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Living with Betrayal

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Abstract

This article addresses the idea that, over the centuries, Christianity has survived only by betraying its own uncompromising ideals. It investigates how damaging this interpretation could be for Christianity, and suggests that Christianity's survival might paradoxically be a function of the very phenomenon that seems at first sight to undermine it.

Keywords

betrayal, nature, grace, redemption, St Augustine

Looking back on the church's long history, one sees that the survival of the Christian movement has, time and again, been linked to what some have interpreted as a timely and prudent betrayal of Christianity's own uncompromising ideals, or at least as an accommodation of these ideals to the conditions of the real world. For how else, such commentators might ask, could you describe the frequent convergence of religious and political interests in the course of Christian history? They could point, for instance, to the Constantinian arrangements of late antiquity, or to the Papacy's connection with the rising power of the Normans in the Middle Ages, or to some of the more dubious alliances contracted between church and state in more recent times.

The significance of these apparent compromises is difficult to overstate. Indeed, had such partnerships not been forged over the course of the centuries, it can be argued that Christianity might simply have vanished. After all, this is exactly what happened in most of North Africa with the arrival of the Islamic warriors from Arabia in the seventh century, even though it was once the home of Latin theology's original creative thinkers: Tertullian, St Cyprian, and, above all, St Augustine. According to this hypothesis, if the same thing had happened elsewhere, the Christian religion would presumably only hold the same degree of interest today as many other religions that emerged in the world of late antiquity, only to fade away. But we

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cannot play out some perverse theological version of *It's a Wonderful Life.* Since history cannot be undone or rerun, we will never know how the world would have looked without Christianity, or indeed whether it would have been better or worse.

Some objections to this scenario, however, immediately come to mind. For a start, the church's survival has not always been bound up with political compromises. At various times the church has in fact endured appalling persecutions and survived only by the courage and fortitude of the faithful, and not by dint of political manœuvring.

This is undeniably true. On the other hand, persecution and martyrdom are, historically, the exception. And the exception seems only to reinforce the general rule. In other words, when the pressure is off, when the church is free to pursue its mission unhindered by hostile forces, it is usually only a matter of time before corruption sets in. Witness the history of the Catholic Church in Ireland since the Reformation. Having survived centuries of persecution, it proceeded to establish itself successfully in the new era of freedom, and then, gradually, to change for the worse. Was it ever thus? St Cyprian pointed out that persecution had been visited upon the church, 'because a long peace had corrupted the discipline that had been divinely delivered to us' (*de Lapsis*, 5).[1] Such corruption, admittedly, can provoke chastening reverses in the fortunes of the church, leading to spiritual renaissance. On the other hand, such renaissances are usually followed eventually by further bouts of corruption. That is how it turned out not too long after St Cyprian's day: when persecution of the church ceased in the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the formerly persecuted church in time learned how to become a highly successful persecutor.

It appears, therefore, almost invariably, that Christianity has been unable to survive for too long in conditions of peace, before it has begun, or has been compelled by historical circumstances, to betray its innermost convictions. Even well-intentioned, exceedingly motivated reform movements within the church have tended to end up in the kinds of disillusioning and dispiriting ruts from which they sought to escape. Luis Buñuel's bleak film *Viridiana*, with its explicitly Christian references, may stand as an emblem of this defeat of goodness and idealism in a world that seems incapable of sustaining them for too long. Likewise, while St George may defeat the dragon in legend, in historical reality the dragon has usually won. In the struggle between nature and grace, nature always appears to hold the trump cards, at least in the short run. And sadly, this has been the case even within the church, where the 'old Adam' is, it would appear, as alive and kicking as anywhere else. Thus, history seems to

[1] See http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/02m/0200-0258,_Cyprianus_Carthaginensis,_Liber de Lapsis,_MLT.pdf

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show that the credibility of the Christian movement has been consistently jeopardized by the discrepancy between aspiration and reality. Indeed, signs of this human, all too human predicament are visible as far back as the pages of the New Testament itself.[2]

Self-evidently, this is a problem that far transcends the shortcomings of Christian leaders: to scapegoat them is to miss the point. For it is the human world itself that seems to be blighted. And not even the motivating power of Christianity appears capable of removing that blight permanently and definitively. Pascal, following on from St Augustine, noted that the root of evil is within us: we can, at most, curb its fruits, but not extirpate the root itself.[3] St Augustine himself had discovered after his conversion to Christianity that he was not 'cured' from his preceding 'illness' but had rather become a 'convalescent.'[4] In a similar vein, the twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein claimed that people were religious to the extent, not that they believed themselves to be 'imperfect' or 'incomplete' ('*unvollkommen*'), but that they believed themselves to be sick ('*krank*'),[5] echoing Pascal's sentiment that '[s]ickness is the natural state of a Christian.'[6] In the age of Darwin, Nietzsche expressed his exasperation with the human condition by asking: '[D]o you suppose the animals regard us as moral beings?' His answer was: 'An animal which could speak said: "Humanity is a prejudice of which we animals at least are free."'[7] The problem was addressed more flippantly in Oscar Wilde's comment, 'that God in creating man, somewhat overestimated His ability.'[8]

However it is expressed, this sombre vision of humanity prompts some obvious questions. Is Christianity perhaps just too sublime, too idealistic, too demanding for this 'fallen,' 'sick,' or 'imperfect' world? Can it only live in this world, when not being battered by the world, by agreeing to compromise its principles to a greater or lesser extent? Can its truth, then, only be protected by a phalanx of lies? Is the betrayal of Christianity practically built-in to all its

[2] See, for example, Mt 20: 20–24; Mk 9: 34; 1 Cor 3: 3–4.

[3] Cf. *Pensées*, fr. 149: '[I]t is in vain that you seek within yourselves the cure for your miseries. All your intelligence can only bring you to realize that it is not within yourselves that you will find either truth or good' (tr. A. J. Krailsheimer [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966], p. 77).

[4] Cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, revised ed. (London: Faber, 2000), pp. 170–71: 'The amazing Book Ten of the *Confessions* is not the affirmation of a cured man: it is the self-portrait of a convalescent.'

[5] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, rev. edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 51.

[6] The sentiment is expressed in a letter to his sister, Madame Périer, and is quoted by Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), p. 200.

[7] *Daybreak*, section 333, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), p. 162.

[8] In conversation: quoted in *The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde*. *An Anthology* by Alvin Redman (London and Sydney: Alvin Redman Limited, 1952), p. 31.

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attempts to live in this world? And was Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, justified in claiming, over half a century ago in *Schleifung der Bastionen*, that Christianity has never really elicited from any human society a response equal to its challenge or expectations, not even in the 'early church.'[9] Is it simply too irresistible a temptation to forgo being the 'salt of the earth,' and to try instead to be a replacement for the world, and thus to control it? In any case, did the original, extreme demands of Christianity not spring from a belief that the time before the end was quite short, meaning that its demands would not have to be met for too long, in a world that was 'passing away'? Can these demands still be regarded as realistic in a world ruled by time's seemingly endless tyranny?

There are no simple answers to these awkward questions, though their dialectical structure should at least alert us to their inherent, paradoxical complexity. To perceive reality as somehow 'diseased' presupposes, surely, the existence of a force for good active in creation that permits us to feel reality as 'diseased' in the first place. Similarly, if, as Nietzsche claimed, Christianity was eventually undermined by its very own ethic of truthfulness, the prior value and effectiveness of that ethic has then, ironically, to be presupposed.

More pertinently, perhaps, the gospels themselves reveal an ethical code that is, in more than one respect, curious. This applies in particular to the 'interiorizing' of moral values, with Jesus teaching that to sin 'in one's heart' is every bit as bad as to do so in 'reality.' Such intensifying and sharpening of moral norms can presumably only be aimed at revealing the quasi-impossibility of attaining moral perfection, as well as underlining the futility of moral censure.[10] For who can claim to be 'without sin,' where the standard is so radical? In other words, should the very drastic nature of Christian ethics not eliminate the possibility of using morality as a stick with which to beat opponents, or even the Christian church itself? Who, from a Christian perspective, would be so foolhardy as to cast the first stone in a battle for moral supremacy?

Finally, the very notion of betrayal is itself dialectical. For it would seem to make sense only if, to begin with, the notion of faith or faithfulness is itself meaningful and valuable. Indeed, it could be argued that the former notion is parasitical upon, or at least dependent upon, the latter. Betrayal, as in the paradigmatic case of no less a figure than St Peter himself, emphasizes and at the same time reveals the meaning and 'rightness' of faithfulness, as the bitterness of St Peter eloquently testifies, in his subsequent regret for his betrayal of Jesus.

[9] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Schleifung der Bastionen* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1952), p. 16. The title, 'Razing the Bastions,' seems to be an allusion to Eph 2. 14.

[10] Cf. Gerd Theissen, *On Having a Critical Faith*, tr. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1979), p. 88.

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As for the other great figure of betrayal in the gospel story, Judas, his act of betrayal even more powerfully and movingly reveals the destructive power of treachery, both for the victim and the perpetrator, while highlighting at the same time the sublime inviolability of truth and goodness.

The point of such observations is not, of course, to suggest that morality doesn't matter, or that the effort to 'overcome' the world is doomed in advance to failure, and so should be abandoned. Rather, what they do is to indicate just where the Christian victory 'over the world' lies, and what exactly it is. For Christianity teaches that this victory was won in this world, but is not itself of this world. Its substantial truth always presupposes the existence and redemptive relevance of a reality that is palpable in this world, but is not of it. This reality is what Christian faith calls God. And God is One. His transcendent nature is no different today from what it was in the past or will be in the future.

For Christian faith, then, the world we know will continue to be an ambiguous maze where humanity is destined to keep moving about nomadically, and uncertainly, during its sojourn in the universe. The good news that Christianity teaches is that God knows where we are and knows how to guide us, by the light and wisdom of his Holy Spirit, through and beyond the labyrinth of existence. Our world may be complex, but it is not, we believe, malevolent, no more than is the creator who sustains it.[11] This belief also implies, however, that our final destination, or liberation and redemption, is not fundamentally a matter of knowledge. It is a matter of grace. This in turn leads to the suggestion that the church's *raison d'être* does not consist primarily in transforming the world, but in enabling human beings to 'overcome' it, and thereby to reach salvation in another world. If this is accepted, then, at least where Christianity is concerned, the question of 'betrayal' becomes less urgent, and not, as it were, so life-threatening.

That said, the church must still have some interest in showing that Christianity does 'make a difference' to the living of human life in this world. Otherwise why speak of a *New* Testament? The church's message cannot, therefore, be purely theoretical or 'theological,' in the derogatory sense of being limited to inconsequential rhetoric. But that 'difference' will probably consist less in transforming the world's structures, welcome though this may be, than in enabling the faithful to endure and hence to 'overcome' this world and its inadequacies.

The philosopher's task, according to Karl Marx, is not to interpret the world, but to change it. Christianity claims, however, that the world has been changed through Jesus Christ, God and man, whose

[11] Cf. Gerd Theissen, *Die offene Tür. Biblische Variationen zu Predigttexten* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1990), pp. 187–88.

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redemptive life and death occurred in this world, but whose 'kingdom is not of this world.' In the context of this belief, morality – or, to pick up our main thread again, the church – can never be primarily a force for transforming this world, but only ever a response in this world to the reality of a world of grace beyond it, one that has changed the meaning and status of our own world, in all senses of that phrase, for good.

It is for this reason that the quintessential manifestation of the church will always be a liturgical act of thanksgiving, or, in very old-fashioned, nearly forgotten language, the Mass. Furthermore, the notion of the effectiveness of the sacramental system (*ex opere operato*) is a guarantee, if such were needed, that even the betrayal of Christian ideals cannot fundamentally undermine the salvation for the human race won by Jesus, no more than the original betrayals of St Peter and Judas were able to. In fact, such betrayals may even, in a way that remains for us opaque and impenetrable, have enabled our salvation to be won in the first place. And in our own case, our own betrayals may equally underline and thus reinforce the reality of salvation. Where sin abounds, as St Paul claimed, grace abounds even more.[12]

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[12] Cf. Romans 5: 20.

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