

EVIL AND GUILT

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

I HAVE LONG felt that what is commonly experienced as guilt is a most unchristian and unhuman sentiment. Did Jesus suffer and die in order to put a 'guilt trip' on humanity? Certainly, an impartial reading of the *Improperia* in the Good Friday liturgy could lead one to answer that question affirmatively. 'O my people, what have I done to you? Or in what way have I afflicted you? Answer me'. Such phrases can only too easily take on the overtones of the parents who instil guilt into their children by constantly harping on how much they have sacrificed for them. Is it the privilege of the christian to bear a double weight of guilt: first to feel guilty about existing at all because of Adam's sin in which we share, and secondly to feel really terrible because of what we made Jesus suffer? Is the purpose of the Good News to make us feel guilty or to free us from guilt? Unfortunately, only too many of our contemporaries have the firm impression that christianity begins with sin and guilt. Instinctively, they turn away from a god who finds his happiness in making us miserable, and in this they reveal a very basic religious common sense. This is not the place to analyse the reasons for this gross misunderstanding or to feel guilty about our own responsibility in the matter. It is useful to remember that the only apostle who felt guilty was Judas. In all the resurrection narratives there is not one word of reproach in all that Jesus says and does. He asks for faith, not for apologies.

Whether or not guilt feelings are innate or acquired, they should be carefully distinguished from the sense of sin, of having done wrong. The confusion between the two has its roots in a society which, in many ways, still demands that those who have done wrong should be made to feel guilty about what they have done. Those who were appalled by the genocide in the concentration camps were even more appalled to learn that many of those who were responsible did not feel the slightest guilt about what they had perpetrated. More recently, the horror of the Manson murders was heightened when it was revealed that the murderers felt no guilt for their crimes. But it is dangerous and fallacious to suppose that we should feel guilty when we have done something wrong. If

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we presuppose that wrong-doing should be accompanied by some feeling of guilt, we are setting up a purely subjective criterion for what is good and what is evil. Furthermore, it is only a step from that premise to the conclusion that because I do not feel guilt then I have not done wrong. It is but one further short step to saying that the wrong-doer must be made feel to guilty if he is to be corrected. Then we are back to a religion that belabours its followers with their sins in an attempt to make them feel guilty. Socially, we are back to a penal system that attempts to humiliate the criminal in order to 'bring him to his senses'. The futility of both systems can be seen in the massive swing away from organized religion and the rising crime rate.

In recent times, certain 'liberated' people have attempted to exorcise the demon of guilt. Only too often they have left the house swept and tidied for the entrance of seven worse demons whose name is also guilt. The consulting rooms of any psychiatrist bear abundant witness to this. Guilt seems to be so deeply ingrained in us that we can feel guilty about not having guilt feelings. This in itself is a valuable insight into the nature of guilt, which is an ever-tightening stranglehold on true personal liberty. It kills the relationship of love to which Jesus invites us. For, if it were God's business to make us feel guilty and our business to respond with guilt feelings, what possible relationship can result other than a religion of neurotic self-flagellation, self-reproach and self-depreciation? There can be no love where there is no real trust; and guilt sows a poisonous seed of doubt that kills love. This is true of any human relationship as well. The child who feels guilty about not living up to his parents, expectations will never grow as a person, and may be compelled to rebel in order to get rid of the burden of guilt.

Obviously, an ethic based on the principle that an action is only wrong if I feel guilty about it can be used to justify anything. The exploiters of humanity do not feel guilty about what they are doing. Those who manipulate finance and politics do not regard themselves as criminals, and sleep well at night. Conversely, an ethic based on the principle that if I feel guilty about an action there must be something wrong in it is equally hazardous. Such an ethic is the highroad to neurotic scrupulosity, and leads to as subjective a morality as its counterpart. The point is that the presence or absence of guilt feelings can never be the starting point for any investigation into the nature of good and evil.

Hence, a guilty conscience can never be a reason for approaching the sacrament of penance. The purpose of the sacrament is not to relieve me of my guilt feelings and make me feel better. Rather, it is a sacrament of forgiveness and healing, an experience of a love that can forgive all without reproach and set me on the road to greater unselfishness. The understanding love of Christ in the sacrament should certainly banish guilt by making me realize how unworthy and selfish a response it is to his forgiveness. Similarly, the fact that I do not feel guilty about anything in my life is not a reason for abstaining from the sacrament, whose other purpose is to foster an awareness of what might be called our passive involvement in the mystery of evil; our sin not of action but of non-action.

Here we face the delicate task of heightening the awareness without at the same time instilling guilt. A good example is the reactions of a group of school children to a dramatic film on world-hunger. Some were so incapable of supporting the burden of guilt evoked by the film that they blocked the whole question out of their minds. Others felt guilty but wanted to do something about the starving millions in the world. They wanted to get rid of their guilt. But any movement, no matter how worthy its aims, which begins from guilt feelings is off to the worst of starts. If I feel guilty about the steak on my plate because of the hungry in the world, the odds are that if I do not eat it I shall expect the hungry to feel grateful towards me for my sacrifice. I am merely transferring my guilt to them. Here we are back with the Victorian charity institutions, whose benefactors were so insistent that the children who received their bounty be grateful for what they had received. Furthermore, to begin with my personal guilt feelings can lead to over-indulgence towards those about whom I feel guilty. The parents who feel guilty about what they have not given their children are precisely the ones who end up by spoiling them.

But turning away from a problem because of guilt, or using guilt as a motive for action, alike prevent my taking up a mature and free responsibility to a problem like world-hunger or world-poverty. Responsibility and concern are born of a liberty that is not selfishly trying to assuage its own feelings. The resultant action will be all the more realistic and constructive, since it will seek to confront evil at its source and not merely attempt to eliminate the manifestation of evil that makes me feel guilty. Peace is not merely the cessation of hostilities, and world-hunger is not really eliminated by free gifts of food to the hungry. Guilt has the unhappy ability to focus our

attention on the symptom rather than the disease. This is because guilt is essentially a self-centred feeling, which makes me concerned about evil only in the measure in which the evil makes me feel bad about myself.

Perhaps the most common form of guilt is the vague feeling that I have done something wrong, but I cannot say exactly what it is; or the guilt which comes from an undefined awareness that I am not doing something I should do. This guilt gives rise to fear and anxiety and a diffidence about self which cramps my personal liberty and creates an insatiable hunger for reassurance. This is a regression into a child-state of feeling that we have done wrong without understanding what that wrong is or how it is wrong. It is interesting to note how much advertising relies on the technique of instilling this sort of guilt. We are made to feel that there is something wrong in our lives which will be eliminated if we buy this that or the other product. We are depriving ourselves or our families of something essential and should feel badly about it. The result is a whole segment of society who feel guilty every time they sweat.

If we allow ourselves to be swayed by this undefined guilt we shall inevitably slip into an ethic of approval. We will base our lives on what makes us more approved and accepted by the particular society in which we find ourselves: whether right-wing and conservative, or left and liberal or any of the many shades in between. Peer pressure does not end in school. The fear of not being approved by the righteous and respectable has its equivalent in the fear of being known as 'straight'. Both fears are the product of this undefined guilt and mean that I can never become my true self. My life is dictated largely by what the neighbours will say, no matter who those neighbours may be. Evil becomes non-conformity. Good is what is approved and accepted. The policies by which Hitler implemented his famous statement that 'Our organization only admits into its ranks those whose psychological make-up is such that they do not threaten to become an obstacle to the further spread of our idea', involved the instilling of a powerful guilt about not conforming to the party ideal and a complete absence of guilt about conforming to the evils of race-hatred.

The experience of undefined guilt arising from some undefined wrong undermines the right esteem that we ought to have of ourselves, and erodes a right self-confidence. It also eliminates the possibility of a truly loving relationship, since approval is substituted

for love; and the real oppositions that so often lead to a deepening of love are avoided. We are as afraid to disapprove as we are of being disapproved of by others. On the religious level this saps that complete trust in God that is at the heart of christianity. So often our religious upbringing leaves us with the vague feeling of guilt about ourselves and our lives. Basically we have a bad self-image based on the guilty feeling that somehow or other we must be doing wrong. This goes with the feeling that God has a whole list of sins with which he is going to face us one day. In other words God may at some time turn nasty on us. And if God does not fully approve of us how can we approve of ourselves? We forget that 'love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'.

In that state we tend to become so anxiously preoccupied by this undefined guilt that we never come to grips with the real evil in us and the world. If we are to be blamed for something of which we are unaware, then evil is not a mystery but a mystification. But what about praying to be forgiven for our unknown sins? What, too, of the great parable in Matthew's gospel, where both the just and the unjust are surprised: 'when did we see you hungry and thirsty. . .?' If we limit our understanding of that parable to the aspect of last judgment, we merely feed our guilt. The point of the parable is not to instil guilt or make us anxious. Its point, like that of the parable of Dives and Lazarus, is to heighten our consciousness of what is happening here and now. It invites us to become more aware of who we are and what we are about here and now, and of the abiding presence of Jesus among us in the least of his little ones. This is the very antidote to the guilt that blunts the edge of our awareness and distracts us from the here and now with vague presentiments about the undefined future. Lack of confidence in myself as a creation of the love of God can lead only to despondency, an acceptance of myself as a mistake on the part of the Creator, as one who might just be saved on sufferance. Or it can lead to neurotic attempts to make up for myself by engaging in pseudo-religious activities that cost me great sacrifice and effort; and the more they hurt the better they are.

But what about guilt feelings that come from a very well-defined source: from an awareness of specific personal sin, where we can point to some particular act of selfishness that has harmed another or ourselves? Surely it is right and proper that we should feel guilty about that? Guilt, however, is essentially self-centred. It breeds and is bred on an anxious fear about what is going to happen to me

because I have done wrong. Guilt is concerned not with evil in itself, but with what evil has done or may do to me. If my relationship with God has remained on a legalistic level, I shall feel guilty because I have broken the law and fear punishment. The answer is to put myself right with the law before the lawgiver can catch up on me and notice my guilty look. This is of course the reduction of religion to law. But should I be able to look at the crucified Christ, the image of the destructive power of sin; should I be able to look at the face of the crucified Christ in those whom I have wronged and feel no guilt? I may certainly feel guilt, but if I go with it I shall be led like Judas to some form of self-destruction. Guilt leads us to believe that our sin is too great to be forgiven. It makes us so involved with ourselves that we are blind to the forgiveness of God. Guilt makes us prisoners of our own wrong-doing. It locks us into a vicious circle of self-reproach and self-disgust which makes us incapable of either forgiving ourselves or of fully accepting the completeness and immensity of God's forgiveness. Furthermore, it makes true reconciliation with the one we have wronged impossible because we cannot really believe that he has forgiven us.

The antithesis of the suicide of Judas is the tears of Peter. The christian response to the awareness of personal sin is repentance and change of heart. Repentance is the responsible admission of our personal involvement in evil, a vivid awareness of the depth of that involvement, but one that is accompanied by a complete abandonment of ourselves into the arms of God's forgiveness. If the arms nailed to the cross make us aware of our sin, they are at the same time the arms that are ready to embrace us in loving pardon. That pardon has nothing of reproach; it is a true inner renewal in which we are born again out of love and into love. Repentance means that we receive ourselves back from God who is love. Where guilt leaves us scratching open old wounds, refusing to let them heal, repentance heals and strengthens us and sets us out again on the road of becoming ourselves. Guilt weeps over the graves of dead sins, but repentance leads us to a life where we can confront evil. To be truly repentant is to accept ourselves with all our possibilities for good and evil with a realism that is poles apart from the neurotic world of guilty self-introspection.

But such repentance is born of the Good News of salvation. The paradox is that we, as sinners, must first of all have our eyes opened to the forgiving love of God in Christ if we are to be able to admit and face up to our sin without the selfishness of guilt. Christ

revealed the evil in the world, but he only revealed it in the context of that incredible affirmation of the goodness of human nature which is his own becoming man. Jesus did not go round accusing people of their sins; he preached the Good News of salvation first. In his own person he renewed the image of man for all mankind. He restored to us an image full of hope and trust and love.

But if guilt is so pernicious, why is it so widespread? Has it no role to play other than a destructive one in the development of the human person? Quite simply, guilt is as widespread as sin itself because it is a by-product of the selfishness that is the root of sin. And what can any of the children of sin do but destroy the human person? The destructiveness of guilt can be seen in the barriers it erects in our relationships with God, others and ourselves. Guilt leads us to run away and hide like Adam and Eve in the garden. It makes us unable to share our nakedness with others. In the same way it alienates us from ourselves, since it makes us incapable of accepting ourselves realistically and in truth. There can be no future for us if we allow ourselves to be hag-ridden by guilt and remorse. All we can do is to eat our hearts out in anxious fear and self-disgust. If we have done wrong and are aware of it, there is no point in wishing we had not done so or kicking ourselves mentally for having done wrong. But there is most certainly a point in looking to the future and seeking the truth of ourselves which will avoid the repetition of the same mistake. Real sorrow does not consist in continually raking up a murky past, or perhaps trying to persuade ourselves that we did not derive some self-satisfaction from our wrong-doing. Sorrow leads to a renewed future in the full awareness of all its possibilities for good and evil. Where guilt never allows sin to die, sorrow allows sin to be swallowed in the immensity of God's mercy and looks to the renewed life of the resurrection.

No one was more aware of evil than Christ himself. No one came to grips with it as he did. Yet it would be absurd to suppose that Christ in any way felt guilty. Only he could ask, 'which of you will convict me of sin?' Far from making us aware of evil, guilt blinds us to the real dimensions of evil. Far from being a criterion of good and evil, guilt is the most subjective and fallacious measure of real evil. Our relationship with God invites us to trust him as one who understands us completely, more than we think we understand ourselves. Were we in this life to catch even a glimpse of the loving acceptance God has of each and every one of us, guilt would be banished for ever. In the meantime it remains a demon to be exorcized.