

St. Paul and the Damascus Event

THE GERMAN philosopher Friedrich Schelling identified three phases in the evolution of Christianity and saw them as extensions of the three great apostles Peter, Paul, and John.

Petrine Christianity has its focus in the Roman and Orthodox Churches. Pauline Christianity has been traditionally associated with Protestantism. Johannine Christianity designates a more esoteric ideal only a distant future shall realize.

Though simplistic, this threefold distinction has some merit. Petrine Christianity has been characterized by ecclesiasticism. It has been structural, hierarchical, authoritarian. Protestantism arose out of a perceived need for more immediate, a less mediated, access to the living God. But whereas Luther confidently appealed to Pauline doctrine in all matters, he yet paradoxically made a sharp distinction between faith and knowledge and called thinking the “whore intellect.”

While faith was for Paul both an instrument for securing, and in itself a form of, supralogical knowledge, it was not incompatible with the right use of the thinking faculty. Therefore, Pauline Christianity continues to hold relevance for the contemporary Christian precisely because his intellectual needs must be addressed prior to faith’s full commitment. This bonding of high reason and visionary faith characterize Emil Bock’s superb study of the life, letters, and teaching of St. Paul (*Saint Paul*, Floris Books, 1993, 384 pp.), whom Albert Schweitzer called “the patron saint of thinking in Christendom.”

Paul felt the compelling need to clearly articu-



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The Conversion of Paul

“To his great astonishment, he [Paul] recognized his own higher self, yet at the same time the higher self of all humankind. Not a man but the man, not any ‘I’ but the ‘I’ revealed itself to him. An organ had opened up in Paul that could perceive the spirit-sun of the Christ because they were essentially akin,” (Emil Bock) just as the physical eye can perceive the light of the sun because it is itself of a solar nature.

late this new faith to his contemporaries, to both justify his own radical conversion and to satisfy his own keen intellectual needs. So that Schweitzer remarks in his own book on Paul, “The result of this first appearance of thinking in Christianity makes it possible to establish for all time the certainty that faith has nothing to fear from thinking...All those who believe that they are serving the Gospel by the destruction of free thinking in the faith of Jesus must hide before Paul.”

While Protestantism has been increasingly infected by the scientific rationalism of the last five centuries and inclines either to literalism, pure abstractionism, or deconstructive relativism, Paul's Christianity is intellectually vital. It is the result of the higher mind's engagement of superphysical realities, opened to him from the time of the Damascus event, which Bock calls a "supersensory event of the first order," since it "stands not only at the beginning of the Christian part of Paul's life, but at the beginning of the spread of Christianity and thereby at the inception of world-encompassing Christendom as a whole."

If Paul was "untimely born" (1 Cor. 15:8) to meet the Lord's needs, now, two millennia later, Bock maintains, Damascus is an imminent experience for general humankind. We would have to recall Paul's Pharisaical upbringing to appreciate this analogy. For the present day ethos is strongly sense-based. "Will humankind simply continue to harden itself more and more in the materialism of the earthly sense? Or will a small pioneering few at least open their eyes to the world of the supersensory, which, like the roaring surge of the sea, has long been breaking over us, and where the majestic light-form of Christ appears in a new apocalyptic proximity? In the flashes of revelation issuing forth from the storm clouds of our times, those who yearn to experience a Christ Who is present and timely can find their Damascus thereby. They can also rediscover the Damascus event of Paul and the full nature of his apostolic work for the nations."

Bock emphasizes that Paul's conversion is not merely that, it is an elevating, transformative experience by which the apostle's consciousness and very being is permanently changed. It is, in a word, an initiation. The hierophant is Paul's own destiny. The inner vision and the visionary capacity become part of his new nature.

It is in working the soil of daily circumstance that the fruits of illumination are harvested. One

Saul Become Paul

Paul of new birth, new name, new growth,
New miracle of truth and blossoming;
The Searcher Paul, who recently betroth
To tenderness and love, forthwith could bring
From center to circumference, midst pain,
Midst danger and extremity, beset
By man and destiny, the Christian skein
That formed through pagan world the wide,
strong net.

Intense in work and word, obedient,
Youth becomes steadfast man, tried, tested,
proved;
Paul the Defense, enduring, eloquent
For charity and hope and faith; behooved
To turn his fullness—fearless, measured, free—
To common good and whole reality.

—Mary Helen Weber

does not go out of one's way to gain enlightenment. Therein lies the Luciferic snare—the egotistic striving for bliss, the preoccupation with personal redemption. One does not repair to the halcyon spiritual oasis to encounter Damascus. To go on retreat, to go to a retreat, may as well signify retreating from one's pressing, if distressing, duties.

The current intense fixing on one's psychological weather, with submerged affect and buried impulses, is part of the self-fascination which plays no part in real spiritual becoming. In this context, Bock refers to the historical Rosicrucian as "the final descendant of an ancient, genuinely esoteric Christianity, which had transmitted the courage and patience to embark on those paths which had as their goal *the spiritual service of humankind, not the soul's personal deliverance*" (italics added).

Alluding to what can be an obsessive concern with becoming other, of changing oneself, Bock writes that Paul's transformation did not make him a "different person"; he became "more himself." That is, as we are, we are fragmented, shadows, partial images of wholeness. "What is visible as our physical form represents only our sheath, only

a fraction of our real being, which is of a super-sensory nature, has actually entered into incarnation, such that we can say: It is here.”

Our higher members overshadow us. When Christ appeared to Paul, He appeared *in* him. Paul’s higher self is born to his consciousness as his essential being. “Like a genius, this our higher being makes itself felt above and in us at high points in our life.” It ever dwells in heaven. Our destiny is to dwell with it, as it, where it is.

While the Christ “I” is the sum of all true human egos, the higher “I” of all human beings, through the baptism in Jordan Jesus became “to the very highest, most divine extent, himself.” For Paul, Damascus marked the onset of the “permanent, illuminating, and strength-bestowing presence” of the Christ in him, “When it pleased God ...to reveal his Son in me” (Gal. 15-16).

The foregoing is but the background or context for Bock’s study of Paul’s life and teachings. His ideas unfold organically, for they are clearly the product of heart-infused and mind-plumbed medi-

tation and they glow with living warmth and intelligence. Bock succeeds in showing how Paul became the first Christian to “bear and radiate the redeemed and illuminated consciousness,” who marked out and walked a path that is open to all who seek Christ. The author traces the westward movement of the new religion, describes Paul’s journeys, trial and martyrdom. He delves into the Epistles, studies their language and highlights their teaching, particularly as presented in the concepts of the old and new Adam, resurrection and transformation, the apocalyptic elements of the Second Coming, and the interplay between faith (*pistis*) and knowledge (*gnosis*).

A fair reading of Bock’s *Saint Paul* will surely transmit something of the actual Damascus revelation. It continuously sets off flares of intuitive recognition. Again and again one receives seed thoughts which are carefully nurtured into blooms promising the fruit of transformative understanding. This is food for the soul. It is also an esoteric feast. □

—C.W.

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