

The Problem of Moral Divergences

Divergences in traditional morals may result from outward conditions of life combined with profound differences of temperament; they may also come about because of differing levels of application and differences of perspective. The discrepancy between the Law of Moses and that of Christ offers an obvious example.

In speaking of divorce Christ points out that Moses—but a Moses commissioned by God—permitted divorce because of “the hardness of your heart”, and he adds, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” The question that arises here has to do with knowing whether the human reality that determined the prescription of Moses ceased to exist at the time of Christ; to say the least, there is no reason for supposing it did; we therefore have the right to conclude that in promulgating his ban on divorce Christ is concerned with a different human fact from the one considered by Moses, namely, a particular and not a general fact, one created in a sense by the Christic Message itself. If Islam returns to the Mosaic Law, it is because it refers to the same human facts as that law; it does not presuppose a climate of sacrificial *bhakti* but the psychological and social possibilities common to all men. From the Judeo-Islamic point of view, divorce is certainly not good in itself—a *hadīth* terms it “hateful”—but it is acceptable according to circumstances, and it then becomes something neutral; this proves that these legislations take account of conditions that are independent of “hardness of heart” while admitting that not every matrimonial union is the work of God, the sole condition that would render it indissoluble. If one wishes to claim a quasi-direct divine will for marriage, one must exclude every economical and political motivation and all petty bargaining; in any case the fact that marriage is indissoluble in principle, since it refers metaphysically to the paradisiacal prototype or to an ecclesiastical symbolism, does not mean it is something absolute from the standpoint of human facts or contingencies—a standpoint that unquestionably has a right to existence, for otherwise the Sinaitic and Koranic prescriptions would not exist.¹

¹ Moreover, hardness of heart does not necessarily reside in the complaining spouse; it

To situate properly what we have just said, it is necessary to understand that by “hardness of heart” Christ does not mean blatant malice so much as basic egoism, the egoism that makes the average man attach himself to the here-below more than to the hereafter or to the outward more than to the inward. If the Sinaitic and Koranic Laws authorize divorce—and thus seem to accept a certain “hardness of heart”—it is because there is a form of egoism that is legitimate, fundamental, and perhaps even healthy; one could also say that Christ considers the principle of individual interest only in its worldly or passionate aspect, whereas these Laws take account of conditions, modalities, or degrees that are able to neutralize this aspect or tendency. Both points of view—the Christian and the Judeo-Islamic—are of divine origin since they give rise to sacred prescriptions; each must appear in its providential context as a result of the divine play of possibilities. Christ, who is concerned solely with the hereafter—“My Kingdom is not of this world”—expects one to submit to destiny; Judeo-Islamic Law admits, however, that a man has a right to shape his life in the interest of his own equilibrium, hence also for the sake of the goods of the next world; this assumes on the one hand that the good things of the here-below contain an indirect spiritual value in principle and by their nature—because of their participation in the celestial prototypes²—and on the other hand that our choice of these goods or manner of dealing with them does not run counter to objective Law or our subjective interest. For Christians whatever is of this world *ipso facto* takes one away from God; for Abrahamic Semites whatever *de facto* takes one away from God is of this lower world alone; this *distinguo* is more than a truism, despite its schematic and apparently simplistic form.

certainly does reside in the oppressing spouse, and above all in parents who impose on their children partners who are contrary to their natures. If divorce violates the sacrament of marriage, forced marriage is also a profanation of the sacrament.

² This is expressed by the following verse of the Koran: “Each time that a fruit shall be offered them [in Paradise] they shall say: This used to be offered unto us beforehand [on earth]. . . . And in this place they shall be offered pure spouses” (*Sūrah* “The Cow” [2]:25). The good of heavenly rewards does not lie in the fact that they imitate earthly pleasures; on the contrary the good of earthly pleasures—objectively conditioned and subjectively precarious—resides in the fact that they imitate heavenly pleasures by ontological participation.

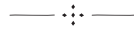
“My Kingdom is not of this world”: this saying implies that the things of this world must be lived in relation to the other world in a moral, separative, and limitative manner, not in a manner that is contemplative and unitive; it is not the cosmologically “vertical” contents that count but the “horizontal” containers, the superimposed levels, earth and heaven, “flesh” and “spirit”; and “no man can serve two masters”. On the Muslim side it is said that the Prophet intended to bring “not only the goods of the other world but also the goods of this world”, which means that there is an alternative only in a certain respect, but that in another respect there is compatibility and interaction, for both positions, the spiritual and the moral, are relative and conditional. The Christian point of view is founded upon an axiomatic and quasi-exclusive consideration of the humanly irremediable fall of the soul, which is hopelessly given to concupiscence, passional attachment, and even pride; the Judeo-Islamic point of view begins on the contrary by considering not only human nature as such, which is deiform and in this respect incorruptible, but also the positive symbolism of natural things, since neither our fall nor that of the surrounding world can be substantial, hence absolute. According to Islam either there is no “original sin” or else this sin is not absolute and not able to impair the soul’s capacity for salvation, a capacity conditioned objectively by Law and Grace and subjectively by faith and effort.



Since Christianity sees a maximum of concupiscence in sexuality—it is almost the “ontological sin”, the sin *par excellence*—and for this reason exalts chastity and recommends celibacy, it is logical in wishing to combine a maximum amount of penance with marriage and therefore in being opposed to all eroticism and forbidding divorce and polygamy; in short it eliminates all chance of escaping from the pitfalls of an unhappy marriage, and it endeavors as far as possible to attach a kind of punishment or reproach to marriage. Be that as it may, from the Judeo-Islamic point of view it can be said that Christianity does not take into account certain legitimate facts of human nature while nonetheless attributing an absolute value to the requirements of its perspective, even though they are relative like the perspective itself; and it can also be said that this is because Christianity is not *a priori*

a religion but a mystical brotherhood that has become religion. Now a religion, Muslims say, is composed of a *sharī'ah* and a *tarīqah*—an exoterism and an esoterism—whereas the Christian system is an esoterism lacking the corresponding exoterism and conferring therefore an exoteric significance upon its institutions.³

The ambiguity of earthly pleasure, above all sexual pleasure, comes from the fact that it combines concupiscence or animality—insofar as it involves a desire for what we do not have—with an angelic and quasi-divine awareness of what we are in our ontological and paradisiacal substance. All moral and mystical oscillations and tensions are explained in this way, and the ambiguity is not just in the experience but in the subject as well as in the object. Man oscillates between sacraments and idols, objectively and subjectively: he is himself either angel or animal, but he can also be both at different times according to his disposition or circumstances. For primordial man every natural pleasure was a sacrament, hence a unitive rite, which is what caused Meister Eckhart to say that to eat is in principle to take Communion—in principle, that is, in an eminently conditional manner. Be that as it may, noble joy is the encounter, at once concrete and Platonic, with what we are in our depths; if the *Upanishad* says that “man is made of desire”, it could as well have said—and more ontologically—that man is made of beatitude.



This saying is entirely characteristic of the Christian perspective: “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man”; this is said in order to emphasize the “commandment of God”, which concerns purity of heart, in contrast to the “tradition of men”, which concerns legal purity and includes physical purifications. What Christ means is that purifications of the body and utensils are worthless without purity of heart; he goes even further by asserting that inward purity does away with the necessity of

³ The social framework of Christianity is *grosso modo* a combination of Jewish tradition, Roman Law, and Germanic custom, the result being stylized where necessary by Christian sensibility.

outward purifications, which is undeniably an esoteric attitude. Quite paradoxically—though this is a possibility, which as such could not but be realized—Christ instituted a religion, hence a *de facto* exoterism, based on the very negation of exoterism, but without including, at least not explicitly, what we might call an “absolute esoterism”, that is, a form of spirituality based on intellectual and unitive contemplation of metaphysical truths.

“A new commandment I give unto you,” said Christ, “that ye love one another”: this message is an innovation only insofar as it is superimposed upon the old traditional order or the morally polyvalent Law; in any case it in fact abolishes prescriptions that do not enter directly into its perspective, and it provides the key for all the new things presented by Christianity. This “new commandment” sets forth a climate of ascetic perfection for the sake of a mystical love that rejects the “world”, but even so it could not abolish the positive virtualities that are present in human nature as such.

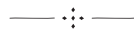
Judeo-Islamic morality, or Abrahamic morality if one prefers, is “equilibrium for the sake of ascension” or “the horizontal for the sake of the vertical”, not equilibrium or the horizontal for its own sake. As for Christian morality it is “ascension alone”, equilibrium appearing as a betrayal; and in this lie the strength and the weakness of this perspective.⁴ The juxtaposition we have just presented is doubtless schematic, but it must be so in order to characterize the divergent principles of the theologies and moralities in question; certain objections are easy to foresee, though it is impossible to do justice to all the nuances and compensatory factors. Nonetheless we would add the following clarifications: the Christian tradition relativizes the quasi-absoluteness of the first sin and its consequences—and in this way comes closer to the other two Semitic monotheisms—when it asserts that original sin “wounded” but did not “destroy” deiform human nature, which as such continues to be capable of goodness.

As for the Jewish perspective, it cannot simply be combined with the perspective of Islam as if to constitute what we have termed a “Judeo-Islamic morality”: in fact Judaism gives much more weight to

⁴ The separation between clergy and laity or between men of religion and men of the world is quite revealing in this regard; conflicts between these two groups eventually gave rise to scissions and inversions, which are only too well known.

the idea of original sin than does Islam, although this idea is brought out in the Koran as well. Obviously Judaism is at the very origin of this idea since it has its revealed basis in Genesis, or the first chapter—*Bereshit*—of the *Torah*; starting here the Jewish tradition taught that the sin committed in Eden has repercussions for all human generations; every man has inherited the guilt incurred by his first ancestors, and through it he is corrupted in his very nature and destined to suffering and death. Christian exegesis of Genesis merely follows and elaborates this doctrine, carrying it to its ultimate penitential conclusions, whence arises a “Judeo-Christian” morality of an ascetic kind, prefigured among others by the morality of the Essenes and perpetuated as one of the currents within Judaism itself; but it is in fact merely one current in the midst of an overall ethical system much more closely related to that of Islam than to that of Christianity.

The entire Christian paradox, whose legitimacy results from the positive spiritual possibility it manifests, becomes clear when one considers the fact that Christianity is a sacrificial *bhakti*—not a musical and dancing *bhakti* like Krishnaism—which was predestined to become a complete, hence “world”, religion and which by its very particularity, presented as absolute, fatally provoked a reaction from the Semitic and Biblical world, a reaction that took the form of Islam precisely; this is a providential sequence independent of the intrinsic content of these religions, for each is situated in its fashion at the center and origin.



Karma, bhakti, jñāna: ways of action, love, knowledge. Christianity is a personalist *bhakti* founded upon a fact, namely, the salvific Redemption brought about by the historical Christ; this fact, since it requires the quality of absoluteness, is necessarily unique in the strict sense of the word, and this is why Jesus was born of a virgin and raised the dead. But whatever a given fact might be, it cannot of itself take the place of total Truth; the “Christic” fact, for entirely material and all the more paradoxical reasons, therefore neglects all men whom it cannot reach in space and time, and this is a sign of its limitation. But this does not prevent this perspective-framework from being able

to convey every metaphysical truth; Christianity in fact possesses its *gnosis*, its theosophy, its esoteric dimensions.

Islam on the other hand presents itself as a *karma-mārga* insofar as it insists upon works and as a *jnāna-mārga* insofar as it identifies itself with an idea, that of principial Unity; upon this double basis it conveys a theocentric, not personalist, *bhakti*. What this means is that Islam is a *karma-bhakti-jnāna*, and this synthesis or equilibrium is in any case characteristic of its nature—a synthesis founded not upon a fact but upon a principle, that of absolute Reality. Thus the prophetic fact becomes in turn a principle, and it does so in the form of the succession of “Messengers”, the last of them, Muhammad, necessarily being conceived as their synthesis. Contrary to what takes place with a historical fact, which is accessible only to those who could have been informed of it, principial truth is by its very nature accessible to all, for it can appear everywhere: there can be a prophet who proclaims it everywhere, and in principle nothing prevents it from revealing itself to every well-disposed intelligence since it is inscribed in the very substance of the human spirit. It is true that at the exoteric level of Islam this universalist perspective becomes in turn a simple confessional fact, a fact that can be transcended only by an integral esoterism; we insist upon the epithet “integral”, for in every religion there are semi-esoterisms, which release us only partially, if at all, from the limitations of the “saving mirage”.

A remark is called for here in order to forestall—or rather dispel—certain misunderstandings that are as common as they are unfortunate. Formerly, the prince of darkness fought against religions above all from without and apart from the sinful nature of man; in our age he adds a new stratagem to this struggle, with regard to emphasis at least, which consists in seizing religions from within, and he has largely succeeded, in the world of Islam as well as in the worlds of Judaism and Christianity. This is not even very difficult for him—ruse would be almost a needless luxury—given the prodigious lack of discernment that characterizes the humanity of our epoch, a humanity that more and more tends to replace intelligence with psychology, the objective with the subjective, even the truth with “our time”.

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