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The Strategy of Satan

"The religious sanctification of relative interests in the spiritual life of the radical is, however necessary, just as dangerous a source of confusion as in conservatism. It leads to the same peril of endowing the egoism of a group or the prejudice of an era with the sanctity of the eternal."

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Reflections on the end of an Era. 184

"For we have to struggle, not with blood and flesh but with the angelic Rulers, the angelic Authorities, the potentates of the dark present, the spirit-forces of evil in the heavenly sphere. So take God's armour . . ."—Eph. vi 12, 13a.

THE purpose of this article is to argue that the publicists, moralists and theologians who are continually propounding their diagnosis of the present moral predicament of the world often go astray in the direction of false optimism or shallow pessimism because they underestimate the strategy and power of the forces of evil. We all know that we are in a dangerous position; that the future of western civilization is so precarious that our fate is, as it were, balanced upon a knife-edge. If we could gain an insight into the nature of the corrupting and violating power in our midst we might begin to understand what must be done, through God's Grace, to counteract and finally to overcome it.

At this point it will be objected that there is no need to postulate such a power of evil, capable of such conscious scheming. Is it not primarily rather a great negative or denying "contingent" force which universally contradicts and thwarts the good, but in itself is neither personal nor organized—part of the constitution of our environment and as inevitable an accompaniment to our progress as shadow to sunlight? The very difficulty, however, of defining something which may be in essence negative but exercises such a universal *real and positive* force, shows that we are on safer ground in our original definition. If there be any error in this, it is probably in the direction of underestimating the enemy. And, if he is indeed "personal", this is precisely what he wants us to do.

A few examples will furnish the only means to test the above suggestions. First, the accumulation of "natural calamities" in these days provide a very interesting study in the complex interaction of evil forces and influences. Earthquake, cyclone and flood are presumably neither more nor less numerous and devastating than in the past, but we have in these days an increasing number of what might be termed mixed afflictions. Specimens of these are only too easy to describe. Some are due to the inventiveness of man. It is, of course, a natural phenomenon if an aeroplane is struck by lightning, although in the past this was not possible. If the *Titanic* struck an iceberg, the subsequent loss of life was partly due to the inventive skill of those who had produced such an enormous machine to carry human beings over an hostile element. Responsibility for the accident may therefore, on a rough calculation, be shared equally between natural forces and human ingenuity. In other cases the human contribution to disaster is significantly larger. The tremendous and frightening increase in population in certain areas of the world is due mainly to human interference with natural processes; medical and social reforms have increased the birthrate and decreased the deathrate, and "nature" is no longer permitted to wipe out surplus population, in the wholesale manner of previous centuries, by famine and epidemic. In the absence of any general adoption of any method of family-planning the ultimate catastrophe is likely to be the more terrible because postponed from year to year; some unavoidable interruption in the food-supply may set in motion a chain-reaction with appalling consequences. Here the proportion of human responsibility might be estimated as high as 75 per cent.

Stupidity is perhaps a venial sin, but *Hubris* or overweening pride has also a big share in promoting such disasters. This is also true in the case of those greater calamities, involving the lives of countless human beings, who starve and are wasted by disease in the overcrowded countries of the world. Much of this suffering is due to natural causes, much to human foolishness and negligence, but not a little to satanic elements. These have to be isolated and examined like ultra-microscopical viruses in the human body. Racial prejudices or hatred, national selfishness, corrupt internal administration, are general terms for such, but the very use of these terms covers but another subterfuge of the evil one in our minds. Let us therefore be more precise. Here there may be a man, or a group of men, living in luxury like Dives in the parable, oblivious to the sighs of the poor at their gate; elsewhere, some directors of a vast commercial concern, sitting far away across the seas, determined only on profits, and forgetting that exploitation, while favourable to a few, sometimes spells ruin for many. Or take you or me. In our comfort and prosperity, a genial indifference to the

fate of our fellow men is broken rarely if ever; we proceed complacently and unheedingly down the broad road that leads to destruction; "and many there be which go in thereat."

From these considerations it is easy to turn to a profounder examination of human appetites. Our characteristic lusts have been analysed so minutely by casuist and psychiatrist that only one remark is necessary here. It is simply that Paul's complaint in *Romans* vii 18 : 19 is just as true today as when it was written. My desire to do good is always turning back, so to speak, upon itself; intentions are excellent and the result hideous. But in our personal lives the most subtle of all temptations is the one which we recognize as such in our most enlightened moments. These are not necessarily the most disillusioned; "Oh what a fool I was!" is a remark indicative as much of wounded pride as spiritual insight. But it is the vision of God given to us in some momentary revelation which, like a lightning flash, shows us what we were and are. We soon sink back into our usual slightly uneasy equilibrium of everyday morals. And when the temptation returns, even our recent experience of God's truth about it may not enable us to recognize it. For Satan is an adept at arranging small superficial changes which alter the appearance of anciently familiar sin. So we suggest to ourselves that on this occasion all is different, while in the depth of our conscience we know it is the same.

With most nations and communities such depths of cleverness are unnecessary. Few things are more frightening than that double-edged modern phenomenon: the long-lived lie and the venerable idol. Surely at no period in the world's history was such a multitude of lies released to bamboozle the nations, especially the long-suffering ordinary worker or cultivator. Not only is the air full of them, but the apparatus of publicity is now so elaborate and efficient that words themselves are becoming unnecessary—everything can be taught by pictures. Like the Moslem, who, after seeing an inferior product of Hollywood in a Calcutta cinema, muttered into his beard; "Now we know how white women behave," people *know* because they have *seen*. What we see is, of course, more often a mirage rather than the truth. This however does not concern our pastors and masters; they are mainly interested either in filling up our leisure hours with some kind of entertainment, or putting across the particular propaganda which they want us to believe at the moment. The first section, although often tending to the corruption of public morals, does not concern us here. The second, which is even more prominent under totalitarian regimes, provided us all with idols (miscalled "ideals") which we are to worship, slogans ("manifestoes" or "platforms") which are to be believed, and bright hopes for the future ("main objectives", "freedom and prosperity", "dictatorship of the proletariat" and

the like) which are to be swallowed whole. It is not denied that there is still a minority of intellectuals capable of penetrating these smoke-screens to discover where the enemies of the truth and protectors of vested interests live and work. But even if they know this, they are powerless to destroy them—they are too strongly entrenched. Nothing short of a general catastrophe, such as war, will dislodge them. In that event, their empty redoubts are soon occupied by other would-be tyrants.

So the average man has before him an array of false gods not less numerous, seductive or awe-inspiring than the rows of images I have seen in Hindu temples. The charm of idol-worship is always mysterious to some minds; why a man or woman should so far surrender intellectual integrity as to bow down before such effigies is a question unanswerable by the writer. Yet it is a universal characteristic of human nature: the Tibetan Lama tells his rosary in much the same way as the Italian peasant woman, and the Chinese have, or had, a goddess whose peculiar pleasure it was to rescue those in peril on the sea, like the Mediterranean *Stella Maris*. Similarly, the simple-hearted worker in the Ukraine or Middle West accepts without much question the wrapped-up carrots held before his nose by Krushchev or Dulles. In all this our ancient adversary is confidently busy and generally successful. He inserts into the minds of the "leaders" ample fuel for the never-extinguished flame of their suspicions and prejudices; the longer their tenure of office, the more pronounced the warp in their minds. The latter is always encouraged by those favourite instruments of satanic strategy, the narrow-minded "experts" of all kinds, especially military. It is difficult to foresee any radical change in this particular aspect of politics in any conceivable future. Yet even this kind of prophecy may be falsified by unexpected developments in circumstances.

To most observers the kind of situation here briefly sketched is the most dangerous of all. This type of idolatry leads towards massacres, famines and horrors of all kinds, as well as the ruin of many fair ideals and fervent hopes. Martyrs are numerous, and it often seems that their sufferings have been in vain. Surely nothing could be worse than this. Yet *this* is not the satanic masterpiece; it is not this which causes most mirth in hell. *Corruptio optimi pessima*. It is when the enemy succeeds in establishing himself in the very centre of the opposing camp; when there is a spy on our General Staff. It is here suggested that the main cause of the ineffectiveness of the forces making for righteousness in our present world is that, without knowing it, we are being deceived and bewitched into worshipping, not only idols of the kind mentioned above, but also others which were innocent and holy in the not so distant past but have now become transformed into deceptions and snares.

It might be that most of the above would command general assent from thoughtful Christians. But the conclusion of this essay must, one fears, expect generally equal opposition. If our main thesis is correct, the Satan, arch-deceiver that he is, insinuates himself into places where his presence is not likely to be discovered (until, like the snake in the Garden of Eden, he chooses to show himself) and uses instruments which we all believe he never could use. So any one of us is as likely to be bamboozled as anyone else. The very suggestion, for example, that he is using the Christian Church and Sacraments in many instances is received with horror as blasphemous. Yet we believe that it has happened.

It will perhaps be admitted by many that an introvert Church is an unhealthy Church. A sincere devotion to her Lord, and a concentration upon learning his Will, must be accompanied by a mission to the world outside which is continually reaching out to draw men and women to Him. Everything that interferes with the latter object must become suspect. Yet, to so many outsiders today, organized Christianity appears to be so absorbed in its own affairs, chasing so many apparitions and involved in so many secondary problems, that its victories are unknown, its defeats exaggerated, its activities obscured and its aims impugned. It is allowable to suspect that someone is sowing tares in our precious field. But how can we find and uproot them? A good method is to look in the most unlikely places. A great deal of time and energy is being wasted at present on controversies about episcopacy and "orders." These are actually matters of Church organization and therefore of secondary importance. The influences which cause God-fearing and self-denying men and women to spend God-given opportunities and resources in worrying about them are certainly of no celestial origin. Similarly, undue emphasis upon the holiness and eternity of that extremely fallible organization of human beings, the Church of Christ on earth, tends to exalt to heaven what can only be transformed into the heavenly City by the Grace of God and never the merits of man. The process by which a revelation of God or a sacrament gradually, often by very slow degrees, is changed, in the very presence of those who worship it, into an idol, is never apparent to the human observer. Only by the result is it known; "by their fruits ye shall know them." The history, especially in recent decades, of the Roman Catholic Church, is full of examples of this. But every Communion can furnish instances.

The most exquisite physical agony is felt when a junction of sensitive nerve-centres is pierced. The Communion of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, is such a centre in the life of the Christian Church. It is not uncommon for us to wonder at the ways of Providence when a useful life is cut off at its prime, or a mother of young children killed outright by lightning. These are extreme

examples of the contingent nature and general chanciness of our environment and our life within it. A greater mystery surrounds the indubitable fact that the Satan has succeeded his instrument, Judas, in being present at the Sacred Meal. For that which should be the uniting place of all Christians, where their love to each other is shown forth to the world, has been the centre of division, bigotry, and even persecution for centuries, and even today Christians cannot unite at the sole Feast at which their Lord is Host. (Compare *Luke* xxii : 26 and *John* xiii : 35.) This is a great triumph for evil, perhaps the greatest of which we can be conscious. By it the Christian Church is not only "divided"—it is continually stultified and fatally weakened. The inspiration and strength which would come from obedient united loving Communion with the Lord is only spasmodically available, or often lacking altogether. A kind of cramp paralyses our organic life; we advance in detachments and occupy outposts, while the enemy from the rear sees to it that no decisive victory is ever won. In the Holy War, as in other wars, co-ordinated effort, carefully planned, is the only means for ultimate victory.

Criticism of the Church by outsiders is often regarded as unimportant by those in its inner circles. We must not forget that the main business of the Church in the world is just with that ignorant outsider, rather than with the vast indifferent multitude whose interest is so hard to stir. So we may regretfully allow him to make his point that the Church is self-centred. He may be right; if not, we must prove him wrong. But the charge just made is a far graver one, for it must needs come from within the circle of those whom the Lord has called to be His own. How far is it justified? The deceiver of the whole world (*Rev.* xii : 9) knows the answer. No single Christian can presume to indict his Church, or any other. It is the world outside, with its ever-increasing masses of heathen, and the events of our time, which furnish the overwhelming evidence. All we Christians can say is : "Lord, is it I?" and pray for forgiveness.

H. D. NORTHFIELD

REMINDER

The Annual Meeting of the Baptist Historical Society will be held on April 27th, at 4.30 p.m., in the Institute Hall at Westminster Chapel. Tea at small charge.