SPES ROMANA, SPES CHRISTIANA

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The Christian concept of hope as *certa exspectatio futurae beatitudinis*\(^1\) looking forward to the true *patria* in heaven introduces a new dimension into the religious ideas of the Graeco-Roman world. This originality resides in the transcendental vision of its aspiration. Greeks and Romans before Christ acknowledge hope as a fundamental human emotion, and indeed deify it, but they envisage its fulfilment solely within this world; Christian hope can likewise seek a limited end in the here and now, but its primary impulse is towards a realisation beyond the present world. This extended teleological vision inevitably transforms the moral attitudes and values of Christians in important areas of human life. One obvious example is their attitude towards suicide, which for the Stoics can be the supreme exercise of moral choice dictated by the human reason, the highest arbiter;\(^2\) yet for the Christian, who acknowledges an authority beyond the intellect of man, suicide is a tragic act which in Dante’s *Inferno* consigns the self-immolator to the seventh circle of Hell.\(^3\) This paper seeks briefly to delineate the evolution in the Roman world from *spes Romana* to *spes Christiana*. Inevitably we must look to the fourth century to witness the confrontation between Roman and Christian ideologies, and the final section of this paper will examine the conflict in a remarkable poem of Paulinus of Nola, a Christian steeped in the Roman literary culture and a Roman magistrate and poet who turns Christian apologist.

I

In the literature of classical Greece, *elpis* is inevitably an ambivalent emotion, spelling sanguine expectation yet also self-delusion. This ambivalent role is memorably symbolised in Hesiod’s myth of Pandora, when Elpis is the sole power which remains in the jar when the others have flown out to afflict mankind.\(^4\) The two sides of the coin of hope appear in both the poetry of Pindar and the dramas of Euripides. In Pindar, it is now the destructive emotion enticing man to seek more than his allotted portion, now the sustaining power helping to make his life more tolerable; likewise in Euripides it can be the mark of a noble spirit or a mere anodyne amongst trials.\(^5\) Such an ambivalent force in

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life, when envisaged as a deity, never attains great popularity as a cult-figure or as a representation in Greek religious art.

The Romans, however, visualised Spes as a much more benevolent deity — a fact of some psychological interest for students of the two cultures. What to the Greeks doubtless appeared as religious naivety was none the less for Rome a potent source of community-strength which reflects a more optimistic view of the benevolent ordering of the world in the Roman interest. We should be tempted to regard this as post hoc rationalising if we looked merely at the texts of the Augustan period which envisage Roman world-dominance as providential, but the cult-practices and the temple-dedications to Spes date from considerably earlier. The characteristic adjective attached to the goddess is bona, and she is regularly invoked not only as a public patroness but also as a domestic protectress, for example at marriages and birthdays.

This Roman vision of hope is characteristically concentrated within this world. When Aeneas consoles his comrades at sea

revocate animos maestumque timorem
mittite; forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit

he looks to an earthly Utopia in Italy. So too the Horatian expressions of hope anticipate the achievement of greater happiness in this life. Moreover, not only are such aspirations riveted upon expectation of happiness in this world, but the Romans do not look for aid outside the world to achieve them. The intellectuals of the republican and early imperial eras looked with suspicion on divinities accorded transcendental status, and on individuals practising ‘transcendental meditation’, a notably non-Roman pursuit. The world of reality for the classical Romans is emphatically one-storey. The divinity that shapes Roman ends is an immanent power working through nature and man, and true religion is in large degree a religion of self-help. Hope in a future existence sought from an other-worldly deity would have been a concept totally alien from the world of Virgil, Horace and Livy.

II

In this vision of the one-storey universe, Roman religious ideas easily achieved a fruitful synthesis with the physical and theological conceptions of the Stoics. Partly in consequence of this entente which was equally evident in ethical tenets,

7. Virgil, Aen. 1.202f.; Horace, Odes 2.9.1, 2.10.15.
8. A good example is Livy’s criticism of Scipio Africanus for seeking private communion with deities at 26.19.5-9; cf. Polybius 10.2.
9. Livy again affords good examples of such attitudes at 5.11.6 and 6.18.9 See in general I. Kajanto, God and Fate in Livy (Turku 1957).
the Stoic theory of the emotions achieved wide acceptance in Roman intellectual circles, and a wide diffusion from the time of the Augustan age. Zeno’s list of the reprehensible emotions to be excised by the wise man (lupē, phobos, epithumia, hédonē, translated by Cicero as aegritudo, metus/formido, libido/cupiditas, and laetitia)10 is soon popularised in non-philosophical literature as metuere, cupere, dolere, gaudere.11 The second of these concepts, that of desiring (cupere), has a more derogatory sense than the Latin word for hoping (sperare), though clearly spes in its baser application approximates to the notion of cupiditas. However, presumably because the Romans envisaged spes in a more idealised and religious sense, they were slow to use the word as an alternative description of the second of the Stoic vicious emotions. Not until Seneca do we find it employed in Latin in this restrictive sense of acquisitive aspiration towards worldly things,12 but thereafter it becomes a commonplace, and the word passes into Christian writers in this sense of a vicious emotion which should be excised with the other three. We need only recall the poem of Boethius

Gaudia pelle,
Pelle timorem,
Spemque fugato
Nec dolor adsit.13

It is in fact true to say that amongst the Christians of late antiquity the word spes connotes rather the Stoic concept of vicious emotion than a Christian theological virtue. The schematic development of the teaching of the Pauline epistles into a theological system is a gradual one prominent only from the time of Gregory onwards.14 But behind the usage of the actual term spes, radical changes in philosophical and theological vision are creating a new backcloth for the new role which spes is imminently to play in the history of medieval ideas.

III

Whilst the vision of a ‘one-storey’ reality was being projected in the early imperial period by the synthesis of Roman religious tradition and Stoic philosophy, a double challenge was already gathering strength. As the Roman

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10. Zeno, SVF 1.51, fr.211, 3.92, fr.378; Cicero, Tusc. 4.15, 3.24 and Fin. 3.35.
11. e.g., Virgil, Aen. 6.733, Horace, Ep. 1.6.12.
13. Consol. 1.7.
civilisation became more cosmopolitan, and especially when the centre of Roman letters shifts to Carthage in the second century, the reviving Platonism makes rapid headway in the Latin-speaking world. Simultaneously the mystery-cults, especially those of Mithras and Isis, attain increased popularity in religious practice. It is not long before the systematic reconciliation sought between Platonism and Isis-worship by a Greek intellectual like Plutarch becomes increasingly acceptable within the syncretist framework of Roman religious ideas. Once the Platonised Isis becomes a resident of the Roman Pantheon, the way is open for the transcendental element to enter the Roman mind by the back door.

The change becomes evident in a writer like Apuleius, who is at such pains to pose as a Roman establishment-figure, almost as a latter-day Cicero in the changed conditions of second-century Romanitas. But in the two centuries intervening since Cicero, the philosophical centre of gravity has moved at Carthage; Apuleius in the footsteps of Plutarch seeks to reconcile his Platonism with his religious practice, and is simultaneously fascinated by the Egyptian cult of Isis.

Apuleius’ mystical and transcendental approach to deity emerges strongly from his novel *The Golden Ass*, which is in essence a proclamation of pagan hope. After the narrator-turned-ass has wandered forlornly through the world of violence, greed and deceit, he escapes by the power of prayer, for the goddess Isis restores him to human shape that he may become her votary. The author’s Platonist preconceptions here introduce an important development from earlier Roman concepts of hope. The hope which the hero Lucius reposes in Isis rests on the rescuing intervention of a transcendental deity. However, in spite of Lucius’ religious conversion to the Isiac faith, which he promises to observe till his dying day, the hope to which he gives utterance is wholly related to the prospect of happier fortunes in this world.

IV

The Christian divergence from this Roman notion of hope with which men aspire to a happier condition in this world takes its initial impulse from the Hebraic concept of *qāwāh*. This is the word which in the Old Testament expresses the confidence of the Jews that God will aid them to create a great

15. The *De Iside et Osiride* is a fascinating document in this connexion; see the new edition by J. Gwyn Griffiths (Cardiff 1970).
16. See Tertullian, *Apol. 6*.
nation, enter the promised land, and establish God's kingdom.\textsuperscript{20} But such expectations as the Jews express are not explicitly extended to life beyond the grave, though some prophetic texts implicitly suggest a more mystical interpretation.\textsuperscript{21}

It is in the New Testament,\textsuperscript{22} and especially in the letters of Paul, that emphasis on the consolations of a future life becomes explicit. Though there are clear anticipations of a bodily resurrection in the evangelists, it is in Paul that we find the most consistent vision of Christian hope fixed upon the next world; of the hundred usages of \textit{elpis/elpizo} in the New Testament, about three-quarters are found in the Pauline epistles. 'Hope would not be hope at all if its subject were in view; how could a man hope for something which he sees? And if we are hoping for something still unseen, then we need the endurance to wait for it . . . If the hope we have learned to repose in Christ belongs to this world only, then we are unhappy beyond all other men.' 'There are bodies that belong to earth, and bodies that belong to heaven . . . The dead will rise again free from corruption, and we shall find ourselves changed.' The fulfilment of this hope is imminent with the Parousia: 'The Lord himself will come down from heaven to summon us . . . and first of all the dead will rise up, those who died in Christ. Only after that shall we who are still left alive be taken up into the clouds . . .'\textsuperscript{23}

This Pauline doctrine provides the scriptural basis for the orthodox Christian formulation of hope as the \textit{certa exspectatio futurae beatitudinis in the patria} beyond this world. But in both scriptural contexts and in early patristic thought there was a continuing tension between the \textit{elpis} which looks forward to the Beatific Vision and the \textit{qāwāḥ} which aspires to a future earthly paradise. From the second developed the Christian heresy of millenarism, the notion of a thousand years of earthly blessedness at the end of the world prior to the final judgment.\textsuperscript{24} The prophetic utterance of Isaiah echoed in Peter’s Second Letter seemed to offer to Christians a hope similar to that proclaimed in Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue, the period of a millennium for this returning golden age being suggested by the Book of Revelations.\textsuperscript{25} The debate between heavenly and earthly hope continued well into the fourth century; even Jerome and Augustine were attracted to the doctrine of millenarism. But ultimately both rejected it, and

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\item \textsuperscript{20} Gen. 12.2, 17.4, Jer. 30.1.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Isa. 26.19, Dan. 12.1.
\item \textsuperscript{22} See W. Grossouw, 'L'espérance dans le nouveau testament'. \textit{Rev. Bibl.} 61 (1954), 508ff.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Rom. 8.24; 1 Cor. 15.19, 40, 53; 1 Thess. 4.15f. (Knox's transl.).
\item \textsuperscript{24} See the learned account of J.H. Crehan S.J. in \textit{A Catholic Dictionary of Theology} (London 1962), s.v. Millenarism.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Isa. 65.17ff echoed in 2 Pet. 3.13; Virgil \textit{Ecl.} 4.4ff.; \textit{Apoc.} 20.1ff.
\end{itemize}
Origen’s interpretation of the Parousia as the manifestation of Christ’s triumph at the consummation of the world finally prevailed.26

V

Thus when Paulinus of Nola towards the end of the fourth century renounced the comfortable country life of an Aquitanian magnate and littérature to contemplate the message of the scriptures in his monastery at Nola, a convergence of several strands of thought assisted him in the formulation of the Christian doctrine of hope. On the one hand, he takes over from Roman Stoicism the condemnation of that worldly *spes* which bears the baser sense of aspiration towards material things. In a notable gloss on Joel 1.4 (‘That which the palmer-worm has left, the locust has eaten; and that which the locust has left, the bruchus has eaten; and that which the bruchus has left, the mildew has destroyed’) Paulinus comments: ‘For in my body reside those principal passions — hope, fear, joy, grief — which give rise to as many vices, and which most greatly disturb the human race. Two of them, mental grief and joy, are concerned with the present; the others, fear and hope, with the future. So we must ensure that while we are avoiding one of the vices to which these emotions give rise, we do not fall into the opposite one.’27

On the other hand, Paulinus’ Neoplatonist vision of reality and his close study of the scriptures, especially the epistles of Paul, combined to implant in him a vivid preoccupation with the future life which the approved will enter after the final judgment. Hence though he rarely uses the word *spes* to describe the Christian confidence in the blessedness to come, the prospect is frequently set before the readers of his letters and of his poems.28

Of particular interest here is Poem 31, a long composition which commemorates the death of Celsus, the young child of a kinsman Pneumatius. I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere that Paulinus frequently composes his poems in the tradition of particular classical genres.29 This poem is recognizably in the tradition of the *epikēdeion* or poem of lamentation, but it is deliberately orientated in a Christian direction so that it becomes a Christian *consolatio*.30 In other poems Paulinus seeks similarly to build a superstructure of Christian teaching on a classical theme. For example, he writes an *epithalamion* or

28. See e.g. *Ep.* 6.3 (to Augustine), 31.6, Poem 31. There is a translation of the *Letters* by the present writer in ACW vols. 35-36, and of the *Poems* in ACW 40 (forthcoming).
30. Green (n.29), 37ff., with bibliography of earlier studies.
wedding-song in honour of a Christian couple in such a way as to demonstrate the rejection of pagan pomp and aspirations in favour of a fourth-century Christian view of marriage; by a deliberately intended paradox, the wedding-song becomes a glorification of virginity. Likewise when he composes a *propemptikon* or poem of farewell to a departing friend, Paulinus follows the pattern of motifs frequently found in classical exemplars, but transforms the classical message of dismay at departure and impending danger followed by aspiration for an earthly reunion into a message of Christian confidence. Christ will accompany the journeying Nicetas on his journey to Dacia: even when they are physically apart, Paulinus and his friend will be linked in spirit as limbs of the same mystical body: and they will look to their future reunion in the *patria* of heaven. It is not too much to claim that Paulinus deliberately exploits the classical genres to demonstrate that the Christian attitudes towards significant moments in human life offer profounder insights and deeper spiritual consolations.

Thus Poem 31 develops an implicit contrast between the dull hopelessness of pagan fear or scepticism about survival after death and the Christian doctrine of eternal blessedness for believers who act out their beliefs. After describing in the *prooemium* the dead boy’s early years and the manner of his death, Paulinus exhorts the parents Pneumatius and Fidelis not to indulge that grief which betrays defective faith. At once he passes to the theological explanation, describing how God sent his only son to rescue all mankind by his voluntary death, and by his resurrection to give us hope. Once we follow the apostle Thomas in renouncing our doubts and in believing in the physical resurrection of Christ, our own future life becomes correspondingly certain.

After this lengthy disquisition on the necessity for faith as the precursor of hope, Paulinus appends arguments for human survival by analogy from the world of creation. Sleep, for example, is a form of death from which we are reborn each day. The plants and foliage die each year with the recurring seasons, to be reborn with the new creation in the spring. If the earth can reproduce life from the decayed seed, why should it be difficult for God to restore us to life even after we are reduced to dust? These are arguments which Paulinus has taken over from traditional Christian apologetics, and in particular from a treatise of Ambrose, who is the greatest single intellectual influence on his Christian conversion; but of course the resurrection of the body had frequently been a point of attack on Christian dogma, so that similar arguments are found as early as Tertullian.

Paulinus is at particular pains to counter the argument that decomposition of decomposition of

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31. *The epithalamion* is Poem 25; the *propemptikon* is Poem 17.
32. 31.81-250.
33. 31.251-70. For the same arguments in Ambrose, see *De Excessu Fratris Satyri*, 2.54; for Tertullian, see *De Resurrectione Carnis*, 52.
the human body (by the sea, for example) or the devouring of a corpse by birds or animals make such a recreation by God inherently impossible. He insists that the seed of life which animates rational man still survives after death, and will sprout to life at God's bidding. This idea of a dynamic seed restricted to rational creatures recalls nothing so much as the Stoic pneuma, the fiery principle of life in the individual; but according to Stoic doctrines this pneuma at the death of the individual merges with the world-soul, whereas Paulinus suggests that it continues to lie latent in the decomposing body.

These arguments from the world of physics the poet reinforces with the historical testimony of scripture. Like Ambrose, he recalls the vision of Ezechiel, in which that prophet beheld dry bones on the plain spontaneously knitting together and acquiring sinews and flesh. For those unwilling to accept this as an historical event there is the guarantee of Christ himself that the believer will never be destroyed by death, but will live for ever in the company of God and his saints — words in which we can place our confidence because of Christ's own resurrection and the portents which attended his death. Then too the Book of Acts attests the ascension of Jesus into heaven, and bids us await his return; thus 'faith and hope turn their gaze exclusively on this king'.

Paulinus now turns to the description of the conduct which we must manifest on earth to achieve this precious prize in heaven, which he contrasts tellingly with the depressing pagan traditions of the afterlife. The Virgilian poet almost inevitably turns to Aeneid VI to illustrate this grisly mythology with mention of Cerberus and Charon, Tityus and Tantalus. 'These are the tales which poets without the resource of truth have composed in empty words, poets who have not laid hold of Christ the source of truth.' But how are we to ensure the attainment of that heavenly happiness? In answer Paulinus turns to the theme of riches and poverty with an allusion to that parable of Dives and Lazarus to which he obsessively returns in his letters and poems. His own history had become a by-word throughout Italy and Gaul; he was the ex-millionaire who had followed Christ's injunction, 'If thou wilt be perfect ...'. Now he bids the bereaved parents of the child Celsus follow the same course:

utimini vestris opibus pietate benigna, radicemque mali vellite pectoribus.

34. 31.271-302.
35. Paulinus may have derived this Stoic concept from a Christian source; cf. Tertullian, De anima 9.
36. 31.311-22. See Ezech. 37, and compare Ambrose (n.33), 2.69.
38. Green, ch. 3, establishes that Paulinus as poet reflects the influence of Virgil principally, and secondarily of Horace and Ovid.
39. 31.483f.
40. 31.539f.
Then by devoting their lives to Christ they will enjoy eternal life with him.

In the concluding lines of the poem, Paulinus summarises his message. Pneumatius and Fidelis must seek consolation from ‘hope in the truth’, and believe that their Celsus is happy in heaven. Here Paulinus alludes poignantly to his own son likewise called Celsus, ‘a child long desired but not conferred on us’, for he had died when only a week old.41 As comrades in heaven both Celsuses must pray for their parents so that they may follow their children on the path to heaven.

This moving poem has been criticised for its alleged inadequacies as a *consolatio*. It has been suggested that theological exegesis strikes an inapposite note in a poem which purports to offer sympathy to parents on a grievous loss. Such criticism too narrowly limits Paulinus’ purposes. With the central treatment of Christ’s resurrection, he expounds the fundamental plank of the Christian virtue of hope. With the arguments analogically drawn from human and plant life and with the meditations on Ezechiel and on Christ’s own promises, he seeks to strengthen the wavering faith of those who pull up short before the last and most difficult article of the ‘Nicene’ creed – ‘et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum, et vitam venturi saeculi’. If Pneumatius and Fidelis are in the forefront of those whom Paulinus addresses, behind them are a phalanx of Aquitanian friends and acquaintances, for whom Paulinus’ personal example, as well as the letters and poems which he sends to Gaul, is an exhortation and an inspiration to a deeper spiritual life.

VI

I have been suggesting that in the four centuries which elapse between the Augustan age and the world of Christian humanism as represented by Paulinus of Nola, an evolving pattern in the concept of hope is manifest. The Romans before Christ acknowledge the beneficial aspects of the emotion of hope more optimistically than do the Greeks, and this acknowledgment is reflected in the more positive role accorded to the abstract deity Spes in both public and private life. But neither Spes nor any other Roman deity is envisaged as a transcendent power, nor do the Romans seek from their deities benefits to accrue in any future life; indeed, Roman ideas of the afterlife are characteristically sceptical or pessimistic. Once Stoicism attains a predominance at Rome, *spes* gradually enters the list of undesirable emotions as an alternative formulation of *cupiditas*, the worldly aspiration which is a foe of true *ratio*. Thus for an intellectual Roman of the early empire, *spes* is a two-sided coin; the optimism reflected in its religious associations is balanced against the philosophical exhortation not to indulge in irrational future longings. With the revival of Platonism and the

41. For this and other biographical detail, see P. Fabre, *Paulin de Nole et l’amitié chrétienne* (Paris 1949), esp. 35.
increasing acceptability of non-Roman gods, a transcendental element enters the Roman religious consciousness, and this is well exemplified by the role played by Isis in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*; but the hope which is placed in the goddess does not look to benefits beyond the boundaries of the present world. The aspirations to a future *patria* beyond and outside our present condition, to be attained by belief in and fidelity to a transcendental God, is the unique contribution of the New Testament and above all the letters of St Paul.

The attempt to construct not merely a *modus vivendi* but also a positive synthesis between the teaching of the scriptures and contemporary philosophical ideas had long been proceeding in the Greek world, but first developed fruitfully in the west in the fourth-century era of Christian humanism. Paulinus' formulation of *spes Christiana* affords a useful example. He takes from Stoic thought the rejection of purely worldly hope, which he stigmatizes as a cancer. He visualises the Pauline teaching of hope within a framework of Neoplatonist 'two-storey' reality. He formulates his arguments for the survival of the human body with the aid of Stoic ideas of the human soul. But of course Paulinus' doctrine is centrally and essentially scriptural. In his recapitulation of Pauline teaching he conveys no hint of millenarism. For him the end of hope is the future life with Christ and his saints in heaven.