Chapter 5
Paradise Reinterpreted

The Second Adam

The tree of knowledge of good and evil has cast a long shadow over western history and culture; deepest where Calvinism has prevailed, with its doctrine of total depravity. It is all the more strange then to observe that over the Jewish tradition it has cast hardly any shadow at all, nor indeed over Islam, which has its own version of Adam's story, concentrated on the pride and fall of Satan, who refuses to obey Allah and honor the first man. It is only in the Christian tradition that the events in Eden are especially important, and then only with the coming of St Paul. The story does not figure in the four gospels nor in the words of Jesus, for whom indeed the serpent is a symbol of wisdom: he tells his disciples to be 'wise as serpents'. But Paul seems to have needed a particular justification for his faith and he found it in the idea of the Second Adam atoning for the sin of the First. In the course of succeeding centuries a theology would develop in which two awkwardly combined narratives would supply the rationale for a religion which is named, not after Paul, but after a man for whom those narratives apparently held no particular significance.

It is not easy at this late time to come to terms with the fact that Jesus was not a Christian but a Jew, believing in the Torah, even if it pleased him to provoke some of its less liberal devotees. He is recorded as saying that not one jot or tittle of the Jewish Law was to be changed, yet a few years after his death Paul would be proclaiming him the one who had delivered his followers from the Law. Theologians have done their best to reconcile the two founders of the Church; with what success it is not for an outsider to estimate.

But at least in regard to Adam and Eve and the Fall there is no conflict, for the good reason that Paul is the only one who had anything to say on the subject. The important thing is not just what he said about the story, but the fact that he made it so important, to the degree that any incoming religion has to give it the most serious consideration if it would hope to understand the inner life of the West. It must do this, however, by direct engagement with the text, and not indirectly by engagement with the expository literature, whether that be

from the hand of St Paul or St Basil or St Augustine. Genesis is a universal text, and belongs to no tradition exclusively. It may be argued that were it not for St Paul and his successors it would not be a universal text, and this may have some truth; but it imposes the obligation, if any, of gratitude, not of silence.

What should be the approach of a Buddhist to this or any other sacred scripture? First, it should be respectful, but that ought to go without saying in a religion arising out of the Indian tradition. Second, it should be read in the light of Buddhist values, and with reference to the goal of Buddhist aspirations.

Conventionally we call the goal 'nirvana'. But what are we to understand by that mysterious word? Earlier I described it as the quenching of the fires of self. It is not to be limited by any one description, however, any more than is *suññata*. In the Pali Canon there are various synonyms for nirvana, the most frequent being *vimutti*, freedom, a very grand concept in the Indian tradition generally, and exemplified with special cogency in the life and words of the Buddha. The first step he took towards it was his going from home into homelessness, and the severing of family ties. It was the custom of the country; other parents wept over other departing sons that day. A higher imperative was obeyed, as they understood it, one well-known at least in the Catholic tradition of the West. The Indian home-leaver was not enjoined to 'hate his father and his mother', as Jesus would later say, but he felt nonetheless a call stronger than his duty to them and the continuance of the family name. Along with being the first step on the great quest, however, home-leaving is a metaphor not confined to any one tradition or way of life. It is a rite of passage without ceremony, often without aim or even intention. In the western tradition the first people to go through it were the couple who for so long used to be called 'our first parents', Adam and Eve, driven from the shelter of the garden into an unknown world.

Semitic and Indian Theologies

Reading St Paul one might well wonder why the first creation story in Genesis meant so little to him. Everything goes back to Adam and to him only. Yet before we read of Adam we are told that Elohim created men and women in his own image and sent them out to populate and subdue the world. Thereupon Elohim rested; then, it would appear, he resumed his work under the name of Yahweh Elohim and formed another man. This is one way of reconciling the two stories quite in keeping with the text. It would, however, put paid to the notion that Adam is the only progenitor of the human race, and to St. Paul's belief that with him the whole race fell. In a certain sense Adam is St. Paul's special creation. But as this is the belief that has dominated Christian thinking it is the one that must be dealt with here.

Before attempting to do so, it is interesting to recall that the opening words of Genesis, 'In the beginning…' are not absolute. According to non-canonical Jewish texts, the angels had already been created and there had been an abortive coup led by Lucifer, who, as Satan, would later be reviled by Christians as the tempter snake in Eden. The Koranic version of the story combines the angelic and human creations and something quite different happens. The angels are told by Allah to prostrate themselves before Adam whom he has created to rule as his deputy, and taught things unknown to them. They all do so except Eblis, whose pride is too great. Allah places Adam and his wife, never named, in a heavenly Paradise, and tells them not to approach a particular but unspecified tree. To do so will make them transgressors, but there is no mention of death. Eblis, now Satan, through some means not described, brings about their fall and banishment. Allah, however, forgives Adam but sends him down to earth, having given him commandments and said that those who accept the divine guidance will have nothing to fear whereas those who reject it will be sent to hell for ever.

There is of course no such being as Yahweh in Islam. Yahweh is the Jewish tribal, then national, god. The word is a name, whereas Allah, as also Elohim, is a title. The father of both Arabs and Jews is Abraham, through his sons Ishmael and Isaac. In the Bible it is Yahweh who calls Abraham (Gen. 12, 1) but Elohim who saves Ishmael in the desert (Gen. 21, 14-20).

By the time of Moses the Jews, or Hebrews as then known, were living in Egypt, and their numbers and power alarmed the Pharaoh, who enslaved them and tried without success to murder all the male children. Having killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew, Moses fled into the land of Midian, where he again stood up for people who were on the receiving end, this time the daughters of a priest whom some shepherds had driven from a well. Presently he married one of these girls and became a shepherd himself, and it was while was tending sheep on Mount Horeb that Yahweh spoke to him out of a burning bush, telling him to return to Egypt and lead the Hebrews to the Promised Land. To show his power, Yahweh turned Moses' staff into a serpent.

In the course of time this tribal god assumed ever greater stature in the minds of the Hebrews until at least some measure of creatorship had to be attributed to him, and he became the Yahweh Elohim of Genesis 2 and 3, not quite of a stature to call light and the firmament into existence by word only, but able to form a man and a woman and the animals and trees and the rivers flowing out of Eden.

Buddhist theology is very different. It has not found any necessity to conceive of a Creator God. In its early days it was able to live with the old Indian cosmological notion of contraction and expansion, and as it spread it

adapted to other cosmologies. It seems to me that Buddhism is unhappy with the idea of power, and most unhappy with that of supreme power. Too bad, it will be said, if there is a Supreme God; that is simply the greatest fact of life and folly to deny it. What a Buddhist would see here is a supreme *assertion* not necessarily borne out by the great facts of history or nature. For every philosopher or scientist who believes in the existence of God another can be found who does not see it as necessary. And surely the question has something to do with necessity, apart from desirability. Necessity suggests obligation and if it is not established then obligation is not incurred. In other words, I am not obliged to acknowledge the existence of a Creator if the works attributed to him by his devotees can be accounted for in another way. I am free to accept the world as I find it without reference to First Causes or Final Purposes. The presence of the world and my place in it – the place of man and other living beings – become the supreme facts; one can live a good and happy life with that focus.

The claim common to each of the theistic religions is that its particular Supreme God is the author of the universe, and this applies as much to Indian as to other systems. In Buddhist theology the gods are unenlightened beings, but inclined to believe the best of themselves; an attitude which allows a gleam of humor to play upon a normally unsmiling subject. One story in the Pali Canon tells of the coming of a Great God. His merit in a higher sphere being exhausted he finds himself in a lower. Presently he feels lonely and wishes for company. Coincidentally another being arrives. 'Good heavens', says the first arrival to himself, 'no sooner did I wish for company than it appeared. It must have been because of my wish. Surely I must have called this being into existence.' At the same time the other is thinking, 'This being was here before me. Is it not likely that it was he who caused me to be here? Better do what he probably expects and worship him.' Buddhism does not deny the existence of gods, whether monotheoi or polytheoi. It does, however, recognize their tendency to make the highest claims, and views it with a certain indulgence; it is what gods have always done, and provided they do not demand blood sacrifice it is usually possible to live with their vagaries. But behind the indulgence and the humor lies a very deep belief – that power, the boast of the gods, is not the most important thing.

Naming and Claiming

Is it possible to bring any of this to bear on the story of Adam and Eve? First, what are the essentials of the story? A god, Yahweh Elohim, is introduced, a free agent it would seem, with certain creative or, rather, formative powers. He exercises them to make man from the dust, and breathes life into him, and he becomes a living soul. His raison d'être is work – to till the ground – and so

Yahweh proceeds to plant a garden and puts him there. He is naked but this does not bother Yahweh. Neither does Yahweh demand worship. He does however demand obedience, which centres on the famous tree of knowledge. If Adam eats of it he will die that day. This in Buddhist terms is unsatisfactory; the solitary man is simply told not to eat and has no say in the matter, though it vitally concerns him. Shall the creature then argue with his Creator? If the creature has been endowed with a humanly valuable intelligence, he will have some glimmer of a critical faculty, and the right to use and express it if endowed with any dignity above the level of a slave. This is one of the great differences between the Abrahamic and the Indian religions. St Paul puts it most strikingly in his image of the potter and the clay, and it persists in the more abject declensions of the faith. Buddhism had from the start a strong egalitarian and mutualistic tendency, such that, were it to conceive of a Supreme Creator it would suppose a degree of genuine intercommunication between Him and the human beings He created. A man silent as an earthen pot will not do. Once created he has rights. They do not rest on power or indulged powerlessness but on the fact of existence; so an Adam whose story was written in Buddhist terms would not just be put in a garden and told to look after it and not touch a certain tree under pain of death. Having the power of speech, he would say something, if only 'What am I?'

But we are dealing not with a Buddhistic but a Biblical Adam, who accepts orders and gets on with his work. By way of compensation, he is permitted to name the animals; which brings him into the sphere of power, but not into that of morality. This will not happen until he eats the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The animals have been created to provide company for Adam, but fail to do so. Seeing this, Yahweh shapes a woman out of one of his ribs. Once again, Adam gives a name. By now, he knows himself as an *ish*, a man; and so the woman must be an *ishshah*, derived from man. So, doubly – by giving her a name and by the nature thereof – he lays claim to the woman, who of course has been made out of his body, anyway. She starts life with great disadvantages.

Then the serpent appears and the first conversation in the Bible takes place, initiated by the animal. He tells the woman that if they eat the forbidden fruit they will not die. If he means they will not die that day, as threatened by Yahweh, then he is telling the truth. There has been nothing in the story to suggest they will not die in the fullness of time; it is the tree of life and not obedience that confers immortality. The serpent seems to be saying not only 'Your eyes will be opened', but also 'Do not yield to threats'.

There follows the lovely verse describing the so-called Fall, but really describing a preliminary enlightenment. Before eating of the fruit, the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and pleasant to the eye and desirable for

the gaining of wisdom. In Buddhist terms it holds promise for body, feelings and mind, and rightly she eats; certainly a Buddhist cannot fault her for doing so, nor, as she does not die, for giving of the fruit to Adam who, surprisingly, in view of his docility before Yahweh, takes it and eats.

The First Adult

The Buddhist term '*adharma'* describes the condition of the man and woman before eating the fruit. It means living without a moral sense, without reference to good and evil, without any need to make moral choices. In the world of *adharma* what happens happens, what is is, what is done is done, and there's the end of it. But the woman is not satisfied. In fact, she is so dissatisfied that when she feels called to make a choice she is prepared to run the risk of death on the day to get beyond this premoral state. The duty of obedience has been imposed on her. And if she feels it is not absolutely binding she is hardly to be faulted on that account. She eats and does not die. Not in the obvious sense anyway. But something dies – the woman she was, what we might call her child-self. That is now dead and gone, and there is an adult in Eden.

This new woman wants to share her good fortune with Adam. He too eats, and his eyes are duly opened. Their first moment of shared new consciousness is awareness of their bodies as they see they are naked. Hitherto body and mind were not strictly differentiated. Now the body is perceived as an external object divided from the mind, though not in the way that other bodies are. They know these two bodies to be their own, external and differentiated but not separate from their sense of self.

They have left the sphere of *adharma* and entered that of self-consciousness and morality. They have withdrawn from being immersed in nature, represented by Adam's work in the garden, and begun something else with the sewing of leaves together to make clothes. This separates them from the naked animals and there will be no more conversations with the serpent or his less intellectual kin.

Before they have time to assimilate these changes, Yahweh is heard in the garden. They have a sure feeling he will not be best pleased, and hide themselves among the trees. When summoned, Adam says he was afraid because he was naked. The woman is not asked why she hid. We are not bound to believe she was afraid.

There follows the rather undignified passage from which no one but the serpent emerges with credit. Adam blames the woman, she the serpent, and Yahweh curses them all and the ground beneath them. To give point to this,

there would seem to be an immediate special creation of thorns and thistles, making Adam's future work even harder. Then we hear the name Eve – *Khawwah*, life – for the first time. It is unlikely that Adam is being ironical, although at this particular moment life can have held few charms for the man.

However, as Yahweh says, 'the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil'. He admits that the serpent was right. And indeed he was doubly right, as the man and woman have not died. But neither have they made themselves immortal by eating of the tree of life, and Yahweh drives them out before they take it into their heads to do so. The serpent had not told them. Perhaps he did not know how highly Yahweh valued immortality.

First Steps to Freedom

In this story, a Buddhist looks in vain for evidence of a fall. Certainly, there is disobedience, but the conditions were unilaterally imposed without consultation. Such an imposition by a stronger on a weaker party is not just, therefore not binding. In Buddhist terms, Adam is not only not bound by Yahweh's injunction but is justified in ignoring or disobeying it. All the more so Eve, who was not directly commanded by the god.

Young Catholics of my day were taught that when Jesus commended to his disciples that they become as little children he was speaking in praise of obedience. It was one of the supreme virtues in the eyes of the Church, exemplified in the tripartite monastic rule along with poverty and chastity; and in the Jesuit discipline, which reputedly says that a member of the Order should be as a corpse in the hands of the mortician. Such a high valuation of obedience is not surprising in the light of the traditional interpretation of God's first dealings with man and woman. The Fall occurred through disobedience. This was not, to be sure, one of the seven deadly sins. It seemed to be in a category all of its own, worse even than murder in the sight of God, who forgave Cain for slaying his brother, but not his parents for eating the forbidden fruit.

In a Buddhist view of the story, however, disobedience is the first step towards freedom. It is a step upward, not a slip or stumble, much less a fall. The path out of Eden is eastward, as the story tells, but on a rising slope. Eventually it will reach India, and its highest points are Bodhgaya and Isipatana, scene of the Buddha's first discourse. On the way there are dips and thickets and sometimes the path is almost lost; and afterwards the same, until we reach our own time, an age of improvement in many respects, but also the age of totalitarianism, genocide, and environmental ruin.

The Buddhist critique of progress has to be much the same as its critique of power, if only because progress is so often considered in terms of power and power so often justified by appeals to progress, and because both in their usual courses show the same deficiency in wisdom. One of their major common characteristics is the tendency, often exalted to the status of right, towards interference; whereas wisdom inclines to detachment. Another is restlessness, usually presented as meliorative activity; whereas stillness is the sign of wisdom. A third is intolerance, easily disguised as the duty to protect susceptible minds from harmful influences; whereas wisdom says 'Be brave in yourself'. And, of course, as the twentieth century above all others has shown, power and progress all too often mean destructiveness, rationalized in all sorts of ways; whereas wisdom conserves, largely by letting things be as they wish to be.

One of the most curious features of the Eden story is the lack of wisdom in Yahweh. He does not seem to realize that by forbidding the fruit of a certain tree he will make it all the more tempting. It would appear that although he has created man and woman he does not understand human nature. It is also curious that he thinks Adam will be satisfied with just animal companions, although this may be explained in another way: that as they are all 'living souls' made of the same substance there is no essential difference between them in his eyes.

From these folklorish beginnings, Yahweh goes on to be the god of the patriarchs and prophets, the protector of a chosen people and the giver of the Law. Believers call him the God of History, and distinguish him from the Godhead of Meister Eckehardt and the Hegelian Absolute and any other quasi-abstractions. He is a god with whom believers can have existential relations, and Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Unamuno are among those for whom he is the meaning of life: individual rather than institutional Christians. A god, then, with impressive credentials, and yet not one to whom a Buddhist can bend the knee, any more than to Elohim with his cosmic power and creative word.

The central theological question for Buddhists is not the existence of a Supreme Being but, if one exists, our relationship with, better, perhaps, our posture before this being. To reject the doctrine of the Fall is to say human nature has been essentially the same ever since it appeared in the world. The event in Eden may be seen as a step towards freedom, not a sin deserving punishment, and most certainly not a fault transmitted to the whole human race. Each person has to take some such step if he wishes to become free. Adam and Eve did it in relation to Yahweh, the Buddha in relation to family, wealth, and social position. This idea will be folly to some and scandal to others. The proper posture of man, they will say, is prostration before his Creator. But prostration means submission to overmastering power, and the inference that divine goodness is a form of mercy, and divine justice condescension from on high. It means security, of course, as the All-Highest will not be expected to strike his

devotees. The tragedy of freedom is that it cannot be secure. It always faces a double threat – of destruction by those who fear it, and betrayal by those who love it.

But to return finally to Adam and Eve as they leave their birthplace, where, so far as the text goes, there is not the slightest suggestion that they were ever happy. The expulsion is a favorite theme of western art, and they are always shown as being in a distressful state. One does not have to see them so at all, but instead as emerging from confinement and an unhealthy, because subject, relationship with Yahweh – a woman who has had a glimmering of the idea of development, and a man who has shared in it, for whatever reason. Perhaps as they walked away he turned and saw the angels and the whirling sword of fire, and said, 'It certainly looks as if they won't let us back in again.'

And she: 'What makes them think we would want to go back in?'

'It was our home.'

'The world is our home now.'

A Buddhist Creation Story

The Buddhist creation story is called the *Aggañña Sutta,* the Discourse on the Beginning of Things. It would seem at first sight to be very different from the biblical story, and indeed it is until man and woman appear. It does not show an *act* of creation but, in keeping with the Indian tradition, an evolution. The universe has contracted and most beings have been reborn in the sphere of radiance, one of the blessed states to which a good life can lead. Then the universe begins to expand amid water and darkness, and a substance appears on the water with the taste of honey and the color of ghee. This is the primordial earth.

One of the radiant beings, described as restless, curious and greedy, eats of this substance. Others follow. The substance permeates them and they are filled with craving. Both they and the primordial earth are changed. The earth hardens and the beings become denser of body and lose self-luminance which has characterized them hitherto. With its fading the heavenly bodies appear and measured time is marked by their movements.

The three great vices that Buddhism sees as characterizing human nature have already begun to show themselves. They are greed, hatred and delusion, with body, feelings and mind as their particular spheres of operation. The radiant beings have shown themselves greedy in their eating of the primordial earth. Now they show ill-will to some of their own kind who are the least comely. The result is that primordial honey-tasting earth disappears, to be replaced by a more ordinary soil, though one producing a sort of fungus with

the taste of honey. This compensates the beings, who have been bewailing the loss of the sweet earth. They eat of the fungus, grow solider still, and again make distinctions of beauty. Now the fungus disappears, to be replaced by a sort of creeper, also tasting of honey. They repeat the pattern of pride and ill-will, and once again the environment changes and the prehumans gather and lament, and are so deluded that they fail to see their own responsibility for the changes that have happened to them and to the world.

Now a recognizable plant appears – rice. It lacks the honey-taste of its predecessors, but is free of husk and grows anew overnight where it has been gathered. The beings become more recognizable too. Up to now, they have not been sexually differentiated, but as they eat the new plant, sexuality is developed in some of them and they see themselves as women and men. They engage in *methuna* (sexual relations), to the consternation of the neuters, who think they are mistreating each other and drive them away. The neuters get over the shock soon, however, and let the men and women back among them, to build houses where they can enjoy the pleasures of *methuna* in privacy.

This is the first part of the *Agañña Sutta*; the second deals with the foundation of ordered society, and need not be discussed here. A number of dissimilarities from the biblical creation stories are noticeable. First, as already said, the cosmology is evolutionary not ordained by divine fiat. It is impersonal in that there is no one named. The purpose of the story is to show how social divisions came to be, and to deflate the pride of the priestly caste, which is depicted as fraudulent and parasitical – not the crowning glory of the social system which it made itself out to be. The successive phases in the evolution show the vices of greed, hatred, and delusion in operation, until at length a mixed population of neuters and sexually differentiated beings appears. Among the latter, it is notable that women are mentioned before men, but neither sex is said to be dominant or subordinate. A note of paradox runs through the story, for although it is the practice of the vices that brings the radiant beings down from their lofty sphere, the human state at which they arrive is, in the Buddhist view, the most fortunate of all for the attainment of nirvana.

My understanding of the *Aggañña Sutta* is that the beings described are not fully humanized until sexuality manifests itself. The Eden story may perhaps be understood in this way too. It is not said that the man and woman had physical relations – 'Adam knew Eve his wife'– until they left the garden, implying that their previous companionship had been asexual. It is as if sexual maturity were a prize they had won but could not claim until they emerged from the subjection which had been their lot. The nature of their companionship in Eden has been a contentious point in theology, but the first child is certainly said to have been conceived outside the garden. Eve says she has got him with Yahweh's help. There is no suggestion of guilt being transmitted.

This child, Cain, will follow in his father's footsteps and be a tiller of the soil. He will offer its fruits to Yahweh; but the god who dressed Cain's parents in animal skins in preference to figleaves will favor the animal sacrifices of the second son, Abel. Cain will kill Abel, and Eve will bear a third son whom she will call Seth, and in the fullness of time, through Noah, Abraham and David, his lineage will produce a Jewish man named Joseph, who will be the father or foster-father of Jesus, whom a small number of his contemporaries will call the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah.