

The Evil of Men and the Evil of Nations

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It is a fairly commonplace observation that the morals of groups fall far short of the morals of individuals—far short, even, of the ‘average’ morality of the individuals who compose the groups. The selfishness of nations is proverbial; it was a saying of George Washington’s that no nation is to be trusted beyond its own interests, and this saying has gained wide currency as an expression of political wisdom. The arrogance of powerful nations is as familiar to students of history as their selfishness. The late Professor Dicey, writing before the fear of world cataclysm had begun to darken men’s minds, advanced the theory that wherever British interests were at stake, these were to be advanced even at the cost of war—a theory that could be accepted as a reasonable political attitude, whereas if it were to be translated into personal terms, it would arouse the horror of any civilized person; for who in any circles would dare to assert that he was in favour of always advancing his own interests, however many murders he committed on the way?

Why should there be such a gulf between the moral behaviour of individuals towards each other, and the moral behaviour of groups towards each other? For make no mistake about it, this is not a question that concerns only the nation-group. Wherever recognizable social groups face each other, with or without political organization, we may expect scant justice, and less charity, in their mutual relations. There is no need, alas, to go into the world of profit-making industry to verify this fact; we have only to consider the attitudes of different religious groups towards each other—even the attitudes of different religious orders within the same Christian Church; the fact that these groups are composed of men and women individually dedicated to service of the same God seems to do little to mitigate the conflicts arising from the selfishness and arrogance which everywhere accompany the behaviour of humanity ‘in the gang’.

It would be too easy a solution to answer this question in general terms by pointing to the corruption of original sin; the moral behaviour of groups cannot be understood in quite the same terms as the

moral behaviour of individuals.

We all need to belong to definite social groups, in which we feel 'at home', in which we accept and are accepted, in which our personalities can grow as in fertile soil. It is through membership of groups that our convictions gain stability, so that we are able to face new challenges and situations with security and poise. It is within the group that our personalities expand, in the 'homeliness' of accepted norms and conventions. The group thus plays a vital part in our formation as complete human beings. Now the moral attitude which corresponds with membership of the group is the attitude of loyalty. Loyalty implies an obligation to devote ourselves primarily to our own group, to defend its values against attack, above all to preserve its integrity. This loyalty is at once a high form of altruism, and an enlightened form of self-interest, since our own integrity and our very existence as human beings are involved in the integrity of our social groups.

Now it is clear that our definition of loyalty already contains a certain negative element. To devote ourselves primarily to our own group means not to devote ourselves to others, at least not in the same way. To defend our group and to seek to preserve its integrity means to prefer it to others in this respect. Moreover, our loyalty demands a clear object, a powerful symbol of unity; and in practice a group is often best defined by opposition. We know who we are because we know who we are against, like the anti-social teen-age gang.

It is unreal then to deny the importance of loyalties in favour of a vague kind of 'love-universalism'. If we did so, we should be aspiring to the status of pure spirits, and ignoring our real situation as incarnate individuals. We are in a particular situation here and now, and this situation demands a kind of attention which we cannot give to what is remote from us. Let us consider the most obvious case of the family-group. A father has a duty to provide for his own family first, although other children may be worse off than his own; his own family will demand a share of his time and energy which might be thought 'in the abstract' and 'from a purely objective point of view' to be quite disproportionate to their needs. But these are mere words. There *is* no abstract in this matter, because we are individuals incarnate in our particular bodies and in our particular situations and families; there *is* no 'purely objective point of view', since what is our own, as part of ourselves, does not belong to the world of purely objective measurement. No kind of love-universalism can make sense which does not begin with a lively realization of our place in the world. The celibate

priest renounces family life in order to release his love for a wider family, and in this the Catholic Church shows her wisdom and her realism; but the priest's family remains a limited one, to which he owes a peculiar loyalty and to which he 'belongs' in a special sense, if his ministry is not to be dissipated in a world of abstractions. Our Lord Himself came with a peculiar mission to the chosen people, and appeared at first reluctant to heal the daughter of the Syro-Phenician woman.

If such is the nature of man that group loyalty is essential to his moral health, it is not difficult to understand how group arrogance and selfishness come to flourish. Loyalty, to be sure, is *not* group selfishness, nor is it group arrogance; but it can be dangerously similar in appearance. The high social value of mistaken loyalty can only too easily remove from the group the restraint of conscience which functions in the individual, so that the resentment and greed and arrogance which we will not admit to ourselves find a projected form of expression and grow to alarming proportions in our group attitudes. The stronger the symbolic power of the group, and the more absolute its demands, the greater will be the danger, and as at the present moment it is the national group which has supreme symbolic power, it is at the level of the nation that loyalty is most easily perverted to evil ends.

Another process is also to be taken into account when considering how individual morals are reflected in the group; and this is the snowballing process which takes place when minor resentments combine and seek out a specific scapegoat or object of hatred. On a small scale we can see this happening in almost any neighbourhood gossip group, when a few people find that they share a scarcely definable antagonism to some other individual. Give them a few minutes to combine their antagonisms, and a much more potent compound will emerge—the unfortunate victim will be hard put to it to re-establish his shattered reputation. Even those who did not share in the original antagonism are likely to be drawn into the attack, in order to 'belong' to the group. On a national scale, it is usually under the stress of war that this process becomes manifest, but the danger is always present, and the results are much more sinister. We think, perhaps, with justifiable horror, of the mass-extermiation of the Jews in Hitler's Germany, and think that *we* could never do such things; but what of the 'slight antagonism' we feel towards such and such a person, or group, or nation? Only a slight antagonism maybe, a far cry from murder. But once let this antagonism be shared by a large number of people, once let it breed, let it be

given effective leadership, fostered by propaganda, and finally harnessed to the terrifying power of modern science, and we may find we are much nearer to murder than we thought. The words of our Lord may strike home with a new meaning: every man who hates his brother is a murderer. Again, we may laugh at the concept of the 'master-race', and think how far we are from such absurdity. But what of the slight scorn we may feel for those of a different race, or colour? A justifiable excess of patriotism, we may think, hardly a blemish on a Christian character. But once let this arrogance fester among millions, once let it be given a creed and a purpose, and we may find that we are involved in group conduct as ridiculous as that of the 'master race' in the eyes of the rest of the world.

There is likely to be, of course, in every nation, a group of individuals who are able to assess the moral worth of the policies which its government pursues, and who act as a kind of national 'conscience'. But the national conscience is almost bound to be of a much more precarious nature than the individual conscience. Insofar as its appeal is purely rational, it will have difficulty in withstanding the powerful emotions generated in the crowd. Moreover, the forces of loyalty, albeit a false loyalty, will almost certainly be arrayed against the national 'conscience'. The moralists will find it difficult indeed to avoid the stigma of treachery, and society will prepare for them another Golgotha.

If we wish to affect in any way the morality of the group, clearly we must first understand the nature of the problem. We must accept group loyalty as a fundamental postulate of human nature, not to be circumvented by any vague moral sentimentalism. At the same time the moral dangers inherent in group behaviour must be equally understood; and while we realize that groups are on the whole unlikely to reach as groups the moral stature of outstanding individuals, nevertheless the same moral law does apply to nations and to individuals. The leaven is hidden until the *whole* is leavened. The mustard seed grows to be the greatest of trees. A Christian can never be finally content with a double standard of morality, one for himself and another for his country.

How then is loyalty to be expressed in a form that is beneficial and not harmful to other groups? The question does not admit of an easy answer, but there are signs and indications which give grounds for hope, and which suggest a course of action for those who have the capacity of leadership. Let us mention two of these signs. There is a growing body of people in Europe who see the destiny of their countries as members of a wider federation of states. It would be unrealistic

to dismiss this idea as merely a mundane economic arrangement, or as an anti-communist alliance, for it has captured the enthusiasm of a younger generation which is primarily concerned with neither of these things. Here in fact is a genuine loyalty which wishes to see the nation committed with others to a superior loyalty in which the interests of all should be justly represented. Let us not pretend that such a sentiment in itself solves any practical problems—or even that it justifies in itself any particular political decision; but here at least is a hopeful sign—the emergence of a kind of national consciousness of self-commitment with other nations which has a close similarity with what we should regard as a praiseworthy community sense in an individual. Another hopeful sign is the increasing support given on an organized, national level to projects which aid the underdeveloped countries in their fight against ignorance, disease and starvation. Here is the outstanding challenge of our day to the emergent group moral consciousness of the prosperous nations of the world. While one half of the human race is starving, we enjoy an ever rising standard of living which is already one of unimaginable luxury compared with that of the underprivileged. But if our charitable sentiments towards them are to be in any way effective, they must find organized political expression. Already, at least one political party in England has pledged in a formal resolution its active support for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Again it would be over-cynical and unrealistic to dismiss such a move as merely enlightened self-interest; at least part of the truth is that here is a kind of loyalty emerging which finds expression in group behaviour which bears a close resemblance to personal generosity.

It may be objected that loyalty of its very essence demands that we should be primarily concerned with our own group, and therefore excludes any genuine unselfish action towards others. There is a paradox here. Just as those individuals are most vital who are open to others, so those groups are most vigorous who do not seek to remain enclosed within themselves, but who go out towards a wider community. The family which seeks to preserve its integrity by remaining small and isolated is less likely to hold together than one which is united by shared outward-going interests. No social group coheres better than one which is involved in active work for the benefit of others. It is the introverted groups which breed internal tension and discord.

It is not only by joining in and encouraging outward-going political commitments that we can influence the morality of nations. If, as I

have suggested, the cumulative petty resentments of individuals can add up to an alarming degree of political hatred, then we have a grave responsibility to eradicate these resentments in ourselves first of all, to remove the very seeds of group violence from our own personalities, and this purification will have a political as well as a personal significance. Violence and resentments of all kinds have been for too long accepted as part of the normal way of life of the western world. In this matter we have much to learn from the Indian spiritual tradition, and in particular from the example of Mahatma Gandhi; it is well to recall that throughout his campaign against the English occupation of India, his respect and affection for the English was never in doubt; he undoubtedly loved the English—but he thought they belonged in England, not in India. We have much to learn indeed from such a tradition; and we should recall with humility as we learn, that it is our own authentic Christian tradition, so sadly neglected by us, which is being represented to us. To cultivate non-violence in this way is a challenge to the strong rather than a refuge for the weak; it can liberate vast resources of spiritual power little dreamt of by those who remain divided between primitive fears and vague religious sentiment.

A person who has learnt to control his inmost hatreds and resentments is likely to be a very poor recipient of propaganda; and it is above all through propaganda in the modern world that group hatreds are expressed and fostered, whether in parties or in social classes or in nations. Through propaganda a false appeal is made to loyalty and to mass emotion which removes the control of conscience. How easy it is to raise a laugh in any political party by the most unreasoning spiteful attack on a political opponent! And yet it is very doubtful whether such tactics produce any good result; petty hatreds only serve to disorganize rational thought, to embitter the opponent, and to encourage in one's own group a spirit of violence and contention which is fatal to the growth of any generous impulse. It is time we learnt the lesson of experience, that hatred never was and never will be an instrument of peace, either within a nation or between nations.

To avoid antagonism may seem to be a purely negative ideal, aiming at nothing more than passive indifference towards opposing groups; but this is not really the case. It is impossible to remain indifferent towards an antagonist. To avoid hatred is one thing; the next step demands greater moral courage. We should strive actively for peace by endeavouring to share in any genuine vision of justice which our enemies may have—in fact to see in ourselves the injustices which they

rightly hate, and to be morally in accord with them in attacking this injustice; and at the same time, we should make it clear that it is the injustice and only the injustice of the opposing group that we attack, not the persons who compose it. By fostering the growth of a *critical* loyalty of this kind, which is none the less a true loyalty for being discriminating, we may hope to develop within the group a more and more influential restraining influence, a body of responsible men and women who will be as it were the 'conscience' of the nation.

All this may appear to be simply exalted idealism with no application to the grim realities of power politics; and indeed anyone who is seriously concerned to bring moral influences to bear in international or inter-group politics will inevitably be involved in continuous compromises and frustrations. But there is a real direction of progress here, and no Christian can avoid the challenge. For too long we have been prepared to accept the teaching of our Lord as purely a matter for individuals; even our great communal liturgy has been allowed to degenerate into a near-meaningless external display, attended by a collection of individuals immersed in their private meditations, concerned for their own personal salvation, but completely oblivious of the social dimension of their existence. For such devout people, it is not surprising that the political world appears like a dangerous wilderness full of wild beasts. But this wilderness is part of ourselves; we ignore it at our peril. If we are to conquer it, it can be with no other standard than that of Christ; but lest we should fall into sentimentality and facile optimism, we shall see that on our standard our Lord, now our victorious King, hangs on the cross wounded to death through the malice of a crowd.