

A SELF-SACRIFICING GOD AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL.

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EMINENT authorities in science and philosophy frequently pass severe judgment upon the Christian doctrine of Atonement. The historic doctrine is declared to be essentially irrational and, more than this, to be positively inimical to right effort and moral development. Such beliefs, we are told by Sir Oliver Lodge in a recent article,* are "now recognizable as savage inventions" and hence are totally unacceptable to the religious consciousness of the present. Whatever force such criticism may have in other ways, it does not apply to one aspect of the doctrine in question,—*the revelation of suffering and self-sacrifice in the life and being of God*. It is my purpose in this article merely to suggest that this part of the Christian revelation is not repugnant to reason, and to point out how in one respect it has supreme value for moral and religious practice.

The rationality of the conception of a self-sacrificing God needs no defense, except from attacks in behalf of a logical consistency more formal than real. In previous times objections from such a source would require more serious consideration. To establish the possibility of suffering and self-sacrifice in the Divine nature, it would be necessary to prove that these qualities or manifestations can co-exist without contradiction along with other attributes such as, perhaps, immutability or imperturbability. But, happily, the tendency of our day is to consider it of primary importance that thought shall be concrete and practical rather than formally precise. Consequently, there is little inclination to condemn on account of any logical quibble a principle which has notable efficacy in adjusting the conflicting elements of human experience. Enlightened theists are agreed that the nature of God is most perfectly expressed

* Sir Oliver Lodge, "Suggestions Towards the Reinterpretation of Christian Doctrine." *Hibbert Journal*. April, 1904.

in His moral character and attributes. With the same unanimity, benevolence and love are recognized as the highest expressions of moral excellence. Furthermore, all human experience finds the culminating manifestation of love and benevolence in suffering and self-sacrifice for the sake of the cherished object. Therefore we should expect *a fortiori* to find these features most prominent in the life and character of God. To deny their possibility in His nature is to deny of God the height of moral perfection in all human understanding of it. Truly, such a conclusion would be a surrendering of the united testimony of our moral and intellectual faculties to a "metaphysical figment."*

More important for present consideration is the other question concerning the value of this revelation of the Divine nature for moral and religious living. To attempt a complete treatment of the subject would be to attempt a task which the totality of Christian thought in all the centuries of our era has failed to accomplish. My conclusion was stated somewhat abruptly in the opening paragraph. In justification of the position taken, I shall refer to only one conspicuous service rendered by the conception mentioned which is enough by itself to establish its surpassing worth for human life and conduct. This service is the solution of the problem of "physical" evil. By "physical" evil is meant the ill which man suffers from the operation of natural laws and forces and, in short, from every agency apart from human volition. The presence in human experience of an enormous amount of sorrow, suffering and destruction due to purely natural or physical causes is the greatest hindrance to belief in a beneficent Providence in the world or a Divine purpose in history. Because the conception of God suffering and sacrificing Himself for humanity contributes to the solution of this aspect of the problem of evil and thus removes the chief obstacle to belief in the "powers of righteousness" and to faith in the moral order, I venture to affirm its supreme value for moral and religious practice.

The nature of the solution provided for the problem of physical evil by the idea of a self-sacrificing God will be apparent when we consider two changes which this conception effects in our usual view of things.

As a revelation of the essence of the Divine nature, it gives such positive significance to suffering and self-sacrifice in the discharge of duty that much of human suffering appears not as a

* Principal Caird, *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, II., p. 144.

negation of life but as the elevation of the sufferer to a higher and more real plane of living.

Notwithstanding their ruthless operation the laws and forces of the physical universe have revealed to the mind of man the existence of a Supreme Being of infinite power and majesty. The indestructibility of the basic material in nature suggests the permanence of a Being more everlasting than the hills. The fixity of His purpose is indicated in the uniformity of natural law. The decrees of God are as certain as the rising and going down of the sun. The persistence of physical energy typifies His irresistible power, as silent and inexorable as gravity. Such a Being of infinite might may well evoke feelings of deepest awe and reverence. But the homage paid is rather that of fear than affection. While man is constrained to worship a Being so majestic, there is no ground for assuming in Him a kindness that is considerate of human interest or careful of human welfare. In fact the natural order suggests upon its face an unbending and despotic will much more than a merciful Providence. Some have thought to find in the beauty of nature an evidence of the gentler side of the Divine character. But this is scarcely possible. The beautiful and the sublime in nature may be manifestations of the symmetry or splendor of the Divine personality; but these attributes do not necessarily imply a disposition to kindness or benevolence.

The effect of thus understanding the character of God solely through its revelation in the natural world is to put exclusive emphasis upon physical existence and efficiency in the life of intelligence. Not that we are impelled in this way to a materialistic conception of the universe, or to deny the personality of its Author. Since intelligence is the outcome of the natural evolution, it must be predicated of its ultimate ground. But because our conception of the Supreme Being is derived solely from His activity in nature we are bound to conceive of the reality of Absolute Intelligence as essentially expressed in the world of matter and of energy. Thus, if the only manifestation of the Divine nature is given in the evolution of the physical universe, man is compelled to conceive of the highest possible reality for himself or any other intelligent being in like terms of natural force and actuality. God and man have intelligence and personality in common. But God's life is to man's as countless cycles of alternate evolution and dissolution are to a short span of years. God's power is to man's as the momentum of a planet is to the strength of a human limb. God's purpose is to man's as the outcome of history is to the issue of one man's ambi-

tion. In short, the comparative reality of any person's life will depend upon the length of his physical existence and the amount of his physical energy.

If in this way we define the reality of intelligent life in physical terms, it follows necessarily that any shortening of the existence of an intelligent being or diminution of his potential energy will be a direct negation of his reality. Hence the many natural agencies which tend to curtail and cut off human existence,—calamity, disease and death,—are in the extreme sense evils; for they destroy the very essence and reality of intelligent beings. From this point of view, physical evil appears as a monstrous enigma, the spectacle of a Supreme Being in the natural exercise of His powers implicated in the torture and destruction of countless numbers of His creatures,—a spectacle which mocks both faith and hope. And this is the thought to which we have been coming. The conception of God derived from His revelation in the physical universe does not aid in solving, but rather aggravates the problem of evil. For if we thus understand the divine character in terms of infinite force and unending existence, in the same way we must construe the reality of every intelligent being. Furthermore, since physical evils do diminish man's strength and terminate his existence, they utterly annihilate his reality, and set at nought his every striving toward the infinite and eternal. If such is the fate which God has prepared for His creatures it is impossible to maintain belief in His goodness or faith in His moral order.

But let us add to the conception of God derived from the physical order the Christian revelation of His character as expressed in suffering and self-sacrifice. The majesty and power manifested in nature are not contradicted by this profound benevolence. Rather they are wholly absorbed in it and expressed through it; for, in the light of this new understanding of the Divine nature, infinite strength is seen to be subservient to infinite love. Such an alteration in our conception of the Ground of all being effects an entire transformation in our conception of reality in general. The real essence of intelligent personality is seen to reside not in its physical powers but in its moral capacities. If Absolute Intelligence finds fullest self-expression in sacrifice and suffering for cherished creatures, the reality of human intelligence will be proportionate, not to the amount of physical existence and energy, but to the exercise of moral capacities for benevolence and sympathy. The greater the benevolence becomes, the wider the sympathy extends, the closer will the life of the finite intelligence approach the Absolute Life

and, consequently, the more reality will it possess. Since benevolence is most perfectly expressed in suffering and self-sacrifice, so in activities of this kind human life comes nearest to the Divine life and hence attains highest reality. Therefore, pain and even death undergone in the discharge of duty, or for the sake of others, appear not as a negation of life but as an elevation of the individual into comradeship with God, his initiation into a higher mode of existence, an "eternal" life.

Thus the conception of a self-sacrificing God enables us to overcome one difficulty in the great problem of physical evil. By it we are given reasonable ground for believing that the pain and suffering, inflicted by natural agencies upon a man who is fulfilling his obligations and laboring for the broader human welfare, do not destroy or diminish his life, as certainly appears; but, if bravely borne in the pursuit of the chosen vocation, they are instrumental in giving to their victim more reality and a higher life. It is true that only those ills which are directly involved in altruistic endeavor come under the category of self-sacrifice. But in a thoroughly unselfish life which is governed entirely by benevolent purposes and actuated throughout by feelings of humanity, many if not the most of the ills endured are so intimately connected with social service that they deserve to be considered as integral elements in a career of self-sacrificing devotion.

The revelation of the Divine character which we are discussing not only overcomes the gravest difficulty connected with the problem of physical evil, i. e., the "suffering of the righteous," but also provides a new standpoint from which the whole operation of natural law, with its apparent cruelty and ruthlessness, may be interpreted as the expression of an infinite benevolence, obscured only by the boundless extent of its activity.

Physical evil occupies so prominent a place in human experience that it can be explained by one of two extreme and antithetic conceptions of the Supreme Being. No God of passive goodness or colorless amiability could be responsible for the suffering and torture inflicted upon human beings by natural agencies. Either the Supreme Being is a veritable monster of cruelty who is oblivious to the agony of His defenceless creatures, or He is a God of benevolence and self-sacrifice, who is willing to share to the utmost the sufferings of His creatures in order that they may attain some higher good, some end of transcendent value which is a compensation for all the pain and suffering.

Of the two alternatives suggested, the former is perhaps the

more plausible if we confine ourselves to individual cases of calamity and destruction that have occurred within our own experience, and if we receive our ideas of the Supreme Being solely from the natural universe. To give the latter view of a God of infinite benevolence any degree of probability requires that we should take a wider outlook upon the problem of physical evil than is at first natural,—in fact that we should consider it rather in its universal aspects than in individual cases. Now, it is the merit of the Christian conception of a suffering and self-sacrificing God that it gives us such a new standpoint and induces us to take such a wider outlook. For a God who would sacrifice Himself for humanity would not be content with casual or sporadic expressions of His devotion to men, but His benevolence would be so wide and all-embracing that it could be obscured only by its vastness.

From this standpoint and this only the facts of physical evil admit of an explanation which is compatible with the demands of morality and the cravings of religious feeling. Taking a large view of man's experience, we are emboldened to ask if through the disastrous clashing of human personality with the forces of nature any end is attained of such transcendent worth as to commend itself both to the finite intelligence that suffers from the contact, and to a God of infinite benevolence. The result of man's experience in a world of uniform,—if inexorable,—law is not difficult to discover. Through continued observation of the regular sequences of nature, he has gained foresight, self-reliance, and the ability to protect himself. Such a result would be impossible in a world whose forces were incalculable and worked at haphazard. So also it could not be achieved in an environment whose agencies were miraculously guided at every turn so that human safety might be guarded. Even the direst accidents contribute indirectly to human well-being. For through the horror which they excite, society is aroused to take additional precautions for public safety, and thus more lives are saved eventually than were originally lost. The end attained through man's struggle with the forces of his environment is, therefore, the cultivation in him of *free and independent personality*. To man, this is a result of inestimable value, for it is the realization of those higher possibilities peculiar to human nature, the promise and potency of which raise man above the level of the brute and suggest his kinship to the Divine. It is a result which might have supreme value for a God of infinite benevolence, as well; for it represents the development of a society of intelligent persons who are appro-

priate objects of His care and devotion, and capable of returning to Him a tribute of disinterested love.

But the more difficult question is still unanswered. Was there no other way for a God of infinite power to achieve this result? Must man be exposed to the blighting ills of nature in order to win the dignity of free personality? In answer to this question I will only say in conclusion that one who can accept the Christian revelation of the Divine character has convincing proof that there was no other way as well as remarkable testimony to the value of the prize which man gains through his experience of earthly suffering, in the fact that God Himself has chosen to share the suffering and sacrifice endured by man in his painful progress upward.