

On Grace, Aldous Leonard Huxley

On Grace

'Merit,' writes Michelet in the course of an attack on the Christian conception of Grace, 'merit is said to consist in being loved, in being the elect of God, predestined to salvation. And demerit, damnation? Being hated by God, condemned in advance, created for damnation.' This was more than a passionately convinced democrat could swallow. 'Who can believe nowadays that God saves according to favour, that salvation is an arbitrary and capricious privilege? Whatever any one may say, the world today believes, and believes with unshaken faith, in justice, equal justice, without privileges.' Charles Péguy, in one of his youthful writings, developed the same theme. For 'just as we are one (solidaires) with the damned of the earth . . . even so . . . we are one with the eternal damned. We do not admit that there should be human beings treated inhumanly; that there should be citizens treated uncivically or men thrust out from the gate of any city. Here is the deep movement by which we are animated, the great movement of universality which animates the Kantian ethic and which animates us in our claims. We do not admit that there should be a single exception, that any door should be shut in any one's face. Heaven or earth, we do not admit that there should be fragments of the city not living within the city.'

'No more elect.' The words are an admirable war-cry. But a war-cry is seldom, perhaps never, a truth. 'No more elect' is the expression of a wish, not the statement of a fact. For are there not, in the very nature of things, certain doors which, for some people, must always remain closed, certain unescapable and foredoomed damnations, certain inevitable elections? Pelagians and Arminians, Humanitarians and Democrats (under the different names, the heresy remains the same) have answered: No. It is always in man's power to shape his own ends; human effort, right action are always enough. But not only orthodoxy, the facts themselves, it seems to me, condemn such heretics. For here and now, and quite apart from any hypothetical after-life, are not Grace and Reprobation observable facts? Unpleasant facts, no doubt—but so, sometimes, is gravitation, a very unpleasant fact indeed when, at the top of a skyscraper, your elevator cable breaks. No amount of disbelief, no amount of not admitting will prevent people who have stepped over the edges of precipices from falling to the bottom. To put fences round quarries is right and reasonable; to pretend that it is impossible to fall is silly.

Michelet and Péguy, it seems to me, are like men who refuse to admit the existence of gravitation. 'To every one that hath shall be given and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath,' is the formulation of a natural law. We can do something to limit the operation of this law, just as we can do something (by means of fences, parachutes, and what not) to limit the operation of the law of gravitation. For example, certain social gulfs can be fenced round with legislation. We can make it possible for one man not to have political powers that are not shared by his fellows. We can abolish the extremes of wealth and poverty. We can give all children the same education. The operation of the law of Grace will, by these means, be limited; but we can no more abolish the law itself than we can abolish the law of gravitation.

Occasions for the law to manifest itself—these are all we can abolish, and not a very great number even of those. For though we can prevent one man from having more money than another, we cannot equalize their congenital wealth of wits and charm, of sensitiveness and strength of

will, of beauty, courage, special talents. To those who, quite unjustly, have much of this hereditary wealth, much in the form of valuable personal experience, of knowledge, power, and social influence will be given; from those who lack it, the little they have will be taken away.

Democrats do their best to prevent any doors being slammed in the faces of the not-having, or specially opened for the elect; but in vain. For though we can prevent one man from possessing political, economic, or educational privileges not shared by his fellows, we cannot prevent him (if he is naturally gifted) from making incomparably better use of his educational privileges than they do, from spending his money in a more human and comely manner, and from wielding power over those who do not like responsibility and whose only desire is to be led. The man who said 'Plus d'élus,' was himself one of the elect—at any rate in certain respects. For a man may have (and will be suitably rewarded for the having) a certain kind of spiritual wealth and at the same time lack (and be punished for the lacking) certain other gifts and graces. Intellectually, for example, he may have and it will be given him; but emotionally and aesthetically, it may be taken away from him because he has not.

Humanly speaking, the Nature of Things is profoundly inequitable. It is impossible to justify the ways of God to man in terms of human morality or even of human reason. In the final chapters of the Book of Job God is justified, not by His goodness, not by the reasonableness of what He ordains, but because, as His strange, enigmatic, and often sinister creations attest, He is powerful and dangerous and gloriously inventive beyond all human conception; because He is at once so appalling and so admirable, that we cannot sufficiently love or fear Him; because, in the last resort, He is absolutely incomprehensible. The wild ass and the untamable unicorn, the war-horse laughing among the trumpets, the hawk and the fierce eagle, 'whose young ones also suck up blood'—these are God's emblems, these the heraldic beasts emblazoned on the banners of Heaven.

The arguments uttered from the whirlwind—or rather the mere statements of prodigious fact—are too much for Job. He admits that he has been talking about things 'I understand not, things too wonderful for me which I know not.' 'Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.' Job's, it seems to me, is the final word on this disquieting subject. In Ivan Karamazov's phrase, we must 'accept the universe' not merely in spite of the frightful and incomprehensible things which go on in it, but actually, to some extent, because of them. We must accept it, among other reasons, because it is, from our human point of view, entirely and divinely unacceptable. 'Wilt thou condemn me that thou mayst be righteous?' God asks, and, without deigning to explain what His own righteousness may be, He proceeds to round off His extraordinary zoological argument with Behemoth and Leviathan. 'The one,' God explains, 'moveth his tail like a cedar, the sinews of his stones are wrapped together.' As for the other, 'who can open the doors of his face? his teeth are terrible round about.' Behemoth and Leviathan are more convincing than the most flawless syllogisms. Job is overwhelmed, flattened out; the divine logic moves on the feet of elephants.

'Merit consists in being loved, elected by God, predestined to salvation.' And 'justice is not enough.' Michelet was angry with the Christians for making these assertions. But at bottom, and when freed from their mythological incrustations, these assertions happen unfortunately to be true. Our universe is the universe of Behemoth and Leviathan, not of Helvétius and Godwin. Salvation in this Behemoth-world

(to say nothing of success) is not the necessary reward of what we regard as merit; it is the fruit of certain inborn qualities of spirit (qualities which may be humanly meritorious—or may not); in other words, it is the result of favouritism and predestination. Justice is not enough; faith (in the sense of something non-moral, but somehow God-pleasing) is also necessary—indeed, in some cases is alone sufficient to guarantee salvation. Personal integrity, happiness, even the general good can be achieved by, humanly speaking, immoral people and as the result of committing unjust acts; whereas the just acts of moral but unfortunately predestined, God-displeasing people can result in damnation for the meritorious actors and disasters for those around them.

In that strange and very beautiful book, *The Castle*, Franz Kafka has written, in terms of a nightmarishly realistic allegory, of the incommensurability between divine values and human values. Judged by human standards, the officials in his heavenly Castle are malignantly capricious and inefficient almost to the point of imbecility. When they reward it is by mere favouritism, and when they punish it is as often as not for honourable and rational acts. Above all, they are never consistent. For sometimes the moral and reasonable people find themselves rewarded (for it so happens that they are somehow God-pleasing as well as moral and reasonable); and sometimes the immoral and unreasonable ones find themselves (as we think they should be) severely punished—but punished for actions which, in others, more happily predestined, were counted as a merit. There is no knowing. And that there should be no knowing is precisely the 'point' of the Nature of Things. In that unknowableness consists a part at least of its divinity, and one of our reasons for accepting the universe is just this fact: that it propounds to us an insoluble riddle.

Here I must draw a very necessary distinction between salvation and success. (I use this last word, not in its restricted Smilesian sense, but in its widest possible significance. Cézanne never sold any of his pictures; but he was a highly successful painter, successful, that is to say, in relation to painting.) Those who have talents will be rewarded for their good fortune with appropriate success; but it does not follow that they will be given salvation—salvation, I mean, in the present; for we cannot profitably discuss the hypothetical future after death. There may or may not be a posthumous Kingdom of Heaven; but there is certainly, as Jesus insisted, a Kingdom of Heaven within us, accessible during life. Salvation in this inward heaven is a certain sentiment of personal integrity and fulfilment, a profoundly satisfying consciousness of being 'in order.' (In sua voluntate è nostra pace.)

For normal men and women a consciousness of having behaved in a humanly speaking, meritorious fashion is, in many cases, a necessary prerequisite to this salvation. But by no means in all cases. One can feel fulfilled and in order for no better reason than that the morning happens to be fine. Salvation is a state of mind, is what we have in our consciousness, when the various elements of our being are in harmony among themselves and with the world which surrounds us. To achieve this harmony, we may have to behave meritoriously—but equally we may not have to do anything of the kind. It is possible for us to be harmonized gratuitously—in orthodox language, to be saved by God's grace.

The greater and the more exceptional are a man's success-earning gifts, the harder, as a rule, will it be for him to achieve that harmony of which the consciousness is salvation. The poor in spirit are less successful than the rich in spirit, but they are for that very reason more liable to be saved. Thanks to their poverty, they are actually

unaware of many of the possibilities of discord which it is so easy for the richly gifted to turn into actual disharmony. True, the salvation of the rich in spirit, when they do achieve harmony, is a better salvation than that of the poor in spirit; heaven has its spheres. But harmony is always harmony, and, on their lower plane, the poor in spirit are as genuinely saved as the rich on theirs.

Also more of them are saved, both absolutely and in proportion to their total numbers. Cosmic injustice is thus seen to be tempered by a certain compensatory kindness to the dispossessed, who turn out after all to be the possessors of something which entitles them to receive a gift. This something (which, so far as success is concerned, is nothing, has a negative value) is their poverty. The law of Grace holds good even here: 'for unto every one that hath shall be given.' The poor have poverty and are given salvation; they have no talents, and success is therefore taken away from them. Those, on the contrary, who have talents are given success; but having no easily harmonizable simplicity, they are not given salvation, or given it only grudgingly. It is almost as difficult for the spiritually rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven as it is for the materially rich.

Success is given to those who have talents; but in many cases it is given only when the talents are used in a humanly speaking, meritorious way. There are also many cases in which the consciousness of having acted meritoriously is necessary to personal salvation. But to help to individual success or individual salvation is only a secondary and incidental function of morality. The essential 'point' of meritorious behaviour is that it is socially valuable behaviour. The individual succeeds because of his talents and is saved by Grace—because he has certain saving peculiarities of character or has performed some usually non-moral but God-pleasing act of 'faith.' Works are the things which save, not the individual, but society, which mitigate the injustices of a world, of which Behemoth is the emblem. Putting fences round quarries—that is works.

Christianity approves of putting fences round quarries; but it also insists very strongly on the fact that the quarries exist and that the law of gravitation is unalterable. In this it shows itself to be thoroughly scientific; though it is doubtless not quite so scientific in identifying one of the non-moral conditions of salvation with belief in the Athanasian Creed. Democratic humanitarianism is not scientific. Its apostles proclaim salvation by works and seem to believe that the law of Grace, if it exists, can be repealed by Act of Parliament. Not content with putting fences round quarries, such humanitarians as Michelet and Péguy paradoxically deny the possibility of falling. If people in fact do fall, that is due to the malignity of certain of their fellows, not to the operation of a natural law.

If the world is a bad place (and Behemoth is not remarkable for his virtues), ought religious myths to be true? To admit the existence of the bad facts, to incorporate them in a religious myth is, in a sense, to condone and even sanctify them. But evil should not be condoned or sanctified; to change what we regard as bad is the first of human duties. In the fight against evil, are not all weapons legitimate? One cannot disparage a thing more effectively than by saying that it does not exist, or that if it does exist, its being is only accidental and temporary. Purely practical religions, like Christian Science and democratic humanitarianism, make free use of these weapons of ostrich-like denial and deliberate ignorance. Seeking to cure the sick, the Christian Scientists refuse to admit that there is really such a thing as sickness.

Attacking injustice, the humanitarians deny the existence of Grace. From the advertising agent's point of view they are probably right. 'No more Sickness' and 'Plus d'élus' are admirable slogans, guaranteed to sell large consignments of Christian Science and democratic humanitarianism in a remarkably short space of time. But will they go on selling the goods? And even now do they sell them to everybody? The answer to the second question is: No, there are many people to whom these slogans do not appeal. And presumably there will be such people in the future; so that the answer to the first question is only a tempered affirmative. 'No More Sickness' and 'Plus d'élus' will go on selling the goods to some people, never to all. To be accepted by most people over long periods, myths must be at bottom true as well as useful. The successful religions are at any rate partially scientific; they accept the universe, including evil, including Behemoth, including the rank injustice of Grace.

A danger besets the scientific, the too realistic religions: they may find themselves proclaiming that whatever is, is right. Facts are not necessarily good for being facts; it is easy, however, to believe so. The human mind has a tendency to attribute, not only existence to what it considers valuable, but also value to what is.

If we accept the universe, we must accept it for purely Jobic reasons—for its divinely appalling and divinely beautiful inhumanity, or, in other words, because, by our standards, it is utterly unacceptable. We must accept Behemoth, but accept him, among other reasons, that we may the better fight with him.

Grace is a fact, and the law of Grace ineluctable. But a religious myth which took account only of Grace and omitted to speak of Justice would be very unsatisfactory. Nietzsche's is such a myth. The values he transvaluates are the social values, and he transvaluates them into the values of Grace. 'Rien que les élus,' says the philosopher of Grace: nothing but the elect, and those who are not the elect are nothing. The law of Grace should be allowed to operate without restriction. No fences round any quarry; those whom Nature has reprobated should be encouraged to fall. Such a doctrine is all very well for chronically moribund men of genius living quite alone in Alpine hotels or boarding-houses on the Riviera. (I myself always feel intensely aristocratic after a month or two of isolation in the Dolomites or by the Tyrrhenian.) But for the people who, in prosaic London or Berlin or Paris, have to do the actual pushing over precipices, for the people who have to be pushed . . . ? One has only to put the question to realize that a religion of unmitigated Grace simply won't do.

As usual, we must split the difference; or rather, we must preserve the difference and simply lay the two incompatibles together, Grace and Justice, side by side, without making any vain attempt to reconcile their contradiction. Mutually hostile, these two principles of Grace and Justice can be reconciled in practice by those who feel what is called, in the jargon of democratic theology, 'the sentiment of solidarity'—by those, in other words, who love their fellows. Some men and women have a special talent for love; they are as few, I think, as those who have a special talent for painting or mathematics. To the congenitally less gifted, Christianity and, more recently, Humanitarianism have tried to teach the art of loving. It is an art very difficult to acquire, and the successes of its Christian and democratic teachers have not been considerable.

Most people do not love their fellows, or love them only in the abstract and when they aren't there. In moments of crisis, it is true, they may be carried away by the 'sentiment of solidarity,' they may feel one with 'les damnés de la terre, les forçats de la faim.' But disasters are not chronic, and at ordinary times the feelings of most of us towards the damned of the earth are practically non-existent. Unless their case is brought violently to our notice, we simply don't think about them. In time, perhaps, as the science of psychology becomes more adequate, a better technique of teaching men how to love one another may be discovered. (Alternatively, of course, our descendants may develop a new social order, something like that of Mr Wells's Selenites—an insect society in which love is perfectly unnecessary.) Scientific psychology may succeed where Christianity and the political religions have failed. Let us hope so. In a world where most people had been taught to love their fellows there would be no difficulty in reconciling the claims of Grace with those of Justice, of universality with favouritism. But in this actual world, where so few people love their neighbours, where those who have not envy those who have and where those who have despise or, more often, simply ignore, simply are unaware of, those who have not—in this actual world of ours the reconciliation is difficult indeed.

The end