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Beyond Tragedy

ESSAYS ON THE CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

By

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5: THE TEST OF TRUE PROPHECY

WHEN a man speaks in the name of God and prefixes his pronouncements with a "Thus saith the Lord," he is either a fool, or a knave or—a prophet. How is one to know into which category he belongs? How is one to judge the eternal word and to know when the prejudice of an hour or the foolish opinion of a man has been falsely arrayed in the pretense of divine wisdom? The history of religion is full of the chronicles of both fools and knaves and our insane asylums still boast their due quotas of unhappy maniacs who think they are messiahs. By what criterion is one to discover what is true and what is false in the conflicting claims of competing messiahs and prophets?

The prophet Jeremiah is very much concerned with the problem of false prophets. He deals with it repeatedly. The test he presents for distinguishing between the true and false in prophecy may not be exhaustive. The problem is too great to be easily exhausted. But his test is important and convincing. Jeremiah accuses some of the prophets of his day of

speaking "the vision of their own heart and not out of the mouth of the Lord." But that is merely to describe false prophecy. False prophecy always means to give ultimate significance to purely individual and partial judgments. The question is: How is one to detect this false element? Jeremiah's answer is that a false prophet betrays himself by offering false security to people. "They say still unto them that despise me, the Lord hath said, Ye shall have peace." Or again: "They say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you." The false prophet preaches security to those who make their own inclinations the law of life and who thereby despise and defy God. The prophecy is false because a life which defies the laws of life in order to gain security destroys what it is seeking to establish. The mark of false prophecy is that it assures the sinner peace and security within terms of his sinful ambitions. True prophecy has the function of revealing the true laws of life to the sinner, and discovering to his blind eyes how he increases his insecurity by taking the law into his own hands for the purpose of establishing himself in an insecure world.

I

The most basic need of the human spirit is the need for security and the most fundamental problem

of religion is the problem of meeting this need. In a true religion, faith in the ultimate meaningfulness of existence, grounded in a God who transcends the caprices and contingencies of the physical order and who is capable of overcoming the chaos created by human sin, is the final security of the human spirit. In false religion this ultimate security is prematurely appropriated and corrupted so that it assures man peace in his sins and not through the forgiveness of his sins. To understand the importance of this distinction it is necessary to analyse the whole imperilled nature of the human enterprise.

Man's insecurity lies first of all in the determinate and finite character of human existence amidst the immensities of the physical world and the caprices of nature. When he surveys the heavens, the work of God's hands, the moon and the stars which He hath ordained, he is overcome with a sense of his own insignificance: "What is man that thou shouldst be mindful of him?" The summer's heat and the winter's cold, the capricious storm or the equally unpredictable attack of unseen disease germs, may destroy his life. To the perils of the natural order must be added the perils of the social order. At any moment man may become the victim of the greed, the cruelty, and the thoughtless passions of his fellows. The fury of war may claim his life. He is, as was St. Paul, "In peril by land, in peril by sea, in

peril of false brethren." Unable to live without a sense of the meaningfulness of his existence, his confidence in meaning is constantly imperilled by the chaos which threatens to engulf him. The chaos may be represented by the capricious forces of nature which seem to take no account of his significance, his hopes and his dreams. In the words of Goethe: *Die Elemente hassen das Gebild her Menschenhand.* Or the chaos may erupt out of the sinful forces of his society; for all human society seems but a tentative peace and uneasy armistice between conflicting interests and passions.

In consequence of these perils the need of security is a basic need of human life. I remember how wonderful was the experience of my boyhood when we ran to the barn, warned by ominous clouds of an approaching storm, and then heard the wind and the rain beating outside while safe and dry under the eaves of the haymow. The experience had actual religious overtones. The safety and shelter of the haymow were somehow symbolic of all security against dark and tempestuous powers. The words of the Psalmist, committed to memory in confirmation class, achieved a sudden and vivid relevance: "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. There shall no evil befall

thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling." This word of the psalm is, incidentally, a perfect illustration of all the illusions which may arise from an ultimate religious faith. When faith in an ultimate security is couched in symbolic expressions which suggest protection from all immediate perils, it is easy to be tempted to the illusion that the child of God will be accorded special protection from the capricious forces of the natural world or special immunity from the vindictive passions of angry men. Any such faith is bound to suffer disillusionment. Nor does it deserve moral respect.

Stoic indifference toward the varying vicissitudes of mortal existence is preferable to lobbying, with whining entreaties, in the courts of the Almighty, hoping for special favours which are not granted to ordinary mortals or to godless men. The ultimate security of a noble faith lies in the assurance that "all things must work together for good," but not that all things are of themselves good, or that the faithful will escape vicissitudes which are of themselves evil rather than good. Those who know and love God understand that the meaning of life lies rooted in a power too great and good to be overcome by the momentary anarchies of history or by the periodic suggestions of chaos and meaninglessness which arise from man's strange relationship to nature's blind and morally indifferent forces. St. Paul expresses this idea

perfectly in a glorious passage in Romans: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Every possible peril and evil is anticipated—and discounted, because it cannot destroy the faith, that the love of God gives meaning to life.

II

The sin of man arises from his effort to establish his own security; and the sin of the false prophet lies in the effort to include this false security within the ultimate security of faith. The false security to which all men are tempted is the security of power. The primary insecurity of human life arises from its weakness and finiteness. Man is a frail little insect buffeted by forces vaster than he. Man is a defenseless creature, the prey of armed and brutal men. What is more natural than that he should seek to transmute his weakness into strength? That he should desire enough power to hold the enmity of nature at bay and to intimidate his human foes? So natural is this that we will concede its necessity and refrain from challenging it by pacifistic moralising. Surrounded by armed foes, the defenseless nation will obey a natural impulse of survival and arm itself for de-

fense, unless it should discover, as have some animals, that the best defense is defenselessness. But, if it is wise, it will not draw self-righteous conclusions from this paradoxical strategy or imagine that all men and nations can adopt it with impunity.

Nor is man's triumph over nature evil of itself. The whole history of civilisation is a chronicle of man's increasingly effective exploitation of natural forces for his own ends. Prometheus, the firebringer, is the true hero of the human epic. Every technical advance has had the effect of strengthening the weak human body. The human eye can now see into the stars, the human voice carry to the ends of the earth; human feet have been transmuted into incredibly speedy wheels; and the wings of birds have been added to human equipment. The automatic machine has enhanced the dexterity of human hands; and power machinery has given the frail human body the strength of a thousand giants. While some of these technical advances have exchanged new perils for the old ones, no one would be so perverse as to question the beneficent effect of this total development, particularly not if the medical sciences are included through which the human body found protection against the "pestilence that wasteth at noonday" and from all the stealthy enemies of health which have assailed man's flesh.

III

Considering how natural and inevitable is the impulse to seek security through power and how successfully power achieves its desired object, it is not surprising that there should be many false prophets who encourage men to trust this security, assuring them "no evil shall befall thee" and "the Lord hath said ye shall have peace." Why is their prophecy false? Because they do not see to what degree the security of power leads to both injustice and pride.

All power leads to pride and injustice; to the pride of "them that despise me," the pride of men who have forgotten that they are creatures and that no creaturely human strength is strong enough to make nature purely the servant of man rather than his nemesis; to the injustice of those who create their security at the expense of the security and freedom of others. The sin of pride, to which the prophets of Israel were so sensitive, is more obvious in our day than in theirs. Yet there are fewer prophets to recognise and challenge it. If this age is essentially irreligious, the basic cause of our irreligion is our sense of self-sufficiency. The achievements of science and technics have beguiled us into a false complacency. We have forgotten the frailty of man. We have overlooked the fact that no medicine for senility can be found by even the most advanced science. We have

failed to consider that the mystery of death still challenges human pride; that man, for all of his enhanced physical strength, continues to be as grass which flourisheth in the morning and in the evening is cut down and withereth. He still "brings his years to an end like a tale that is told." Sometimes this abyss of death suddenly opens before the proud modern and the peril of meaninglessness threatens his security. That is the significance of the philosophies of pessimism which periodically break through the optimism and self-sufficiency of modern irreligion and try, with Bertrand Russell, to erect a structure of meaning upon the "firm foundation of unyielding despair." No ultimate sense of meaning can be gained from the conquest of nature; for, in the words of a medical leader, more realistic than most moderns, "nature intends to kill man and will succeed in the end."

Pride as a consequence of power gives man a false security. Thus it enhances his insecurity. This is as true of collective man as of individual man. Modern civilisation, which beguiled itself in its youth with the dreams of eternal progress current in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is facing a more premature senility than any previous culture. The forces of human rationality, which it trusted to arrest the decay to which all civilisations seem subject, have accentuated the processes of decadence. Human

reason has sharpened the anarchies of nature and sin and made the resulting conflicts more deadly. There is a curious irony in this denouement. It is such a vivid portrayal of the self-defeat of human pride. Here is mortal man, darkly conscious of the capricious and arbitrary character of human fate. He thinks his own reason is an eternal and universal force, set against the contingencies of nature, only to discover that human reason remains a servant of the passions of nature within him and a victim of the caprices of nature about him. Nothing in world history illustrates more clearly than contemporary history the meaning of the prophetic word: "Surely men of low degree are a vanity and men of high degree are a lie. God hath spoken once, twice have I heard this that power belongeth unto God."

Injustice is as inevitably a consequence of power as pride. The life which seeks to transcend its creatureliness and make itself the centre of existence offends not only against God, who is the centre and source of existence, but against other life which has a rightful place in the harmony of the whole. Security through power means insecurity for those who lack power. It is interesting how clearly the prophets saw the relation to each other of power, pride and injustice; and how unfailingly they combined their strictures against the religious sin of pride and the

social sin of injustice. Modern exponents of the "social gospel" are usually not as penetrating in their insights. They see only the sin of injustice but not its source. Kings and emperors, oligarchs and aristocrats, empires and civilisation all illustrate this perennial sin of all men: Seeking to transcend the insecurities of finiteness through power, they involve themselves in the insecurities of sin. Their power, by which they intend to protect themselves against other life, tempts them to destroy and oppress other life. But sooner or later the oppressed life is endowed by the spirit of justice—and vengeance—with a strength that complements its weakness. Jeremiah accurately describes this process of history and the rise and fall of empires in the simple words: "Woe unto them that spoil and are not spoiled; when they cease to spoil they will be spoiled."

How curiously nature and sin are involved in this process; for human imagination transmutes nature's harmless will-to-live into a sinful will-to-power. But the will-to-power always hides behind the natural will-to-live. France's vindictive oppression of her German foe was prompted by genuine fears, lest she be destroyed if the foe should arise and regain his strength. But the spirit of vengeance against this injustice was the very force by which the foe arose; and now that he has arisen he seems to dream of gaining sufficient strength to become forever impreg-

nable. The Germans speak with religious fervour of an "eternal Germany"; but the policies by which they seek to gain this strength make the whole of Europe insecure. In this insecurity one may already discern the forces which will destroy German security before it is fairly established. "Eternal" Germany is haunted by the spectre of dissolution; which is the reason why she dreams so fantastically of her eternity and seeks so frantically to establish it.

This is the vicious circle in which sin inevitably involves the man or nation who tries to gain immortality. The moralist will draw the obvious conclusion from such a portrayal of the facts that the nations ought to learn what individuals have long since learned: that collective security is preferable to the anarchy of conflicting interests. Such a conclusion is legitimate and necessary. But it does not solve the total problem. Among the false prophets who say, "Ye shall have assured peace in this place," are both realists and moralists. The realists condone the struggle for power as an inevitable extension of the will-to-live and therefore morally permissible. The moralists believe that because such a struggle is obviously suicidal it should not be too difficult to dissuade men from it. The moralistic prophet is not as false as the first. He is at least capable of speaking a warning "Thus said the Lord" to particular nations at particular times. Yet this moralism is false

prophecy. Its error can be most briefly described as its failure to understand what Christian theology has meant by original sin. It does not see that man is not free to extricate himself from the vicious circle of sin, even if he recognises it as a vicious circle. This is true, if for no other reason, because even though he can see how others are involved in it, he never believes himself involved. In himself the will-to-power always seems to be perfectly justified by impulses of survival and policies of defense. It is this very blindness and self-deception which constitutes the mystery of sin. For it is really a mystery. No one, not even the most astute psychologist, has ever made a perfectly convincing anaylsis of the comparative degrees of ignorance and dishonesty which enter into it.

IV

Once this is recognised, the prophet is under compulsion to speak a woe, not only upon specific forms of human injustice but upon the human heart for its perennial injustice and the recurring tragedy of its self-defeating sin. Then he will be able to offer no civilisation "assured peace in this place." Then man will be forced more and more to rely upon an ultimate mercy to resolve the paradoxes of his life. Perhaps there is an equal danger of false prophecy in such a word of judgment upon all life and every civilisa-

tion. Such a prophecy may fail to explore the moral possibilities which actually exist in every human civilisation. Individuals differ in the degrees of ego-centricity which they express. Nations differ in the wisdom with which they seek to gain a more ultimate collective security in place of the tentative security of their own power. There is always some possibility of fulfilling the law of life, which is the law of love. Individuals may, on occasion, forget themselves and discover that self-realisation is the consequence of such forgetfulness; and that it is most surely its consequence if it is not its designed and desired end. To the prophet's task, therefore, belongs the duty of revealing the way of God more perfectly. That means suggesting alternatives for specific sins.

A dominant class must be told that there is no security in increasing oppression of a resentful oppressed class. Sooner or later injustice will create the force of vengeance by which it is destroyed. The nation must be told that no nation can be strong enough to protect itself against all of its foes, particularly since its strength arouses new enemies against it. Individuals must be taught the self-defeating character of every form of ego-centricity. The prophet Jeremiah defines one of the marks of the good prophet as his ability to cause "my people to hear my words, then should they have turned them from their evil ways." Moral counsel belongs to the

task of true prophecy. But if this moral counsel is not informed by a profound understanding of the human heart it will be easily tempted to regard some partial victory over human sin as the ultimate victory. It will fail to see how perennially and inevitably the human soul is involved in the self-defeat of sin, no matter what level of righteousness it achieves.

Thus the false prophet of our day imagines that commercial and trading nations have discovered the law of mutuality by which social enmity is destroyed. They glorify the prudent internationalism of the trader. Yet a trading civilisation is involved in more bitter international quarrels than any civilisation of history. Thus too the false prophets of our day speak of our bourgeois civilisation as a "Christian" civilisation because it is democratic, imagining that democracy represents something of the eternal and ultimate spirit of love. These same false prophets claim God for their civilisation and pronounce maledictions upon any one who suggests that even a democratic civilisation may stand under the judgment and the doom of God. A New York minister, whose sermon was recently reported in a metropolitan daily, spoke in this spirit. He said: "Let us not listen to the croakings of the pessimists who prophesy the end of our civilisation. God's arm is not shortened that he cannot save. Let us implore his aid in our extremity and we will live to praise his name." Thus

a modern sermoniser expresses sentiments strikingly similar to the ancient words which fell under Jeremiah's strictures: "They say unto them that despise me, the Lord hath said ye shall have peace—no evil shall befall you."

The false prophet does not see that democracy may be little more than the luxury of a stable civilisation, in which the social struggle has been mitigated for the time being because one side has so much power that the other side cannot challenge it, or because there has been so much comparative affluence that injustice is obscured by the comparative comfort of the oppressed. But when a contracting economy destroys the total wealth of a society and when the stabilised social equilibrium is disturbed, the social struggle breaks out afresh; and there is no guarantee that such a struggle may not break the forms of democratic arbitration of rights and interests.

No society and no individual can ever escape the vicious circle of the sin which aggravates human insecurity by seeking to overcome it. All societies and individuals therefore remain under the judgment and the doom of God. Their hope must therefore always lie in a mercy which is able to overrule the angry passions of men, in a Kingdom of God which will bring the kingdom of sin to naught. The more they understand this, the more will they be able to build

civilisations in which the sinful aggravation of the struggle for existence is mitigated.

V

The temptations to false prophecy are so ubiquitous that any sensitive teacher of the word may well be driven to the edge of despair. It is so easy to condemn flagrant pride and to condone a subtle form of it; to outlaw overt injustice and to sanction a covert form of it; to condone the security of power because its tentative necessity is recognised; or accept injustice complacently as the price and inevitable consequence of power; or to encourage men to the illusory hope that they may build a world in which there is no power, pride or injustice. How can all of these temptations be avoided? They cannot. All of us will always have something of the false prophet in us, wherefore we ought to speak humbly. We will mistake our own dreams for the word of God. Sometimes sloth will tempt us to make a superficial analysis of the moral and social facts with which we are dealing; sometimes pride will tempt us to speak as if we had already attained or were already made perfect; sometimes cowardice will tempt us to make concessions to the immense, blind and stubborn self-righteousness with which every culture, every nation and every individual wards off the word of God.

It is instructive that the same Jeremiah who spoke so uncompromisingly against the false prophets tried to return his prophetic commission to God. He was not certain that he was worthy of it, and he doubted his courage to maintain the integrity of the word of God against the resistance of a whole generation which demanded security from religion and rejected the prophet who could offer no security on this side of repentance. His commission was returned to him by the Lord with the demand that he "separate the precious from the vile" in himself, so that he might be worthy to be a prophet. Thus the Church can disturb the security of sinners only if it is not itself too secure in its belief that it has the word of God. The prophet himself stands under the judgment which he preaches. If he does not know that, he is a false prophet.

Six:

THE ULTIMATE TRUST