

God in the nineteenth century: Wagner

Sermon: Evensong, Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge, 26 October 2008

Our hearts are thrilled with compassion, for it is old Jehovah himself who is making ready to die. We have known him so well, from his cradle in Egypt ... We saw him bid farewell to those companions of his childhood, the obelisks and sphinxes of the Nile, to become a little god-king in Palestine to a poor nation of shepherds ... We saw him move to Rome ... he obtained power and, from the heights of the Capitol, ruled the city and the world, *urbem et orbem*. ... We have seen him purify himself, spiritualise himself still more, become paternal, compassionate, the benefactor of the human race, a philanthropist ... But nothing can save him!

Do you not hear the bell? Down on your knees! The sacrament is being administered to a dying God!

Heinrich Heine penned these words in 1834 – and, in many respects, they indicate rather well the state of God in mid-nineteenth century Europe, at least in intellectual circles. Nietzsche, after all, would *report* God's death, not recommend it.

Wagner, in his *Ring* cycle, stood in such company; indeed, he knew Heine well. The composer fell greatly under the influence of Young Hegelian writers, who had declared that, whilst Hegel's philosophy had helped to bridge a number of gaps that imperilled human flourishing – gaps between the dualisms of man and Nature, Spirit and Nature, knowledge and will, 'ought' and 'is', secular and divine, particular and universal, self and society – Hegel had ultimately fallen short of what he might have achieved by his insistence upon Christianity as the ultimate truth, instead of an historical stage on the road thereto. In his *Essence of Christianity*, Ludwig Feuerbach, to whom Wagner dedicated one of his theoretical works, had argued that alienating theology transferred authentic religious impulses, such as love, justice, and charity, to an object outside man. Now, however, was the moment to turn from God to man. In the *Ring*, Wagner celebrated a myth of the gods' downfall. Various dramatic treatments had been considered, with figures such as Apollo or the social-revolutionary Jesus of Nazareth as harbingers of freedom, whatever that might entail, until Wagner settled upon Siegfried. But very soon, and not least in the light of his experience of revolutionary defeat in 1848-9 and his subsequent reading of the 'pessimistic', world-

renouncing philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, Wagner, whilst retaining some of his revolutionary enthusiasm, came to see his apparent solution as having failed. Perhaps he had killed off the gods – or God – prematurely. Perhaps the death of God had also entailed the death of man.

Thus was the scene set for his final drama, *Parsifal*, perhaps the greatest example of a modern, even modernist, mystery play – and not only in the sense of an abiding mystery concerning whatever it might actually be ‘about’. Parsifal himself seems to be a different kind of hero: a charismatic hero, yes, but one who does not really do anything. The community of the Grail is in decline, perhaps terminally so; the drama concerns its rescue or salvation, which will not be accomplished by the fire of revolution. A letter from 1862, when Wagner had broken off composition of *Siegfried* and was already thinking about *Parsifal*, is instructive:

... the myth of a Messiah is the most profoundly characteristic of all myths for all our earthly striving. The Jews expected someone who would liberate them, a Messiah who was supposed to restore the Kingdom of David and bring not only justice but, more especially, greatness, power, and safety from oppression. Well, everything went as predicted, his birth in Bethlehem, of the line of David, the prophecy of the three wise men, etc., his triumphant welcome to Jerusalem, palms strewn before him, etc. – there he stood, everyone listened, and he proclaimed to them: ‘My kingdom is not of this world! Renounce your desires, that is the only way to be redeemed and freed!’ – Believe me, all our political freedom fighters strike me as being uncannily like the Jews.

This is already quite a different Christ from the socialistic enemy of law and property envisaged in Wagner’s sketches for a drama on *Jesus of Nazareth* – or better, that Jesus still exists but has been built upon, his negations negated. He has been metaphysically redeemed from his narrowly political one-sidedness. Yet this is as nothing compared with what we heard in the lesson. Those words are spoken on Good Friday. Parsifal imagines essentially what we do when reading the narrative of Christ crucified, which we heard from St Matthew’s Gospel.

Alas for that day of highest grief!
Now I imagine that all that blooms,

all that breathes, lives, and lives anew,
should only mourn and weep!

We know that Easter is to come, although we also stand in the shadow of the Cross – and not only on Good Friday. Nor should we forget Hegel’s re-positioning of God’s *death* on the Cross at the very heart of faith, an attribute, he claimed, which starkly distinguished Christianity from natural- and folk-religions. Yet the words in *Parsifal* we heard from the apparently wise Gurnemanz present a very different resurrection strategy:

You see that it is not so.
It is today that the tears of repentant sinners
water field and meadow with holy dew:
thus are they made to flourish.
Now does all Creation rejoice
in the Saviour’s dear path,
and dedicates to Him its prayer.
It cannot see Him Himself upon the Cross;
it looks up to man redeemed,
who feels himself freed from the burden of sin and horror,
made pure and whole through God’s loving sacrifice.

So what has happened to Christ, if indeed that be who ‘the Saviour’ is? (I think that He is, although it is perhaps worth mentioning that He is never mentioned by name in the drama. Unfortunately, I shall have to put this matter to one side.) Either Christ has been brought down from the Cross or those who put Him there have been prevented from doing so. Michael Tanner, one of the most astute Wagnerian critics, is, I think, right to say that Wagner ‘is repelled by the idea of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity dying in order that the First Person should allow man into Heaven’. Or at least he is right about this stage in the drama, for a key to Wagner’s greatness is his relentless self-questioning, both from work to work and within works. At this stage, it is quite true that we turn instead to Nature and to the extraordinary claim that Nature, absolved from sin, has been granted its day of innocence. The Fall, it seems, might have been suspended – or is there already a caveat, in referring to Nature, rather than to man? It would seem so, since man could hardly be redeemed without something, some sin, from which to be redeemed. Sin, whether from Adam or no, is still

operative, if on the defensive – although we should remember the audacity of making this claim on Good Friday of all days.

But what if it is not Good Friday, which Wagner may be portraying as an example of what is to come, or may be presenting as something unique, for one day only? What if we are not standing with such overwhelming directness either in the shadow of the Cross or in Wagner's Nature transformed? This is where Wagner attempts to grapple with an issue he might once have written off as only presenting itself were one to take an ill-advised turn toward the transcendental.

For hesitantly, ambiguously, yet unmistakably, we see introduced that Third Person of the Trinity Michael Tanner forewent to mention. What Parsifal has learned on the travels preceding our excerpt is emphatically not to be attributed to his own agency, nor even to that of any other mortal. Whether secular or atheist commentators like it or not, this is the realm not just of self-realisation, but also and primarily of grace, the divine gift that might alleviate the sorry lot of man's sinful existence. When, in the Third Act, Parsifal returns to Monsalvat in search of the Grail, he succeeds through the intervention of something higher, which imparts to him knowledge that he could never have obtained through his own offices. It is this and this alone that enables him finally to carry out his deed, to heal the high priest Amfortas's wound, thereby to put Amfortas out of his eternal agony and, crucially, to rejuvenate the religious community. Grace supplants or at least enables self-realisation. Tanner argues that there is 'no point in Parsifal's development at which one could say that without the intervention of divine grace he would have remained powerless to accomplish his mission'. Yet this is to ignore the several, far-from-incidental references to grace (*Gnade*) in Wagner's text, its first theological usage in a Wagner drama since the 1840s.

Parsifal's concern with Christianity is far from incidental, in that it enables exploration both of the cyclical (Schopenhauerian) and teleological (Hegelian) – or, if you prefer, and to generalise excessively, the archetypal Greek and Jewish strands of the faith. *Parsifal*, like Christianity, is neither merely cyclical nor straightforwardly linear. Into the age-old conflict between time and the eternal, Wagner introduces a crucial Christian agency of mediation, that gift from God commonly and often confusingly known as 'grace', which for us may be considered to represent a decisive *act*. In the words of the New Testament scholar, James Dunn, 'In Paul ... $\chi\alpha\rho\iota\varsigma$ is never merely an attitude or disposition of God (God's character as gracious); consistently it denotes something much more dynamic – the wholly generous *act* of God. Like "Spirit," with which it overlaps in meaning ..., it denotes

effective divine power in the experience of men.’ Now this is not meant in a Young Hegelian, detranscendentalising manner, bringing the divine back down to earth in the greatest deeds of man. Nor, however, is it quite so inconsistent as one might imagine; for Wagner, finding that manner insufficient, attempts to redeem what might be of worth in it. We certainly go beyond some vague ‘redemption’ of Nature, beyond the old monistic trap of elevating it above Spirit – or man.

Wagner had, rightly, always been concerned most profoundly with the abiding problem of modern politics: how to reconcile the apparently idyllic communal integration of Hellenic life with the post-Classical, Christian conception of subjectivity. For us, the Incarnation has changed everything. But in the world in which, as Wagner put it, the cloister had replaced the amphitheatre, the consequences had been far from uniformly beneficial. This was not the world in which, as eighteenth-century deists such as Voltaire had naïvely fancied, all would thank God for His goodness by dint of wonder at His Creation. The situation was rather, as Wagner bewailed, that ‘our God is money, our religion its acquisition.’ Gone was the Greek religion of art, or art of religion. Public life had vanished. Man’s purpose having been located outside his earthly existence, life could ‘remain the object of man’s care only with respect of his most unavoidable needs’. This was the state of affairs that had led Wagner to the barricades, to restore the dignity and unity of art and religion. But he also eventually came to point us to the eminently orthodox realisation that our own efforts will never, can never be sufficient. Experience had taught him that hard truth and enabled him to point us to the realm of grace, which in turn points us to the indivisibility of the Holy Trinity. The enigmatic final words of *Parsifal* – ‘Redemption to the Redeemer’ – suggest that, even if this were not the intention, the nineteenth-century death of God, far from being unduly exaggerated, was entirely necessary, just like that on the Cross, and should certainly not be ignored by those of us living in its wake. Its piercing agony stands at the very heart of our faith, enabling and necessitating His Resurrection, both in history and in eternity.

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