

THE PROBLEM OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT IN JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU.

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THE dogma of original sin reduces itself briefly stated to the following: The main consequences of Adam's fall were twofold, physical death—the separation of the soul from the body, and spiritual death—the separation of the soul from God, as man no longer made God the end of his life but chose self instead. The responsibility for Adam's fall was placed on the entire human race "through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners."¹ In other words, Adam's sin was the cause and ground of the depravity, guilt, and condemnation of all his posterity. The dogma of eternal punishment is the natural corollary of the dogma of original sin. Separated from the soul man's body is in a continual state of pain due to the disturbance of the original harmony between body and soul. Separated from God man's soul is in a continual state of suffering and sorrow due to the absence of that which constitutes the true life of the soul, namely, the presence and grace of God.

To atone for Adam's sin, to save man from damnation by re-establishing the unity between man's soul and God, Christ descended on earth and suffered death by crucifixion. Faith in Christ as the son of God and the saviour of mankind is, therefore, the first and essential *sine qua non* for salvation: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."² The dogmas of original sin and eternal damnation form the basis not only of Catholic but also of Calvinistic theology. In fact, Calvinism stresses the above—dogmas much more than catholicism and limits very much the chances of the individual for salvation. For, while Catholicism proclaims that Christ has suffered death for

¹ Rom., v. 19.

² Mark, xvi. 16.

all men and that man is consequently to a certain extent the maker of his own salvation; Calvinism, stressing the teachings of St. Augustine and giving them its own interpretation, claims the absolute necessity of a special grace, not necessarily merited, for one's salvation. Calvinism represents man as sent into the world under a curse, as incurably wicked and doomed, unless exempted by special grace. He cannot, however, merit the special grace by any effort of his own. "To live in sin while he remains on earth, and to be eternally miserable when he leaves it—to represent him as born unable to keep the commandments, yet as justly liable to everlasting punishment for breaking them, is alike repugnant to reason and conscience and turns existence into a hideous nightmare."³

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Geneva was still to a certain extent, the Jerusalem of Protestantism. In spite of the somewhat liberal religious views of some of the ministers of the church, the general bulk of the ministry, as well as of the people, still clung tenaciously to the orthodox teachings of Calvin. The sermons which were so frequent at Geneva were full of exhortations to live up to the dogma and of detailed interpretations of the teachings of Calvin. Questioning the dogma of eternal punishment, for instance, or denying its validity, was a very risky and dangerous matter. David Noiret, once partner in Rousseau's father's "Dancing School" almost lost his life at the hands of a group of bourgeois because he dared to express the hope that his brother-in-law, a Catholic convert, may, after all be saved; as in both religions "the one and same God was invoked."⁴ At Neuchâtel the questioning of the justice of the dogma of eternal damnation led to civil commotion and disturbances. "It was at Neuchâtel that the controversy as to the eternal punishment of the wicked raged with a fury that ended in a civil war. The peace of the town was violently disturbed, ministers were suspended, magistrates were interdicted, life was lost, until Frederic promulgated his famous bull: 'Let the parsons who make for themselves a cruel and barbarous God be eternally damned as they desire and deserve, and let those parsons who conceive God gentle and merciful enjoy the plenitude of his mercy.'⁵

³ J. A. Froude, *Short Studies*, II, 3. Quoted from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, 199.

⁴ See E. Ritter, *La famille et la jeunesse de J. J. Rousseau*, p. 109.

⁵ J. Morley, *Rousseau*, Vol. II, p. 90. Cf. also Rousseau's own account of the affair in his letter describing Neuchâtel to the Marechal de Luxembourg. "Ils (les ministres) viennent encore d'exciter dans l'état une fermentation qui achèvera de les perdre. L'importante affaire dont il s'agissait étoit de savoir si les peines des damnés étoient éternelles. Vous auriez peine à croire avec quelle chaleur cette dispute a été agitée; celle du Jansénisme en France n'en

Such were the conditions and such was the religious state of mind of the environment in which Jean Jacques was born and reared. Endowed with an extremely vivid imagination Rousseau must have been deeply impressed with the sermons in church and the religious controversies and discussions outside of the church, in the streets and cafés. And, we may perhaps be justified in assuming that the germ of his mortal fear of being damned, which later in his life assumed an almost pathological aspect, took roots in the early years of his adolescence. We do know positively that as a youth Jean Jacques was pretty well versed in Calvinistic dogma and general theology. At the age of sixteen, while at the hospital of the Catechumens, in Turin, he gave rough battle to the priests who were to instruct him in the Catholic dogma. It was also at the same place that Rousseau was confronted in a rather ugly manner with the practical applications of the dogma of eternal punishment. It was put squarely before him by the Father Inquisitor as the final test before being received into the bosom of the Catholic Church. "After several questions. . . . he (the Father Inquisitor) asked me bluntly if my mother was damned. Terror repressed the first gust of indignation. . . . I hope not, for God may have enlightened her last moments."⁶

It was later, however, particularly during his stay at the Charmettes that Rousseau became literally obsessed by the fear of damnation. His readings may partly account for his state of mind at that period. He was studying then the writings of Port Royal and of Pascal, and Pascal's influence on his mentality must have been very great indeed. The passionate poet-thinker must have appealed greatly to the imagination of Rousseau, especially since Pascal's conception of man and that of Calvin were so very similar. The deep anxiety and sorrow of Pascal communicated itself to Rousseau's already feverish state of mind, and the result was a sort of pathological fear of death and damnation. The very idea of damnation caused him great mental agony and sheer animal fright. Madame De Warens, Catholic convert though she was, was still under the influence of Magny, the pietist, and she did her best to quiet Rousseau's fears, but her assurances that there was no hell and that the Lord was all merciful would disperse his fears temporarily only to

a pas approché. Tous les corps assemblés, les peuples prêts a prendre les armes, ministres destitués, magistrats interdits, tout marquoit les approches d'une guerre civile, et cette affaire n'est pas tellement finie qu'elle ne puisse laisser de longs souvenirs." (*Correspondance*, Vol. II, p. 177. Werdet et Lequien Fils, Paris, 1826.)

⁶ *Confessions*, Vol. I, p. 49; London, 1901.

come upon him again with greater force. "A dread of hell. . . little by little disturbed my security, and, had not Mamma tranquilized my soul, the frightful doctrine would have altogether upset me."⁷ Outwardly content and calm he was continually brooding over the idea of death and damnation. The dread of hell would come on him in the midst of his studies and he would then ask himself, "Should I die at this instant, would I be damned?" Haunted by these morbid thoughts, Rousseau had recourse to what he himself calls "les expédients les plus risibles" to free himself from that state of mind. "One day meditating on this melancholy subject, I exercised myself in throwing stones at the trunks of trees, with my usual dexterity, that is to say, without hitting any of them. In the height of this charming exercise, it entered my mind to make a kind of prognostic that might calm my inquietude. I said, 'I will throw this stone at the tree facing me; if I hit my mark, I will consider it as a sign of salvation; if I miss, as a token of damnation.' While I said this, I threw the stone with a trembling hand and beating heart but so happily that it fairly struck the body of the tree. . . . From that moment I have never doubted my salvation."⁸

We may reasonably doubt his last statement, though Rousseau's peculiar frame of mind would perhaps lend itself to such expedients. The fact, however, remains that even in his "happy days" Rousseau was tortured by the idea of damnation. His poetry, even, contains traces of that state of mind. In his "Épître aux religieux de la Grande Chartreuse" we find the following significant lines:

"Happy, indeed, if I could, living as you do,
Obtain his favors and calm his anger.

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Your enemy (the devil) beaten, ashamed of his defeat,
Comes not any longer to trouble your sweet abode,
Tranquil on the fate of your eternity,
You are already witnessing the beginning of your happiness;
And, my soul torn by thousand remorse,
Fears one day to be delivered to the demons and hell."⁹

Thus his "âme déchirée" was haunted by hideous images of flames and demons until the magic voices of Diderot, Holbach, Grimm, etc., dispelled their charm and rid him from their wicked power.

⁷ *Confessions*, Vol. II, p. 106.

⁸ *Confessions*, Vol. II, p. 107.

⁹ Quoted from P. M. Masson's *La Religion de Jean Jacques Rousseau*, Vol. I, p. 118. Mason's book is a real treasure to the student of the religious evolution of Rousseau. Cf. also, A. Monod, *De Pascal à Chateaubriand*, pp. 402ff.

In the course of the evolution of his religious views, Rousseau gradually frees himself from the nightmare of constant fright, but the problem itself is always present to his mind. Under the liberalizing influence of the philosophers, Rousseau's outlook upon life broadens and his conception of God becomes more spiritual and less dogmatic. In his daily intercourse with Diderot and his meetings with the other encyclopedists religion was certainly discussed and the supremacy of reason in religious matters supported. They, the encyclopedists, expressed themselves with great ease and displayed on every occasion their erudition. They had an almost blind faith in the truth of their theories, and they advertized them at every opportunity. To men like Diderot, D'Holbach, Helvetius, religious dogmas were baneful expressions of ignorance, fanaticism, mental perversion. And, there was nothing they hated so much as the Church and its representative—the priesthood. Rousseau was, for a long while one of them, and, although of a different religious mentality, he could not help being influenced by them. And so he was. "Philosophy, while it attached me to the essential part of religion, had detached me from the *thrash of the little formularies* with which men had obscured it."¹⁰ "Peu de dogmes et beaucoup de vertus" becomes his motto, and writing to Voltaire in 1756 he boldly states his belief that the Lord "will not refuse eternal happiness to any virtuous and earnest unbeliever." And in the same letter "The question of Providence is closely connected with the problem of the immortality of the soul, in which I am fortunate to believe. . . . and with that of eternal punishment in which neither you, nor I, nor any right-thinking man will ever believe."¹¹ Writing to Vernes two years later he again finds occasion to maintain "with regard to eternal punishment it does not accord with the weakness of man nor with the justice of God."¹² It is, however, only in his "Profession de Foi du Vicaire Savoyard" that Rousseau gives a sort of final battle to this herculean problem. In majestic and eloquent language, picturesque and passionate, Rousseau bitterly attacks those who gloating over the idea of hell "because they would like to damn everybody" have invented a cruel and blood-thirsty God. And he goes on to enumerate all the forcible objections to the dogma of eternal damnation:

"Two thirds of mankind are neither Jews, Christians, nor Mohammedans. How many millions of men, therefore, must there

¹⁰ *Confessions*, III, p. 73.

¹¹ *Correspondance*, I, p. 241.

¹² *Correspondance*, I, p. 328.

be who never heard of Moses, of Jesus Christ, or of Mohammed? Will this be denied? Will it be said that our missionaries are dispersed over the face of the whole earth? This, indeed, is easily affirmed; but are there any of them in the interior parts of Africa, where no European has ever yet penetrated? . . . Do they penetrate into the harems of the Asiatic princes to preach the Gospel to millions of wretched slaves? What will become of these secluded women. . . ? Must every one of them go to hell for being a recluse?

"But were it true that the Gospel is preached in every part of the earth, the difficulty is not removed. On the eve preceding the arrival of the first missionary in any country, some one person of that country expired without hearing the glad tidings. Now what must we do with this person? If there be a single individual in the whole universe, to whom the Gospel of Christ is not made known, the objection which presents itself on account of this one person, is as cogent as if it included a fourth part of the human race."¹³

The passage quoted above is a masterpiece of argumentation and it betrays at the same time all the grudge that accumulated in Rousseau's heart against the dogma. The enormous injustice implied in the dogma of damnation is very intensely expressed and the solution given is very characteristic of Rousseau. "Your God is not mine! He who begins by choosing for himself one people and proscribes the rest of mankind is not the father of the human race; he who destines to eternal punishment the greater part of his creatures, is not that good and merciful God whom my reason acknowledges."¹⁴ In other words to Rousseau the problem is no longer extant. The eternal damnation argument is a wicked and cruel human or rather priestly invention. He, Jean Jacques, does not conceive a God capable of such wanton and unjustified cruelty. Indeed, in his later works and correspondence, Rousseau, though returning now and then to the "cruel dogma," has but very little new to say. His last indignant outburst is found perhaps in his letter to M. de Beaumont: "How in heaven can one conceive a God who creates so many innocent and pure souls with the only intention of bringing them into guilty bodies, in order to make them morally corrupt, and to condemn them to hell, because of no other crime except their union with the body, which is his work!"¹⁵

One of the greatest human poets, Dante, was perplexed and irritated by the same problem of damnation: "A man is born on

¹³ *Emile*, Vol. II, pp. 94ff.

¹⁴ *Emile*, II, pp. 82ff.

¹⁵ *Lettre à M. de Beaumont*, p. 19.

the banks of the Indus, and there is no one there to tell, read, or write about Christ. All his acts and desires are virtuous. . . . He dies unbaptized and without faith, where is the justice that condemns him? What is his sin if he believed not?" (*Paradiso*, XIX, 69-78; cf. also *Paradiso*, XIX, 893-5, and *De Monarchia*, II, viii, 28ff.) Dante's answer to the question is orthodox Catholic: "Who art thou that wouldst sit on a bench to judge a thousand miles away with thy sight short of a span." The answer is, of course, entirely inadequate. It is a sort of rebuke for formulating the problem rather than an answer to the problem itself. And it was probably suggested to Dante by certain passages of the Book of Job: "Wilt thou disannul my judgment? Wilt thou condemn me that thou mayest be righteous?" (Job, xxxviii. 4; xl. 8.)

Dante was an ardent Catholic and as such he could solve the problem only in accordance with the letter and spirit of Catholic theology. And, however much he sympathized with the ancients, however keenly he felt the injustice wrought upon the "virtuous Hindu," he could not but meekly resign himself to the mystery of the dogma.

Both Dante and Rousseau affirmed the "insufficiency of reason in matters of faith." Dante, however, included in the field of faith not only the existence of God, immortality of the soul, etc., but also revelation, tradition, and all dogma. Rousseau, on the other hand, limited the field of faith to what to his earnest belief were the essentials, refusing to confuse "le cérémonial de la religion avec la religion." He then disdainfully rejected the competency of reason to deal with the essentials of faith, but loudly proclaimed its authority in matters of ceremonial and dogma.