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III

Is There a Problem of Evil?

When we pose the question 'Is there a problem of evil?' we are not doing so with the intention of charming away evil with words, still less of relieving our minds of the sense of sin, as modern psychology is more and more tending to do; nor are we concerned with a merely comforting mental adjustment nor with what people refer to as 'happiness,' to which moreover they suppose themselves to have a 'right'.

On the contrary, for us, evil corresponds to a reality at the level of the world, and so does 'sin,' in the religious sense of a voluntary disregard of a revealed law. Likewise 'goodness,' in the ordinary sense, though often vaguely conceived and expressed, corresponds to a reality at this level. In fact, the two things belong together, as members of a duality, as shadow belongs to light and cannot help doing so. All this may be taken for granted in the present instance.

However, what we are now concerned with is whether or not evil constitutes a 'problem,' one that supposedly is still awaiting a satisfactory solution. It cannot be denied that this opinion has often been put forward, consciously or, still more often, unconsciously—the phrase 'problem of evil' is one of the commonest clichés in the language—and furthermore religious writers, especially in the Christian Church, have frequently felt constrained to offer more or less satisfying solutions to this supposed problem, of which a typical example is the statement, theologically valid but vulnerable to sentimental stultification, that God 'permits' evil in view of a greater good. 'Why does the world not contain only good, only joy?'

is a question constantly cropping up through the ages. 'Why was it not created free from evil, pain and anxiety?'

When shorn of all accessory considerations, the alleged problem reduces itself to the following dilemma: God is said to be almighty and all good; He is also called the creator of the world. If He is good but yet created a world as evil and unhappy as the one we see around us, then He cannot be almighty; if on the other hand He is almighty and still created the world thus, then He cannot be all good.

In their time, the Manicheans and kindred sects known to early Christian history, on the basis of such reasoning, concluded that the demiurge, the world's creator, must be an intrinsically evil being, certainly not God Himself. Trying thus to shift the blame, they still left the essential problem unsolved, since they did not tell us how or why the demiurgic tendency itself either arose in the first instance, in the face of God, or was able to operate. In fact these sects were obsessed with this particular problem, and their attempts to find an answer satisfying to human feeling often led them into strangely contradictory enunciations. It is not with these desultory attempts, condemned by the Church, that we are concerned today, for in the religious crisis through which the world is now passing the basic dilemma takes a different and more far-reaching form; in fact, behind it lurks the thought, as an implicit conclusion, that if things are so then God is neither almighty nor good nor creator, for He does not exist. The world is a blind place then, a field of blind forces whose playthings we, and all our fellow beings, are and must needs remain. If during past ages, when faith was relatively general, people hesitated to draw the conclusion in this naked form and therefore resorted to various intellectual subterfuges in order to avoid it, that conclusion was there all the same potentially, a seed waiting to germinate whenever it found itself in a soil conditioned to receive it; the unuttered thought was like a perpetual chink in the armor of belief, and the various dialectical expedients resorted to during times when the

human mind was still predisposed to accept the theological premises were never quite sufficient to plug this gap in man's spiritual defences. One is speaking, of course, chiefly of the Christian world; in the Indian traditions the problem, if indeed it existed at all, never assumed this acute form for reasons to be explained later but, as we are living in an environment formed on the basis of Christian concepts and still predominantly governed by Christian values, it is necessary, and indeed inevitable, for us to concern ourselves with the consequences of Christian thought, or lack of thought, on this vital subject. We are living through an age of doubt, if not of 'counter-faith,' and this makes it more than ever imperative for us to think clearly, if we are able, concerning a question with which the spreading attitude of doubt is causally bound up, at least in large measure. Before we can think of discovering an answer, however, we must first make sure the question itself has been properly put; for unless such is in fact the case, it would be idle to expect a proper solution.

Indeed, many of the unresolved problems that plague men's minds, and especially those of a metaphysical order—the ultimate questions concerning selfhood and existence—are not merely unsolved but insoluble because they have in fact been faultily set. There is a catch in the statement of the problem itself, and this precludes the possibility of an answer. A question badly put—to quote one eminent commentator of our time, Frithjof Schuon—does not call forth light any more than it derives from light. Half the urgent questions that keep tormenting us would evoke their own answer spontaneously, if only they could once be correctly framed.

Such is the question now before us. What we are presently attempting to do is in fact to improve the framing of this question of evil, as an indispensable prelude to any eventual answering of it.

Before proceeding with our discussion, however, there is one further remark to offer; the evidence that will be laid before the reader, doctrinal, illustrative, or dialectical, is

drawn from many different sources. Little is attributable to myself personally, except the manner of presenting it. In any case, the truth belongs to all equally, in proportion to each man's power—and willingness—to assimilate it (this was said by René Guénon); there is no room for claims of human originality in respect of the truth itself, except in this sense, namely that whoever succeeds in expounding any aspect of truth is original in virtue of that very fact, and necessarily so. It is also good to remember that the effective realization of truth in any circumstances will always entail more than an operation of mere thought. Such a realization, as saints and sages are forever reminding us, will always imply an equating of being and knowing; it must never be supposed that the thinking faculty amounts to the total intelligence of a being, though it is a mode of intelligence in an indirect sense and useful in its own sphere, which is that field of relativities whereof the manifested world consists. True intelligence, which alone deserves the name of intellect unqualified, is a faculty which, if it be not hindered as a result of insubordination by the lesser faculties, its appointed handmaids, will fly straight to the mark. It does not 'think'; it sees. The catalysing of this power to see, which everyone bears within himself whether he be aware of it or not, is the aim of all spiritual method, its only aim. Correct framing of a necessary question, so that the evidence supplies itself and hence also the answer or proof can act as such a catalytic agent. That is why a discussion like the present one can on occasion be fruitful; otherwise it were better to keep silent. Of purposeless discussion the world has more than enough.

But let us now go back to the dilemma concerning the Creator's power and His goodness, as propounded above. We said that behind it lay concealed the thought that this apparent contradiction was tantamount to a dethroning of God, to be replaced, as the ultimate and only principle in the universe, by a blind becoming, a view from which a determinism

governed by chance alone would moreover seem to follow inescapably.

It is, then, a rather startling fact that at the very time when theories of this kind seemed to be gaining ground in the world of science and among the educated classes generally—I will not call them intellectual—and in a more diffuse and instinctive form among the urban masses, another type of theory should have gained credence whereby something like an optimistic bias is attributed to the course of the universe and to the shaping of its contents, a bias working in a (to us) pleasing direction, by a passage from simple to complex (complex being equated with superior) and culminating, up to date, in mankind as we know it, though, of course, with the implication that further developments in the same sense are to be expected in an indefinite future. I am referring to the body of theories that come under the heading of evolutionism, of which the Darwinian theory was but one specification among others, one that created the stir it did largely because of its timing, having supplied just the kind of explanation people were looking for at that moment, especially in the sociological sphere where the doctrines in question are associated with the name of 'progress'. It provided, as it were, a scientific sanction, supported by much tangible evidence, to an already existing wish, and this conjunction carried it far on the road to general acceptance within a very short time.

Evolution, whatever truths or fallacies the word may enshrine, has become, to all intents and purposes, a dogma of the modern age—in some countries its open denial might even land a man in jail—and though scientists themselves may discuss its premises in this or that context, the public at large takes it as much for granted, as a glance at the daily press shows, as any medieval public took for granted certain dogmas of the Church, even while oversimplifying their meaning. As Gai Eaton wrote: 'The ages of faith are always with us, only their object changes.' Here the word 'faith,' of course, must be understood loosely as meaning belief; since

faith in its deeper (and more accurate) sense is far more than that, indicating that indirect and participative knowledge that must fill the gap between knowing and being, theoretical assent and realization, so long as the two exist apart; once they are unified, by the miracle of intellection, there is no more seeing in a glass darkly, but only face to face, in the noonday of truth.

Now, this mention of the evolutionary doctrines has a purpose that ties up with the subject of this essay. I am not concerned to discuss the applicability of these doctrines as such. What I wish to illustrate, by this passing reference, is that they imply, under all their differing forms, acceptance of a kind of universal trend toward the better, which here is represented as an inherent property of becoming, the good itself being always an ideal perceived some distance ahead but presumably never actually attainable, since this would terminate the evolutionary process in a seemingly arbitrary manner. It is noteworthy that with every fresh discovery of science, every invention and especially those that present a sensational aspect as with rockets to the moon, etc., this idea of the upward evolution of humanity is evoked as a kind of mystique, and the same occurs in respect of the more important social developments. If it be objected that some of these happenings are by no means so certainly beneficial as their sponsors would have it, that is not the point, since what we are trying to observe is a certain trend in the general mentality, very marked in our time, which, because of its reading of an optimistic bias into the unfolding of the universe, runs flatly counter to the other logical implications of a materialist determinism, of a universe conceived as functioning minus God. That two such opposed assumptions should be able to coexist in a selfsame mind, as they so often do, is a highly significant piece of evidence, since it shows, for one thing, that the 'problem' of good and evil, or superior and inferior if one so prefers, is still very much with us and as far from a solution as ever.

There is really no logical reason for believing in a survival value attaching to what is good, rather than to what is evil (one cannot avoid using these terms here, imprecise as they are); nor is there any evident basis for the supposition that a blind universe, one that reflects no principle superior to its becoming, somehow carries within itself a preference in favor of what we men regard as 'good'—on the basis of our own feelings. Indeed, there is a very considerable weight of evidence against such an opinion, at least sufficient to preclude any facile assumption in its favor. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that behind the belief in question there lies some kind of sentimental motive, such as has influenced both the selecting and the reading of the evidence in a manner that cannot be described as purely scientific—to be 'scientific' implies above all impartiality and this again goes to show that man is still tormented with the pressing problem of his present unhappiness, for which he tries to compensate by projecting onto the future his own yearning for a universe organized so that he will not suffer; in other words, a 'good' world or a happy world.

The picture that this calls up, if one pauses to think, is so reminiscent of the carrot swinging in view of the donkey to make it pull the cart ever farther that one cannot help asking oneself who, in that case, is the driver of the cart, the one who placed the carrot where it is? This also is in its way a pertinent question.

The stage has now been sufficiently set to allow us to come to grips with our initial question: 'Is there a problem of evil?' as the saying still goes. It is best to leave aside individual speculations and turn, for light, to the teachings of the great traditions and see what they have to offer by way of an answer. In treating their sacred narratives and other symbolical expressions, however, we must be ready from the start to look beyond the letter, to read between the lines, to find, side by side with the more literal interpretation (valid at its own level), that deep-searching interpretation that Dante called

'anagogical' as pointing the way to the heights of mystical realization. (The word 'mystical' here must be given its root meaning of 'silent,' of a knowledge inexpressible because escaping the limits of form.) To this knowledge the sacred forms—forms, that is to say, drawing their spiritual efficacy from the fact that they are founded upon true analogies between different orders of reality—serve as provisional pointers. Their providential usefulness is to provide keys to the mysteries; as such, they are not to be decried, as so often happens, in the name of some mental abstraction or other that would have itself 'pure spirit,' but rather they must be treated as the good craftsman treats the tools of his trade, by guarding them against such impairment as a strait-laced literalism, on the one side, or profane denigration, on the other, may have wished upon them. This all has a close bearing on the currently imputed failure of religion and the consequent neglect, by disheartened men, of means provided for the sake of the only task that matches the human condition—means that have to be formal by the very fact that we ourselves are beings endowed with form.

In order to illustrate our chosen theme, it is fitting, with an audience largely composed of Christians or of people molded more or less by Christian thought, that we should turn first of all to the evidence contained in the earliest chapters of the Book of Genesis, those that give the story of Adam and Eve. No more illuminating symbolical narrative is to be found in all sacred literature.

Here we see the Tree of Life, corresponding to the axis of the universe, standing in the midst of the garden in which Adam, primordial man, dwells at peace with all his fellow beings, the animals and plants of the garden. Through him they participate in the center, represented by the tree; so long as his attention remains focused there, there is no disharmony or fear anywhere, and as far as anyone can tell this state of affairs will continue indefinitely. Here we see the image of *per-*

fect participation in passive mode. (Of participation in active mode we shall have something to say later.)

But now there comes along the serpent, offering to Adam a hitherto untasted experience, that of fragmented unity, of things unreferred to the center and valued for their own sake as if they were self-sufficing entities. This was, and still remains, the characteristic lure of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam, persuaded by Eve at the instance of the serpent, tastes of the fruit, and behold in a moment his pristine purity of intent is lost, and he and Eve suddenly become conscious of all that divides them from themselves and from one another and consequently also from each and every thing around them. From that moment on they both feel imprisoned within their own fragmentary consciousness, their empirical ego, and this fact is evidenced by their shame at their own nakedness, which they try to cover up with an artificial selfhood of their own contriving, the fig leaves that have become the prototype of all human disguise.

And as for the Tree of Life, what has become of it? For it no longer is, as far as Adam and Eve are concerned. Looking where they expect to behold it, they can discern only that other tree, the Tree of Good and Evil bowing under the weight of its fruits light and dark, containing the seeds of indefinite becoming. Advisedly we said 'that other tree,' since for the first time they feel an acute sense of otherness, of *I* and *you*, and by this very fact they are cut off from those other beings with whom they formerly had communed on free and fearless terms.

What they fail to perceive, however, is the real identity of the tree itself; this is a vital point in this highly symbolic story. Indeed, I myself remember as a child at school feeling much puzzled by this unexplained appearance in the garden of a second tree; it was not till years after I was grown up that it dawned on me that there never had been a second tree but that it was the same tree seen double, through the distorting glass of ignorance. Regarded from the viewpoint of igno-

rance, the Tree of Life *becomes* the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; regarded from the viewpoint of true knowledge, the Tree of Becoming (as it might just as well be called) *is* the Tree of Life.

Here we have a complete metaphysical doctrine, in its essentials, expressed through the biblical narrative. And how effective to communicate is this concrete symbolism of a tree, or trees, in comparison with the abstractions dear to the philosophic mind!

But now we have been led back to our initial dilemma. Apologists who have wished to defend God (!) against an accusation of being 'the author of evil'—and many have felt constrained so to defend Him—have missed one vital point: the paradise, happy as it was, *contained the serpent*. Nothing is said in the narrative itself to account for this startling fact, which occurs almost casually at the moment when the fatal event is about to take place.

Yet if one pauses to look really closely into the premises of creation, one must surely wake up to the truth that a paradise—any paradise—to be a paradise *must contain the serpent*. I admit I did not discover this for myself; it was pointed out to me. The perfection of a paradise without the presence of the serpent would be the perfection, not of paradise, but of God Himself. It would be, in Sufic terms, 'the paradise of the Essence'. Therefore when one says of a paradise (or anything else) that it is created good or perfect, this can only mean that it is good or perfect *as far as a paradise* (or other created thing) *is able to be perfect*.

Moreover, the same principle will apply in the case of a hell. A hell, to be a hell, must contain a trace of the Tree of Life concealed in it somewhere; it cannot be a place of absolute evil or absolute imperfection or absolute anything. That is why, in the Tibetan iconography for instance, when hells are depicted, a Buddha is always also shown there, as a necessary, if latent, witness to the omnipresent truth.

The essential principle to grasp is that wherever one is dealing with a *relative* perfection, one that has existential limits, one has implicitly accepted a degree of imperfection in respect of the absence of whatever lies outside those limits. This privative character of the limit is manifested, within any limit, by a proneness to change and consequent suffering. This is a basic thesis of Buddhism, but it is not less a thesis, if differently expressed, of the Semitic traditions. Let it be remembered that even Christ on occasion said, 'Why callest thou me good?' What he was in fact affirming by these words was the genuineness of his own human state, in the presence of his essential divinity. When it is said of Christ that he is 'true God, true Man,' this necessarily implies, in respect of the second term, an existential limitation, therefore also a certain aspect of imperfection inseparable from the relative as such. Were this limit not there, as expressed in the fact that the Son of Man, Jesus, was able to become and to suffer, the humanity of Christ would have remained a mere phantom—there have been sects holding this view—and his incarnation would have been meaningless. In the human person of Christ we see therefore the perfect figure of humanity including its limitations. By definition the suchness of man is not the suchness of God; hence it cannot be called 'good' in its own right but only inasmuch as it reveals the divine perfection, first by existing at all and secondly by its symbolism.

In purely metaphysical terms this truth of Christianity can be expressed most succinctly by saying that in Christ absolute perfection and relative perfection meet. The intersection of the cross is the symbol of their perfect coincidence.

From all this it can be seen that our original question 'Is there a problem of evil?' by dint of closer scrutiny has undergone a shift of emphasis, since enough has been said to show that what manifests itself as 'evil' relatively to our human situation has its roots, cosmically speaking, further back in an imperfection inseparable from all manifestation as such, be it in the shape of a world, an individual being, or even a para-

dise. When the Sufis declare that 'paradise is a prison for the Sage just as the world is a prison for the believer,' they are voicing their ultimate dissatisfaction with all that is not God while at the same time claiming to be something of its own.

It would then appear as if the question to be put should rather take the form of asking, 'Why does God create at all? Why is there any manifestation, any world? In fact, why need we exist?'

Now, before deciding whether such a question is a proper one or not, it is important to stress the fact that whenever divine action is spoken of, that action must be regarded as *necessary* as well as *free*; *in divinis* the two attributes coincide at every point whereas, with us, existence, which relativizes everything, renders them more or less incompatible in any given set of circumstances. God's infinity implies absolute liberty; where there is no limit, there can be no constraint either. Likewise God's absoluteness implies limitless necessity; it is absurd to speak as if God's ordinances bore an arbitrary character, though the anthropomorphic symbolism sometimes may seem to suggest such an interpretation, a matter of expression only, which ought not to deceive any reasonable mind.

If then the creative act has been described, theologically, as 'gratuitous,' this is intended to affirm God's absolute freedom and certainly not to deny His infinite necessity. The best one can say, therefore, about manifestation is that the infinite nature of the divine possibility evidently includes it and therefore also requires it; were it not so, the infinite would not be itself. This must, however, never be taken as meaning that the world, by existing, has added something to God or that its eventual disappearance will indicate a proportional privation concerning the Divine, for the relative in itself amounts to nothing in the presence of the real, though by its own limited reality it manifests the real at a given level, failing which it would not exist. As for the question why do things exist, it is devoid of intrinsic sense; our existence is not something to

which the question 'Why?' can validly be attached in expectation of a solution comformable to human logic, itself an apanage of the existence in question. Existence is something one can accept only for what it is. All argument about things starts from there; it cannot be pushed further back thanks to some more than usually ingenious subterfuge of the discursive mind. Only the eye of intellect—the 'third eye' of Indian traditional symbolism—is able to pierce beyond the existential veil because something of what lies beyond is already to be found in its own substance; it is not for nothing that Meister Eckhart called it 'uncreate and uncreatable'. But here we are outside the discursive realm altogether.

The only comment to be offered—and it constitutes a perfectly adequate answer to a question in itself senseless—is that, as long as existence (or creation) is a possibility (as it evidently is at its own level), that possibility will in due course be called to manifestation for the reason we have already given, namely that the divine all-possibility cannot be limited in any manner whatsoever. This is enough to account for the existence of the relative, the cosmic unfolding in all its indefinitude of becoming, including that apparent opposing of relative to real, of world to God, that constitutes, for beings, their separative dream. Better reply we cannot find, but this one surely is good enough.

It now remains for us to consider in turn, though very briefly, what the chief traditions have to say on the subject of evil, since each will inevitably look at it from its own angle, offering comment attuned to its own spiritual dialect and technique. The unanimous testimony is to be found at the center, where all ways meet.

So far, we have chiefly drawn examples from the Christian tradition for obvious reasons, with passing references to the sister traditions. Here, all that needs to be added on the subject of Christianity is that the idea of 'a problem' of evil originated there and is largely confined to that field. This idea is closely bound up with the anthropomorphic representation

of the relationship between human and Divine, which, if pushed too far or insufficiently corrected by commentaries of a more purely sapiential kind (as in the sermons of Meister Eckhart, for instance), can easily become invaded by sentimental and moralistic influences. To say this is in no wise to blame the anthropomorphic symbolism as such, which has not only proved its usefulness in the course of ages but also offers certain undoubted advantages for many souls. If it has its dangers, this is true of every form of expression, however hallowed; the serpent will be there, in some form or other.

There is only one defense against the kind of doctrinal abuses we are thinking of, those which in the Christian world, especially in modern times, have troubled and even alienated many minds, and this is by a return to the central themes of the doctrine, to its metaphysical heartland. Sentimental and rationalistic confusions invariably arise in the periphery of a tradition; it is an excessive preoccupation with marginal matters that tends to provoke them. Too many rather trivial considerations habitually occupy Christian minds to the neglect of the essential. Christian theology has been relegated dangerously to the status of a 'speciality,' a matter for professionals and experts, instead of being regarded as the daily food for every soul which it really is. In this respect the Eastern traditions, despite the degeneration of the times which has not spared them, have much to teach regarding the day-to-day practice of religion. At Kalimpong, in the northern hills of Bengal where I lived for three years, my gardener (who was no saint) possessed a metaphysical and theological sense that many a bishop might have shared with advantage. The things he saw around him were far more transparent to his intelligence than is usually the case among religious people here. In that sense he could see God everywhere; theology was, for him, both a living and a practical pursuit. His devotion, such as it was, had an undoubted intellectual quality.

Only too often Christian devotion has been kept starved of intellectual nourishment, with the result that it has readily

slipped into sentimentalism, and this in its turn has tended to drive out of the Christian fold many of the more intelligent minds, with disastrous results for themselves and for the world; but the fact is that, though these people may have been, in one sense, too intelligent to accept the heavily sweetened food that their religious mentors thought they wanted, yet in another sense they were not quite intelligent enough to detect, through the sugar, the salt that was still there waiting to be tasted.

One can only repeat it: a Christian revival without a renewal of intellectual penetration of the central truths is a chimera. Collective sentimentality will not bring it about, if indeed it does not hinder it further. It is time the leaders of the church recognized this; otherwise they will remain blind leading the blind, despite their sincere wish to serve. There is no substitute for knowledge.

To return to the Christian attitude toward evil: exoterically and in conformity with the anthropomorphic symbolism, Christian teaching has largely been content to say that God 'is not the author of evil,' which, for its part, came about thus and thus. This view, though it contains flaws, is nevertheless justified, inasmuch as God does not will evil qua evil, evil as it appears to us. He is the creator of the relative, as required by His infinity; of that relative the thing we call evil is a necessary function, being in fact the measure of the world's apparent separation from its principle, God—an illusory separation inasmuch as nothing can exist side by side with the infinite, however real it may claim to be at its own relative level. To quote Frithjof Schuon, who has thrown the greatest light upon this question—his books are treasuries of spiritual discernment—'One cannot ask of God to will the world and at the same time to will that it be not a world.' A world is a whirlpool of contrasts (the Indian word *samsâra* expresses this), it is not a unity in its own right. It is no limitation on the Almighty that He cannot produce another Himself, a second Absolute. The world is there to prove it.

Passing now to another Semitic tradition, Islam, we will find that it follows a somewhat different line. The central testimony of Islam is the unity and absolute transcendence of God, a truth that it shares with Christianity but stresses, if anything, in a more exclusive way than in any other tradition; hence it is obliged to declare, without turning aside, that whatever exists in any sense whatsoever is unequivocally the creation of God and therefore that evil, since it exists, is to be numbered among God's creatures.

If Christian theology on the whole shrank from such a plain statement and wished to wrap it up for the reasons we know of, Islam did not avoid it for another good reason—both reasons are valid but relative, hence their mutual exclusion. Indeed, where relativities are concerned, such divergencies are unavoidable and moreover necessary, since truth is one and discernment is a function of intelligence as such, in the light of truth. In this way, differentiation of witness, as between the various traditions, serves to reveal the converging nature of the various spiritual paths and their meeting at the center, in the heart of truth.

The existence of the relative has this positive merit, offsetting its limiting or negative function, namely that it precludes our taking ourselves or the world for absolute, in other words, for God. The same applies in the field of doctrine. To attribute an absolute character to a form or other relativity is of the very nature of error, by fixing or 'petrifying' a limit and its attendant oppositions. Hence the teaching of Islam that 'the variety of the interpreters is also a blessing'. This statement contains no condemnation of orthodoxy, or of forms as necessary and legitimate instruments, but it bears witness to that variety in testimony that is one of the factors guaranteeing the unity of revelation.

The Muslims have also said: 'When the gates of Paradise were opened the gates of Hell were opened at the same time.' How often do we hear a wish expressed that God had made heaven but no hell; how many people expressing their belief

in heaven couple this with a refusal to entertain any belief in hell. Here again is a case of failing to recognize that two things belong together, as correlatives pertaining to the same order. To deny this is implicitly to deny the Absolute, by wishing to endow one particular relativity with an absolute character while refusing relative existence to its normal partner; it is but another form of the error that would have God create a paradise minus the serpent.

All relativity can, and indeed must, ultimately be transcended, not by arbitrary denial but by integration. The world cannot just be charmed away, but it can be rendered transparent so that the light, ever shining, may illuminate our existential darkness. The center is everywhere, this room included; and, where the center is, there is the beatific vision.

Passing now to the Indian traditions, it will be found that the viewpoint differs considerably, inasmuch as the general concept of manifestation is not linked to the more particular concept of 'creation,' as in the Semitic religions. The Hindus, when they attribute creative activity to the Divinity under one or other of its aspects, liken this to a 'divine playing,' which is a way of affirming the unqualified freedom and transcendence of the Godhead in its unmanifest and impersonal essence, versus those dynamic, creative, and therefore qualifiable aspects of Divinity that correspond to the personal God of western spiritual parlance.

In Buddhism, where the idea of creation is practically absent, the personal aspect is as if 'bypassed' in the case of both the divine prototype and the human being. The 'non-theistic' (not atheistic) character of the Buddhist wisdom and its insistence on the 'non-selfhood' of all things belong together, a fact that moreover explains Buddhism's marked preference for apophatic enunciations. Dogmatic affirmations, by lending to ideas a kind of fixed self, are, from a Buddhist point of view, always suspect, if not in practice avoidable altogether. The Hindu tradition, on the other hand, with the maternal exuberance that characterises it, is able to

accommodate all manner of doctrines such as, in other traditions, would tend to exclude one another; thus, for example, the Vedanta stands near to Buddhism in the rigorously impersonal nature of its appeal, while Vishnuite Hinduism and the bhaktic doctrines generally come much nearer to a personal religion in the Western sense. In practice Hinduism is able to associate both the personal and the impersonal approach in a synthesis that allows of an almost endless variety of combinations.

The manifested world, or worlds, as viewed through Indian eyes, does not, as we have said, require in principle to be given the character of a willed making or 'creation'. In Buddhism, where this idea (as already pointed out) practically finds no place, *samsâra*, the Round of Existence, is described as having 'no beginning' but as 'having an end'; in other words, the process of continual passage from cause to effect is left undefined in terms of origin, but that process and its associated possibility of suffering can be neutralized by integration into the center 'where the wheel of rebirth is not turning'. Negatively regarded, this will be nirvanic extinction or self-naughting; positively regarded, it is the awakening to enlightenment, Buddhahood. Compare with this the Christian view representing the other extreme, namely the description of the world as having 'a beginning' (in creation) but as able to become 'world without end,' in salvation through Christ. One metaphysical paradox is worth another, since, strictly speaking, beginning and ending belong to the same duality; their dissociation in either direction is metaphysically inconceivable. The paradoxical character of both the above-mentioned enunciations is explainable in terms of a spiritual purpose, a call to realization; neither of them should be driven too far in literalism, but each expresses truth in its own way.

The mentality fostered by both Hinduism and Buddhism is not such as to see a problem in evil or suffering, as has happened elsewhere, because a sense of the relative and its

ambivalent character, at once a veil over the absolute and a revealer thereof, of a reality at one level and an illusion at another, is too strongly ingrained in Indian thought to allow of evil being regarded as anything more than a particular case of the relative, viewed from its privative angle. Suffering in all its forms is then accepted as a measure of the world's apparent remoteness from the divine principle. The principle is absolutely omnipresent in the world, but the world is relatively absent from the principle, this apparent contradiction between 'essence' and 'accidents' is paid for in 'suffering'. By identifying ourselves, consciously or unconsciously or by our actions, with our 'accidents,' whereby a specious selfhood is both created and nourished, we invite an inescapable repercussion in the form of the good and evil that consequently shape our lives for us while we are swept along by the stream of becoming. So long as that stream continues to flow, in the passage from action to concordant reaction, suffering will be experienced in positive or negative form, as unwanted presence of the painful or else as absence of the desirable. The nature of *samsâra*, the world's flow, is such, and no effort or contrivance on our part can render it otherwise. One can shift given evils to one side (life in this world often compels one to do so), or one can promote certain good objects—often at the price of neglecting others—but the process itself we never touch by this means; our many attempts to abolish given evils will necessarily remain a treatment of symptoms, leaving the deepest causes of unhealth untouched because intellectual discernment, the essential diagnosis, is wanting. Fundamentally, religion is concerned with such a diagnosis, and, in the light of it, with the remedies to be applied; it is directly concerned with nothing else.

While we are on the subject of cosmology, something must be said about the theory of cosmic cycles, highly developed in Indian tradition but also known to Western antiquity with its golden, silver, bronze, and iron ages, the first-named corresponding to a period of primordial purity, of which the

terrestrial paradise gives the type, the lattermost indicating a period of general obscurity due to the neglect or loss of the essential knowledge, leading to a catastrophe that will appear to the humanity concerned as a final discrimination or judgment. When one considers the process of cosmic development in relation to human existence, individual and collective, it is apparent that there are times and occasions when a kind of cumulative bias in one or other direction takes place, like a spring or neap tide which nevertheless leaves the ocean itself essentially as it was. In a minor way recorded history is full of examples of this kind; but it is possible also to recognize oscillations on a much larger scale in which the tendency toward enlightenment or toward infatuation becomes so pronounced as to justify the use of the broader classification of cyclic phases mentioned above. Each of these great divisions of time represents a piling up of positive or negative factors which the beings who experience the results will interpret in terms of quasi-universal good or evil, though in point of fact the process of cosmic flux goes on uninterruptedly, nothing of this world being intrinsically permanent or satisfying. For man to seek his real home amid these ever-shifting quicksands seems like asking for disappointment; and yet this is precisely where his quest must start—from the very situation, that is to say, determined for him by antecedent karma, which he has the power neither to choose nor to refuse. The gate of deliverance can be found only here and now, not elsewhere or otherwhen.

By now enough will have been said to show that if there be a question that urgently concerns us—the word 'problem' was unhappy—it is neither the existence of the world nor our idea of what a world might have been like had we been asked to create one, but solely the question of how best to rejoin our own center, which is also the center of all things, the Tree of Life, the axis uniting heaven and earth. The word 'religion' by its derivation means 'to unite,' and so does the word 'yoga'—the same root as 'yoke'.

In effect we have somehow to retrace the steps of our forefather Adam, but in inverse order. For him it was an outgoing path that lured him from center to periphery, a consequence of the illusory duplication of the original unity, whereby the Tree of Life became mysteriously clothed in the semblance of the Tree of Good and Evil; this gives us the very pattern and principle of distraction in this world.

For the posterity of Adam, nourished as we are day after day on the fruits, white or black, of the dualistic tree, the process of return must start out from here, as was said once before, which means that it is the Tree of Good and Evil this time that must be caused to yield up its secret by revealing its identity with the Tree of Life, even while remaining itself at its own level.

This brings us to the point where it is possible to speak of *realisation in active mode*, which we promised to discuss when speaking of the Adamic innocence. This innocence is always a perfection in its own way, like that of the newly born—hence the injunction to enter the Kingdom as a little child—but its existential passivity leaves it vulnerable to the egocentric urge that lets men feel themselves 'as gods' and places them under the law of mortality by that very fact. For unequivocal liberation it needs to be completed by the active realization, full awareness of the essential identity, across their relative distinction, of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Contrast, nirvana and *samsâra*. It is only this transcending of all the dualities and their oppositions that can render one immune to the serpent's stinging, because then the serpent itself, like everything else, will in the light of knowledge have been recognized for what it is, namely a property of existence and no more. Light therefore takes priority among all our needs; the Buddha in placing 'right view' at the beginning of the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to deliverance paid full tribute to this first requirement. Though passive and active realization have both been mentioned in turn, it is necessary to make a third point by saying that reintegration in the cen-

ter, to be complete and in balance, will in fact be active and passive at one and the same time, the former in virtue of knowledge that is active by its own nature like the intellect that communicates it, and the latter in virtue of the living gift of grace, the spontaneous attraction of the center itself, which cannot be commanded but can only be accepted freely or else ignored; in which case, as Schuon said in one of his most telling passages, it is always man who is absent, not grace. To follow the spiritual way, the ingoing path, a two-directional traffic will therefore always be implied, whatever may be the apparent emphasis in any given case, as between human initiative on the one hand and divine gift on the other; it is the very disproportion between a necessarily limited human effort, however intense, and the transcendent and unlimited object to be encompassed that shows why this must be so.

The traditional image of the Buddha—perhaps the most miraculous form of icon in existence—perfectly exemplifies the synthesis of attitudes required of man by the circumstances. As he sits in lotus posture at the foot of the Tree of Enlightenment—the Tree of Life it might just as well be called—the Buddha, the fully awakened, touches with his right hand the earth, calling her to witness; an active attitude toward 'the world' is indicated by this gesture. His left hand, for its part, supports the begging-bowl held in readiness to receive whatever may be cast into it from above; this gesture indicates passivity toward heaven, perfect receptiveness. The incomparable eloquence of this symbol beggars all comment.

For a Christian, the realization in active mode is represented essentially by the redemption inaugurated by Christ Himself. To compensate for the fall, the path of reintegration has to pass through the sacrifice—the ego must suffer transformation in the fire of Shiva, as a Hindu would put it. Virtual reintegration into the Adamic state of innocence, in passive mode, is operated through baptism. Virtual reintegration in active mode, into the Christic state, is operated through the

Eucharist, the eating and drinking of Christ in order to be eaten and drunk by Christ. Herein is to be seen all the difference separating 'the sinner that repenteth' from 'the just person that needs no repentance'. It is the former that corresponds to the active realization: the bird that has escaped from the cage will never again be caught. The innocence represented by the passive participation is indubitable, but it is the other that calls forth the greatest joy in heaven.

Incidentally, the foregoing citation provides an excellent illustration of the polyvalent character of revealed Scripture, in virtue of which the same words, while retaining their literal applicability at one level of understanding, are transposable into a more universal sense at another. Here is a case of that method of exegesis referred to once before under the name of 'anagogical,' as pointing upward to the threshold of the mysteries. The immense stress laid by all the great traditions on scriptural memorizing and recitation is explained by this property of the sacred text to vehicle superposed aspects of the truth, whereby it is able to provide a support for meditation and concentration that is practically inexhaustible.

This twofold virtuality, covering all possibilities both passive and active, has to be *actualised* through the life in religion; religious doctrines and methods, whatever their particularity of form, have no other purpose but this.

Moreover, the same is the unique purpose of human life as such—'human life hard to obtain,' as the Buddhists say, and therefore not to be frittered away in irrelevant, profane pursuits. Again and again the various traditional paths rejoin one another in this urgent plea to man to fulfil his human destiny, which is none other than deliverance—or salvation, if the Christian term be preferred, always provided it is given the sense not of some individualistic compromise or other but that given it by Christ's own words when he said, 'Be ye perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect,' surely the most awe-inspiring injunction to be found in Scripture.

The transcendent nature of the human vocation and of its finality is evidenced, above all, by the presence, in man, of a sense of the Absolute. The name of God is indelibly inscribed in the human heart; all the profane overlayings due to inattention and consequent ignorance are unable quite to extinguish its remembrance, though they may at times come near to doing so in practice. Even man's infidelities betray themselves by their inconsistency. As Meister Eckhart put it, 'The more he blasphemes the more he praises God.' At any degree, the state of forgetfulness will always carry with it a gnawing sense of privation, which will not be stilled until its one real object, instead of many fancied ones, has been found again. Did we but know it, all the desires beings experience, all their attempts to snatch satisfaction from this thing or that thing, are but signs of a deep-seated homesickness for the Tree of Life, man's true homeland.

The one and only 'problem,' in our situation, is to find the way home, in which case we can show it to others. One who has missed his own way makes a poor guide; to have ignored this fact is what vitiates so much so-called service in the world, a typically humanitarian delusion. In the long run, only the saints can offer efficient service, those who know the way by walking it.

The way itself involves two conditions, namely a direction—the sacred tradition provides this direction—and a method of concentration appropriate to each person's relative capacity; but whatever form this may take in practice, in principle method is reducible to the unbroken remembrance of God, perfect mindfulness in the Buddhist sense. The Prophet of Islam, speaking with the fierce eloquence of the desert, has cried out: 'All in the world is accursed except the Remembrance of God.' Whatever is attachable to that remembrance is acceptable; whatever is incompatible is for rejection. This is the law governing the whole spiritual enterprise.

Man is human by his vocation; he is subhuman in proportion as he disregards it. The animals and plants who follow their own destiny are superior to the man who betrays his. To spend the precious gift of human existence on anything but 'the one thing needful,' as Christ described it while in the house of Martha and Mary, is to condemn oneself to the fate of the Flying Dutchman and sail the ocean of existence interminably to and fro, buffeted by its gales and deluded by its calms while always seeking a haven. Divine grace always leaves us this one hope; God who now seems so distant is ever close at hand—'closer than your jugular vein,' as the Koran has it. The Tree of Life is standing in this room, as certainly as it stood in Eden; it is a pity if we will not use our eyes.

"Is the a Problem of Evil?"

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