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WHAT THE CROSS MEANS TO ME

A Theological Symposium

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H. WHEELER ROBINSON

A WELL-KNOWN philosopher,[1] contemplating the Christian faith from without, remarks that it was the preaching of "Christ and Him crucified" which overcame the world; "Therein was a new poetry, a new ideal, a new God." The points are well taken, even though Santayana goes on to say, "The moving power was fable." It is by the inherent poetry of life that men are stirred to action—by the common intimacies of hearth and home, by that loyalty to the land of their birth that is focussed in a few familiar spots, by friendships and fellowship, by self-denying heroism, by sympathy with suffering. On the Cross, and especially in the words spoken from it, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," they have seen the culmination of this poetry. Out of it there has come the Christian conception of what life can be made—a life of the spirit's triumph over all untoward circumstance, a life of spiritual victory over material forces, a life of peace within, fulfilling the promise, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." Above it all, they have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ—the God who forgives the evil of man's ways, and welcomes the penitent without other demand than that of trust in Him, the God who suffers in His Son, and takes upon Himself the burden of the world's guilt. This is the victory of faith, which has overcome the world, and its promise and prophecy, its base of operations and its vanguard are the Cross of Christ.[2]

1. When we begin to interpret the appeal of this poetry by the inferior logic of analysis, we may well fix our eyes on one dominating aspect of the Cross—that it sets forth in clearest fashion that *vicarious suffering* which is deep-rooted in all our social relations, indeed in all life as we know it. The long process of biological evolution which has preceded human life is as surely

[1] Santayana, *Little Essays*, p. 61; quoted by Logan Pearsall Smith, *Milton and His Modern Critics*, p. 39, n. 1.

[2] Therefore the true centre of Christian thought; cf. Ignatius Loyola, *Exercitia Spiritualia* (p. 265 of 1696 Ed.): *"Hic tandem est meta laborum. Contemplare Christum, fixum in cruce, et animam agentem."*

marked by "altruism" as by "egoism," if we may use such terms in relation to unconscious or instinctive activities. The social solidarity of animal life in attack and defence, the parental care and self-sacrifice of animals for their offspring, the sympathy of animals with one another in suffering,[1] the general instincts of the family and the herd, witness to something as fundamental as any impulse to competitive individualism. So, also, when we come to human life, its sociality is really as marked a feature as its individuality. We are all bound up together in the bundle of life, for better, for worse, profiting by the good of others, whether predecessors or contemporaries, suffering by their evils, inevitably and involuntarily. All such suffering can broadly be called "vicarious," since it is borne in the place of others.[2] But it is only the voluntary acceptance of such suffering which makes it "vicarious" in the fullest sense. Such acceptance, even if it be no more than uncomplaining submission to what cannot be avoided, gives it a new and spiritual quality. But the fullest significance comes from the voluntary choice of suffering, or rather of some end that is seen to involve suffering, for the common good.

Of such a nature was the suffering of Jesus on the Cross. He was no helpless victim, whose only merit was to endure patiently the misfortunes of an unhappy career. He deliberately chose to suffer. Nothing makes that clearer than the dramatic scene portrayed in the Gospel according to St. Mark: "They were on the road up to Jerusalem, Jesus going in advance of them; the disciples were appalled and those who followed were afraid."[3] The eagerness of that forward-striding figure, detached from His reluctant followers, when seen in the light of Cæsarea Philippi,[4] shows that He is deliberately fulfilling a purpose. By challenging the Jewish authorities at their headquarters, He is voluntarily giving His life "a ransom for many." The full meaning of that phrase does not yet arise; but at least it implies that Jesus goes, of His own free choice, to do that which (as He clearly sees) will bring Him to the Cross. By so choosing He crowns the long series of vicarious sufferings which runs up through Nature into the whole history of mankind.

If, then, the Christian faith claims (as in one form or another it

[1] C. Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, pp. 156 *ff.* (Ed. 1901); see also Tourguénieff's prose poem on a sparrow's sacrificial defence of its helpless young (quoted by A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, p. 44).

[2] Cf. the terms "vicar," and *"vice."*

[3] x. 32.

[4] viii. 27 *ff.*; note here the first declaration of the spiritual necessity for His suffering (verse 31).

must do), that the vicarious suffering of the Cross was not man's alone, but God's also, this is no heterogeneous fiction foisted on credulity by dogmatic theologians. It is simply the further extension upwards from human life of that which we have seen to extend downwards into lower realms of being. Thus, there is unity of principle in the universe, common to creation, conservation, redemption. The whole created order is bound up in the bundle of life *with God Himself*.[1] More and more as I look at the Cross, this authentication of vicarious suffering is what it means to me, in its first and most direct appeal. God, who made the world, and bears the ultimate responsibility for its suffering (which can by no means be wholly explained on any theory of retribution), reveals Himself as sharing, in His own great way, the suffering of His creatures. It is the only satisfying solution to the problem of suffering. The Cross of Christ is God's answer to the cry of all sufferers, the answer of a sympathy that convinces us of its own reality by actually sharing our burden.[2]

2. But the suffering of the Cross is not to be regarded as a merely human symbol of the suffering of God. That would not yield the distinctively Christian values, which depend on the *divine* initiative. Nor does it seem to me at all adequate to divide the unity of the personality of Jesus (a unity made clear in our earliest sources) into a human nature which suffered, and a divine nature which could not suffer. This was one of the baneful influences of Greek metaphysics upon Christian theology, and perhaps we may see, as one of its results, the absence of any adequate doctrine of the work of Christ in the Early Church. Certainly, neither the conception of an infusion of immortality into the human race by the Incarnation, nor the doctrine of a ransom paid to the devil, has stood the test of time. The Biblical suggestions of a sacrifice for sin[3] and of an actual victory won over the powers of evil[4] were indeed maintained and were highly profitable for devotion, but neither of these metaphors can be worked out into an adequate theory for us, who do not share the practices and presuppositions of those days. The Reformers, in their revival of the doctrine of penal substitution, could appeal to certain elements in the unsystematized utterances of St. Paul, and the doctrine

[1] Cf. 1 Sam. xxv. 29 (of course, in a somewhat different application of the figure).
[2] Isa. xlvi. 1–4; Hos. xi. 8, Jer. xlv. 4, 5.
[3] Isa. liii. 10, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, *passim*.
[4] Luke x. 17, 18; Col. ii. 15.

enforced the objectivity of the law of righteousness, but to-day it is increasingly seen to issue in a "transactionalism" which tends to rob God of His glory of giving, and to represent Him as a judge who administers the law, rather than as a God of grace. A favourite conception of modern times has been that of Christ as man's representative, who makes for man that offering of a perfect penitence which man in his sinfulness could not make, and so justifies the divine forgiveness. But, however true and suggestive this conception is in itself, it does not really make the essential contacts, with man on the one side and with God on the other, which are needed to bridge that gulf between man and God which man's sin has created. Substitutionary penitence is a fiction, and we are still left asking, as with all conceptions of an offering acceptable to God, how that which man offers can also be God's redeeming act.

If, however, we begin with the historical realism of the Bible, i.e. simply with Christ's will to suffer on man's behalf, whatever the fruit of that suffering, then faith in the grace of the unseen God encounters no difficulty on the side of religion, whatever difficulties may be raised on the side of philosophy. By the overwhelming assertion of Christian faith, Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, however variously that manifestation be construed in the Christologies of the Church. Now just as far and as closely as we identify Jesus with the presence in time of the God of eternity, so far and so closely may we believe that what is true of Jesus is true of God. One great meaning of the Cross is, as we have seen, the direct extension of the principle of vicarious suffering to God Himself. That which He has ordained for His creatures, that which was actualized in His Son, is proclaimed as true also of that Being whom no human eye has seen or can see. We cannot possibly picture God by our imagination or fully comprehend Him by our reason. But if Jesus is indeed "the image of His substance"[1] made accessible to our vision, and if the outstanding feature of that manifestation is vicarious suffering in the fullest sense, our reason is justified in prolonging that principle into the very nature of God, and we can say that God suffers with us and for us and (by His Holy Spirit) in us.

What objection can be raised to such a faith? Chiefly that to make God accessible to suffering (in such ways as are possible to spiritual Being) is to conceive a limited God, frustrated in His

[1] Heb. i. 3.

purposes, since not even God can be supposed to choose suffering *for its own sake*. The answer to this objection is a simple one, which should be sufficient. If God is suffering through limitations originating beyond Himself, He ceases to be God in the full sense which the Christian faith demands. But if the limitations spring from a self-ordained purpose, and are voluntarily accepted as part of the fulfilment of that purpose, there is no ultimate frustration, but rather an enrichment, of the majesty of the Most High. God, as well as His Son, endures the Cross, despising the shame for the joy that was before Him.[1] The Biblical teaching is that God created man free either to obey or to disobey Him, and the fact of that freedom (within definite limits) is confirmed by all our experience and the record of it in history and literature. But our disobedience is the defeat of His purpose and must bring sorrow and spiritual suffering to God in its own degree. God cannot truly be said to love man if the child's disobedience does not bring suffering to the father. But because that Father is God and not man, the suffering will not be helpless and unavailing, as it so often is in our human relationship. It will take its own great place amongst the realities of the spiritual universe. The voluntary acceptance of that suffering by God, in the persistent pursuit of a purpose that cannot at last fail, will transform the suffering into grace as surely as did the voluntary acceptance of the Cross by Jesus Christ transform its shame into glory. Is not the believer, then, standing on firm ground when he claims that the second meaning of the Cross to him is the suffering of God, of which the visible Cross is part? May not his penitent faith find the assurance of welcome and the promise of forgiveness in this visible part, this historical actualization of the suffering of God, suffering inflicted by his own sin, and freely endured because of God's love for the sinner?

3. But it may be said that such an interpretation of the Cross does not take us beyond the so-called "subjective" theory of the Atonement, according to which it is simply the revelation of the love of God in Christ which moves men to conform to His will. Those who are content with such a theory often protest against the charge of "subjectivity," since the revelation of God in Christ is historically as "objective" as any fact of history can be. But even so, ought we to be, can we be content with such a theory? Does not

[1] Heb. xii. 2. The reverent application of these words to the Father (*mutatis mutandis*) must not be confused with ancient patripassianism, for which (in the Sabellian form) Jesus was a transient extension of God, without real personality (cf. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*,[2] I, p. 473).

the experience of the Church, set forth in Scripture, in the history of doctrine, and in our own consciences, testify to the conviction that Christ has wrought a vital and necessary work of redemption, beyond that of revelation—that, in fact, the revelation is not the redemption, but the redemption is the content of the revelation? If we are to maintain this conviction (often expressed in crude and even repellent metaphor) it can be only by a deeper analysis of what sin and the guilt of sin really mean. Here again the Cross can help us, for it is as truly a disclosure of man's sin as it is of God's grace.

To say this, does not mean that the sin of those who crucified Jesus is inherently greater than other sins before or since. He himself said of it, "they know not what they do." The point is rather that the background of the Sufferer's sinlessness throws into unique contrast the ugliness and horror of moral evil. The more we exalt Him, the more of God we see in Him, so much the more do we see what the evil in our own hearts really is. Given a like opportunity for the clash of our vested interests, our personal ambitions, our prejudice and our cowardice, with all for which Jesus stood, dare we think that we should come out better than the men who crucified Him? Decent folk would, indeed, shrink from inflicting the physical torture, for His Cross itself has taught men greater sympathy with suffering, but there are other ways of rejecting Him. The Cross has a strange and awful power of revealing the human heart to itself as "deceitful and desperately wicked," just because it shows sin as what it ultimately and essentially is—antagonism to grace, "enmity against God."[1]

This antagonism of the world to God is not to be measured by the particular sins we remember individually with inner shame and self-loathing. Behind them all, as their source, is an attitude of will, a dark mystery of sinfulness, unexplained by the ancient doctrine of "Original Sin," or by the modern doctrine of an evolutionary development from lower forms of life. All we can say of it is that the use or abuse of personal freedom can never be explained without explaining it away, but that it is exercised within a social environment which besets us all like a close-fitting garment,[2] and constantly hinders our course. Here, also, as in regard to vicarious suffering, we are made to know our "social solidarity," not only with those who crucified Christ, but with the whole human race. Our consciousness of a common alienation from

[1] Rom. viii. 7. [2] Heb. xii. 1.

God extends the personal responsibility of each of us to our share in the sin of the whole race. He who has had this individual and racial *guilt* brought home to himself is hardly likely to be content with a gospel dealing only with the present *power* of sin. Dimly or clearly he will be likely to see the need for deliverance from the guilt of sin, the sin of an irretrievable and irrevocable past, both his own, and that of the race.

Only a superficial reading of human history and an inadequate self-examination can explain the frequent identification of guilt with the consciousness of guilt, often with the suggestion that guilt is merely the psychological product of a peculiar environment. In fact, the sense of guilt seems to deepen with the growth of saintliness, and we must consider the testimony of many generations if we are not to be misled by the transient decline of Biblical thought at the present time. Just as surely as the moral consciousness in man needs God to account for it, so the moral failure of man needs God to remedy it. The sense of guilt witnesses to our relation with God in this matter; our sin is not the concern of ourselves or of our fellows alone; it concerns God. This is the particular case of the general truth that time belongs to eternity, on which any Christian interpretation of the Cross must rest.

4. With this emphasis on the guilt of man's sin, marking its significance in the eternal realm of God's purposes, we may now ask what divine forgiveness will involve, and look to the Cross of Christ for our answer, since it is there that forgiveness is actually experienced by the believer. Behind the words, "Father, forgive them," there are the Person and the Work of Christ to give to the prayer its deeper meaning. So behind every preaching of the Gospel of forgiveness, there is God reconciling the world unto Himself, which must mean not simply moving us to a changed attitude, but also removing every obstacle to forgiveness, such as that to which our sense of guilt witnesses. In this aspect of reconciliation, there are two obstacles to be removed, first the burden of man's responsibility for the moral evil of the world, and second, the temporal defeat of God's eternal will to holiness, so far as this is matter of past history.

Moral evil, like moral good, is first known for what it is by its material and spiritual consequences. So long as it lurks in the uncertain realm of possibility, it can often be plausible enough to capture man's desire. But when it becomes fully intelligible by its translation into the actuality of life, the consequences characterize

the volition, and declare its quality. Jesus, being what He was, did not share with man the experience of actual sinning, and therefore could not share our (always imperfect) penitence; but He could and did share in the suffering consequent upon sin throughout His whole life, and most of all in the physical and spiritual sufferings of the Cross. In this sense of resultant suffering, and in this sense alone, can He be said to share the burden of our guilt. We introduce a legal fiction or a psychological impossibility if we say that the penal wrath of the Father was directed against Christ.[1] We may rightly say, however, that by freely accepting physical and spiritual suffering which was the result of man's sin, He identified Himself with those who bore its guilt. That supreme act of sympathy would mean something very real, if it were no more than a heroic human gesture, as of the captain of the sinking ship, who stays to the end with its crew. But, for Christian faith, this is the act of God, and its meaning is that *He* wills to bear the burden of our guilt, so far as this is possible to the Holy One.

How far, indeed, is it possible or even conceivable? Only, I think, in the way made visible on the Cross. Sin and guilt cannot as such ever enter into the full consciousness of holy personality. The saint can know profound sympathy with the sinner suffering from the results of his own evil will, but never with the sinner in his actual sin. What does enter into the holy consciousness of man or God is *the suffering due to sin*; sin, in fact, has to be translated into its ultimate equivalent of suffering,[2] to exist there at all. So we may venture to think of the holy consciousness of Jesus, with its unimaginable sensitiveness and so, with fitting reverence and humility, of God in His eternal Being. In Him we live and move and have our being, even as sinners; without this life in Him we should cease to exist. But our sinfulness cannot be *in* Him, in the same sense as is our existence. It must be transformed within His consciousness, into equivalent suffering, as it was for Jesus; or rather, the suffering of the Son of God was an earthly part of this heavenly suffering. God's will thus to suffer, and not simply to react in holy wrath, is His grace. This transformation of the intrusive element into something of iridescent beauty[3] is like that of the grain of sand transformed into the pearl. "Where sin

[1] Even Calvin refrains from saying that *Deum fuisse unquam illi vel adversarium vel iratum* (*Institutio*, II, xvi, 11).

[2] See Chapter V, "Suffering and Sin," of *Suffering, Human and Divine*, by H. Wheeler Robinson.

[3] The *polupoikilos sophia* of Eph. iii. 10.

abounded, grace did much more abound";[1] God was more than equal to man's rebellious challenge of Him, and His victory lies in this metamorphosis of the consequences of evil. This divine transformation has, as we have seen, its imperfect parallel in the saint on earth, and even in the penitent sinner, who has only begun to tread the way of holiness. That way must be for him, as for his Lord, a *Via Dolorosa*, though from a cause different or partly different. The penitent sinner, ever conscious of his personal responsibility for his own sin, and for his contribution to the sin of the whole world, must learn to bear in patience and humble submission the inevitable consequences of the wrong done by himself and his fellows. In so far as he does this—and there is no growth into holiness without it—he may come to share in the divine attitude towards sin, and will himself be willing to accept the burden of sin, no longer as penalty, but as transformed into discipline (chastening) and service. It is this transformation of *meaning* that is the keyword to redemption, and it is writ large on the Cross of Christ. There, as nowhere else in God's universe, we may see this miracle of redemption, this suffering of the Cross, which Jesus transformed from shame into glory. There is no legal fiction, no ascription to Jesus of an unreal consciousness of guilt, in such an interpretation of the meaning of the Cross. The cry of dereliction, into which so much of artificial theory has been read, can be taken in its simple and direct meaning—that Jesus experienced, at that moment, the worst spiritual agony He could endure, the sense of abandonment in His utmost need by the Father He had always obeyed. Without that experience He could not be said to have suffered as we suffer, "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."[2] The closer we keep to the actuality of the Cross, the more likely is our interpretation of it to correspond to the truth of God. For God is always realistic in His ways, since He is always the living God.

(5) That aspect of the Cross which logically comes last, though often the first to be perceived, is that it prescribes a new "law." Jesus Himself made that explicit by saying, "If any man would come after me let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."[3] However inadequate be our understanding of, and response to, that supreme test[4] of real discipleship, the heroic

[1] Rom. v. 20. [2] Heb. iv. 15. [3] Matt. xvi. 24; Mark viii. 34; Luke xiv. 27.
[4] The requirement is single, not triple. The most complete "denial" of self is the cross of the martyr; "follow me" simply renews the "come after me," which is the disciple's volition.

challenge in the demand will always attract men, since they often respond better to a great demand than to a small one. The appeal to Christ's example will always have its place in Christian education, though it must not be mistaken for the Gospel. Nor must the Cross be taken as merely the illustrative application of the Sermon on the Mount, as when the slave Epictetus patiently bears the physical cruelty of his master in the true spirit of Stoicism. Stoicism broke down for the mass of men because of its lack of sufficient motive. The motive of Christian morality, which alone accounts for its wide extension and its high heroisms, is the grateful response to the redemptive grace of God, as seen in the Cross of Christ. That is why St. Paul lays such repeated stress on "thanksgiving."

As the central manifestation of Christian morality in St. Paul's view of things, there is that quality of character and attitude of life which he calls *agapé*—a term which cannot be translated adequately. What it means is the whole way of living which is described in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians. Obviously, this form of "love" is not so much emotional as volitional, not so much an affection as an obligation. It is a principle, not a code of rules; it must operate from within to be "the fulfilment of the law." It is a relation to others accepted for Christ's sake, inspired by His Cross, reckoned by the Apostle as the highest product of the Spirit of God. It is vicarious suffering baptized into the Holy Spirit.

Just as "Christ and Him crucified" becomes the "power-house" of Christian morality,[1] so also the Cross indicates the particular and characteristic content of the new "law." This new "law" differs in emphasis, as well as in form, from the old law. It springs from "the mind of Christ" which made Him "obedient unto death, yea, the death of the Cross,"[2] and is reproduced in those lowly minds which in like manner seek to serve others, rather than win their praise.[3] The intrinsic worth of the moral act is thus contrasted with its social reward, which too easily becomes the foundation of ethical systems, and of so much so-called Christian life. Moreover, the moral acts of the Christian can never be reduced to a scheme of definite duties, because their only sufficient standard is that Spirit of the Cross which withholds nothing. Every boundary line we draw, saying "This is enough, if I can reach it," is erased, since, if we do reach it, this is only to catch a glimpse of heights yet unclimbed. This sense of the infinite in

[1] Cf. Rom. i. 16 (*dunamis*). [2] Phil. ii. 8. [3] *Ibid.*, 2–4.

Christian obligation, which is at once its constant spur and its constant humiliation and rebuke, derives from that Cross on which God gave Himself in giving His Son.

The Cross is thus that creative act of God which, when confirmed by the Resurrection, and dynamized by the Holy Spirit, established the Church, the Body of Christ. Already at the Cross, in that Johannine word, "Behold, thy son! . . . Behold, thy mother," we see the beginning of a new fellowship of the Cross, created through a common relation to it. But this is no other than that "fellowship of the Spirit," which is the New Testament inner definition of the Church. It is only as the mind of Christ controls the minds of believers in their mutual relations that the essential Church is found. Only then is the work of redemption which was begun on the Cross carried forward to its completion, each believer being led to "fill up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ for His Body's sake, which is the Church."[1] So far as this mutual relation of *agapé* is achieved through the Holy Spirit, so far does the Church continue, in its own degree, the offering of the Cross.

The inscription on the Cross, in self-evident mockery, declared Jesus to be "the King of the Jews," and was written in Hebrew and Latin and Greek. If we wished to replace the mockery by reverent truth, we could hardly do better than write the inscription in terms of the Pauline Benediction—"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." Each is in a richer language than that of Hebrew or Greek or Latin, for it is uttered through the actuality of life, divine and human. The Benediction also, like the historical inscription, says the same thing in three languages, for the love of God which is the eternal Gospel is actualized in the grace of the crucified Christ which is its historical form, and is ever renewed in the fellowship of believers through the Holy Spirit, which is the experience of redemption, the reproduction of the Cross.

H. WHEELER ROBINSON.

[1] Col. i. 24.

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VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

TO theologize in the midst of a war-racked world is no irrelevant frivolity. On the contrary, it is, more than ever, an imperative necessity. In vain shall we preach Christ crucified if we rely solely on our endeavours to arouse devotional sentiment; doubly in vain if we would be heard in a world in which human life is immeasurably cheapened, human pain and self-sacrifice an everyday commonplace, human heroism and human wickedness multiplied *ad nauseam*. "Is it nothing to you, all ye who pass by?"[1] Nothing whatever—we shall be compelled to reply—to a world familiarized with daily crucifying and being crucified unless we have penetrated beneath the externals of the nineteen-centuries-old events on Golgotha and have revealed something of their present-day relevance in the light of their eternal purpose. "Emotional reaction to a crucifix is no adequate substitute for a doctrine."[2] Worse, the emotional reaction will itself be a spurious escape-mechanism if it be prompted otherwise than by doctrine. Almost may we be tempted in our day to envy the apostle who could find the preaching of the Cross to be "to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Gentiles foolishness."[3] Nineteen centuries of familiarity have bred a more negative and grievous contempt—the contempt not of positive scorn, but of bewildered indifference, or the still more blasphemous contempt of self-indulgence in groundless emotionalism. Truly, to seek to "understand what we believe," to dare to probe ever more deeply into the timeless significance of Christ's work in time, is essential if we are to present the Cross as something more than the daily commonplace of heroic death for a "good cause."[4] Only so can we proclaim that the Cross is the Tree of Life, and the Crucified the manifestation of the righteousness of God made available to man.

"The achievements of the Saviour," wrote St. Athanasius, "are of such kind and number, that he who would try to enumerate them is like a man who gazes at the expanse of the ocean and

[1] Lam. i. 20.
[2] A. B. Macaulay, *The Death of Jesus*, p. 38.
[3] 1 Cor. i. 23.
[4] Cf. Rom. v. 7.