

Watching on television Mr Nixon explaining that while he accepted full responsibility for the Watergate affair he was in no way to blame for it, prompted the irreverent thought that if God would put on a similar but more convincing performance we would have the ancient problem of evil wrapped up at last. (This was followed by the thought that, in a sense as different as it could be from Mr Nixon's, this is exactly what He did.)

Restricting themselves, however, to the more directly political field, commentators have by now compared the business to practically every other available scandal—the Tea Pot Dome fiddle . . . Mr Lynch's gun-runners . . . the affair that kept nearly everyone in England so happy during 1963. In fact it is extremely and interestingly different from any of these. The others involved rather shocking and startling revelations of secret goings on, whereas nobody is going to be astonished at the behaviour of President Nixon or his entourage. It is true that in the internal politics of his country, and more especially in the internal politics of the party which is not his at all, the Nixon organization acted with more than usual deviousness, and some of their methods were a little surprising even given the rough standards of American electioneering, but if we turn to more significant matters than which group of rich men will control the United States we get a much clearer perspective and a better sense of proportion. There is throughout the world a clear enough record of murder, lies, torture, robbery, aggression and intimidation carried on by the agents of U.S. governments, a record perhaps even blacker than that of other Great Powers. Why is it felt that people who will order the armed invasion of the Dominican Republic will shrink from unlawfully entering a psychiatrist's office? That those who arrange for the burning to death of peasants in South-East Asia would hesitate to burn a few files? The men who spent vast sums of money trying to rig the elections in Chile or who fought a bloody and prolonged war to prevent free elections in Vietnam would not have many scruples about interfering a little with the electoral process back home. The moral principles that actuate the leaders of the free world cannot possibly come as a surprise to any of us. What then accounts for the interest in Watergate—always supposing there still is an interest in the affair by the time this is printed?

I think it lies not so much in what was revealed as in the act of revelation itself. Everybody knew in a general sort of way what kind of men these were and what kind of system they operated in. And of course they were not a very different kind of man from their political opponents, nor indeed from the rest of us, and we operate in some version of the same system. What we have been given is a dramatic representation on a very large and public stage of a world of cynicism, cruelty and corruption.

For this reason the most appropriate comparison is not, in fact, with minor scandals of the past; the thing that comes nearest to it is Mr Khrushchev's 'revelations' about Stalin. Of course everybody already knew what kind of man Stalin was and what kind of system he operated, and that he was incomparably nastier than Mr Nixon, a man even more prone to torture and murder and the perversion of justice, whose arrangements in eastern Europe were in some respects more ruthless than those of the United States in Latin America. In this sense Mr Khrushchev told us nothing new; what made a difference was simply that it was all agreed officially and publicly stated. Those commentators who, seeking some comfort in Watergate, argued that at least it showed how a democratic country like America could expose and deal with its own corruption were thus wrong in thinking this peculiar to the western democracies. The process in the Soviet Union took longer, was more cumbersome and more traumatic, but it happened just the same. In both countries someone said the equivalent of 'It's all over: the President says to tell the truth'.

Mr Khrushchev's speech and perhaps the Watergate affair function, then, as symbols which can be part of the process of exorcizing the evils they represent. They can best be seen, in fact, as confession of sin: the ritual expression of the evil we have done or with which we have been in collusion. In our opinion neither the Khrushchev speech nor Senator Ervin's committee should be seen as merely a matter of a breast-beating therapy to relieve feelings of guilt. They represent a genuine act of confession. Confession is not the revelation of a secret, most of us are pretty well aware of each other's sins at least in general, nor is it a mental resolve to deal with them, it is a public symbolic act in which we distinguish good and evil and recognize some evil as our own. Such confession by a whole society on a political level should surely be seen, just as much as the confession of an individual, as an act of God's grace in history. When the love of God comes to us we have the courage to admit the truth, and when we admit this truth in a public symbolic way (not simply discovering some public scapegoat) we have something analogous to a sacrament of God's grace.

Of course the sacrament of confession does not invariably or immediately bring about a dramatic change in our way of life; Mr Khrushchev's sign did not open up an era of ever-increasing de-Stalinization and it is too early to know whether Watergate will lead to a genuine rethinking and restructuring of the American monarchy, but at least it marks a possible beginning.

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