

# The Impossible Convergence

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ACCORDING to the unanimous conviction of the old Christendom and of all the other traditional branches of humanity, the cause of suffering in the world is the internal disharmony of man—sin, if so preferred—and not just a lack of science or organization. No progress or any tyranny will ever make an end of suffering; only the sanctification of all men could bring this about, were it in fact possible to realize that state of things and thus to transform the world into a community of contemplatives and into a new earthly paradise. This certainly does not mean that man should not, in conformity with his nature and with simple good sense, attempt to overcome the evils he encounters in the course of his life; for this he requires no injunction whether divine or human. But to seek to establish a certain well-being in a country, with God in view, is one thing, and to seek to institute perfect happiness on earth apart from God is another; in any case the latter aim is foredoomed to failure, precisely because the lasting elimination of our miseries is dependent upon our conformity to the Divine Equilibrium, or upon our establishment in the "Kingdom of Heaven which is within you." As long as men have not realized a sanctifying "inwardness," the abolition of earthly trials is not only impossible, it is not even desirable, because the sinner—"exteriorized" man—has need of suffering in order to expiate his faults and tear himself away from sin or in order to escape from the "outwardness" from which sin derives.<sup>1</sup> From the spiritual point of view, which alone takes account of the true cause of our calamities, evil, by definition, is not what causes us to suffer, it is that which—even when accompanied by a maximum of comfort or of ease, or of "justice" so called—frustrates a maximum of souls as regards their final end.

The whole problem reduces itself to the following nucleus of questions: what is the good of eliminating only the effects, and not the cause, of evil? What is the good of eliminating these effects if the cause remains and continues to produce similar effects indefinitely? What is the good of eliminating the effects of evil to the detriment of the elimination of the cause itself? What is the good of eliminating the effects but at the same time exchanging the cause for another far more pernicious one, to wit, hatred of the supernatural and a passion for the worldly?

In a word: if one combats the calamities of this world without regard for the total truth and the ultimate good, one will be creating incomparably greater calamities, starting off, in fact, with the denial of this truth and the elimination of this good. Those who think they can liberate man from an age-old "frustration" are in fact the ones who impose on him the most radical and irreparable of all frustrations.

The *Civitas Dei* and worldly progression therefore cannot converge, contrary to what is imagined by those who strive to accommodate the religious message to profane illusions and agitations. "Whoso gathereth not with me, scattereth": this saying, like many others, seems to have become a dead letter, doubtless because it does not belong to "our own time"; nevertheless, as a recent encyclical tells us: "The Church must examine the

signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel"; yet meanwhile it is the exact opposite that is being done.

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"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all else shall be added unto you": this sentence is the very key to the problem of our earthly condition, as is also that other one telling us that "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you." Or further, to recall another teaching from the Gospel: evil will only be overcome by "fasting and prayer," that is to say, by detachment from the world, which is "outward" and by attachment to Heaven, which is "inward."

To the question: "What is sin?" it may be replied straight away that this term refers to two levels or dimensions: the first of these requires that one should "obey the commandments," and the second, in accordance with the words of Christ to the rich young man, that one should "follow Me," that is to say, that one should establish oneself in the "inward dimension" and so realize contemplative perfection; the example of Mary takes precedence over that of Martha. Now, suffering in the world is due, not only to sin in the elementary sense of the word, but also, and more especially, to the sin of "outwardness," which moreover fatally gives rise to all the others. A perfect world would be, not merely one where men abstained from sins of action and omission, as did the rich young man, but a world above all composed of men who live "towards the Inward" and are firmly established in the knowledge—and consequently in the love—of that Unseen which transcends and includes all things. Three degrees must here be observed: the first is abstention from sin-as-act, such as murder, theft, lying and the non-performance of sacred duties; the second is abstention from sin-as-vice, such as pride, passion, avarice; the third is abstention from sin-as-a-state, that is to say, from that "outwardness" which is both a dispersion and a hardening and which gives rise to all vices and all transgressions. The absence of this sin-as-a-state is nothing other than "love of God" or "inwardness," whatever be the spiritual mode thereof. Only this "inwardness" would be capable of regenerating the world, and that is why it has been said that the world would have come to an end long ago but for the presence of the saints, whether visible or hidden from view.

It is sin-as-vice and, with all the more reason, sin-as-a-state that constitute intrinsic sin; these two degrees come together in pride, a symbolic notion which includes everything that imprisons the soul in outwardness and keeps it away from the Divine Life. As regards the first degree—that of transgression—there is here no intrinsic sin except in function of the intention and therefore of a real opposition to a revealed Law. It may happen that a forbidden act becomes permissible in certain circumstances, for one is always allowed to lie to a brigand or to kill in legitimate defence; but apart from such circumstances an illegal act is always connected with intrinsic sin; it is assimilable to sin-as-vice and by that very fact to sin-as-a-state, the latter being none other than "hardness of heart" or the state of "paganism," to use scriptural language.

The impossible convergence is, in point of fact, the alliance between the principle of good and organized sin; that is to say the idea that the powers of this world, which are necessarily sinful powers, should organize sin with the aim of abolishing the effects of sin. It would appear that the new pastoral message is attempting precisely to speak the

language of the "world," which has now come to be treated as an honourable entity without there being the slightest discernible reason for this unexpected promotion. Now to wish to speak the language of the "world," or the language of "our time"—another definition which studiously avoids being one—amounts to making truth speak the language of error or virtue the language of vice. The whole problem of pastoral communication in search of "a language" reduces itself in practice to the following feat: how to speak Latin so that people may think that it is Hottentot, or in other words, so that they do not notice that it is Latin? Nothing is more dubious than the expression "to speak the language of someone or other" or else "to speak the language of one's own time." With the relativistic adulteration that this really implies one may indeed win adherents, but no one will be "converted"; there will be no conferring of illumination, no calling to the saving inwardness.<sup>2</sup>

To understand religion is to accept it without attempting to impose any off-hand conditions; imposing conditions clearly is to misunderstand it and to render it subjectively ineffective: an absence of haggling is part of the integrity of faith. To impose conditions—whether at the level of individual or social "well-being" or at the level of the liturgy which one would like to make as flat and trivial as possible—is to be in fundamental ignorance of what religion is, what God is and what man is. It amounts straight away to treating religion as a neutral and inoperative background such as it could never be and to taking away from it in advance all its rights and its whole reason for existing. Profane humanitarianism, with which official religion is trying more and more to identify itself, is incompatible with the total truth, and consequently also with true charity, for the simple reason that the material well-being of earthly man is not the whole of well-being and does not in fact coincide with the whole interest of the immortal human person.

"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God ..."

To recall this truth over and over again is the first duty of all men of religion; if there is one truth of which it could be said that it is particularly apt for "our time," it is this one beyond all others.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

*Meister Eckhart says, As a man gets to be like God and God gets dear enough for him to disregard himself and not seek what is his in time or in eternity, he is released from all his sins and purgatorial pains, yea though he have committed every sin on earth. And this life is attainable while yet he eats and drinks. Further he declares, To be the heavenly Father's Son we must be strangers to the world, remote from self, pure-hearted, inward minded.*

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<sup>1</sup> It is from this idea that is derived the obligation for man, in the majority of archaic tribes, to be a warrior, and thus to be continually risking his life on the battlefield; the same point of view crops up in the warrior castes of all the great peoples. Without the heroic virtues, so it is believed, man becomes decadent and the

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whole of society degenerates. The only man for whom escape from this vicissitude is possible is the saint, which amounts to saying that if all men were contemplatives the hard law of heroism would not be necessary. Only the hero and the saint reach *Valhalla*, Elysium, or the heaven of the *Kamis*.

<sup>2</sup> "But into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you not, go your ways out into the streets of the same and say, even the very dust of your city, which cleaveth on us, we do wipe off against you. Notwithstanding, be ye sure of this, that the Kingdom of God is come nigh unto you. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom than for that city." (Luke, X,10-12). This passage, like the one that forbids the "casting of pearls before swine," clearly shows that everything has its limits.