

SALVATION: CONFIDENCE OR ANXIETY

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SALVATION MAY BE considered in two ways. There is the fulness we are saved to and the wretchedness we are saved from. In the order of experience, the first is the basis of peace and confidence, the second (since for the moment we have salvation only in hope) is the basis of christian fear.

Only a selective reading of the New Testament could lead to the conclusion that fear has no place in the new order. Certainly, fear is in the background, for the overriding burden of Christ's message is peace. Any understanding of christian fear that would undermine the peaceful confidence of the Father's adopted children, snatched from darkness and admitted to the kingdom of light, must therefore be excluded from the outset. But when this is said, other considerations remain. We are not confirmed in goodness or exempt from the law of the flesh. Relapse remains an ever-present possibility. Perfect love casts out fear, but we cannot be sure that we love that much.¹ What we are being saved from is still with us.

A facile but once common approach was accustomed to distinguish between an Old Testament God who ruled by fear and the God of love revealed in the gospels. The reality is less simple. For paradoxically, Christ, while he enables us to overcome fear, also places fear on a more solid basis. He brings a new and urgent insistence that the consequences of sin belong not merely to the order of temporal misfortune but to the order of eternal happiness or loss. He reveals the full moral import of the private world of thought and so makes judgment more redoubtable. It is true that there is a fear which enters the lives of Christ's followers only to be banished; Christ's answer to man's fear is constant: 'peace' and 'fear not'. But it is only the hard of heart who do not fear God at all.²

Christian experience, then, is a tension between fear and confidence. The knowledge of Christ, says Pascal, is a middle state where we find both God and our wretchedness; and thus we avoid

¹ 1 Jn 4, 18.

² Cf Lk 18, 2-6.

the optimism that leads to pride and the unrelieved sense of our nothingness that would induce despair.³ The middle ground is not, of course, a fixed point. In our religion, as in other realms, we are creatures of mood; experience oscillates between the more and less fearful and the more and less confident. Fear has its privileged moments. Certain reflections bring fear in their train: the thought of death, the memory of past sin, the realization that we shall go to God largely empty-handed. In the course of the liturgical cycle or during a retreat, there are days when fear breaks the surface of conscience, while at other times it remains an undertow. But fear is never an uncontrolled explosion. The tension is always unequal, and if the lesser force never quite leaves go of us, in the end it is always confidence which wins.

It is a matter of common experience that there is a confidence that would not deserve the name were it not linked with fear, a fear sometimes acute, for the most part muted, but never completely absent. It is only in the setting of risk that confidence assumes definite shape in our experience. For the climber, for instance, confidence is an exhilarating reality, not just because his skill and equipment are reliable, but because on a rock face the difference between living and dying resolves itself into a few yards of nylon rope. This is why confidence is a positive and vital experience for the climber, while for the sunbather, who is in no sense risking his neck, it is not. We can pursue this analogy a step further. For a man on a rock face, survival depends largely on his ability to ward off the two extremes of over-confidence and panic, to hold the middle state between presumption and despair. Fear is his protection against the false step, but only if fear is held in check. Panic does not enhance confidence but destroys it. It is one of the oldest truths, yet one which needs to be insisted on, that both over-confidence and panic have their counterparts in religious experience. The counterpart of confidence is pride, the wrong sort of ambition, the conviction that we can achieve salvation by our own power. The counterpart of panic is scrupulosity, 'servile fear', anxiety.

False confidence and anxiety

The frequency with which the problem of scrupulosity is dealt with by spiritual writers would suggest that anxiety is an occupational hazard for the religious man. Lives made wretched by guilt

³ *Pensées*; tr. Martin Turnell (London, 1962).

and near-despair are a standing challenge to the easy assumption that religion invariably leads to greater happiness. Annihilation is presumably a more tolerable expectation than the everlasting bonfire; and, confronted with religious fear at its cringing worst, the unbeliever is understandably led to prefer his own brand of insecurity. It is true, of course, that the bonfire burns less fiercely in the popular religious imagination than it used to. But it would be false to every confessor's experience to claim that morbid fear belongs to the past. Confusion between sin committed and temptation largely resisted can still be a source of frightful anxiety to conscientious catholics. There are still people who think of God as a magistrate more interested in passing sentence than in hearing about extenuating circumstances. There are still people who have failed to grasp that God understands even better than we do the ills that both flesh and psyche are heir to. There are still depressives whose black moods thrive on their religious notions, like a student under psychiatric care who once came my way: when depressed, he was haunted by the detailed memory of a lesson on hell inflicted on him at the age of ten.

It is necessary to insist on this, because the answer to over-confidence does not lie in a return to anxiety. To recover the right balance is a more subtle matter than bringing back the indiscriminate labouring of eternal punishment. If ever it happened in the past that teachers or missionaries sought unconscious satisfaction in frightening people, those days must not return. Nevertheless, there are grounds for the concern voiced from time to time in 'conservative' circles, that we have banished healthy fear along with morbid anxiety, and that too many of us are getting an *ersatz* confidence on the cheap.

False confidence takes many forms. It is fostered by unreflective false attitudes towards God, the tacit assumption that his *raison d'être* is to give us the maximum of security on the easiest possible terms. It does not require much cynicism to detect the traces of this particular god in history in the shape of tyranny, greed, cruelty and sexual license – all of it quite often bolstered up by religious conviction. People find confidence in God because his will, on their reading of it, coincides with the objectives they approve and work for in the way of maintaining class or racial barriers. There is the confidence of those whose God is not so much merciful as completely tolerant – the easy-going, accommodating 'good Lord', never averse to turning the blind eye or to stretching

a point. In short, behind much that passes for christian confidence, there is the god whose twofold function was discerned with a high degree of accuracy by Freud: to explain the riddle of the world and to assure us that we are watched over by a solicitous providence. What such a god does not do is to disturb us.

A more subtle variant of the God who does not disturb is the God who only disturbs other people. This trick is not of course a new one. It is at least as ancient as the scribes and pharisees. In the recent past it was the main means by which respectable christians could believe that God, while setting his face uncompromisingly against drunkenness, prostitution and petty theft, took a more benevolent view of the discreet and sophisticated sins of middle-class people. Today the trick has been brought into the open. 'God disturbs' has been stepped up from being an assumption to being a slogan. The ways in which it is applied (mainly, now, at the expense of the respectable rather than on their behalf) are not the point here. The principle itself is sound, together with much that is urged in its name. But what must be kept in mind is that it is extremely difficult to maintain the right balance between confidence and fear if we see ourselves primarily as agents of the disturbing God and only secondarily, if at all, as liable to find our own ways, too, called in question by God.

A third cause of over-confidence may be traced to a particular characteristic of contemporary culture, the spirit of pragmatism. The main features of the pragmatic man have been sketched out by Harvey Cox in the *Secular City*.⁴ He is the man to whom nothing is more alien than existential *angst*. Ultimate questions, whether about death, guilt or the final meaning of things, are questions that it does not occur to him to ask. He is the man who brackets off the problems he cannot cope with and gives his attention solely to the ones he can. Now pragmatism, according to Harvey Cox, is a style. A style never completely contains the man. The contented pragmatists whose eating and drinking and leisure activity figure so prominently in the cheerful utopia of the 'ad man' do not exist in the order of reality, where the 'ad man's' paradise never quite falls within our reach. Yet for all this, we cannot deny the profound influence even on religious people of the pragmatic model. To some extent our style forms us, and alongside the more traditional christian with his liability to characteristically religious anxieties, the

⁴ Cox, Harvey: *The Secular City* (London, 1966).

community of believers contains many who cultivate the pragmatic style. And for them, it is probably true to say that outside occasional moments of crisis, the fear of God and the sense of sin come less readily than to those who breathe a slightly more rarefied religious atmosphere. Since the pragmatist is inclined to regard guilt feelings as a form of sickness, systematically to arouse them strikes him as a morbid proceeding. As the thought of death is pushed into the background, so is the idea of judgment. The pragmatist's diminished sense of the sacred, if it has freed him from superstition, has blunted his sensitivity to the awesomeness of God. It is not difficult to argue on the level of theory that the many valid insights of the modern pragmatic man do not obstruct but rather clear the way to a properly religious understanding of sin, which has nothing to do with morbid guilt feelings. But in practice the difficulty remains.

The solution: humility

Christian confidence, then, stands in need of fear if it is not to degenerate into something less than itself; but the fear must remain healthy and subsidiary and never pass into anxiety. Here, it may seem, are the elements of a problem to be solved by finding the right sort of considerations. This is partly true. Often those who find no solution are hampered by one aspect or another of a stultified theology. At the root of much anxiety there lies nothing more mysterious than a set of ideas about grave sin which no moralist ever held. The first corrective needing to be applied to false confidence may well be a less selective presentation of the sterner details of the good news. As Fr Piet Franzen writes:

Certain psychologists are wrong in thinking that the wise preaching of the great truths of our faith would normally engender complexes . . . it is high time that a more virile tone were bestowed upon our education and the training of christians, religious and young priests: that we should free ourselves from religious sentimentality, and especially from that idiotic phobia of complexes which is by far the greatest phobia of our time.⁵

But thinking the thing out is not enough. To start with it does not always pay off. Guilt has its own strange alchemy; the most encouraging and theologically sound reflections of a confessor or spiritual writer can be twisted and corrupted into further material

⁵ Franzen, Piet, S.J.: *Intelligent Theology* (London, 1969), Vol 3, p 31.

for anxiety. On the other hand, the assurance of over-confident people can prove equally resistant to abstract considerations. Their attempts to awaken the sense of having sinned against God run up against alternative and non-religious answers to the problem of guilt. Too much is too easily explained away. But if we try to arrive at basic christian attitudes simply by pushing our thoughts along certain lines, or by working up certain feelings, we fall into an error which is more serious than poor psychological tactics. What we are really trying to do is to extort from God by main force what the world (and that includes us) cannot give.

Religion is not first and foremost a matter of having the right ideas, still less is it the art of blending emotions. It is the unfolding of a relationship of faith, and faith is openness to the transcendent God. The basic paradox of faith is that to be fully oneself, life must turn about a centre beyond self. This is why knowing Christ (which means being a christian and possessing the attitudes and the characteristic mental ethos of the christian) is above all a matter of reaching out to him in the different areas of christian living, and notably in the seeming loneliness of prayer and the reference of one's life to other people. It is a fact borne out by experience that both the over-confident and the anxious tend to be self-centred; and it is of the essence of faith, hope and charity to face outwards.

It would be unhelpful to explain to deeply religious people that they are deficient in faith, hope and charity. They know this already. Can we be more specific? Perhaps the deficiency can be best identified in terms of humility. Humility does not blind us either to the good or the bad in ourselves. It accepts both and enables us to cope with all the real problems that our complicated selves present to us. But with this, it also eliminates the false problems, the ones which arise from the failure to see ourselves as we really are, that is, as related to others and to the supreme other, God. It is the humility inherent in faith, hope and charity that saves them from being drawn into the vortex of our self-centredness and destroyed. So the humble man is not tempted to make his faith a possession, to be more interested in feeling safe than to go on trusting in God. It is humility that enables love to be the genuine reference to the other precisely as other, and hope the constant awareness that we are not yet what we are called to become.

In the problem of confidence and anxiety the point at issue is not the static condition suggested by such terms as 'disposition' or 'state of soul', but the working out of a relationship whose object is

God and other people. This is why we can only hope to resolve it within the wider context of humility. Let us take anxiety first.

It is characteristic of the genuinely humble man that he does not think himself the centre of the universe even when suffering makes the very attempt at self-forgetfulness an ordeal. And it is part of the tragedy of many people afflicted with religious anxiety that they fall down on this very point. Relationships seem irrelevant to their absorbing pre-occupation. Yet their problem is to find God's love and forgiveness; and these are things that we come to understand only in experience. Often, it is precisely in the giving of love and forgiveness that we discover – what no amount of introspection could have revealed to us – that we, too, are loved and forgiven.

But humility may need to go further still. It may require the direct surrender to God even when every nerve recoils from the exposure. Probably the most promising place to look for illustrations of this humility is the seventeenth century, when the personal implications of predestination haunted the religious psychology of the age as the implications of pragmatism or the God-problem haunt ours. An outstanding instance occurs in the life of the jesuit writer, Jean Joseph Surin. For several years, and under the influence of what was certainly a cerebral illness, he had struggled with the conviction, made more compelling by atrocious hallucinations, that he was damned. The final release came about partly, no doubt, through physical recovery. But that there was more to it than this is apparent from the following passage from his journal:

There came into my mind words: 'You are damned'. Their tone was such that my spirit was crushed. Yet on the verge of immense anguish, I felt a movement of heart which prompted me to resign myself to this, if such were the will of God, and I prayed: 'it is my will if God so wishes'. I cast myself face down on my bed in total submission and abandonment to the divine will The result was such a peace that despair has never been able to take possession of my interior life; and that was the last blow that the enemy struck against me.⁶

Some years earlier the young Francis de Sales had found release from a comparable though less protracted ordeal in a similar surrender. 'If I cannot love you in the other world, since no one confesses to

⁶ Cf *Lettres spirituelles du P. J.-J. Surin*, ed. L. Michel and F. Cavallera (Toulouse, 1928): my translation.

you in hell, at least let me profit from every moment of my short life to love you here on earth'.⁷

From the standpoint of the twentieth century it may seem bizarre to find theologians framing such prayers. Their words, of course, are as extravagant as the fears which prompted them. But both the fears and the means of release contain a lesson that remains relevant. The fears, though not in their terrible starkness, are fears which beset christians today and may well beset christians at any time. And their response, though its scale is exceptional, testifies to a basic principle. The hardest thing for the fearful to do is to surrender to God when the very thought of God has become a source not of security but of fear and disturbance. In such a situation, one thing is clear: that we can no longer have God on our own terms. When we surrender in spite of this – whatever form our surrender may take – the freudian God in us dies. True peace and confidence come to us in that death.

What of the opposite problem, when the starting point is not morbid anxiety but the inability to be fearful at all? Here, too, the answer must be humility, the humble reaching out from self to other people and to God. In the attempt to love and forgive, to meet, that is, demands which have no upper limit, we discover the extent of our own weakness. In our inability to relate to the useless, the hostile or the uninteresting in a way that even approximates to the demands of the gospel, we become aware of the lasting diminution worked in us by our sin. Furthermore, the truly humble man, open to God and to others, is exposed to more than his own sin; he also learns piecemeal, and in the course of experience, the meaning of holiness. For meeting Christ in others is to perceive their goodness and to be affected by it.

God's answer, then, the promise of salvation, does not come to us only when we have successfully formulated the question by our own effort. The wretchedness he is saved from (and hence the grounds of christian fear) is revealed to the humble along with the answer (which is the basis of his confidence). Really to know Christ, whether in prayer or in demanding situations, is to submit to judgment as well as to mercy. His presence reveals us to ourselves. To surrender is to have our eyes opened; only those who avoid surrender remain locked in the blindness of an imagined justice.⁸

⁷ Hamon, M.: *Vie de Saint François de Sales* (Paris, 1890).

⁸ Cf Jn 9, 41.

To put it another way, the experience of fear and trust co-exists in a productive tension only in humble lives referred to God, in whom justice and mercy are reconciled. Both the tension and the ultimate unifying reference are brought out in the prayer of an anonymous monk of the eastern church:

Jesus, you are present when I sin, and you remain in me silent. Your very presence condemns what I do. Yet at the same time you know and you understand my sin more profoundly than I understand myself. You do not judge me from a distance. You identify yourself with the sinner before you, and yet, at this moment, you contradict what I am. But your presence envelops me in boundless mercy You have no need of formal sentence. Your presence alone, Lord, is the judgment which condemns me, but your presence also is grace. There could be no word of grace if there was no word of judgment.⁹

This bears the clear impress of experience. Ultimately, only such experience can prove that behind the language of paradox which alone permits us to talk at all about christian confidence and fear, there is a livable tension and not incompatibility. That such experience requires a certain understanding on the level of basic theology is unquestionable. Equally clearly, it requires much more: a spirit humble enough to be both judged and forgiven in self-surrender to the living God.

⁹ *The Unity Book of Prayers* (London, 1969), p 53.