

The Manger, The Cross and The Resurrection

A Christian Interpretation of Our Time

PAUL RAMSEY

CHRISTIANITY is not a compound of all the sentimentalities. Nor is it simply a compound of all the sentiments, however fine they may be, which we annually experience in our celebration of the Nativity. "Christmas Christianity" is not enough! We must go on, if not to Easter, at least to Good Friday. Not the Manger, but the Cross is the symbol of the deepest meaning of the Christian faith.

In Christ, it has been said, are met in one man's ideal of what God ought to be, and God's ideal of what man ought to be. Christ is a revelation of the nature of God's love, and, at the same time, an ideal for human devotion and ethical endeavor. The Cross, moreover, is a disclosure of the fact that man who nailed Christ there is a sinner, and a revelation of the magnitude of human sin. At the Cross we know that man is a sinner, and that he is a great sinner. But we also receive through the Cross a profound insight into the *nature* of human sin when we hear Jesus saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23: 34)

This is what we need to have brought home to us, if we are to understand what is meant by saying that we, like all men, are sinners. It is altogether probable that the current increased use of the word "sin" has far outstripped the increased sense of sin which it is supposed to indicate. Even while saying that we know that sin is something deeper than merely "missing the mark," it may still appear that the chief business of our lives is to aim just a bit straighter, and that the principle result we expect from Christian exhortation is that people will tug just a little harder at their bootstraps in their struggle for perfection. Sin is exhausted of its meaning by the particular sins of which we are conscious, and from which one by one we may hope to turn away. We have not heard Jesus praying for us, "Father, do thou forgive them, not this time because they

seek forgiveness, but because they know not what they do."

Liberal Protestantism has been overly concerned to refute the very probable and somewhat trivial Socratic truth that all men, whatever they do, do it because they think it is good to do so. Our conception of sin has been that of known wrong consciously embraced, or known right deliberately violated. If sin be this, then, according to Socrates, no one ever sins; and we may use the word only by the empty logical device of referring to a "class without any members," as we may, if we wish, speak of those people at the north pole who are Hottentots. In either case, sinners or polar Hottentots, there are none present. Consequently, liberals have set out to find deliberate sins, and finding them to eradicate them severally.

Sin has other reality than this, however, and the word sin greater meaning. Are not we ourselves forced to speak of sin in a manner which indicates our belief that responsibility for our actions can penetrate below the level of consciousness of our actions; and that, as a consequence, the deepest sin is unconscious, not conscious? More important than the petty actions of childhood, which may be the conscious violation of known standards, are the unnumbered cruelties of children to children in the otherwise good organization of their gang life. A German Nazi youth may well serve his cause with such zeal and conviction that neither he nor many of his comrades or leaders are consciously sinful in producing its cruelties. Do we not here recognize that sin and responsibility may vary inversely, rather than directly, with consciousness, so that greater sincerity actually means greater sin? Our own responsible and sinful implication in social institutions must already extend far out beyond the range of our conscious participation, else on what grounds do we make ourselves more consciously sinful by

making ourselves more sensitive to the grinding, impersonal results of our common life? And when we are stabbed sharply awake to evil results that have followed from one of our actions, which we certainly did not "intend that way," should this not give us pause, and bring the reflection that it is not just in *this* case that we sin not knowing what we do.

Repentance

What, then, of repentance? Repentance in which we suffer remorse for an action the evil character of which has thrust itself, or has somehow been hauled into our consciousness, is clearly different from that repentance which is appropriate for our deeper, unconscious sin. Repentance for our unconscious sin, make no mistake about it, is repentance for our righteousness. It is superfluous to say "for our supposed righteousness," because before God all human righteousness is "supposed" until God has acted the judged. Like St. Paul, what we need is not so much conversion from our sins as conversion from our righteousness. How, then, shall we repent for the unconscious sin of our righteousness?

This is a desperate practical need of the world today. Last summer, *Life* magazine published an account of one Buzz Wagner, who was recently killed in an accident while on a routine flight in the continental United States, but who was then the leader of a group of our men engaged in operating areoplanes against the Japanese. The title of the article, "Kill or Be Killed," indicates both the dogged nature of the fighting and the desperado type of courage therein portrayed. Three weeks later, in a letter to the editor, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom protested against this process of training up "public enemies" for the post-war world through an emphasis on the "sinister prowess" and "foul attitudes" of this hero. "What," the writer asks, "will be the future of men whose training is contrary to the laws of organized society? What sort of men are we turning out to save our democracy?" That is to say, unrepentant unrighteousness or conscious cruelty is not fit to rule the world.

Later this protest was itself protested, first, by two wives of men serving in this group:

"Suppose Buzz Wagner and all the other 'public enemies' who are doing their duty bravely, told you what must be their inmost feeling about the game of 'kill or be killed'—would that help anyone?"

And by a friend, who wrote:

"Buzz Wagner is my friend. He has 'sinister prowess' but not one 'foul attitude' in his whole

being . . . [Fortunately] these men will rule *our* post-war world."

The first correspondent is correct, of course, in seeing that the unrepentant unrighteousness of men consciously, deliberately, and unrepentantly sinful is permanently destructive; but what she does not see is that repentance for unrighteousness and for conscious sin is not enough. The second group of correspondents is correct in seeing that repentance for unrighteousness is not alone adequate for this hour, but they are wrong in failing to see that unrepentant righteousness is no more competent to organize our world than is unrepentant unrighteousness. Their letters are an amazing but altogether typical instance of how much confidence we place in the righteousness of men, and of the greater comfort we get from "idolatry" than from trusting the Lord. Before God, unrepentant unrighteousness and unrepentant righteousness come to the same thing; and an indication that they are judged alike by God is the fact that in history they come in time to the same thing, namely, cruelty. This is the Cross in History from which also, in the light of the Cross of Christ, we learn that man's deepest sin lies in an unrepentant righteousness that knows not the sin for which it is responsible.

Remorseful Repentance

Sorrow or remorseful repentance for things we have done in the past, the sinfulness of which we now see, is something which must always be *subsequent* to the sin itself. While, on the other hand, repentance for righteousness or for the unconscious sin of each moment for which we are nevertheless responsible is something which must necessarily be *simultaneous* with the act. In one case we repent for that which we *have* done; in the other we repent for that which we *are* doing. Ludicrous results and theoretical confusion always follow from any attempt to mix the two, as, for example, by trying to be sickly sorrowful for what we are now doing. George Bernard Shaw has spoken as follows of his father:

"Now a convivial drunkard may be exhilarating in convivial company. Even a quarrelsome or boastful drunkard may be found entertaining by people who are not particular. But a *miserable drunkard*—and my father, in theory a teetotaler, was *racked with shame and remorse even in his cups*—is unbearable."¹

If such remorse is the only kind of repentance, then Charles Clayton Morrison is right in saying that we cannot be repentant for what we are doing in wartime, but only for our part in the prior actions and failures that led to war. But the "mournful

¹ Hesketh Pearson: *G.B.S.: A Full Length Portrait*. N. Y.: Harpers, 1942, p. 5 (Italics mine).

Christian warrior" of the Lutheran tradition, who repentantly fights the just war, is not one who is always blubbering over his gunpowder! Rather is he one whose permanent attitude of life is directed, not toward the righteousness of his act as itself sufficient to justify him, nor toward the unrighteousness of his act as sufficient to condemn him, but toward God, the Author and the Finisher of his faith.

Just as futile as the effort to be contrite about those things we are now doing, is the effort at moral perfection which consists in the illusion that we can bring all our sins into the focus of consciousness and renounce them. Through infinitesimal distinctions of conscience this leads to withdrawal after withdrawal from what we are now doing, and to final despair. To quote again from Bernard Shaw, commenting upon a fellow-socialist who had resigned his seat in Parliament rather than compromise his conscience:

"When I think of my own unfortunate character, smirched with compromise, rotted with opportunism, mildewed with expediency, blackened by ink contributed to Tory and Liberal newspapers, dragged through the mud of Borough Councils and Battersea elections, stretched out of shape with wire pulling, putrified by permeation, 'worn out by 25 years' pushing to gain an inch here and straining to stem a backrush there, I do think Joe might have put up with just a speck or two on those white robes of his for the sake of the millions of poor devils who cannot afford any character at all because they have no friends in parliament. Oh, these moral dandies! these spiritual toffs! these superior persons! Who is Joe anyhow that he should not risk his soul occasionally like the rest of us."²

This is the truth there is in Luther's half-joking, half-serious remark to the rather enigmatic Melancthon, that Christianity is something which enables a man, when he must, to "sin bravely." We cannot remorsefully repent and put away from us *all* our sins, because this would mean ceasing to do what we are *now doing*; and this, however much we need to do it with regard to this or that particular action, is impossible with regard to all our actions, save by an act of renouncing life which is itself an act of life. We also sin, not knowing what we do, whenever we act at all; even when, as by a metaphor we say, *we* do good.

More fundamental than sorrow for our past sins is a repentant faith which *in acting* nevertheless *waits* for the Lord to complete by His Divine Providence the goodness of our finite actions, and which still trusts Him when in His Divine Judgment our

action is thwarted and rejected. If we are to be truly forgiven, truly the Father must forgive us.

Action of God in History

If the preceding analysis of human sin be true in indicating that we at every point in our righteous and unrighteous lives need to be saved by the grace of God, then, the one thing we know about the action of God in history is that it cannot be limited. Even though made in the interest of human freedom, any limitation upon the sphere of God's activity in history is in reality a renunciation of the possibility of the only satisfactory human salvation. We can perhaps make ourselves righteous enough, but we cannot save our righteousness, because we always sin in trying to do so.

Another conclusion of which we may be sure is that God does not in one act judge us and in another save us, in one age let loose his wrath upon us and in the next heal our sins along with our wounds. The judgment and grace of God are one as He is one, and as we are one in sin. God must judge and save us in the same historic act, because our sin and our righteousness are bound together. He saves us by judging and limiting us, and in thwarting us saves that which He wills.

No finer interpretation of history has recently been formulated than certain paragraphs of Raymond Gram Swing's news broadcast on New Year's Eve. Reflecting on the year that had passed and the year that was to come, he said:

"... My own sense of the future, if I may speak subjectively, is somewhat fatalistic. We are now caught up in the stream of doing, and the stream is stronger than any individuals of today. For what is in this stream is our past—all of it, both strong and weak—and, coming now to the test, we ourselves cannot be sure how we as a nation shall perform. For better or worse, we are committed. An individual cannot foresee before his hour comes how he will act. A general, in the heat of a campaign, is submitted to the acid of the unknowable, and it eats away what is weak in his judgment and his character. And in the same way a nation goes to war with the stamina bred through generations, with the inventiveness of courageous spirits, with the capacity for work, with the ability to sacrifice, not any of them developed on the spur of the moment, but filling the reservoir of its accumulated character as a nation. No doubt sometimes you have wondered whether the strong in us was going to be enough, and the weak in us was going to be too much, for us to triumph in this war and in the peace to come. Well, we can't be sure. We are what we are, and we aren't going to be better

² Hesketh Pearson: *G.B.S.: A Full Length Portrait*. N. Y.: Harpers, 1942, p. 156.

now. And it is what we already have become that will carry us to the point we are destined to reach.”

This is an introduction to a Christian understanding of history. It acknowledges the inexorable character of history, not only in regard to war itself, but also with regard to the way in which the war is conducted, and the outcome toward which it moves. Generalizing this statement backward, as perhaps Mr. Swing would not, it speaks to us of a necessity bearing upon and expressing itself in the actions of statesmen and diplomats in the events that led to war. And who can say that the public pressures and the spirit or character of the several nations, within the narrow limits of which the politicians acted, might themselves have been different, who can say this save by a mental act of erasing the past of any present moment and dreamily imagining that moment to begin *de novo*? The Christian recognizes the inexorable character of all history, yet without seeing it as a fatalistic human process alone.

The Christian accomplishes this by seeing history as both the judgment and grace of God. These two aspects of God's action in history go together. For man to regard history as the sphere of God's judgment while at the same time disputing the ground with God in claiming to initiate “gracious” or “saving” action, is fatal to any adequate understanding of the human situation. On such a view, the “day of grace” is an “open season” for human activity, and this is sinned away before God steps in with His judgment to make history *become* inexorable at a certain unpredictable moment. Aside from the fact that if man at any time must provide grace for himself, he is left with his deep, unconscious, and most persistent sin, this interpretation sees only *some* aspects of the inexorableness of the historical process. On both counts, then, in order to provide satisfactory salvation for human sin, and to read history aright, a more adequate Christian view looks upon the “day of grace” and the “day of judgment” as coinciding in every day of historical existence, and as being in both respects fundamentally the work of God, who is at once man's Judge and Savior.

By the action of God in history, the sinfulness of human actions is judged and corrected, and the goodness of human action saved and incorporated in the Divine Will. Since our judgment about what is good is always infected by our sinful righteousness, the act of God in history always has, in relation even to the best of us, an aspect of “otherness,” of being beyond the good and evil of our own mixed, self-defensive human judgments. When we do think we know the will of God for our time, our wills are strengthened, either to do or not to do, by a course

of events utterly beyond our control. After each event we must always confess that we have been acted upon more than we have acted, that we have been changed more than we have changed anything, and that the ideals with which we began have not been realized in reality so much as they have been transformed to accord more with reality. By grace are we saved!