

What We Are and Where We Are

by

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AN increasing number of people in the West, Christian as well as non-Christian, dismiss as naive or childish many of the beliefs which their ancestors regarded as essential elements of Christianity; and there is one particular set of beliefs that has been cast aside with real indignation. These are beliefs derived from the doctrine that human acts have repercussions far beyond the frontiers of the human world and may provoke, in the very nature of things, reactions which our language defines in terms of punishment and suffering. In earlier times the process whereby these consequences come home to roost was seen as a divine Judgment and this suffering was described in the picturesque but compelling imagery of the pains of hell.

How could this God of the Sunday Schools allow his well-meaning, "fundamentally decent" children to suffer in perpetuity for faults and weaknesses which are "only human" and which, in any case, usually derive from environmental factors rather than from the personality of the sinner? Obviously, he could not. But then one is logically compelled to ask how he can permit many other things which do, undeniably, exist: war and oppression, cancer and the wide spectrum of physical and mental "handicaps". It is something of a mystery that such a God should allow the world to exist at all.

"Glorified be God with a glory remote from all representations of him", say the Muslims. Remote from the representation of a good man writ large, remote from the image of human fatherhood lifted to a higher plane and infinitely remote from the Dear Old Man in the Sky. Being human, we have need of images as rungs of a ladder leading to That which is without image, incomparable; but when we take these provisional supports too literally and draw final conclusions from them we enter the region of the absurd.

The fear of hell has made countless men turn round, face their goal and move towards it when, but for this fear, they might have wandered away and been lost in the shadows. If fear sets a man on the path to safety and towards the recognition of his true nature, then fear has its use; and, since human responsibility exists and since acts do have owners to whom their consequences are related, there are indeed things to be feared and there is no deception in the imagery of fire and brimstone. It is, however, an imagery that suggests punishment coming from outside ourselves (even when Selfhood is taken in its deepest sense), quite alien to all that we are. In an age in which men are already profoundly alienated from their roots and their world, this imagery threatens a further alienation, not because it is inherently false but because it is readily misunderstood by those who have lost all sense of unity.

Not that we are free to alter doctrine to suit our needs. What we can do, however, is to recall aspects and elements of doctrine that have been forgotten over a long period and to place a new emphasis upon them. Since the idea of responsibility carries little weight if it is confined entirely to the social realm and since any extension of responsibility beyond this realm implies that super-natural consequences attach to human acts, we need to be reminded that, in religious terms, we are judged, not by some alien despot who rules—or misrules—the universe, but by the Norm inherent within us.

"Fire will invade, envelop all", says Thibon, writing from the Catholic point of view: "All will be judged from within and, so to say, by its own self".¹ "Whosoever sins, sins only against himself",² says the Qoran; and again, "Read thy book. Thy soul suffices as a reckoner against thee this day".³ In every religious context we find the doctrine that divine Judgment (under whatever name it goes) is neither more nor less than the stripping away of every kind of falsehood and self-deception, with a consequent exposure of what we really *are*. Our true identity had been mercifully veiled from us —this was our freedom and our opportunity to exercise responsibility within our given field—but at the last the veils are drawn away, the comedy is over, and we are shown to ourselves.

¹ L'Echelle de Jacob: Gustave Thibon, p. 94.

² Qoran, 4:3.

³ Qoran, 17: 14.

Our actions are the outward sign of what we are. This is their chief significance and this is why a change in a man's basic nature—"repentance"—is said to free him from the burden of his past sins, however black they may have been. Those who regard as absurd the notion that a man could deserve supernatural punishment for some apparently trivial sin are right, so long as the situation is defined in this way. But it is not the sin that is punished. It is the profound inner warping which betrayed itself through this sin that stands revealed—and is to be measured against the Norm—when time and obscurity are brought to an end.

And yet our acts can never be disowned, any more than we can disown our limbs. "This Day", says the Qoran, "We seal up mouths; and hands speak out and feet bear witness to their doings".⁴ As was suggested earlier, the distinction commonly made between a hard core of individuality and the web of action within which it operates is a convenient but superficial distinction. The person as a whole, as the manifestation of a particular pattern in time and space, is not subject to chance or accident: whatever happens to him and—most important of all, in view of contemporary efforts to exempt from responsibility those who act "under orders"—everything in which he takes part is an aspect of his total nature. The paradox in which human reason can find no reconciliation lies in the fact that this total nature, though already complete beyond our existential context, is—from our point of view and in our experience—in the process of formation, still malleable, still alterable. And our experience represents something inherent in the nature of reality. We do not merely have an illusion of freedom. We are free, but only relatively so. Absolute freedom is a quality that belongs to God alone.

There is no need to labor this riddle, for no amount of twisting and turning in the corridors of reason will solve it; but the emphasis upon experience—our consciousness of happenings, together with the ideas and feelings which they provoke—is essential to an understanding of what the traditional doctrines have meant by "hell". "The damned souls are in Paradise", said Simone Weil, "but for them Paradise is Hell". It is in rather the same paradoxical spirit that the Zen Buddhists tell us that this present world of time and space (and suffering) is none other than the timeless Nirvana. Hell is not a locality but a state of being and therefore, in our terms, a state

⁴ Qoran, 36:64.

of experience. The experience, perhaps, of the intractably imperfect in the presence of the Norm from which it has departed and to which it refuses to return. The damned soul, says Thibon, is "an essentially refractory being, for ever consumed by flame and for ever powerless to become flame".

Hell is an alienation so extreme that the only way in which the damned can experience their own totality is in terms of pain. Like the madman convinced that the person who loves him most is his deadliest enemy or like the victim of hydrophobia who dies in an agony of thirst though water is at hand, the damned are meshed in an evil dream which disguises the most benign objects in shapes of terror and malignancy. This infernal state is, according to traditional teachings, the result (from our point of view, here and now) of a misuse of our relative freedom, a refusal not only to be what we are—in terms of our Norm—but also to accept the burden imposed upon us as responsible beings and to face the fact that our actions and their consequences have a significance far beyond the narrow field in which they are initiated.

"Since we are 'not other' than the Self", says Schuon, "we are condemned to eternity. Eternity lies in wait for us, and that is why we must find again the Centre, that place where eternity is blessedness. Hell is the reply to the rim which makes itself centre or to the multitude which usurps the glory of Unity; it is the reply of Reality to the ego which wants to be absolute..." We are condemned to totality because no amount of wishful thinking and no amount of theorizing, no sheltering under the earth's weight and no act of self-destruction, can make us less than we are. We can only pretend to be less than viceregal creatures with a viceregal responsibility, and this is the pretence that is to be stripped away on the Day of Judgment.

According to the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, "The greatest evil is to forget that thou art the son of a King". This forgetfulness is closely bound up with the desire of the human 'ego' to set itself up as a false absolute (on however petty a scale), which is why it has even been suggested that hell contains only those who prefer to be where they are and reject the offer of release. So it is said in Islam that the souls in hell enjoy, each of them, some particular pleasure or apparent advantage which roots them in their condition of misery, unwilling to break out of this dark dream and face the light.

In denying or forgetting his viceregal identity—his divine ancestry —man loses a dimension of his being, but through this amputation he gains an illusion of self-sufficiency and of freedom from responsibility, a little king who no longer recognizes that his castle is held in fief and that he has an account to render. This deceptive freedom has made possible the development of contemporary science and technology and has led to the unprecedented exploitation of the natural world (both animate and inanimate). It has enabled modern man to commit monstrous crimes against his fellows and against his environment (therefore ultimately against himself) without any awareness of guilt so long as he has been acting as massman, as a member of an organized multitude "doing his duty". Yet this has in no way freed him from an obsessive sense of guilt in his personal life, as an individual acting alone, indeed there has never been a greater fear of taking risks than there is among the bourgeoisie of our time.

The exercise of human responsibility may well involve the readiness to take tremendous risks and to assume an unavoidable burden of guilt; but this burden is intolerable only so long as we refuse to see it as a condition of our existence. The soldier who kills because he is commanded to do so and the civil servant administering regulations which cause harm and suffering imagine themselves exempt from responsibility—"I didn't make the rules!"—without being able to say to whom their acts belong, if not to themselves, imagining that so long as they are in uniform or dressed for the Office they are less than men. Do they suppose that responsibility rests solely with those who give them their orders? They are servants of God, not of their fellow men; and if they obey their fellow men this is their choice and the responsibility is theirs. It is not by chance that a particular man is in a particular place at a particular time and acts according to the circumstances. That is where he is because he is what he is; and he stands to be judged for what he is.

The Christian tradition has given an intensely emotional flavor to ideas of sin and guilt, partly by taking the view that the sinner is "hurting" a loving Savior through such acts of disobedience and partly by the emphasis it has placed upon the fatherhood of God, so that emotions derived from childhood situations attach to the sins of the adult. This emotional attitude, perfectly in place within the body of the Church, has persisted among those who are no longer Christians and for whom, therefore, there can be no confession, no expiation and no

forgiveness. In the Christian it may be an aspect of health; in the ex-Christian it is often a sickness.

Awareness of guilt in the sense of a personal, intellectual recognition of what we are and where we are is perhaps the beginning of realism and the knowledge that we are responsible beings. But guilt as an emotional condition tends to be at once paralyzing (so far as the individual is concerned) and destructive (in terms of human relationships): it is in essence a feeling of alienation. Whereas the awareness of guilt is, in its basic character, an awareness that we are not what we should be; that we misuse our powers and misrule our kingdom. In Christianity it is bound up with the knowledge of an original sin constantly sustained, in Islam with the knowledge that the compact made by all souls "when they lay within Adam's loins" has been broken, and in Hinduism with the doctrine of 'karma' and of the chain of actions and reactions which has brought us to this twilight place. To say that we should be "better" than we are at once reduces the question to the level of moralism and sentimentality. What we should be is other than we are, more truly ourselves in terms of our own Norm.

But since we can only start from where we are and only initiate action in the place in which we find ourselves, it is as sick men that we begin our work and the world with which we have to deal is a ruined paradise. Perfection is far off and, under the circumstances in which good is inextricably mixed with ill and every light projects a shadow, none but the saints can act responsibly without incurring some further burden of guilt.

What is required of us is not that we should try to achieve an impossible purity of action but that we should learn to discriminate between the relative goods presented to us as our field of operation, situating each thing in its place and at its level in the total order, reconnecting where connections have been broken and reuniting where unity has been shattered. This we can do only if we are prepared to understand our real situation and, at the same time, to turn our faces towards our own true centre and, by focusing our attention upon it however distant it may seem to be—begin to draw the scattered elements of this situation towards it.

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Man is committed at birth to two journeys. The first he cannot escape, for this is the journey of action and experience as he travels down the stream of his own lifetime and creates—a man of his period, localized in time and space—a story which is an expression, in this particular mode, of his ultimate identity. The second journey, which can—at least in a certain sense—be avoided, is upstream, using time and locality only as starting points, leading beyond their zone. This is the journey described in countless myths and legends, the arduous, perilous way towards the centre of being, the passage from the ephemeral and illusory towards the eternally real. It was to provide a landscape for this journey that the monster Chaos was slain and an ordered world raised from the waters, and it was to provide a negotiable way through this landscape that the prophets labored, Christ died and Muhammed led the people of the City into battle in the Arabian wastes.

In a normal society the circumstances of the first journey provide supports for the second, and it was man's aim in the past to build and maintain a physical and social environment in which every element had a dual character, existing as a 'thing' in terms of the first journey, standing as a symbol and signpost in terms of the second. For a very long time now the routes of these two journeys have been diverging, and it is not by chance that the last of the great, world-transforming Revelations laid such particular emphasis upon the duty of pilgrimage: the pious Moslem on his way to Mecca is like a dancer who, by the steps he takes towards the physical symbol of all centrality, acts out the drama of his own inner, timeless journey, just as, in his obligatory prayers, he creates a tiny area of consecrated territory—confined to the dimensions of his prayer-mat—in an environment that has become almost totally profane. From this point of view it might be said that the sacred rules of Islam were specially designed to protect the traveler in a world which no longer offers him any foothold.

But the fact that we find ourselves now in a world in which the two paths have diverged so far that they can scarcely any longer be related to each other is not, in the last analysis, a senseless accident. The human world, being what it is, could only decay in the course of time, but, since decay is itself a necessary aspect of a larger pattern and since there are possibilities which can only find existential expression in such a context as ours, this is where we belong. We live out our lives here and now (rather than in some paradisaal environment) because it is our

nature to be where we are. And we are told that there are compensations available to such as us which were not available to the less degenerate men of earlier times. "You are in an age in which, if you neglect one-tenth of what is ordered, you will be condemned", the Prophet of Islam told his Companions, "but after this a time will come when he who observes one-tenth of what is now ordered will be saved".

Modern man is weak, not to say feeble, and he is at the same time subject to pressures and to temptations unknown to the people of earlier times; moreover he lives in an environment so hostile to religion and to the sacred in its terrestrial forms and in its very texture that divine Justice must allow for this and we cannot be judged by the standards which might fairly be applied to our ancestors, living, as they did, in an environment in which it was "natural" to be religious. But if we have a quite special claim to Mercy, there is still one vice, sin or crime which excludes the possibility of forgiveness, and this is refusal of the Mercy that is offered us. One might say that we are like drowning men to whom a hand is held out. If we refuse to recognize this hand for what it is, if we will not grasp it, then there is no hope for us.

The great revealed religions and the truths inherent in the ancient traditions of humanity are, by definition, "a mercy to mankind". So, to a lesser degree, are the saints and men of true piety. So also is the sacred in all its ramifications, whether in the form of temples and sanctuaries built by hand or in the splendor and beauty of virgin nature. To scorn sanctity when we find it among men or to defile the sacred is therefore the gravest form of what Christians call the sin against the Holy Ghost. It is to trample Mercy underfoot.

Here, in human terms, we meet with a paradox. The relative can make no impact upon the Absolute. Man, however much he may blaspheme or rebel, can do no injury to God. But the manifestations of Mercy in this world are, of necessity, more fragile than their author. The sacred is vulnerable. We have to tread very carefully upon this earth, for it is scattered with the signs of divine Mercy. We have to be aware of the wonders that surround us and take care not to damage them, both for our own sakes and for the sake of others who might find their salvation here or there, among the little things that are so easily destroyed.

On the one hand there are these "little things" in which Mercy lies half-concealed; on the

other, the daily trivialities which seem so important to the men of our time and which they cherish with such blind devotion. What is required of us is an act of discrimination between gold and straw, between sacred and profane; required of us precisely because it is our nature to be capable of this act. And, in a world encumbered with distractions, such discrimination becomes increasingly necessary. The further the world moves from its source and is stripped—or appears to be stripped—of supernatural meaning, the more necessary it becomes to concentrate our attention upon essentials, and for beings who are here so short a time, whose powers decay just as they are learning to use them and who die long before they are ready to go, there cannot be many essentials. In our context very little matters, but that little matters enormously.

The complexity of modern life is a surface complexity in that most of the strands which compose it are woven from artificial needs, unreal obligations, trivial ambitions and, above all, glossy but unsatisfying substitutes for the few things really necessary to the accomplishment of the human journey (in either of its aspects). The hostility of all religions to "riches", their praise of "poverty", is to be understood primarily in a spiritual sense and therefore links up with archaic man's indifference to actions and events which do not bear the stamp of That Time, the stamp of eternity. In both cases it is the unreal—or the "less real"—that is to be feared in so far as it threatens to dissipate man's energies (and his capacity for giving attention) in the wilderness of quantity. And it is precisely by giving the whole weight of our attention— an attention so powerful that it is said to be capable of penetrating the veils which hide the light of heaven from us—upon the realm of quantity and relativity that we have been able to build the scientific and technological wonders of our age.

Anyone, any race, could have done it, given the willingness to make the Faustian sacrifice upon which the whole edifice depends. It happened to be the Europeans who first turned their backs upon the light in order to conjure marvels out of the darkness, but other races have lost no time in following suit: the notion that it is possible to have the best of both worlds is ludicrous, since human attention cannot be focused in two opposite directions. But in view of the tremendous though misdirected energies which we have concentrated upon our own particular and limited level of existence, it is surprising that we have not achieved more than has in fact been achieved. For all our fine sentiments, we are no closer to creating a heaven on earth than we

ever were.

We never shall. In the long run, we can get no effective purchase on quantity. We are real and need to be matched with reality, whereas the realm of quantity (as opposed to the world of unique and significant objects) becomes increasingly shadowy as we pursue it down the corridors of time. The danger lies in the fact that the more shadowy and unrewarding this realm becomes, the more feverish is our pursuit of a satisfaction that constantly evades us and the more involved we become in haste and hullabaloo. The search for plenitude in the region of number, the pursuit of reality among husks and fragments that have become no more than units in a numbered sequence, is dissipation, and its final outcome can only be a fierce and despairing destructiveness. Everything disappoints and so everything must be punished for not giving us the satisfaction we crave. The thirst for the Absolute which is inherent in human nature is focused with a terrible and distorting power upon the partial and the fragmentary, and under the blaze of this attention even the most harmless objects are twisted into monstrous shapes, as though the sun were concentrating upon them through a burning glass.

Simone Weil speaks of the "monotony of evil", and monotony is one of the chief characteristics of the realms of quantity: "Nothing new—all here is equivalent". And evil as we know it in action is closely bound up with certain typical reactions to monotony: on the one hand an almost manic overvaluation of particular relative goods for their own sake and, on the other, boredom and despair in the face of a state of existence without grandeur and without ultimate significance. The man who clothes trivial things in robes of splendor and projects upon them his huge appetite for the real and the truly important is, in fact, father to the "disillusioned" cynic who perceives the hollowness of all such inflated goods but does not know how to go beyond this perception and refill the empty gourds. Thus we gravitate between an idealism that refuses to face facts and a cynicism incapable of penetrating beneath the surface of the factual.

Given the peculiar conditions of our time, there is a need for disillusionment. Illusions are sticky things and hold a man in their web, content when he should be discontented, happy to be where he is and unaware that any further journeying is required of him. In other periods, in "protected" environments, a certain optimism, a certain tendency to see the best in everything and to ignore the worm in the apple, did no harm at all; but in our case, hemmed in by so many

illusions and led astray by phantoms, a recognition that the profane world as such is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing" may be the beginning of wisdom and recall certain men to their responsibility for re-consecrating a desecrated environment.

But disillusionment when it is entirely passive, and when it represents little more than the angry disappointment of the greedy 'ego', issues only in despair. And despair, in the sense of a dead-end to journeying and a profound alienation from destiny, is more common than might be supposed. "*Mon cas n'est pas unique: j'ai peur de mourir et je suis navrée d'être au monde*".⁵ The term '*navré*' suggests something more subtle than grief. It suggests the boredom and disappointment of the soul which finds only monotony where it looked for splendor and dry wells where water should have flowed. But despair is not necessarily a state of constant unhappiness. There are a great number of men and women in our time who are quite without hope, in the Christian sense of the word, seeing only grey days ahead and a meaningless extinction when the grey days are done, but who are reasonably happy most of the time, find a certain satisfaction in their families and friendships and an even greater satisfaction in their work.

Yet they lead lives of quiet despair and are happy only on condition that they discipline their minds to reject "disturbing" or "morbid" thoughts. Less enterprising—perhaps less courageous—than those who seek satisfaction in danger, narcotics or sexual adventures, they are determined to make the best of a bad job. But this is not good enough, and under such sober and sensible attitudes there runs a current of bitterness which comes to the surface when certain notes are struck or when quite trivial ambitions are thwarted. It is in this context that ambition is so dangerous—not the great ambition which is focused upon power and glory but the little ambitions which are adjusted to the rungs of a promotional ladder or to "keeping up with the Joneses". In the first place, these offer a palliative to despair at times when despair should be squarely faced and transcended. Secondly, they force a man to take seriously occupations so trifling as to be unworthy of his full attention. Thirdly they lead ever further into the realm of quantity, their goal a will-o-the-wisp that constantly recedes. And finally they provide a handle

⁵ Opening sentence of '*Le Bâtarde*', by Violette Leduc (Gallimard).

by which men are all too readily manipulated.

The men of our time set their sights too low—this also is a symptom of despair—and are content (or try to believe they are content) with too little. We are made for better things than a seat on the Board or a Deputy Under-Secretaryship, not because such positions of relative eminence are anything less than worthy and enjoyable in themselves, but because their attainment depends (in an egalitarian and therefore competitive society) upon our giving to an entirely local and profane task all that we have it in us to give—and more than we have the right to give. A man "cannot serve two masters", our energies are limited (and our time is short), which is why they have to be contained and directed and why the human communities of earlier times were concerned that the tasks of the practical life should reflect and even embody the spiritual or ritual work through which we make our way towards the central place.

When the activities which keep the community in being, keep the wheels turning and provide for men's basic needs, take on the character of distractions, when they are irrelevant to any purpose beyond the immediate, practical one, then it becomes important that people should be frequently distracted from distraction (as, for example, the Moslem is by the prayers which interrupt his day's work) if they are not to be completely absorbed into natural process. We do not have the right to work hard at profane tasks unless under the spur of hunger or some equally urgent natural necessity.

It may be said that there is nothing to prevent a man combining intense spiritual concentration with an extremely active life in the world: many of the saints, both Christian and Moslem, have done it. But this is quite beyond the capacities of the majority of people, and a view that ignores the incapacities of the majority is in essence an impractical view. The factors in our competitive society which compel the majority to give their best (in the full sense of the term) to their jobs compel them also to ignore everything outside and beyond these jobs. And, this being so, the price we pay for the comforts and advantages of contemporary civilization is too high. We cannot afford the modern world.

Perpetuating in adult life the young child's competitiveness among his siblings, a society in which a man's position depends entirely upon his own efforts and talents (and in which these

efforts and talents must be fully applied throughout his working life) is precisely the kind of society required if all our energies are to be exploited in the production of social wealth. But this can only be a society in which all values are subordinated to the productive process. No one can rest without falling behind in the race, but it is only in rest from activities of this kind that a man can pursue the "second journey" or, in Christian terms, take care of his own salvation. And only by turning his back upon the realm of quantity and of quantitative rewards so that he faces the centre, the human Norm, can he exercise the responsibility which—as king of his small castle—he is born to exercise.

Compromise is possible in many fields, and the paradoxical nature of the world itself (so far distant from heaven, and yet not-other-than heaven in its ultimate essence) makes compromise a condition of human living. But there is one matter in which no compromise is possible. We are not two-headed creatures, we cannot face two ways at once, and sooner or later we have to choose in which direction our basic attention is to be focused. In the end it is not in terms of relative good or relative evil that a man is judged but in terms of the direction in which he faces.

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The fact that each man must make a choice is effectively concealed from the majority of people. As has already been suggested, the modern world carries with it a strong flavor of fatality—the kind of fatality inherent in natural process—and those who criticize it do so, for the most part, only on the grounds that it is not all it might be in terms of its own aims and ideals. Bettelheim's view that the basic choice of our times is between renouncing freedom and giving up the comforts of modern technology is not widely shared.

It becomes increasingly difficult to see ourselves as creatures made for choosing. Living much closer to the realm of material cause and effect than we do and believing in supernatural rewards and punishments as the ultimate consequences of the choice they made in the course of their earthly life, our ancestors could not doubt the importance of their own decisions. We, on the other hand, constantly doubt this. Convinced that the consequences of what we do are confined

to our locality and, at the same time, overwhelmed by the size and complexity of this place in which we find ourselves, we measure importance in terms of number and value our actions—if at all—only as contributions to some form of corporate achievement.

This is no doubt inevitable so long as we regard ourselves as clever animals dwarfed by the immensity of a hostile environment and as self-contained units dwarfed by the multitude. In appearance at least the decisions which shape the only world in which we believe are made by a very few men and our contribution can be measured only as an infinitesimal fraction of the decisive act. It is not that we consciously reject the more normal human view that one man's action can shake the very fabric of the heavens and the earth, that the descendant of Adam (before whom the angels were commanded to bow down) cannot be merely a contributor to anything, since he is not a part of some greater whole but a unique totality in himself, and that our responsibility is to God alone. We do not have occasion to reject it, since we have quite forgotten that it was ever normal to our kind. This is the measure of our diminution from man to manikin.

However overwhelming and, in many cases, alien our contemporary environment may seem to those who feel they have no kind of control over it, this environment matches with perfect correspondence the typical attitudes and state of mind of our time. The two cannot be separated, and the whole outer fabric of our existence is, in a very real sense, a projection of all that we cherish within ourselves. It can exist only because it is what, basically, we want, or—to put the point more accurately—it is an objective crystallization of our wants and of their unavoidable consequences. The same centrifugal process is at work both in the most intimate recesses of our nature and throughout the theatre in which our life experience unfolds.

This process is, in one sense, inevitable. In another sense it can proceed only by our permission. The traditional doctrines have viewed creation itself as a centrifugal process moving ever further from its centre, outwards into the wilderness, downwards into the abyss, until it reaches its limit ("a fraction of a degree above absolute zero") and is in cataclysmic fashion caught up, redeemed, brought back. The process is necessary because there are elements in the totality of Perfection which can only manifest themselves in distant places, like small lights which could never be seen in the neighborhood of the sun, and there are values which are made

complete only when tested among the fragments of a dissolving world. But, according to these same doctrines, man is made not only for choosing but also for returning and for bringing back. He alone of all that is created can maintain a direct connection with the centre and, by penetrating the thickening layers of cloud, remain aware of sunlight; and so long as he holds to this—his viceregal function—the fragments are kept whirling in meaningful patterns. Only when he lets go can chaos come again.

What the Moslems call the Holy War is in fact the opposition of the unified and God-centered man to the forces of dispersion and chaos both within and outside himself. Such warfare is likely, in our times, to provide a history of defeats and failures—at least so far as our environment taken as a whole is concerned—but this is precisely why we are told that less is expected of us than was expected of the men of other periods. Defeat does not matter, because it is by fighting this war that we become what we are, and the achievement of integrity is not dependent upon the quantitative and temporal outcome of the struggle. Our concern is only with doing what we are capable of doing. The rest is out of our hands.

Defeat is one thing, abdication another. And despair grows out of abdication rather than out of defeat. “What is the good of...” “What is the use of...”, are the catchwords of an age which measures everything in terms of immediate and seemingly objective success. We have the presumption to believe that we can foresee the ultimate effects of our actions, and this belief makes us impotent. Deprived in this way of our true function as men, there is nothing to prevent our being carried away downstream with the other débris of a broken world.

Ours is not a time for impotence. The events of the past fifty years suggest that the process to which Western man committed himself some centuries ago is speeding up at an all but uncontrollable rate and that the moment—the point of no return on the curve of progression—beyond which no real choice will be possible (short of the madman's compulsive decision to break free) is fast approaching. The world we have made is closing in upon us, the pressures are mounting, and techniques whereby men can be reduced to a condition only fractionally different to that of automata are improved year by year. The "developed" world, as it is so curiously called, with the “developing” world close on its heels, now seems to be possessed by an impersonal force quite outside the reach of our will, a force that means to prevail, regardless of

the transformation this requires in man's nature and in his status. Development, understood in this sense, obeys its own laws. They are not ours —or God's.

Yet it is only the little man meshed in this process, frightened of shadows, aware of his own weakness and dependence, who can stand up against the great wind. The big men will not help, for present circumstances must inevitably bring to power chiefly those who co-operate wholeheartedly with the course that events are taking and lend themselves as ready instruments to the prevailing force. It is not for them to cry "Stop!".

According to certain traditions, the burden of personality, which is also the burden of viceregal responsibility, was hawked around creation in That Time, the time of the beginnings, and was refused on every side—the very mountains are said to have trembled and fallen back in fear—until at last man accepted it. We are not free to lay the burden aside. Whether we know it or not, we are account-able for what happens to our province.

And this means that neither the lack of worldly power nor subordination to many masters in a giant organization suffice to exempt us from the necessity for choosing or to save us from the consequences of our choice. The little man in a big world may think himself weak as a kitten, seeking only to 'get by' and glad that the necessity for making great decisions devolves, not upon him, but upon those others whose orders he so readily obeys. He is deceived. Those others cannot bear his burden for him. He was born to it, having been born a man, and it is as much a part of him as his own flesh. Those who feel they have some kind of right to a quiet life have come to the wrong place.

The most menacing among the tendencies now at work in the world—menacing, that is, to what remains of man's freedom of movement—depend upon a general conviction that our responsibility is limited on the one hand to the realm of personal relationships and, on the other, to doing our "duty", understood in the sense of conscientiousness towards our employers and towards the organization in which we work. Behind this there is also a sense of obligation to "keep the wheels turning", and we are subjected daily to a flood of propaganda aimed at strengthening this sense of obligation and persuading us to play our part in the "march of progress" and to adjust ourselves to the "needs of the modern world". The notion that each

individual man is accountable, not merely for what he does "of his own free will", but also for every action in which he participates or assists is destructive of these limitations and calls into question the nature of this obligation. It is totally incompatible with the mechanism of the modern age and, above all, with the process whereby an age of complete human abdication—already prefigured in Communist societies—may be brought into being.

Accountability does not really diminish in proportion to the size of the organization in which a man is enmeshed; but the personal sense of accountability withers away. If three or four men band together in some enterprise, each will have at least a certain power of decision and a certain sense of responsibility for what is done. The larger the organization, the less scope there is for decision and the easier it becomes to forget that the consequences of our acts relate to us personally and directly. All that seems to be required of us is conformity.

And yet the conformist has made a choice, even if it was little more than the choice of abdication, and he is accountable for what is done with his co-operation. When a number of men unite to commit a crime which results in killing, all stand equally accused of murder. They are treated by the Courts, not as though a single act had been fragmented and the responsibility for it parceled out among them, but as though each, individually, was the one murderer. There can be no corporate ownership of human acts and no diminished responsibility when a man is acting in concert with others. We stand alone, each of us, burdened with all that we have done and all that has been made possible through our presence in a particular place at a particular time. This is an aspect of the grandeur of the human state, and this is what we are fit for; and from this there is no escape.

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No escape, that is, at our own level and within the existential frame of reference. If the matter rested here we would indeed be solitary stars in a firmament of darkness. But there are other dimensions than these. "I take refuge", say the Muslims; "I take refuge with Thee from the evil of my heart... I take refuge with Thee from an unprofitable knowledge..."; until the final cry

which completes the circle: "I take refuge with Thee from Thyself".

This belongs to the border country, where the human creature sets foot on the bridge provided. Beyond lies a less fearful region, and the 13th century Moslem saint, the Lady Rabiya, prayed, "My Lord, eyes are at rest, the stars are setting, hushed are the movements of birds in their nests, of monsters in the deep. And Thou art the Just who knows no change, the Equity that swerves not, the Everlasting that passes not away. The doors of kings are locked, watched by their bodyguards. But Thy door is open to him who calls on Thee. My Lord, each lover is now alone with his beloved. And I am alone with Thee".

The taking of refuge is from an imperfect world in which even heavenly fruit is worm-eaten and from a selfhood pitted and riddled with this same imperfection. But the place of refuge is at the centre, where the grim dichotomies are resolved and the shadows fall away. In relation to this centre, the "perspectives" come together as radii of a circle, and the multitude of points that jostle and conflict on the far circumference are placed and ordered, real in so far as they reflect a glint of the central light but something less than real in so far as they have gone out of that light. And the "evil" from which refuge is taken is not an evil inherent in human faculties or in their objects, but the quality of darkness that clings like a cobweb to these faculties and objects in so far as they are partial, shifting, fragmentary and incomplete in themselves unless their connection with totality is constantly renewed.

Since the centre is the place of unity and the source of such peace and reconciliation as we may know in our experience here on the circumference, it is also the source to which love relates, and the lover's eye already participates in the unifying and penetrating clarity which belongs to all central (as against peripheral) vision. The fact that some may suppose that what they saw when their sight was clarified was an illusion, a mere gloss on the ugly data of practical experience, alters nothing. For a person or a thing is, in truth, what God sees—not what we see with a cold eye, an avaricious heart and a jaundiced temper. Recounting the tale of Majnun and Layla, the heroic lovers of Islamic tradition, Rumi recounts how Layla was brought before the Ruler and how he said to her: "Art thou she by whom Majnun was distracted and led astray? Thou art no better than other fair ones". "Be silent", she said, "since thou art not Majnun!".

All that has been said of viceregal power and of that shabby King of the Castle who tends the crumbling walls while the waves eat them away; and all that has been said about responsibility as a dimension of our lives which cannot be measured against the standards which this world provides pre-supposes a doctrine of man's nature in terms of which his everyday personality is no more than the tip of an iceberg. It assumes his rootedness in a central place that is untouched by the winds and the tides we know and implies that the castle over which he rules is important only for the patterns which it briefly embodies in sand.

Meanwhile the supposed masters of this world, the leaders who have fought their way to the top of the human pile (and must fight without respite to stay on top), are too enmeshed in the processes now at work to look up for a moment from their eighteen-hour-day labors and see where they are going. Responding as best they can to crisis following upon crisis, and faced with logistic and administrative problems which are becoming increasingly unmanageable, they cannot afford to cultivate the lover's eye or the vision of the God-centered man. They are competent, but far from superhuman; and, gripped and mastered by the necessities of the moment and by the momentum of the world's descending course, they pull their carts as blinkered horses, seeing nothing but the road immediately in front of them. To stop now—even to pause for breath—would bring the turning wheels to a grinding halt. To attempt, even in small ways, to reverse the process and interfere with its gathering momentum would be to destroy the modern world as we know it.

Those who are able to throw themselves out of the vehicle and, in some last sanctuary, stand at the still centre of the world might expect to hear a huge din of overheated metal fading into the distance, in the direction of nothingness: a juggernaut with its great cartload of human souls.

In the midst of unprecedented change, flurry and pandemonium, the human situation remains what it always was. Man is still either Viceroy or usurper, still noble when he confers the beauty of form on his environment and criminal and damnable when he abuses it, and still able to look upon Layla with the eyes of Majnun. Truth remains what it has always been: accessible—though in varying degrees—to those who focus their attention, their love and their hunger in the right direction.

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To say that man has access to the Truth and can therefore be *right* is to say that appalling risks must be taken. The "tolerance" so highly valued in certain Western countries is based upon the unspoken conviction that no one can ever really be sure of anything and that all sincere opinions must be respected. This, at least, is the theory. In practice there are still many opinions that are not "respected": let anyone in Britain or the United States today express extreme Right Wing views and he will soon discover the limits of "tolerance". But the fact remains that the ideology of our time cannot admit that some men may be right in an absolute sense and others may be totally wrong.

There is good reason for this fear of any claim to know the truth. The majority of people no longer believe that the world, with all its business, rests in the hand of God. Modern societies are like trapeze artists performing without a net. Just as the individuals of which they are composed will do anything to put off the moment of death for every month, week, day that it can be postponed since they are unable to conceive that the end of human life could be the beginning of something better, so these societies, knowing that they risk destruction, imagine that survival depends entirely upon their own efforts and cannot admit that destruction comes about only by God's will and therefore in accordance with the very nature of things. Recalling the wars of religion which convulsed Europe in the past and fearing an ideological war in the future, there are many who wish all men could agree that there is no certainty in this world and that everything is a "matter of opinion". The contention that absolute Truth is accessible to mankind is incompatible with this wish.

The risk lies in the fact that the accessibility of the Truth in no way precludes self-deception. For every man whose vision penetrates to some aspect of the Real there will be a dozen who think they have Truth by the tail, when in fact a cloud or a trick of the light has deceived them. And yet this risk has to be taken—if only for the sake of the one who is right—since the alternative is a blind "tolerance" which makes no distinction between truth and error, allowing millions to go astray out of a misplaced respect for their false opinions. We in our time are more

afraid of fanaticism than we are of error, and such an attitude invites the unchecked spawning of every kind of falsehood. There is little virtue in watching a man walk confidently towards a precipice he cannot see and, out of respect for his belief that he is on the right track, refusing to check him.

So it is in the case of error; and error was never more flagrant than in our age of sophisticated naiveté in which men imagine that their own unaided thought processes can achieve some kind of objective certainty. But a greater problem is presented by the protagonists of partial truths, passionately attached to a particular and limited formulation and intolerant of other equally valid formulations. In West Africa a tale is told of the trickster divinity, Edshu of those trouble-makers found in a number of mythologies who set snares for the foolish and, at the same time, enlighten the wise. This same Edshu walked one day down the path between two fields wearing a hat that was red on one side, white on the other, green in front and black behind (these being, for the Yoruba people, the colors of the four directions or four compass points). The farmers watched him pass and, meeting that evening in the village, discussed the odd-looking stranger they had seen. "A little fellow in a red hat", said one. "Red? Nonsense! It was a white hat". Another: "Green!" And another: "Black!" The farmers came to blows, each knowing himself to be right, and they were brought before the headman for judgment. Now Edshu revealed himself, complete with multi-colored hat: deceptive dancer, trickster, prankster.

Until "Edshu" reveals himself, can we blame men for fighting on behalf of their partial truths? Passionate attachment to a particular formulation (and for many temperaments there can be no faith without passion) often involves intolerance towards other, complementary formulations; but to replace this narrow fervor with a tolerance based on agnosticism and indifference is to substitute a greater evil for a lesser one. From this point of view it is dangerous to over-estimate the intelligence of ordinary people, whether in the West or elsewhere. The man who has grasped one aspect of the truth, seeing clearly—for example—that Edshu's hat is red (or green, as the case may be) has made effective contact with reality and can therefore be said to be on the right track. If we tell him that he is indeed right, but only up to a point—certainly the hat is red, but it is also green—we may leave him so confused that he no longer knows the true from the false. A certain narrowness of view can have a protective function, but we must pay a price

for this in terms of intolerance and human conflict.

At the very basis of the contemporary gospel of tolerance lies the conviction that our earthly life is all that matters and that the peaceful ordering of human society therefore takes precedence over every other consideration. The priests who fixed their gaze beyond the temporal realm are gone. So are the knights, the warriors, who valued glory and honor above life itself. Only the bourgeoisie and the proletariat remain, and for them the piggery and the trough are the only reality there is. Social values become the only recognized values and a man's worth is assessed increasingly in terms of his usefulness to the community in which he happens to live, regardless of whether that community has any intrinsic value in terms of our ultimate end, our *raison d'être*.

We are, indeed, outwardly and partially social animals and, through one aspect of our multiform nature, members of the herd: but this is not the whole story nor anything like the whole story. Each of us stands alone before God, as though the earth were a desert in which no other man or woman was to be found; and each of us is alone in death as though there had never been companions, husbands, wives, children. Alone, too, in pain and in our inmost and incommunicable thoughts. Those we knew and loved in the short interval of our living were images, after their fashion, of Him in whose image we are made. But because each one of us reflects the One, other than whom there is no one and no thing, we are each, in essence, single and incomparable.

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The risk, the potentiality for disorder in the social realm, which accompanies faith in an absolute Truth attaches equally to the doctrine of viceregal responsibility. If jobholders and functionaries take it upon themselves to question (inwardly or actively, according to circumstances) the orders they receive and the policies they are required to implement we are on dangerous ground. How can the machine function unless its servants put aside all personal judgment and all sense of individual responsibility? To this the reply must be that the question is irrelevant. Men were not created to make such a machine work or to be automata in a regimented

society. First things must be put first, and a civilization which does not obey this simple rule—within the limits of the possible—carries within itself the seeds of its own necessary destruction.

One must in any case bear constantly in mind the fact that under the peculiar conditions of our time and, above all, under the conditions likely to be imposed in our children's time there are many worse things than disorder; and we do well to recall the nature of the obedience that made possible the existence and smooth-functioning of the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet labor camps. What is most feared under present conditions is anything that interferes with the process which is carrying us so swiftly downstream. Organizational man wants a quiet life, freedom from real responsibility, an artificial world in which nothing is left to chance and, quite particularly, the absence of "difficult" people who create "complications". We are under no obligation to give him what he wants.

What is being attempted in contemporary societies is the achievement of the kind of order and predictability that is characteristic of the machine, and this involves closing all the doors and windows through which a wayward breeze might bring disorder and unpredictability. Just as the laws with which our societies are encumbered are, in so many cases, designed to prevent a very few people from gaining an "unfair" advantage over their fellows, so the structure of these societies is increasingly determined by the desire to eliminate risk from human life. It is no coincidence that a world which goes to such lengths to "play safe" now faces dangers greater and more threatening than any that have been known in the past.

We do better to face the natural and, in a sense, providential risks inherent in our condition as human beings, rather than huddle together in a hygienic prison of our own making. There is no freedom that is not open to abuse, and abuses cannot be abolished without abolishing the freedom we need to become what we are; and if we say, as many do: "Chain me up, so long as my wicked neighbor is chained too", then we may be sure that powers more deadly than any wicked neighbor will bind us and use us. The history of human sanctity, both in the Islamic world and in Christendom, suggests that civil disorder, social injustice, the breakdown of amenities or the disintegration of central authority have not, in the past, been an obstacle to the achievement of man's true end. The real threat comes from a society which attempts to be all-embracing—in effect, "totalitarian", however democratic its forms—since such a society

threatens, by its pseudo-absolute claims, to suffocate those elements in man which are by their nature fitted to take him on his “second journey”, the only journey that truly matters.

The effort to eliminate risk, in common with all attempts to create a safe and comfortable refuge on earth without reference to any thing beyond this place, is symptomatic of the refusal to embark on the second journey. The first may be accomplished without any effort beyond what is needed to keep our heads above water, but the second is by its nature active, against the stream and full of risk. However powerful may be the certainties which accompany its later stages, the beginning is necessarily a leap in the dark, an act of faith; and this is more so than ever today, when neither our social environment nor the ideologies of our time encourage us to believe that the darkness contains anything more than dreams and illusions. Men who fear so many small things—being schooled in fear by the circumstances of their time—cannot face without some degree of horror the idea of risking everything upon so uncertain an enterprise.

The more effectively sealed and—in appearance—the more self-sufficient our world becomes, the harder it is to believe in any reality outside the bubble in which we are trapped. The great weight of human unanimity throughout recorded and rumored history might teach us otherwise, for even though this unanimity may be questioned in certain aspects, no one can doubt that ours is the first “culture” ever to have treated the physical world as a closed system. But most people are unable to learn from the past, since evolutionary theory and the notion of “progress” have persuaded them to discount everything that was thought or believed before our time. The whole emphasis of modern education is upon treating the beliefs of other times and other cultures as historical curiosities with no bearing on our present state. To exist as it is—to exist at all—the contemporary world has to seal itself off from everything that could disturb its illusions or undermine its complacency.

This is why, under present conditions, the “second journey” can only begin with an act of rejection, perhaps of demolition—a direct attack upon the barriers which block the exits and keep us revolving in a vicious circle—even though it may lead to an act of acceptance which recognizes all things *sub specie aeternitatis* and situates even the negative forces within a framework that makes sense.

The motives for setting out may be as various as are the characters of individual men and women: thirst for the Absolute and for an enduring Refuge, the impulse of lover towards Beloved, or a rage that tumbles prison walls and forces a way into the light and warmth of the sun. But the motives are not of lasting significance: what matters is that a choice has been made, a risk accepted and a first step taken. "Just as it is the nature of fire to burn", says a contemporary Buddhist writer, "so it is the nature of man—would he but remember it—to become Awake". We sleep, troubled by a multiplicity of dreams, but the traveler walks towards an awakening in which are known, at last, and fully enjoyed the realities foreshadowed in his dreaming; until his night is done with and an unimaginable daylight encompasses him.

Seen from here it looks a hard journey and a lonely one; yet none can number the multitude who have gone before us on this way and reached the other shore, and we are told in countless traditions—in religious doctrine, in universal myths and under the subtle disguise of "fairy tales"—that the traveler, far from being alone, is surrounded by helpers and that the very forces which once seemed most hostile now come to his aid. So it is often said that he does not, in truth, leave the world behind him, but draws it after him into the pattern of unity for which it craves. The self-enclosed man is friendless in a necessarily hostile environment, whereas the traveler, like those ancient heroes who were aided in their moments of greatest peril by birds and beasts and plants, is nowhere rejected.

It is from this journeying that he gains both the strength to bear his burden and the power to discriminate between the deceptive relativities of his world; and it is from a man's essential choice of direction, perhaps the only entirely free act of which he is capable, that the pattern of his life is built up. Here we stand, as creatures made for choosing; and we do not know, until the veils are lifted, how much depended upon our choice.