

THE NEW LIFE

By SEBASTIAN MOORE

The ground of desire

I SHALL START with a question that has helped me greatly in the understanding of God in human life. What is it in us that makes us *want* there to be God? Feuerbach made a powerful case for saying that belief in God is wishful thinking, and for Marx, Feuerbach was gospel. Neither they, nor their multiple intellectual progeny, spotted the logical fallacy in saying that because we want there to be a God there cannot *be* a God, God being the product of wishful thinking. Indeed, a God who met the implied feuerbachian criterion for real existence and was *not* desired to exist would be a monster alike for the intelligence and for the heart.

And how important it is to understand that our primary connection with God is desire! To believe that God is, is to trust our desire that God be. It is the most adventurous act of trust that we ever make in ourselves, our feelings, our hopes, our dreams.

But *why* do we wish God to be? This is my opening question. For answer I make a disjunction. The desire for there to be God does not spring from a sense of weakness or worthlessness. It is not the pathetic cry of an animal endowed with mind but crushed by mortality. It is not the need to be affirmed, valued, made to feel significant. The desire for there to be God springs not from our weakness but from our strength, not from a sense of worthlessness but from a passionate sense of our worth, not from our subjection to death but from our sense of transcending death. The remainder of this opening section will consist in unfolding this idea.

Consciousness desires, demands to grow. And its growth is toward a goal, a perfecting. But to understand what this perfection of consciousness might be, we have to ask what consciousness is. Consciousness, I shall attempt to show, is not what I know but what, who, and how *I am*. The perfection of consciousness, then, will be the actualization of what, who, and how I am; that is, my creation.

It follows from this that the more intensely conscious I am, the more I feel the pull of this final perfection. And thus the more valuable and significant my experience is to me, the more I feel the desire for the perfection of consciousness. And thus the desire that there *be* this perfecting, that there *be* God, increases with the sense

of my life as significant and desirable. It is this rooting of the desire for God in self-belief, not in self-disbelief, that is required if our theology of transformation and rebirth is to be valid. The desire for God is the desire of our growing consciousness to grow all the way, for there to *be* an 'all the way' for it.

What is consciousness? Lonergan was once asked, in learned company, 'What is this difference you are always insisting on, between consciousness and knowledge?' His reply was 'That's the one that separates the men from the boys!' Consciousness is not what you know, but how you know. It is not what you know, but you knowing, or you loving, or you suffering, or you angry and so on. Consciousness, then is a far more radical concept than knowledge. Lonergan calls it a 'primitive' notion, meaning absolutely primary, something one either understands or one does not, and if one does one knows it is unexplainable in terms of anything else, for there is nothing else that is *more* primary, that is 'before' consciousness.

Thus growth in consciousness is not the same thing as growth in knowledge. The growth in consciousness does not consist in knowing more and more, but in being more and more. What does this mean? The question is best answered by contrasting my consciousness when I understand something for the first time with my consciousness when I decide to give my life to another in marriage. There is incomparably more of myself in this latter event. More of myself is conscious. Decision is a presence of the self to itself far more vivid than takes place, for instance, in a moment of understanding. Thus the growth in consciousness is a progressively fuller presence of the self to itself.

Once again, how vastly different this notion of increasing consciousness is from an increase in knowledge! Implicit in the confusion of the two is a notion of consciousness as consisting in having myself as object of knowledge. The increase would then consist in seeing myself more and more clearly. Instead, it is being myself more and more fully.

Christianity and the other world religions insist that our perfection is not in knowing but in loving, so that to reverse this priority is heresy — the gnostic heresy. But to say that our perfection is in the full development of consciousness is not this heresy; it is only to reiterate the central religious axiom in more analytical language. By our prophets and wise persons and saints, and pre-eminently by Jesus, we are urged to let ourselves go to that fulness of conscious existence which is had only in loving.

Now if being more conscious is being more, is there a 'being most'? It seems clear that the growth in consciousness is not the kind of growth that could go on indefinitely without ever reaching a goal. For it is a structured, an ordered growth, a descent from level to level of consciousness. So it is not like a house you simply add to. It is the kind of growth that is toward totality, completeness, perfection. So it seems that there *is* a 'being most', a fulness of conscious existence.

What then is to be said of this fulness of consciousness? How is it effected? What brings it about? To answer these questions, we have to reiterate once again the Lonergan disjunction: consciousness is not what you know, it is how you are. So the full actualization of my consciousness is the full actualization of my being. And what is the full actualization of my being? It is the mystery of my existence no longer opaque or ambiguous but pervaded by the meaning. It is my creation. The actualization of my consciousness is the actuation of my being, which is my creation.

In short, consciousness is being. Thus the perfecting of consciousness is the actuation of being, or creation, and to be perfected in consciousness is to be created. 'Send forth thy Spirit and they shall be created: and thou shalt renew the face of the earth'. How often we mumbled those words into folded arms, in anticipation of another boring retreat conference. Sticks of dynamite used to prop up an old floor. This is the ultimate love-affair, the total orgasmic penetration: to be created eternally. We approach, and are drawn to, this condition of full consciousness, in a process that moves, cyclically/spirally, from total undifferentiated desire-to-live to total desire acknowledged and decided-for, which is love.

The lives of the saints give wonderfully clear examples of this larger sweep. I think of Francis, starting as a handsome, feisty, medieval lover, discovering the appalling conditions in his father's factory, and awakening to his true being as God's lover in this world.

The desire that animates consciousness, then, is the desire of being to be all of itself. We are at the antipodes here of a desire whose motivation would be a sense of emptiness, of worthlessness. The motive of the desire we are considering is, on the contrary, a sense of being worthful, great, special, unique. It is this wholly positive sense of ourselves that motivates our desire which stretches to receive, in awesome joy, the creative act in which all being takes its origin.

But can more be said of the actual receiving of the creative act? A few short reflections on this must conclude the first section. To be conscious is to be. To be more conscious is to be more. To be most conscious is to be totally. And what makes me to be totally but that which makes me to be? So to be most conscious is to be, consciously, created. And when am I most myself? When I love. So love is the form or level of consciousness at which I am, consciously, created. Love is the point of conscious contact with the one that causes me to be.

Thus what differentiates the love of God (or love with God) from all other loves is that the love of God *is* love as the place of reception of the creative act. The love of God is differentiated from all other loves *not* by having a different *object* (God) but by the fact that while other loves are specified by the object, the love of God is specified by the condition of the subject. Thus the love of God includes and embraces all other loves. It is distinguished from them only as the whole is from the part. The love of God *is* love, experienced in its full reality as passivity to the creative act. All the mistakes in the matter of loving God and loving neighbour consist in thinking of God and neighbour as alternative objects of love.

Now we simply do not have an adequate expression for this experience of *receiving identity* from the Creator. A mistaken interpretation of Paul's 'I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me' understands this as a *displacement* of my identity by a divine identity. It is not a displacement of my identity, but an intensification of it to the point where it wholly and only expresses the Creator as *Logos*, as Christ, to the point where I am the idea of God. Paul's statement only works for Paul's 'Christ', not for Paul's 'God': I have my identity *from* God' the Creator-arch, *as* God's *Logos* or order or idea. And I have this identity, as has been shown, *in* love. The structure of our eternal identity is trinitarian.

The movement of love without an object is the self-revelation of the subject. It is the direct, as opposed to the implicit realization of the deepest level of consciousness where decision is made, where love is. Love is desire decided for. When I love another person, this level is *implicitly* realized. When there is no specific object, this level shows itself *simply, directly*. Now at this level, thus actual, I most fully am. This movement of love is the actualizing of my being. And what is the actualizing of my being, but my creation? The Creator is known in the movement of love without an object, which is the same as what Ignatius Loyola calls 'consolation without a cause'.

I love. Therefore I am. Love is being in movement, being as movement. And do not say 'The wave is in the sea' but 'The sea is in the wave'. Love is being as movement, being as known, being as act. For being is not inert, and it is as love that we experience our being as not inert, as act.

Progress in praying, then, consists in coming ever closer to that in me which does love God, which receives from moment to moment the act of existence. The reason why the conviction grows, with spiritual growth, that meaning and being are one is that at the core of my being the movement of love which is my meaning, is passive to the act that gives me *being*. Away from that centre, people try to find their lives meaningful, but never being quite in touch with their lives they do not know where to attach the meaning. There is no meaningfulness but the movement of the heart: and the movement of the heart is its being, receptive of being.

Finally, is there a moment of experiencing the self as loving nothing in particular and feeling consequently grateful and celebratory, that could happen long before someone has arrived, through continual prayer and searching, at any constancy or directiveness of that moment? To go by a recent survey taken in the U.S.A., about thirty per cent of the adult population have had such an experience.

The weakening of desire

The story of the Fall is the story of the coming of self-awareness. In becoming self-aware, the animal pulls away from its animality, begins to stand over-against its animality. The tension between self and bodiliness is beginning, and will mark the whole subsequent history. Now the most important consequence of this pull-away from the former spontaneous animal existence is *the weakened sense of being desirable*. The reason why this follows is that the *source* of our sense of being desirable is *in* our animal spontaneity, in an original innocent hedonism still observable in small children. As I pull away from that, I feel lonely, problematic, free, and lack the joyous abandon of the earlier condition that I shall call 'symbiosis'. I feel less confidently desirable.

Feeling less desirable, I both relate less confidently to others and lack that yearning for God which, we have seen, stems from our sense of our goodness and beauty. This is the 'original sin' condition in its root form. I have coined a name for this complaint: *erosthenia*, weakness in desire. It is the root of all our trouble.

As well as this weakened sense of being desirable, there is the attempt to grab all the pleasure and power of our earlier animality *for the newly emerged self*, as a manipulation of others and of the world to its insatiable demands. Sin is adult childishness.

Having got this clear, we can be more specific. That symbiotic sense of being desirable comes, in the male, from being in touch with the woman *in him*, to whom he feels desirable, and vice versa. So in pulling away from my earlier symbiotic existence, I am pulling away from the woman within me, and the woman, in pulling away, is pulling away from the man within her. No longer, then, does the woman appear to me as 'bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh'. No longer does my 'dream woman' invade waking consciousness and make me tender to the real woman before me. And vice versa. We have awoken from the dream of symbiosis into self-awareness. The story reflects this change. No longer is the woman 'bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh'. She is 'that woman you gave me as a mate'. Nakedness is no longer an invitation to simple delight in each other, but rather provokes sexual shame, which is deeply woven into all cultures.

In pulling away from his symbiotic wholeness, the male *pulls away with him* his gender. When two things that were closely bound together pull apart, each takes with it some of the other. And so the man's maleness ceases to be simply a function of uniting, and becomes *his*, becomes his badge, his identity-mark, his signature. The penis becomes the phallus, symbol of life and power. There is a high-pressure fusion of gender with self-awareness. That is why all cultures put a great deal more energy into making boys boys, girls girls, than in fostering feeling between the sexes.

Now what we learn from all this is that the emerging self-awareness exists in a highly problematic relationship with the symbiosis whence it is emerging, a relationship which finds expression in all the complexities of sexual, economic and mortal existence, which initiates the estrangement between the sexes and the perverse tendency of the male to dominate (it being easier for men to 'pull away' than for women), leading to the massive mis-shaping of society.

But to repeat, the most important result of this complex relationship with symbiosis is that since it is our sense of being desirable that makes us desire God, the breach with symbiosis will cause a weakening of the desire for God. And this has awesome implications. For once an animal has become conscious, it has to be directed *by*

consciousness where it *was* directed by instinct. And consciousness, as we have seen, yearns of its nature for its perfection in God. Any impeding of this yearning, therefore, *deprives this new animal of its own directing principle*. And this *is* the human condition. The human animal lacks taste for what is its only real nourishment. Lacking the lead of a strong desire for the perfection of its consciousness, the human animal chases the most bizarre illusions.

All things live by their desire. That is the universal fact. But the *human's* desire is 'on the blink'. Only in the exceptionally mature does it 'connect'. All animals are inner-directed. Few humans are inner-directed — meaning by 'inner-directed', 'led by desire to live successfully'. Michelangelo put all this into his painting of the creation of Adam. It portrays the limpness and ambivalence of the primordial desire for the Creator.

I need to explore this concept of *erosthenia* further, to show how it contrasts with the way we generally think about sin. It is not self-awareness that is the cause of the trouble. It is the separateness that self-awareness brought with it. That first flash of self-awareness separated us from the innocent animal, in other words from that very *élan vital* to which it was meant to bring the enhancement of 'selving'; and to which, in a new world, a third age, it will be rejoined. For Christ is our Orpheus, uniting the beast with the spirit 'on the fields of praise'. An image that brings home to me more than any other that the development of nuclear weaponry indicates a dedication to the Evil One is the report of a witness to a bomb test out in the Pacific. Forty miles from the place of the explosion, albatrosses caught fire and plunged into the ocean. That says it all.

The following piece of theological shorthand may serve to bring this section to a close:

To be grateful for existence
 is to be grateful to a mind
 so original and beyond our understanding
 that it invents existence
 on which all our understanding depends.

To be grateful for existence, I must exist.
 Most of us, most of the time, hardly exist.
 This condition, of a bare and ungrateful existence,
 is what is traditionally called the state of Original Sin.

How beautiful is one who invents existence,
 of whom being is the idea,
 the impossibly original of all that can be conceived,
 the inconceivable conceiver of being
 which is eaten up with love for its inward minding.

How starved is one who is not so consumed
 and cares for everything but himself in his inventing,
 never feeling the throb of being itself
 which is pure gratefulness
 to the terrible beauty itself, inventor of being.
 We do not see the love-affair of the animals,
 having mind enough not to be animal
 but not enough to know their ecstasy.

The liberation of desire

Desire is all. We can have anything we want, if we want it enough. St James says that often our prayers are not granted because we do not pray single-mindedly. And Mark's Gospel has the fascinating saying, 'Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and it will come to you'. Often the people who advocate prayer for peace are not really working for it. Praying for something, if it is authentic, means wanting it with every nerve in your body. And where we most often fall down is in not really deciding what we want, indeed not really deciding that we want what we think we want. The reason for this is that to decide that I want something is to deprive myself of the alternatives. It is not for nothing that the word 'decide' has the same root as 'suicide', 'genocide' — the Latin *caedo*, to die. To decide is to die to alternatives.

Next, a vital distinction has to be made: between the fulfilment of desire and the liberation of desire. Fulfilment of desire means getting what I want. Assuredly this too is no easy matter. If the goal is worth pursuing, its pursuit will involve decision, decisive self-deprivation of the alternatives. But the liberation of desire is, as they say, something else again.

The liberation of desire happens when a desire I did not know I had breaks in on me and is immediately recognized as 'the only thing I ever really wanted'. This is the conversion experience, whether the conversion be religious, moral, political, aesthetic — and there surely are other categories.

Let me now concentrate on a liberation of desire that includes and

goes beyond all the others. It is the moment when a person knows, in the depths of him — or herself, a movement to the unknown that is, indistinguishably, a movement *by* the unknown; a response that is identical with a call, a response that is a call. In this moment, a person receives a name from the meaning without which there would *be* no meaning. This is *the* liberation of desire; when a person can at last say: for this was I born, for this I have come into the world.

What is happening when desire is thus liberated is that our belief in ourselves, which normally is dormant, is awakened by and to the Spirit. The belief in ourselves is the faint spark that the Spirit will blow into the fire of an infinite love. When desire is thus liberated, it leaps beyond our present way of being in the world, it seeks its cosmic place. But to secure this movement beyond our present world, something else is necessary.

What that other thing is we have already touched on when we looked at decision. For with all decision, I have to deprive myself of alternatives, and so with the movement of the heart that concerns us now there goes a deprivation. It is a deprivation as sweeping as the movement itself is far-reaching. For since this movement of desire goes *beyond* our present way of being in the world, we must, for its completion, be *deprived* of our present way of being in the world. This deprivation is beyond our power to bring upon ourselves. In it, we find ourselves deprived, we are passive to the deprivation. Of this deprivation, then, the prime exemplar is death.

Now there is another dimension to the liberation of desire. It is social. We do it for each other. It is something instilled in a group of people by a leader in whom it is charismatically apparent. It is a contagion that is caught from such a person. One thinks of a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, persons who awoke in millions a desire, a hope, a possibility, that they had forgotten they ever had.

Now this desire, this visionary hope, awakened in people by the leader, is far too big for them to handle *without* the leader. They have to invest it in him or her. This means that the leader finds him — or herself acting as a 'conductor' for the myriad energies he has released. The strain of this is nearly unbearable, and we would not be surprised at the irregular sexual morality sometimes triumphantly discovered in the leader by enemies. It has always seemed to me that the action of the Irish clergy in turning against Parnell because of his divorce is one of the meanest and most despicable acts in our history. This consideration points us, with awe, at the figure of Jesus, whom not even the bitterest enemies managed to fault in any way.

Now putting all this together, we have: a desire awakened in people that leaps beyond our present way of being in the world, that requires for its realization that we be deprived of our present way of being in the world, and that has to be 'carried' for us by the one who has awakened it in us.

The most mysterious, yet universal fact in this affair is that these two requirements of awakened desire — the requirement of *deprivation* and the requirement of *being carried by the leader* — are most intimately connected. They combine, in an explosive chemistry, into the premonition that the leader must be killed. Here is the combination, in slow motion. The desire that the leader has awakened in his followers is vulnerable twice over. It is vulnerable in that they cannot handle it by themselves, they can only handle it through the leader. And this investing of their desire outside themselves and in the leader makes it vulnerable to the most radical deprivation. For when the leader is killed, their desire goes with him beyond this world, and is emptied in the total way that death effects. The very act of putting their desire into the leader puts it at total, mortal risk. And those who are closest to the leader and have made the greatest commitment will have to undergo, while still alive, that undoing of all worldly desire that only the dying normally undergo.

It is this prospect, of entering, while still alive, the awful void, that haunts the Women of Canterbury in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, as they contemplate Thomas, their hero, stepping up to his fate and praying to his good angel to 'hover over the swords' points'. They imply that it is worse for them than for him. And in one sense it is. We fear death less than we fear the final demand, from the unseen, to drop everything in sight; that is, the live entry into the void. Their chorus accompanying the murder makes this very clear.

Thus desire, awakened in the depths of our being and leaping beyond our present way of being in the world, is deprived of this world by him who has awakened it, as he enters on his lonely fate: and thus stretched and emptied, desire can at last be permeated by the Creator Spirit who is the bliss of all being.

And thus at last we have told the story of Jesus: a story of the stretching of desire — the life and ministry; of the deprivation of desire — the crucifixion and death; of the invading bliss of heaven — the encounter with Jesus risen from the dead. The story throws a definitive light on our relationship with those beloved ones whom we have had to let go into the night. Our desire, stretched by their life, has been emptied by their death, and learned in this process some

resonance of eternity. And our desire, thus touched with eternity, reaches out to them in a very sure fellowship.

The transformative experience of discipleship, then, may be expressed thus: we feel, in the envisioned bloodshed, the emptying out of desire, making space for the peace that passes all understanding. I am struck with how close the christian experience, expressed in this way, comes to the buddhist. It is the buddhist experience, but socially, historically, and sacramentally enfleshed — which makes all the difference.