
A GOOD FRIDAY ENCOUNTER

Escaping from Guilt in the Christian Tradition

by

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The Death - Dealing Church

Some six years ago at an International Conference in Paris I recall convening an impromptu seminar for those who wished to explore the relationship between psychological and spiritual development. Within half an hour of the start, almost the whole group was in tears as one member after another talked about their experiences at the hands of the churches - both Catholic and Protestant. I still remember some of their stories. There was the man brought up in a Catholic boarding school where the staff - mostly priests - inflicted a vicious round of humiliating punishments for the smallest misdemeanours and seemed to derive sadistic satisfaction from dealing out frequent corporal punishment to lonely and frightened young adolescents. There was the woman who had had her mouth washed out with soap by a nun for saying 'shit' and then been made to stand barefoot in the chapel for an hour without moving. There was the account of a Calvinist minister who had told a fifteen year old that she was possessed by the devil and should on no account enter a chapel building. The stories were not only of priests, nuns and ministers but

also of parents whose religious beliefs and practices seemed to make it impossible for them to relate to their children without at the same time judging or condemning them and making them feel so burdened with guilt that life was almost intolerable. For me that impromptu seminar was saved from turning into a complete nightmare by the contribution of a Swiss woman who told how as an adolescent she, too, had felt utterly guilty, unable to find any virtue in herself and totally despairing. In her distress she had rung the bell of a house of the Jesuit Fathers and had collapsed sobbing into the arms of the priest who opened the door to her. Strangely enough he did not welcome her in but instead himself left the house and taking her arm walked for two hours with her in a nearby park. At the end of that time, she said, her despair had lifted and for the first time for years she felt that she had value. It was only some years later that she discovered that the priest who had walked in the park with her was Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. We will return to Teilhard a little later on. For the moment I need to pause and to reflect with great sadness on those countless individuals over the years who have come to seek my help

because they were so loaded with guilt that life had become well-nigh impossible. None of those people as I recall it had done anything particularly appalling - there were no murderers or rapists, arsonists or swindlers. They were afflicted, however, by a guilt which was elusive but all-pervading, a sense of being in the wrong, of never being able to please those whose love they craved, of being eternally without value. They might well have stepped out of the pages of a novel by Franz Kafka.

The God who comes: Good Friday 1946

Good Friday 1946 found me playing cricket in a Bristol park which was still full of air-raid shelters and all the bric-a-brac of war. Suddenly there appeared in the street at the side of the park a procession of witness headed by a crucifer, candle bearers and a thurifer swinging a censer. The effect on me was instantaneous. I left my friends, ran all the way home and shut myself in my bedroom and sobbed for what seemed like hours. From that day until this I have had an unshakeable conviction that love is the primary force in the universe no matter how great the evidence may seem to the contrary. Looking back on it, this incident was probably the most important event of my life because it impinged on me at so many different levels. In the first place it was visually stupendous: the contrast between the solemn beauty of the procession and the barrenness of the park still ravaged by war could not have been greater. Secondly, it established in a moment an order of values. I suppose I felt

mildly guilty that I was playing cricket on Good Friday but the main feeling was one of quite overwhelming gratitude that I could be so incredibly loved. In that moment I knew that in the last analysis all that matters is loving and being loved. I also knew that the love I had experienced brought with it a sense of being fully and profoundly understood. It followed therefore that to love in this way must involve the deepest commitment to understanding. I have since discovered that love devoid of understanding, although it can bring comfort and solace, can never heal. Thirdly the incident endowed me with an intoxicating sense of my own unique value. At a wholly conscious level I knew that something special had happened to me which I would never be able to deny or eradicate. And that, of course, brought with it an awesome sense of responsibility which would have quite overwhelmed me if I had not been blessed with a sense of humour which usually saves me from taking myself too seriously. As it was, the sense of responsibility translated itself into a dedicated pursuit of discipline which was usually hidden from my friends and often even from my parents. I believe now that having learned that the world was somehow trustworthy, I had to prove to myself that I too could be trustworthy - that I could actually do what I wanted to do and what is more that I could actually do what I did **not** want to do when it seemed that by so doing there would be good outcomes. All of this means that from about the age of nine onwards I was a perpetual source of difficulty and pain for my parents, particularly my mother. As an only

child I had to fight against her possessiveness and her anxiety about my welfare. I was stubborn and arrogant and utterly ruthless with myself when it came to studying late or driving myself to ever more academic achievement. I remember, too, devoting the same energy to the cultivation of my friends so that often during the holidays I would only be at home for meals and after dark.

Behind all this lay my utter loyalty to the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Anglican Church. I was confirmed at eleven and from that age onwards thought nothing of being up at 6 am to attend Mass on Holy Days of Obligation. On Sundays I would sometimes be at Church four times and would fit the writing of an essay into the intervals between. I often wonder now whether during those years I was motivated by fear and guilt but I have concluded that, if these emotions were present, they were far outweighed by a determination to cultivate my will. I remember how delighted I was when many years later I came across Rollo May's book **Love and Will**. These two words, I think, sum up my childhood and adolescence but I am persuaded that it was because I was so peculiarly blessed with the former that I was able to commit myself so ruthlessly to the cultivation of the latter. With clients now I recognise how pointless it is to hope for a strengthening of the will if love has not first been received and given. And yet if love strikes powerfully, the previously apathetic individual can often find a purpose and the will to accomplish it within an astonishingly short time.

Mystical Experience

I suspect that my "Good Friday" experience strikes chords for many people. One of the things we know from the recent research that has gone on into mystical experience is that thousands of us actually have such experiences (some have suggested as many as one in five) but that we seldom talk about them and often, indeed, dismiss them or succeed in banishing them from consciousness. I suppose it is not altogether surprising that we should behave in this way. At a time and in a culture where the so-called scientific method still rules the roost and objective knowledge is enthroned, it is perhaps too much to expect that we should take such experiences with the utter seriousness which I am convinced they merit. They come as gifts but also as challenges to our concept of reality and it is sad in the extreme when as a result of conditioning we dismiss them as unimportant or even crazy.

In a recent book entitled **The Relevance of Bliss**, Nona Coxhead has drawn together much powerful evidence in support of the validity and universality of mystical experience. In her introduction she writes as follows:

"Having been mystically inclined myself since a child, with a persisting tendency to bursts of ecstatic joy, wonder, love of some invisible and immanent presence - which, as worldly matters took precedence subsided into a vague unverbilised awareness - I have felt an increasing urgency to do

what I have done in this book: bring the evidence out into the light and into review, including the speculations of current psychology and science.

Among the first questions I wanted to ask were: Are those who have been called 'mystics' really a special breed, set apart from the rest of us? Do we have to be spiritually 'talented' or gifted, a higher, more advanced kind of human being? Or at least, must one be 'predisposed' to religious experience in order for it to occur?

My suspicion was that the answer was no, that we are all incipient mystics, but I had no wish to make any such claim. Well-aware of the views of psychoanalysts, that had put a definite blight on associating oneself with things mystic for fear of being classified as mentally unstable, even seriously ill, I began my own research with objective caution.

I gathered together some recent statistical studies that showed the incidence of mystic experience in a sample of the population both in the UK and in the US, I compared mystic experience in the East with mystic experience in the West, and I advertised for contemporary experiences from people who would agree to being named and make additional personal comment.

I thought these would be hard to find. So large was the response however that I had to cancel my advertising . . ." (1)

I was very lucky (if luck can ever be the right word) to have my

experience at the age of nine before those habits of thought had been formed which tend to dismiss subjective knowledge and experience as at best suspect and at worst a positive hindrance to the acquisition of the objective knowledge which alone is believed to have real value. Returning to my experience in the park there are certain aspects of it which merit more detailed exploration.

Undoubtedly the most important and life-transforming aspect of the whole experience was the sense of being loved beyond all the possible limits of my imagining. I know and have known intermittently ever since that I am **desired** by Someone or Something who has created me and indeed so many times that it becomes **most** of the time -that such a notion seems patently absurd. In the first place I experience myself all too frequently as being pretty undesirable. I have some abominable habits and I seem to have been perpetrating the same sins for decades. Secondly, it seems remarkably arrogant to claim that I am the desired of God, that God finds **me** infinitely desirable. And yet I know that what I experienced all those years ago is the essential truth about me and what is more that if it is true of me, it is true of all of us. The corollary of all this is that self-hate, self-contempt, self-denigration and all those other states of mind which tell me that I am no good, that I am unworthy, that I am worthless - all these gloomy self-judgments are a denial of the truth about myself and separate me from a compassionate and forgiving self love which is the only possible attitude towards myself in the light of the astounding fact that God finds me desirable.

My experience was given to me on Good Friday. The sobbing in my bedroom took place under a picture post-card (very stylised) of the crucifixion on Calvary and I have tried hard to reconstruct the words of Christ to the nine year old me on that day. At the time, of course, the conversation was wordless - it was heart to heart. I can only reconstruct it in the light of the message that still today has not been fully revealed and perhaps never will be in this world. Certainly I know what it was **not**. Jesus did **not** say to me: "You know, you are a very naughty boy, more naughty than you can ever know. In fact, if you knew the whole story as I know it, you would realise that you actually helped murder me. But you needn't worry. I care about you so much that I actually chose to let you and all your other friends in the human race murder me so that you could experience how utterly forgiving I am and that I can triumph over your evil. You see, you couldn't really finish me off and however awful you are I really do love you and if you trust me and believe me, you'll get a lot better and then you can really be my friend". No, Jesus did not, I am convinced, talk to me like that. If he had I should have been terrified and I should have wondered how on earth I was ever going to be able to forgive myself enough to merit the friendship of such a superior and strange being. I reckon that what Jesus said was more like this. "Hello, Brian. It's lovely to have you near me. I'm so glad you're still alive after this dreadful war. I've tried to look after you - and I hope you're not feeling guilty about playing cricket because it's a good game. Why I interrupted was to let you know

something very important. You know already that life isn't always easy. People do terrible things like dropping bombs and it is very difficult to go on loving them. You get frightened, don't you, and upset and I bet you often feel you're not much good especially when people tell you off or get angry with you. Well, what I wanted to say was this, People do these awful things and you might do them, too, because they're scared. They're scared of knowing what's really going on. Most of them, for example, are very scared of dying, so scared, in fact, that they don't ever want to think about it. What I wanted to say was that you needn't be scared of people because they do awful things and you certainly need not be scared of dying. People did awful things to me and I died but I want you to know that it's alright. Whatever you do, don't let people tell you you're no good and go on trying to find out more and more what's going on. Most people don't want to know, it seems, but that's only because they're frightened".

I have come to believe that Jesus spoke to me somewhat like this in 1946 because such a message makes sense of much that has happened since. It explains why, over the years, sometimes, it seems, against all the odds, I have managed to keep a shaky hold on the truth that I and with me all humanity are infinitely desirable and why, too, I have come to believe that self-awareness and self-knowledge must be pursued however frightening and however inimical they are to part of us which wants a quiet life and resists growth and development. I was delighted to read in a recent book by the Catholic

theologian, Sebastian Moore, **Let This Mind Be in You**, that he has come to believe that the original, generic sin is precisely this refusal to grow, this resistance to self awareness. And, of course, such a resistance is closely linked to the feeling that I am no good. If I am no good, I do not wish to discover more about myself. It is only when I feel good with conviction that I can go forward to discover more with confidence. Moore points out with telling force that we have now arrived at a situation where all the best counsellors and therapists are coming to understand the root of our evil as a bad self-image, a devaluing of self, while Christians tend to say in response, "Ah, but you are forgetting original sin" - not realizing apparently that the counsellors are precisely **pointing** to original sin - namely that attitude of mind which says "Human beings are hopelessly flawed and cannot therefore change". (2)

Self-hate is Sin

My understanding of my own birth and the birth traumas and intra-uterine experiences I have shared with others convince me that the relationship between mother and child built at birth and before birth is of deep significance to the way the new human-being will feel about himself or herself. If there is no love, then the child will not feel welcomed into the world and will have no sense of its own goodness. In such a situation the person will be utterly dependent on others at a later stage to offer the welcome which was denied at the beginning of life. It is never too late for such a welcome to be offered but it seems

that there are few who are able or willing to do so. I have attempted to describe an early and, I believe, direct experience of the love of God which transformed and continues to transform my existence. That experience convinces me that I am infinitely desirable and that when I give way to feelings of self-hate or self-denigration, I am falling into sin. The agony of many of my clients springs precisely from their inability to escape from the clutches of self-hatred into the awareness of their own desirability. As a counsellor my task is to enable them to discover their own loveliness and goodness and I am unlikely to do this if I lose touch with the fact of my own infinite desirability as a child of God - and this no matter how much I sin. If I cannot hate my sin without giving way to self-hate, then better that I cease to counsel - otherwise I shall be in danger of providing a therapy that gives the patient the disease it purports to be curing. And that, I suppose, is what I fear so often happens to those who commit themselves to the servants of the Church and enter, as they believe, the House of the Lord. Perhaps that is why Teilhard de Chardin did not invite the desperate adolescent into the community house but chose instead to walk with her in the park.

Appropriate and Inappropriate Guilt

The prevalence of guilt among so many of my counselling clients led me some seven years ago to formulate a theory of guilt where I distinguished between what I had come to recognise as appropriate and inappropriate guilt. (3) Briefly, inappropriate guilt is the feeling which ensnares us when we have failed to live up to someone else's

view of how we should live and act. Such a guilt leads us to attempt to live out a destiny which is not ours and in all probability brings in its wake sickness of soul and body and sometimes of mind as well. Most of the people in that Paris group to which I referred at the beginning had been made victims of precisely such inappropriate guilt by the Christian upbringing they had received. Appropriate guilt, on the other hand, is the profound feeling of dissatisfaction at having failed to live and act in accordance with the meaning and potential of one's **own** unique life and identity. Such guilt is healthy and useful insofar as it can aid a person in the search for wholeness and fulfilment.

With that concept in mind I wish to revert once more to the memory of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. De Chardin is becoming a little unfashionable of late but for me his great contribution to human thought and to the spiritual history of our race was his insistence that the conscious life of men and women unlocked the mystery of all that has happened in natural history. Evolution, argued De Chardin, is not a random process. On the contrary it has always shown an irreversible tendency to find expression in ever-clearer forms of consciousness until it passed over the threshold of reflective thought - until, in short, men and women appeared on the scene who are capable of reflecting on their own existence. What is more the arrival of man marked the beginning of a new stage and what is to follow can only be understood in terms of the new phenomenon of reflective consciousness and not in terms of what preceded it. Man is still evolving, De Chardin

maintained, and whether or not he steers a straight course towards his ultimate destiny will depend in no small measure upon how well he understands his own responsibilities in the task.

This is where the whole business of guilt becomes so crucial. I have attempted to show that countless people are weighed down by a guilt which leads them to believe themselves unworthy, undeserving of respect, deeply unacceptable in their own eyes. Often such feelings are generated very early on - even sometimes in the womb itself - and always they are indicative of the presence of inappropriate guilt - in other words a guilt that does not really belong to the person who experiences it: it emanates in some cases directly from the mother's own dis-ease and more often from the vain attempt to live up to other people's expectations or to win their favourable judgements.

God within us

I have tried to show from my own early experience of encountering the numinous that human-beings are essentially good and glorious. Indeed, I go so far as to suggest that our besetting problem is our refusal to accept our own goodness and to trust our own amazing capacities for love and creativity. It is as if Christ had never died because we continue to fear death and we continue to deny our status as children of God, Friends of Christ, sharers with him in the divine essence. It is as if we are stuck in our development and dare not go on growing. And yet as De Chardin reminds us, we cannot now dodge the responsibility. It is no use any longer beating our breasts

and calling ourselves sinners and miserable worms. Such an attitude is itself deeply sinful for it goes in the face of God's deep desiring of us. If God so desires me that he counts every hair of my head, how dare I any longer evade my responsibility by telling myself that I am **not** desirable and that there is "no health in me"?

What happens if I accept that I am the desired of God and that I already share in the source of all creation? Do I immediately become crazed, arrogantly insane, struck down by folie de grandeur and fit only for the nearest psychiatric hospital? I would suggest not. The first thing that might happen is that I begin to take myself seriously and the world in which I live seriously. In short, I stop running away from knowledge. I seek to know myself, to discover all I can about myself without fear because I know that God dwells within me and I can trust my goodness because his seed is within me. I am freed to explore the vast terrain of my own being with all its pain and confusion and tangles because I am alive to the joy and the goodness which lie at the heart of my existence. The second thing that might happen is I recognise that the

God within me is also in my wife, my children, my friends and my enemies. Each meeting thus becomes an occasion for the divine encounter. With such a possibility how shall I refrain from smiling when the other crosses my path—The third thing that might happen is that I realize with blinding clarity that the world is on the threshold of disaster. We human-beings have projected on to our lovely earth and on to each other the whole range of destructive feelings of those who believe themselves unloved and unvalued. We ravage and punish the earth, we harbour every suspicion about our neighbour, especially if he has a different colour skin or a different political ideology, we give ourselves material goods as a substitute for self love. And the ultimate obscenity is that we have created the nuclear bomb so that we can commit mass-suicide. Fundamentally it seems we believe ourselves to be so vile that only annihilation will be the just punishment for our offences.

Is it too late? Perhaps so but with God all things are possible - which is another way of saying that with us all things are possible.

References

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