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MYSTERIUM

In the first two generations of Christianity, each Christian community had a prophet. We know of it through the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the apostle Paul. Both sources insist that each community needs a prophet to be a good community. Now, the prophets of Israel were people deeply convinced that God's word was taking flesh in their mouths, and that around this enfleshment of God's word, the people of Israel could come into existence. But once God's word had become flesh in the womb of Mary — the Middle Ages called her the queen of the prophets because she brought forth the word in the flesh — there was no longer any need for the word of God to come through the mouth of a prophet. Prophets, in the strict sense, no longer fit into the life of Jesus or the life of the early Church. So what did these prophets have to say to the Church that the other teachers and preachers mentioned in these first Christian documents could not say? I think they had to announce a mystery, which was that the final evil that would bring the world to an end was already present. This evil was called Anti-Christ, and the Church was identified as the milieu in which it would nest. The Church had gone pregnant with an evil which would have found no nesting place in the Old Testament. Paul in the second chapter of his second letter to the Thessalonians calls this new reality the *mysterium iniquitatis*, the mystery of evil. He says that something unbelievably horrible has come into being and begun to

grow with his foundation of communities around the Eastern Mediterranean, something whose full extent won't be grasped until some future moment at which he places *apocalypsis*, meaning the end of time and the world. This something, he insists, is mysterious and belongs to those things which only the initiated Christian can know. To outsiders who do not accept the divinity of the apparent rebel crucified by Pontius Pilate, it remains veiled.

What is impressive about the transition from the early Church to the established Western Church is how thoroughly this mystery disappeared from the Church's teaching and the concern of most of its members. It re-appeared from time to time in the prayers, writings, and sermons of mystics and reformers; but the Roman Church did not centre faith on its existence, and neither did most of the Reformed Churches. Is it not surprising that this belief should have faded, that Church doctrine would not have picked it up, talked about it, and made it central?

The *mysterium iniquitatis* is a *mysterium* because it can be grasped only through the revelation of God in Christ. This must be recognized. But I also believe that the mysterious evil that entered the world with the Incarnation can be investigated historically, and, for this, neither faith nor belief is required but only a certain power of observation. Is it not the case that our world is out of whack with any prior historical epoch? The more I try to examine the present as an historical entity, the more it seems confusing, unbelievable, and incomprehensible. It forces me to accept a set of axioms for which I find no parallels in past societies and displays a puzzling kind of horror, cruelty, and degradation with no precedent in other historical epochs. To give a very superficial example, just because it comes readily to mind, think of the polarization of incomes during the last twenty years all over the world, not only in the United States, but much more violently in the world at large. I recently saw a statement which inspired confidence that the 350 richest people in the world earn as much as the bottom 65 per cent of the world's people. And what worries me most about that is not the disparity as such, but the fact that that 65 per cent can no longer live, as they could thirty years ago, without recourse to money. Then many things were still not

monetarized; subsistence still was functioning. Today they can't move without buying a bus ticket. They can't get heat in their kitchen by collecting wood but have to buy electricity. How to explain this extraordinary evil?

I would say that this question can be looked at in an entirely new light if you begin from the assumption I spoke of earlier: that we are not standing in front of an evil of the ordinary kind but of that corruption of the best which occurs when the Gospel is institutionalized, and love is transmogrified into claims for service. The first generations of Christianity recognized that a mysterious type of — how shall I call it? — perversion, inhumanity, denial had become possible. Their idea of the *mysterium iniquitatis*, gives me a key to understand the evil which I face now and for which I can't find a word. I, at least, as a man of faith, should call this evil a mysterious betrayal or perversion of the kind of freedom which the Gospels brought.

What I have stammered here, talking freely and unprepared, I have avoided saying for thirty years. Let me now try and say it in a way that others can hear it: the more you allow yourself to conceive of the evil you see as evil of a new kind, of a mysterious kind, the more intense becomes the temptation — I can't avoid saying it, I cannot go on without saying it — of cursing God's Incarnation.¹

Let me give another concrete example, because I was thinking of it this morning, of the perversion of love of which I'm speaking. It concerns a man in a Mexican village whose kidneys got ruined, I guess by tequila. The local doctor said, We can only help you by providing you with a new kidney or with kidney dialysis. They took him off, and he died miserably, not so long afterwards, in hospital far from his family. But the need for kidney dialysis or kidney replacement had been injected into the entire village. And why should the poor be excluded from a privilege given to the rich? I sat down with pencil and paper with a man who knows the situation in Mexico, and we worked out that the cost of that poor drunkard's last months was equal to the purchase price of forty-two homes of the kind in which the people who now need kidney dialysis live. Why is it that none of our major churches is able to condemn this ritual, myth-making ritual, as something which a Christian can't engage in as a recipient, as

a researcher or as a devoted doctor or nurse? My idea is that it is because people do not see the underbelly of that evil, the way in which it is contrary to freedom in the deep sense, and so they just find it confusing. They don't know what to do, or how to react.

I know I risk being mistaken for a fundamentalist preacher in applying the monstrously churchy term, Anti-Christ, to this new evil. I would have preferred to simply speak about sin, but I was afraid that by using that term I would only heighten the guarantee that I would be misunderstood. Let me now face the extreme difficulty many people will have in understanding what I want to say. This difficulty does not lie in arcane speculations about what person or what power Paul meant to refer to in his letter to the Thessalonians, but in grasping the seemingly ordinary idea of sin. I believe that sin is something which did not exist as a human option, as an individual option, as a day-to-day option before Christ gave us the freedom of seeing in each other persons redeemed to be like him. By opening this new possibility of love, this new way of facing each other, this radical foolishness, as I called it earlier, a new form of betrayal also became possible. Your dignity now depends on me and remains potential so long as I do not bring it into act in our encounter. This denial of your dignity is what sin is. The idea that by not responding to you, when you call upon my fidelity, I thereby personally offend God is fundamental to understanding what Christianity is about. And the mystery that I'm interested in contemplating is a consequence of the perversion of faith throughout history, a perversion that has come to haunt us by the beginning of the twenty-first century and is exactly related to my understanding of sin.

All right, you might say, why not simply say "sin" then and dispense with this fantasy-laden, fundamentalist, Biblical, churchy idea of the Anti-Christ. Perhaps I can, but I must first clear up some of the difficulties associated with the contemporary use of the word sin. As far as I can understand, I live in a world which has lost the sense for good, the Good. We have lost the certainty that the world makes sense because things fit together, that the eye is made to grasp the sunlight, and is not just a biological camera which happens to register this optical effect. We have lost the sense that virtuous behaviour

is fitting and appropriate for human beings, and we have lost it in the course of the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries with the rise of the concept and the experience of value. Good is absolute: the light and the eye are simply made for each other, and this unquestioned good is deeply experienced. But once I say that the eye has value for me because it allows me to see or to orient myself in the world, I open a new door. Values can be positive but also negative, so the moment I speak, in philosophy, about values, I assume the existence of a zero point, from which values rise or decline in two directions. The replacement of the good by the idea of value begins in philosophy, and is then expressed in an ever-growing economic sphere within which my life becomes a pursuit of values rather than a pursuit of what is good for me, which can only be another person. What else could it be?

Now, in the tradition within which I'm speaking, sin allows a heightened understanding of evil. Evil is the opposite of good — it's not a disvalue or a negative value — and sin is a mysterious aspect of evil, a personal offence of God which is intelligible only in the light of the new freedom exemplified in the parable of the Samaritan. But, if I'm right, the replacement of good and evil by value and disvalue has destroyed the basis on which sin was predicated, because sin cannot be connected to negative values. And this has made it impossible to convey the idea that modern horrors can be fully grasped only by those who understand their sinfulness, their direct contradiction of the new freedom proposed in the Gospel.

Whether I'm right in my interpretation of Paul, I leave to the theologians. I will bow to their judgement as to whether my view is inside or outside the fold of orthodoxy. I am trying to understand what Paul's sentences say to me as a man who is deeply impressed, almost carried off his feet, by contemplating what the need for education, the need for ever-increasing health services, the need for shelter have generated in the modern world. I am guided as an historian by Paul. He tells me something which I must struggle to grasp, and it's not so difficult if you take him seriously and try to learn to see what he wanted to say. I'm not claiming authority in interpreting Paul, but still I suspect that I might be correct.