The Tragic Schism: Can it be Healed?

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CHRISTIANITY gathers round one central *fact* of history—the deed of Divine Forgiveness. The meaning of this fact spreads out until it is lost to human view in the far distances of eternity. The recognition of this has often led sincere souls,—it led Coleridge—to say that it must simply be accepted. It is a mystery; but *factum est*, and that ought to content us.

Yet the soul accepting is surely the soul in some measure understanding. There is a difference between the mystery which is an impenetrable horror of great darkness, and the mystery that is a vast luminous orb which you one day find yourself at the centre of—an orb of light shot through and through on every hand with rainbow harmonies. Christianity's central fact is in reality the most familiar and the most moving of human experiences—transfigured in the light of heaven. It is a mystery simply because its meaning cannot be exhausted by human description. It is exhaustless as the mind and heart of God. It is the mind and heart of God.

No man can stand to view the wide horizons of the Divine Heart without being conscious that his feet are on holy ground. Yet God does not bid us veil our eyes. It is no part of a genuine piety to do so. And, though we cannot hope '*in hoc vastum pelagus divinitatis navigare*,' we can learn something of the wonder of the ocean where the sun glints on the limpid green depths of the waves by the shore—perhaps even in the whisper of the shell.

I.

The deepest yearning of the human soul arises from *the sense of the absence of God*. The quest of Religion is to reach communion with God. When we take a bird's-eye view of the long panorama of evolution, we see nature operating through her patient laws to 'break, bloom, and blossom' at last into individuality. The true reading of the world reveals it as wholly given over to individuality. And this last result of the evolutionary process betrays its final source. The effect cannot be greater than its source. Its origin is the heart of an infinite spiritual Life. If the End of Creation is a society of individuals, then—speaking in the language of religion—the ground of

Creation must have been the loneliness of God. This was the Divine Purpose—to produce a race of self-conscious beings—a kingdom of souls who should, by a life of moral effort and aspiration here, become fit for perfect communion with God. The screen of Nature and her slow-moving laws was His method of separating off such centres of personal life from the infinite Life. 'So exquisite is the delicacy of His non-obtrusion, so subtly sensitive is the Glory that conceals itself that He withdraws behind the veil of Nature and the operations of the mind and the ordinary movements of life, to give us the power of standing at a certain distance from Him, that we may contemplate and converse with Him, or, if we will, misdeem and forsake Him for a season.' The gift of spiritual freedom, moral consciousness, is God's way of entrusting to us a share in the fashioning of ourselves—for Him. Here, in man, the Divine Spirit immanent in Creation is reaching back to complete the circle of the creative process in personal fellowship with the personal God.

But if God is a personal and transcendent Being, then the yearning of the heart of man—which is part of the immanent Divine Spirit, groaning in Creation to reach back to the heart of God—is not the only spiritual activity at work to complete the circle of creative purpose. The heart of God is also engaged in a search, by personal ways, to reach us from above—in grace.

Once, in time, the circle was completed, when the Nazareth Boy, in the hour of moral maturity, surrendered Himself in perfect trust to this seeking Grace Divine, without any intervening period of failure, or sense of estrangement, or moral wretchedness; when 'the Son' whispered with unclouded consciousness into the listening silence of Eternity the mystic name, 'My Father.'

If there is any other sinless soul among mankind, let him make the same claim. For the mass of mankind moral consciousness begins with a feeling of disharmony, of inner estrangement, a sense of the absence of God. There may be many degrees of need for forgiveness among men, but the gracious forth-flowing impulse of the Heart of God, seeking from above for men, is received by all but the sinless in an experience of forgiveness.

Where shall we look for the Hand of God thrust through the Unseen in reconciling love, if not in Him in whom the circle of Creation was perfectly completed: in Him of whom alone the Spirit could say, 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased'?

II.

It is with this 'tragic schism' we are here concerned—this misunderstanding and estrangement between the soul of man and God; this 'sense of the absence of God' as we have described it, so as to include all phases of the guilt-consciousness. And the problem—for God and for men—is how to turn the estrangement into friendship. What is it that takes place in that profound and moving moral experience, with which, in a broken and imperfect way, human nature is so pathetically familiar?

Must man do anything himself to bring the misunderstanding to an end? Can he make any reparation for the offence that lies at the root of the estrangement? Can the offender be the healer? Would anything that he could do to end the breach satisfy himself in the first place; but, above all, would it satisfy God?

Let us imagine a case of broken confidence between two human friends. You are the offender, let us say, and a very dear and valued friend the offended one. You know you are the offender. You feel you ought to take the initiative. Your conscience is reproaching you. What sort of reconciliation will satisfy that conscience of yours? You set about trying to undo the wrong. Suppose you succeeded perfectly. (Or—no! that is impossible. You may make good material loss or injury. But you can never wholly undo a wrong; indeed, in a sense you can never undo the smallest jot or tittle of a wrong—for the real wrong is a spiritual thing. Between you and the old glad past of perfect confidence a blinding rain, a mist of suspicion and distrust has fallen, and things can never, with that memory behind, be quite the same again). But suppose you had succeeded in paying back in full, so far as outward action can pay back, for all the damage done. And then, in the next place,—for the real injury is the wound to friendship,—suppose you came to your friend, and tried to undo that by confessing in sorrow, bitter and sincere, that you were wrong. Penitence has done its utmost. Is the wound healed, the reconciliation completed? . . . What of your friend?

Suppose your friend had just accepted your action, passively, silently, as a matter of course. Would you be quite content to call that a reconciliation? Would you not rather be inclined to come home and, shutting yourself in your room, say to yourself, in a flood of bitter weeping, 'For all that *I* have done we are as far apart as ever'?

There is a paradox here, but it is a real fact of experience and we must acknowledge it. The paradox is, that though you, the offender, feel that the reparation is yours to make good, yet the making good by outward deed and inward penitence—if that were all—would never satisfy you that a reconciliation had been brought about. It takes two to effect a reconciliation. *The offended one, also, must pass through an experience that is the complement and counterpart of all the bitter sorrow that you, the offender, have undergone in your effort after restoration.*

What, then, is it that must happen in the offended one's heart? Suppose we represent the offended one as breaking through the silence of the first encounter and offering you a bare acknowledgment of your efforts. Would you be satisfied? Your friend has held out his hand to you, but quite coldly, and in a voice of stony indifference said, 'Well, well; let by-gones be by-gones. I forgive you.' Would you be quite happy again? Would you not go home almost more miserable than before? The touch of that cold hand only repelled you, and you shrank within yourself. There was *no* reconciliation worthy the name.

There is a striking illustration in Mrs. Humphry Ward's *The Marriage of William Ashe*. It is the story of a rising young politician who is almost certain of the Premiership some day. He marries a young, winsome, but wayward wife—dashing, volatile, restless, unconventional, with a strain of French blood in her veins. She does things so shockingly outrageous to the society in which she is obliged to move because of her husband's position, that she well-nigh ruins his career. But again and again there is a reconciliation, and a fresh start made. She was never truly repentant; and at last she commits the grave sin of deserting him for another. Her fit of wayward caprice is soon over, and she repents, at length, in all the terrible bitterness of that word. Alas! that is, when all is said, the best, the only, undoing of a wrong that mortal man can make; and what a tragic penalty a real repentance is! She sends

and tells her husband; there is a sincere and childlike candour about her confession. From the wilderness of this heart in extreme bitterness the great call comes to the man—to forgive. What will the cost of a true forgiveness be for him? Will a mere word do? If he would take his wife to his heart again, he must surrender all—honour, and the fame of public service, the loftiest post in the land, the infinite riches of his life—for love. Society will certainly cast him off, if he stoops to associate himself with her once more. . . . He writes to her. He *says* he forgives her; he will make provision for her. But she is surely too sensible to think he can ever make her again what she once was to him. That is the burden of his letter, and it simply makes the poor broken heart bleed afresh. Womanly intuition—nay, the human heart in her—tells her there is no reconciliation, no real forgiveness there; and she will not come home, though there is nothing but death before her. The rich young ruler of this modern story realized that the call to forgive meant, ‘Sell all that thou hast’—all thy dear-won social and political position. And the cost was too much for him. He went away sorrowful.

It is easy to say, ‘I forgive’—and often very cheap. But if there is to be a genuine reconciliation, it is not merely the sinner, the offender, that has (in Bushnell’s phrase) ‘to make cost.’ Repentance there must be, of course; but the only forgiveness that will satisfy the sinner is the forgiveness that comes through fire and water, out of the very depths of the heart of the wronged one, charged with all the tragedy of the wrong. Only forgiveness laden with the agony of the offence can be experienced by the wrong-doer as real forgiveness—can bring perfect assurance of restoration to the guilty soul.

III.

Is it then humanly possible to heal the misunderstanding between man and God? What is the extent of our offence against God? We have to remember here that the depth of our offence, our guilt, is measured not by what we think of it, but by what God thinks of it. Sin has sometimes been defined as selfishness. The definition is not without its usefulness, but it is only a weighing of sin in a human balance, not in God’s balance. We do not see all our sinfulness by simply taking into account our relations with our fellow-men: we

must try to see ourselves in the light of the purity of the Holy God with whom we have to do. Even of our most secret and private sins the question is, ‘What has God to say?’

The moral and spiritual world has a law of gravitation of its own. Every particle of matter in the universe exerts an influence on every other to the remotest star in the furthest bounds of space. Not a stone falls but *some* change, however infinitesimally small, takes place in the arrangement of the forces of the Universe. It is the same in conduct. ‘The evil that I did,’ says Dr. Horton, ‘passed out into the Universe with an influence the extent of which I can never measure, and the force of which I can never arrest. Just as pulsing out from our Sun goes the light which is reaching the nearest fixed star in the Centaur after three and a half years’ travelling, and then will go on and on reaching different systems years and centuries after, so the sin I committed was as a little ray of lurid light: it passed out into an infinite Universe, travelled, and is travelling, on and on and on. I can never arrest it and I can never undo it. It is done, and it is attached to me, the doer, forever.’

The same writer instances the undertone of melancholy which ran through the preaching of John Donne, the eloquent Elizabethan divine—melancholy which betrayed the conviction that the licentious poems of his early unconverted days would live to corrupt and taint young lives centuries after his eloquent tongue was silent. He had had a glimpse of what his sin meant in the eyes of God.

Action is transitory—a step, a blow,
A movement of a muscle this way or that;
’Tis done, and in the after vacancy
We wonder at ourselves as men betrayed.

Man’s life is woven into the warp and woof of existence. Not a step can he take but it is caught up by this web of life, and ‘is bent into directions and produces events which take place inevitably and without regard to our desires or regrets.’¹ Our smallest act lets loose some moral impulse for good or evil which vibrates to the end of the Universe. Our tiniest act of sin creates a discord which goes shuddering through all the soul of God. For the laws by which the Universe is upheld have their source and life in the character of God. The moral basis and the cosmic conditions of Divine

¹ A. C. Bradley, in *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

forgiveness are one and the same. In the eyes of All-holy Omniscience individual guilt must be swathed in cosmic gloom.

Taking our stand upon the Pantheism of Paul, let us try to express this in a picture which, however crudely materialistic in itself, may yet be a shadow of the truth. 'God,' says Paul, 'is in all, and through all, and over all'; 'of him, and through him, and to him are all things'; 'of him are all things, and we in him'; 'in him we live, and move, and have our being.' Creation, in Goethe's phrase, is 'the living garment of Deity.' 'God is in the city'—that is a familiar mode of speech with us: it is still truer and more heart-searching to say, 'The city is in God.' We often speak of the Spirit of God moving through the valleys and plains with their burthen of teeming human life: it is still truer to say that the communities of the valleys are like nerve-tracks lying along the breast of God. A sordid sin takes place in some populous valley. The news sweeps from end to end in a little hustling, hurrying breeze of gossip, moving the cynical to laughter, the vulgar to filthy talk, the decent to a shrinking shame, and those whom it most nearly concerns to a bitterness as of death itself. The moral tone of the valley is lowered, its life depressed, by it. Some soul, a life-cell in that nerve-track has gone wrong, and created a discord which jars through the entire length of it: an exquisite agony of quivering pain, which registers itself in the soul of God! The moral filth and slime of cities—fester-spots; the red wound of war across a continent—causing a deep, shuddering horror, or reflected as a great redness of shame, in the holy heart and soul of God! God is a great throbbing, sensitive, tender Heart of Love in which the failure, sin, and shame of man *lives*—beats—burns. The eyes of guilt look up and call it 'Wrath.'

I heard a voice upon the slope
Cry to the summit, 'Is there any hope?'
To which an answer pealed from that high land,
But in a tongue no man could understand.
And on the glimmering limit far withdrawn
God made Himself an awful rose of dawn.

IV.

Does it not seem, then, that this misunderstanding between man and his Maker is too great to be

healed? If in a case of separation between human friends it is impossible for the wrong-doer to pay down in full for all the damage done, and completely undo the wrong, how much less possible is it for the wrong-doer to do anything to restore the broken relation, when the case is between man and God? Our sins are discords which go jangling through all the ordered harmony of the world, and are therefore injuries to God. As Anselm puts it, the smallest sin is an insult to the Supreme Being. It is therefore an infinite insult; therefore something not to be committed to save worlds from perdition. Though we possessed a world—nay, many worlds,—and offered them all to God in atonement for sin, they would be insufficient. Further, just because we have sinned, and thus blunted the conscience, because we are finite and ignorant, we cannot realise the extent and depth of our sin, and therefore cannot feel a penitent sorrow for our offence that could be anything like the measure of the wound it has caused to God's holy love. Only an Infinite Being, One greater than all worlds, can repair an infinite insult. Only the infinitely holy heart of an All-seeing God can feel the full pain and horror of man's sin against Him. We *ought* to make reparation, but only God *can*. That is the tragedy of sin. Is it, then, possible to repair the breach? It is not possible—unless God does it.

Has God done it? Can we be certain that God has reckoned and paid down all the infinite cost which the forgiving heart of the wronged one alone can and must pay, if there is to be a perfect reconciliation? Can we be assured that God's forgiveness has come to us, out of a heart that has laboured with an agony deeper than all the infamy of human sin? To that question we must next address ourselves. The answer can be stated here in a single word—*Christ*. That Life of tragic sorrow was the cost of forgiveness to God. The Cross was God's heart broken at length in His effort to give Himself again to the being who had caused the terrible estrangement. The more we gaze on that Crucified One, the more certain do we grow that it is not in hell that all the agony of all the world is felt. It is in the heart of God. It is only there. And 'there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.'