiliated and debased. They need to hope, and if all keep silent or if they are given the choice between two kinds of humiliation, they will forever be deprived of hope and we with them. (Camus 1975: 190-191)

Camus' opposition to totality and his defense of plurality and the relative is what is behind his valorization of the pagan gods, whose contiguity with men enables an appeal to

relativism against the wrath of a transcendent absolute. But Camus is silent on the hellish side of relativism, that side which is testified to by Hesiod, whose *Theogony* and *Works and Days* are but a desperate attempt to transform Zeus into an all-seeing and all-wise harbinger of justice to put a brake on pluralistic creation gone savagely mad. Yes, the Greeks were pluralistic; and yes, there is a house of gods; but they are gods who fight and play and who are caught up with the fate of mortals, as Zeus, depicted by Homer, looks helplessly on at the human agony of a war played out by men who know not which forces they may transgress at any moment. Camus' view of the pagan completely overlooks the reasons behind the monotheistic impulse that reaches from Hesiod to Plato and Aristotle.

Thus too Camus' pre-*Plague* positing of pagan innocence against Christian guilt does make sense when the sunny pure (he uses the term 'pure' so naively, and fails to see that the very metaphysical horror of the moderns is so encapsulated in that very term—a pure race, a pure communism etc.) cloudless sky is invoked against European fog (*The Fall*) and the oppressively rigid Parisian Catholic black view of life.

As for the innocence of the Greeks, he easily ignores how the Greek is never certain against which god he will transgress; but the Greek pantheon was such that transgression was inevitable because the gods did not share the same loves or purposes, but were, to use a term of Bernard Knox's, furiously self-absorbed (Knox1990: 44) —and this is why measure is for the Greeks so necessary *and* so useless. When Protagoras says man is the measure, he is continuing the Promethean and Sisyphean task of defying the gods—for, by making man the measure, he is wanting to de-divinise the universe.

In this sense Camus is Greek, and Sisyphus is an apt choice for this process because he fails and is punished. Camus has an intimation of this failure, but his task is compounded by the horizon against and upon which his philosophical imagination is activated. Camus is torn, as we moderns and postmoderns generally are, by the conflict between our servitude to the hidden purposes and powers, which the ancients called gods, and the ostensible freedom and sovereignty of the self. We know how unconvinced Camus was by Sartre's depiction of the responsibility of freedom; its character and framing, even up to the very use of the term 'bad faith,' which carries with it an archaic guilt-ridden view of life suggestive of no religion more than Manicheanism – a pagan doctrine that all too often is mistakenly passed off as the Catholic view of life. Yet the world Camus inherits is the modern one in which, as Heidegger put it, the gods have fled, and

the self inhabits, as Pascal put it, a universe of infinite space and silence. Camus's absurdist man makes all his choices in this silent universe. And like so many moderns, Camus, at least in *Sisyphus*, much like those Enlightened *philosophes* who confuse the entirety of religion with its perverse 18th century French form, would have us believe that life was ever and always thus.

Camus is deeply aware of the cursed condition of the modern, but his account of how it got thus and how he stands with respect to it is, to put it mildly, extremely questionable. In spite of his animosity toward Hegelianism, nothing is so Hegelian and, again I add, Greek (specifically Anaxagorean and Aristotelian) as Camus' reading of Christianity as if it were a seed which generated a specific fate that was forever en-seeded at the beginning. (Cf. Hegel's conclusion of his *Logic* which connects himself with Aristotle). In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus gives no idea of Christianity as an incarnating force, and it is not that Camus stands against this aspect of the Christian tradition, it is more the case that he is simply unaware of it.

The Rebel with its affirmation of solidarity that does not simply negate itself through metaphysical reification is, as we have suggested, the answer to *Sisyphus*. It is a work which emphasizes relationship, while *Sisyphus* depicts a de-souled universe and solitary set of subjects confronted by their own absurdity. Read from the vantage point of *The Rebel*, *Sisyphus* is a book of longing, longing for the solidarity and love, the love itself which ends up becoming that very appeal whose possibility he originally denies. *The Rebel's* concluding appeal to love of life has revealed the solution to the quest of the absurd man who having renounced all hope, for fear of committing philosophical suicide by hoping too early, can now learn to love and hope again in the solidarity and rebellious unity of those struggling for a modicum of justice. In *The Rebel* Camus has returned to the circle of community (the Hegelian image is deliberate); and his community—actual poor, actual miners, actual trade unionists, actual French men/women and Algerian men/women etc.—who can live under a common sun is more real than the vicious metaphysical circle of murderers who in the name of revolt have divested themselves of themselves and become but the servants of abstractions which have ensconced the antithesis of justice in its name.

Two further things are all important and they are what are really responsible for the tear in the fabric being so easily mended by the Johannine (post-Christian) form of Christianity. One is that Camus really is Descartes' child. At times he seems to nod to this. He is Descartes' child in his vision of life as spatial rather than temporal, and in his absurd denial of his historicity in

order to have a new beginning. Yet his absurd types are obviously figures of history, none more contemporary and more empty than those absurd civil servants he mentions (Camus 1975: 85) who are the very antithesis of the conquerors and Don Juans and artists he portrays with such artistry. His admission of the source of Europe's despair reveals the truth of which he is the incarnation: that modern men and women are isolated and all too often unloved, and only by rebelling against this state of affairs can they find a way back to love. But that all men and women are in this position is what Europeans know is not the case, which is why they so readily romanticize indigenous and alien spiritual traditions where the gods have not fled, but walk amongst the living and the dead, and thus enchant everyday life in a manner which Europeans frequently crave, and which Camus seems to suggest can be found in the more benign elements of nature, if only those who live under the same (Mediterranean) sun can live and love in peace.

Camus, then, after such a tortured and agonizing search, has a sense of the power of life to serve and it is this same power which engenders community. To put it in an extra-modern sense, he has found the god to summon, to pray to: the god of love, justice, and charity. But surely this is the most familiar God of all to those whose heritage (let us leave belief out of this, and that I wish to do, because few words are used so mindlessly and uselessly as *belief*) is (post-) Christian. For, this is the Christian God who was originally the God of the Jews. Camus has reached that God—and more or less the position of John's Epistle, that unless one love's the neighbour one cannot love God. His reaching this God has not been through a mere act of acceptance/leap of faith regarding what his Catholic Church taught him as a child. That Church had been so ensconced in the Greek scholastic tradition, and that tradition was not brewed as Camus unconvincingly suggests, in Augustine, but in Paris—this same Paris whose university had become a stronghold of resistance against Protestantism (inciting the St. Bartholomew's massacre). It is with Paris, with Abelard and St. Thomas, that that infamous Greek dyad of transcendence and immanence dictates the meaning of the bible (and against just this sort of dictatorship that a Reformation took place).

The young Camus had favourably quoted Porphyry, but he had overlooked how Christianity's power lay in not appealing to such school masters as Porphyry, but to starving souls looking for just the kind of solidarity and rebellious unity that Camus was looking for—except this unity was not needed against a silent universe, but one populated with gods who once having incited gladiatorial games, had now, in non-Roman guise, incited conquests and tribal

cycles of vengeance which people were fleeing from. Porphyry's teacher, Plotinus, was, as far as one can tell, a very decent man indeed. And he had taken on board the importance of love in a manner which betrays a Christian debt rather than a Platonic one. Hence Margaret Miles points out that Plotinus' care for women and orphans was remarkably similar to the duties expected of Christian bishops (Miles 1999: 112). But ultimately what he taught was one exclusive way of life, viz. the way of the philosophical mystic. The Church, on the other hand, attracted members because of its largess with respect to types and offices required to remake the world that had been shattered by the pagan energies Camus makes so light of. Camus's greatness is best when he speaks from suffering, but he confuses cause and effect when he plays off the pagan and Christian. Of course, the Christian world breeds no end of monsters, but the paradox of the Christian world is that it is always in the midst of the pagan world, as Augustine's heavenly city is always doing battle with the earthly city, which is to say, the Christian is not Christian because of a badge or declaration or vestment or symbol but because of one thing alone, viz. because of a commitment to following Christ in the renunciation of the powers of this world for the powers of everlasting life and love. Thus the Christian world is always ever but a small province under the dominion of ostensibly Christian institutions which can never completely wall themselves off from the pagan energies which are common to all human beings.

In conclusion, the real appeal of Camus was less to the pagan as such, but to the power of love, not in a romantic sense, not in an idealized sense, but in the love of a diverse solidarity in which the powers of men and women are truly able to become what they are. This too was why he emphasized the importance of dialogue.

The mutual understanding and communication discovered by rebellion can only succeed in the free exchange of dialogue. Every ambiguity, every misunderstanding leads to death; clear language and simple words are the only salvation from it. The climax of every tragedy lies in the deafness of its heroes. Plato is right and not Moses and Nietzsche. Dialogue on the level of mankind is less costly than the gospel preached by totalitarian regimes in the form of a monologue dictated from the top of a lonely mountain.' (Camus 1990: 247-248)

I could quibble here about whether Moses is as un-dialogical as Camus implies (Buber clearly did not think so) or if Plato is genuinely dialogical (Rosenzweig did not think so), but Camus had grasped that only in our responsiveness and in our willingness to hear the absolute need of one who must stand in his or her difference can genuine solidarity be attained. Otherwise it is just a suffocating mechanism of the spirit (modern liberal and managerial styles) or outright totalitarian murder.

It is true that Camus was generally so overwhelmed by the present, and disgusted by those who gambled all on a different future, that he failed to do justice to the role of the future as a force with which we must deal and respond to. Secondly, his reaction equally blocks out a more nuanced and accurate and important understanding of how the past works. It does indeed bequeath terrible burdens and lead to terrible catastrophes, of 'sins' accruing over time and undealt with, but it also provides legacies and fruits so there can be greater forms of solidarity. This is far closer to what Augustine meant by providence, and it cannot be dismissed so swiftly as Camus, and not just Camus, suggests. Camus knows as well as anyone that he did not need, for example, to argue with modern men and women interested in creating greater forms of solidarity that the institution of slavery needs to be abolished or adults given the franchise. That work had been achieved by past generations, and he was heir to that labour and suffering.

If I have taken issue throughout with Camus' understanding of the Christian, I have, nevertheless, been arguing that Camus' own appeals are of a type that is thoroughly consistent with what we may follow Rosenstock-Huessy in calling a particular kind of incognito Christianity (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1966: 126-127). I go further and suggest that Camus' incognito Christianity is advanced under his advocacy of paganism. In a world forced to come to grips with the bloody horror of much that has been done under the auspices of Christianity, this appeal to the pagan is understandable. I have suggested, however, that such an appeal to the pagan is based upon a two-fold failure –a failure to be sufficiently open about the horrors intrinsic to paganism, which are those intrinsic to humanity as such, and a failure to grasp the significance of Augustine's distinction between the City of God and the City of Man, the former being not simply equivocal to the historical Church, but rather to that aspect of the Church that is genuinely working in obedience to God's commandments of love. Amongst Camus numerous references to love, the following all illustrate how central love was to Camus' social vision:

‘Recognize the need for enemies. Love that they exist. Recover the greatest strength, not to dominate but to give. (Camus 2008: 204)

‘Whoever gives nothing has nothing. The great misfortune is not to be unloved, but not to love’ (Camus 2008: 39).

‘What takes longest in the world is learning to love’ (Camus 2008: 83).

‘Nobody deserves to be loved—nobody measures up to that immeasurable gift. Those who receive love then discover injustice’ (Camus 2008: 102).

But perhaps the key to Camus’ own incognito faith can be detected in his reflection on a the Doukhobors, a Russian sect, often persecuted, who adopted a purely ‘Spiritual Christianity,’ and thus broke with traditional Christian symbolism:

The Doukhobors, Christianity is within. It dies and resurrects in us. Every Christian has two names – one corporal, the other spiritual – which God gives to him at the spiritual birth, according to his actions. The latter name is not known to anyone below; it will be known in eternity. (Camus 2008: 51)

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