

p94: Who Screwed Up?

Unfortunately, Christianity as a religion has never had a sufficient metaphysical understanding of its own core truth. The message gets obscured by its primary interpretive vehicle: the theology of fall and redemption. Virtually all Christian teaching begins from the supposition that Jesus's incarnation is brought about by the fall of Adam and happens in response to it. "As in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive" is the classic Pauline formation of this idea (1 Corinthians 15:20). The primordial parents Adam and Eve at the forbidden fruit and plunged the world into chaos; Jesus came to rescue it. Thus, incarnation is framed from the start within the context of Go's response to a mistake that should never have happened in the first place. This assumption, in turn, deeply colors our understanding of the phrase, "for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." It sounds like: "God didn't give up on us; God bailed us out."

In a more mystical nuancing of this same basic idea, we encounter the theology of "O Felix culpa" - "O happy fault" - to quote the first line of a traditional Gregorian Advent hymn which expresses this theology particularly clearly. Rather than blaming Adam and Eve, this line of argument claims, we ought to be grateful for them because their mistake set in motion the chain of events through which Christ would fully reveal himself to this world. Without that initial fall there would have been no need for the redemption. In the most subtle versions of this teaching (as in Karl Barth's *Christ and Adam*) linear cause and effect are reversed, and we see Adam and Eve falling into this space/time continuum out of God's "prior" decision (that is, already made in eternity) to reveal himself in human form. Rather than being the cause of the fall, Adam and Eve become the instruments of the ultimate divine self-communication. This is a much more affirmative teaching, which brings the theology of fall and redemption to its most mature expression.

But I would like to push the metaphysical envelope still further and see if we can approach the mystery of the incarnation through a conceptual framework that does not rely on fall and redemption at all but unfolds along an entirely different line of understanding. Instead of a cosmic course-correction, this other approach envisions the steady and increasingly intimate revelation of divine love along a trajectory that was there from the beginning. The best expression of this idea is actually contained in a beautiful saying from Islamic tradition (although its roots go down into perennial wisdom ground): "I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known, and so I created the worlds both visible and invisible." Both the saying itself and the understanding that illumines it derive from a profound mystical intuition that our created universe is a vast mirror, or ornaments (and the Greek word "cosmos" literally means "an ornament"), through which divine potentiality - beautiful, fathomless, endlessly creative - projects itself into form in order to realize fully the depths of divine love. And remember that "realize" has two meanings: "to recognize" and "to make real." The act of loving brings hidden potential to full expression, and the more intimate and costly the self-giving, the more precious the quality of love revealed. This subtle and beautiful understanding of creation will also, as we shall see, have something very important to show us about our true work as human beings.

P97: Down Here of the Edge

So here we find ourselves on this plane of existence, at or near the bottom of the great chain of being. What are we to make of our position? What are we doing "down" here in a world that seems so dense and sluggish, so coarse and fragile and finite? Even in our dreams we move faster than the speed of light, and our mystics and visionaries are perpetually reminding us that in our heart of hearts we remember and yearn for a state of greater spaciousness and fluidity.

It's curious, when you come to think about it, how virtually all the world's spiritual traditions see this earthly realm as somehow deficient. Depending on the tradition, our world is

either an illusion or a mistake, but in either case we "fall" into it, from a lighter gravitational field to a heavier one. We have seen how the Judeo-Christian tradition upholds this understanding in its primordial myth of the fall of Adam and Eve. Other traditions (primarily the Eastern ones) see this world as a mirage, an illusion to be dispelled. Still other traditions, such as mystical Islam, carry a profound sense of exile and a "nostalgia for the infinite." Here is no home.

Is there another way of looking at this? I believe there is, and I think that it is actually at the heart of what is intended by that beautiful mantra, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." But it is so spiritually counterintuitive that it remains almost entirely unspoken - at least I myself have never heard it spoken or written about in any of the traditions. To the extent that what I am seeing here is correct, Christian wisdom steps out into unknown territory, leaving even *sophia perennis* behind.

Here is my take:

Yes, this is a very heavy, frustrating, difficult density that we come into by taking birth in the human realm. Because of the binary, finite nature of both the physical world itself and the ego operating system we use to navigate it, it seems as though we're always bumping into sharp edges. Life presents us with a series of seemingly irrevocable choices: to do one thing means that we have to give up something else; to marry one person means we can't marry another; and to join a monastery means we can't marry at all. Our confused agendas clash both inwardly and outwardly, and we cause each other pain. Our bodies age; we diminish physically; loved ones fall out of our lives. And the force of gravity is tenacious, nailing our feet to the ground and usually our souls as well. I remember my granddaughter, now five, who from the very moment she arrived on this planet experienced an intense frustration bordering on fury at her inability to move. "What the hell?" she seemed to be saying as she flailed her little arms and legs and tried even at four months old to wriggle herself across the room. I have never seen a child who felt the constriction of this planet as much as she did.

Yes, we come into constriction, but is that the same as punishment? I believe not. I believe rather that this constriction is a *sacrament*, and we have been offered a divine invitation to participate in it.

Remember our discussion of sacrament at the beginning of this chapter? A sacrament reveals a mystery in a particularly intense way while at the same time offering the means for its actualization. And in this sphere of human life, the sacrament is finitude and the mystery is "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known..."

Notice that there is a subtle double meaning at work in this phrase. At one level, "I loved to be known" is a synonym for "I longed to be known" (and the phrase is often translated that way). But you can read the words in another way - "I loved *in order to be* known" - and when you do, they reveal a deeper spiritual truth. In order to become known to another, we must take the risk of loving that person, and this includes the real possibility of rejection and the even more painful prospect of heartbreak if the beloved is lost to us. It is difficult to risk love in a world so fragile and contingent. And yet, the greater the gamble of self-disclosure, the more powerful the intimacy and the more profound the quality of devotion revealed.

Could it be like this for God as well?

Could it be that this earthly realm, not in spite of but because of its very density and jagged edges, offers precisely the conditions for the expression of certain aspects of divine love that could become real in no other way? This world does indeed show forth what love is like in a particularly intense and costly way. But when we look at this process more deeply, we can see that those sharp edges we experience as constriction at the same time call forth some of the most exquisite dimensions of love, which require the condition of finitude in order to make sense - qualities such as steadfastness, tenderness, commitment, forbearance, fidelity, and forgiveness. These mature and subtle flavors of love have no real context in a realm where there are no edges and boundaries, where all just flows. But when you run up against the hard edge and have to stand true to love anyway, what emerges is a most precious taste of pure divine love. God has spoken his most intimate name.

Let me be very clear here. I am not saying that suffering exists in order for God to reveal himself. I am only saying that *where* suffering exists and is consciously accepted, *there* divine love shines forth brightly. Unfortunately, linear cause-and-effect has progressively less meaning as we approach the deep mysteries (which originate beyond time and thus have no real use for it). But the principle can be tested. Pay attention to the quality of human character that emerges from constriction accepted with conscious forgiveness as compared to what emerges from rage and violence and draw your own conclusions.

At any rate, I have often suspected that the most profound product of this world is tears. I don't mean that to be morbid. Rather, I mean that tears express that vulnerability in which we can endure having our heart broken and go right on loving. In the tears flows a sweetness not of our own making, which has been known in our tradition as the Divine Mercy. Our jagged and hard-edged earth plane is the realm in which this mercy is the most deeply, excruciatingly, and beautifully released. That's our business down here. That's what we're here for.

Unveiling Love.

If my hunch is correct, you can see how it significantly rearranges the playing field. Our earthly existence, then, is not about good behavior in preparation for a final judgment. It's not a finishing school in which we "learn what we need to learn," not a sweatshop in which we work off our karmic debt. Right here and now we are in the process of speaking into being the revelation of God's most hidden and intimate name. That's a difficult assignment, particularly when "success" and "failure" mostly wind up being the complete opposites of what we would normally expect in life. But the most productive orientation for our time here is not to focus on how quickly we can get back to our spiritual homeland, but to give ourselves fully to the divine intimacy being ventured right here and now. We might reassure ourselves that in some conscious (or deeply trans-conscious) way, we have chosen to bear our part in what mystical tradition calls "the suffering of God" the costliness that is always involved in the full manifesting of divine love. We're doing it here and now, through the marrow of our own human lives, consciously lived. And these space-time conditions, as fragile and as frustrating as they are, are precisely the conditions which allow it to happen. As the poet Dylan Thomas expresses it in the beautiful lines with which this chapter began, "Time held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the sea." It is the reality of the chains that creates the beauty of the song.