Foundations

Lecture given by Dr. Leon Roth

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[St Paul's lecture]

Held in the Crypt of St Paul's Cathedral, London.

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WHEN I received the signal honour of a call to address you on a subject connected with Christian–Jewish understanding, I thought it might be fruitful to discuss with you what it is that gives meaning to that phrase. I invite you therefore to forget for an hour our several loyalties and differing affiliations, and examine our common foundations.

I use the word Foundations of set purpose.

When two centuries ago a Dean of St. Paul's was called to the see of Durham and gave a Charge to his clergy there, he warned them that 'religion is by far too serious a matter to be a hackney subject' upon all occasions: 'People are too apt,' he said, 'inconsiderately to take for granted that things are really questionable because they hear them often disputed.' I submit that the situation with us today is different. We are given many positive - and diverse - doctrines, little guidance on how to distinguish between them. Little attention is directed on essentials; but unless attention is directed and re-directed on essentials, we are carried about with every wind and lost. There is relevant here an old Rabbinic story about the Tower of Babel. It explains why the Tower fell and the builders failed to reach their goal. When they were half way up (it says) they found themselves short of material, and proceeded - disastrously - to supply it from their own foundations. I sometimes fancy that this is what we are all doing today. In our haste to help everybody to get to Heaven, we try to make up for our lack of materials by digging away at our foundations. What I wish to do this evening is to consider with you what those foundations are. What are the primary principles - what are *some* of the primary principles - the weakening or removal of which will bring religion as we, Christians and Jews alike, know it, down to the ground.

And not, I fancy, Christians and Jews only. There are, too, the followers of the great faith of Islam; and I like myself to think of the monotheistic religions, in spite of their manifest differences, as looking back together to the traditional father of us all, Abraham. Indeed, instead of that strange geographical misnomer, Western religion, I should like to be allowed to speak, figuratively of course and crying 'pax' to the historians, of the religion of Abraham. What then, I ask, are the primary foundations underlying the religions which look back to the call of Abraham?

I hasten to add, in order to avoid any possibility of misinterpretation, that foundations are not the buildings erected on them. Each religion is in itself a complete structure, each has its own character and plan; and although they may share the same, or some part of the same, foundations, they are yet distinct, and to be distinguished, from one another. To vary the metaphor, although their soil and deepest nourishment may be the same or similar, their flower and fruit are different. Yet our enquiry may not be without profit. The pursuit of it may sharpen our eyes; and even if we reach no conclusions, we may gain some light on points of importance which may, perchance, meet us on our way.

2.

I shall start from an old Jewish text – I was asked to speak as a Jew – and develop its implications. The passage reads as follows:

> Therefore was man [that is, of course, Adam the first man] created one, to instruct us that whoever destroys one life, it is accounted to him by Scripture as if he had destroyed a whole world, and whoever preserves one life, it is accounted to him by Scripture as if he had preserved a whole world; and [a second thought] for the sake of peace among men, for now no one can say to his neighbour: my first ancestor was greater than thine; and [here we have a third] so that it should not be affirmed that there are many ruling powers in Heaven; and [– finally –] in order to proclaim the greatness of God, for a man stamps many coins with one seal and they are all the same as one another, but God stamps all men with the seal of the first man, yet each man is different from each other.

Before turning to the context of this passage – it is taken from the *Mishnah Sanhedrin*, chapter 4 – I disengage its main heads. The world, and in particular the world of humankind, did not make itself: it has a maker. This maker is one, not many, and what he made bears the continued impress of his nature. But his making is of a very special kind. It is Creation and therefore different from ordinary making. The products of ordinary making – what we would call now, I suppose, machine products – because – cast in one mould, are all the same. The products of *divine* making, and in particular human beings, *although* cast in one mould, are all different. They are therefore, each and every one of them, completely valuable in their own right, each a whole world in themselves. Yet this does not, as might have been supposed, diminish moral responsibility. On the contrary, it increases and enhances it. Each single individual represents, and is answerable for, a 'whole world,' both in himself and in others.

'Ideas,' we have recently been told[1], 'are not what we know so much as what we know *with*.' They are, as it were, guides directing our knowing rather than the objects, or static results, of our knowing. The passage I have brought before you is one of ideas in this sense. It is neither closely expressed nor finely elaborated. Yet if we consider carefully its provenance and context, we shall see how deeply it cuts.

3.

The book from which the passage is taken, the *Mishnah*, is a compilation from earlier material made by the official head of Palestinian Jewry, Rabbi Judah the Prince, about the year 210 of the Christian era. We are relieved, therefore, of the tiresome game of priorities: who said what first; at that date the Church certainly existed as an organised institution and was a growing force in the Roman world. The Mishnah is not however a theological treatise or a theoretical enquiry into ethical conceptions but a practical handbook of conduct for the individual and the community. The section from which our passage is taken, that entitled *Sanhedrin*, deals with the everyday practice of courts of law, and this chapter, the 4th, details the procedure of the court in trials involving the death penalty. It first lays down the special rules for the composition of the court and the special

(1) Professor John Danby in the **Critical Quarterly, 1961.**

method by which decisions were taken. It then turns to the witnesses and relates how the court explained to them the special nature of their responsibility.

> They would bring them in [we read] and admonish them as follows: You are not to speak from guess-work or from gossip or from reliance on a third party however trustworthy in your eyes. Know that you will be subjected by the court to rigorous examination. Understand that cases involving the death penalty are not like those which involve only money. In money cases a false witness can atone for the damage he has caused by a money payment. In capital cases there rests on his head the blood of the condemned man and the blood of the descendants [who may have been born to him] to the end of days. It is for this that man was created one, to instruct us that whoever destroys one life, it is accounted to him by Scripture as if he had destroyed a whole world, and whoever preserves one life, it is accounted to him by Scripture as if he had preserved a whole world; and for the sake of peace among men, for now no-one can say to his neighbour: my first ancestor was greater than thine; and so that it should not be affirmed that there are many ruling powers in Heaven; and in order to proclaim the greatness of God, for a man stamps many coins with one seal and they are all the same as one another, but God stamps all men with the seal of the first man, yet each man is different from each other, and therefore each man should say: for me the world was created. And do not say: Why should we put our heads into this vexatious affair? The Law is explicit: 'If a man is a witness, and has seen or knows, but does not tell, he shall bear his iniquity'. Nor must you say: Why should we [by giving evidence) bring a man to his death? 'When the wicked perish, there is rejoicing.'

This then is a plain recital of regular court practice. Witnesses about to give evidence in a case involving a man's life were solemnly addressed by the Jewish court and told to remember that there is something about human life which makes it different from everything else in our experience. The taking of it is final: humanly speaking there is no restitution for it. Nor is there any substitute for it. It is a value in itself, a whole unique world.

This is stated to be true not merely generally and metaphorically. We should recall the context: the court of justice, the witnesses, the prisoner in the dock. Every human being without exception is declared to be a special creation, an individual person different from every other. For God's activity in the world is not that of a mechanical reproducing, and his creation is not a mechanical reproduction. The unique produces the unique, the unlike the unlike, the creative the creative. Each created person is a whole creative world.

It is for this reason that moral responsibility may be held to exist. Men form one inter-responsible community of individual creative souls. As a modern philosophical novelist has written in our own day: the first condition of life lived together is 'the perception of individuals.' It is the 'extremely difficult realisation that some thing other than oneself is real.' And Miss Murdoch goes on to say, and to say memorably: 'What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man.' As our Mishnah says, it is the individuality of human life which constitutes the sign-manual of the Creator: 'For a man stamps many coins with one seal and they are all the same as one another; but God stamps all men with the seal of the first man, yet each man is different from each other.'

4.

We have squeezed our orange; and although, as we shall see, it yet contains some juice, we must pause now to enquire into its authenticity, its authenticity of course not as text and philology but as idea and doctrine.

We remark first that in its whole context it is a paean to the uniqueness and independent value of each and every living human being. This is one of the characteristic marks of Scripture too. In the Bible life is not only connected constantly with God. God himself is called, in that most awesome of names, the *living* God. He is the fountain of life. He holds our soul in life, and this not in the physical sense only; for he is, too, the way of life, the strength of life, our life and the length of our days. 'Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man

live.' 'It is by these things that men live, and wholly therein is the life of our spirit.' If we 'incline our ear and come unto him, our soul shall live,' and he 'shall be our portion in the land of the living.' The attachment is deep and abiding: 'Thou wilt show me the path of life; in thy presence is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.'

But further, the living God of Scripture is not constricted to the seeming outward sameness of appearance. He looks to the different hearts, weighs the different thoughts, '*understands* all action.' He is thus the 'God of the spirits of all flesh.' The plural ('spirits') in this phrase should be noted. There is not (for the Bible) one undifferentiated spirit common to all men. Each spirit of each man is different; and that this is indeed the view meant is apparent from a glance at the two occasions[1] on which this most remarkable appellation of God is used. In each case the 'God of the spirits of all flesh' is called such because he knows each individual spirit in its individuality. For each spirit is different, each mind is different, each character is different, *each soul is different.* In the phrases of our Mishnah, altho' all men are equally alike in being children of the one Adam, they are also, thro' and by virtue of the peculiar nature of divine creativity, equally unlike. To be a person means to be different.

Thus (to sum up), 'In the beginning, God *created*'; and he created a world not of blank identity but of variety, a variety of qualitative differentiation. There is a better and a worse, there is a right and a wrong. Difference is of the essence. It is not the case that every thing, and every action, is equally 'divine.' Men are not undifferentiable drops returning at their latter end to be absorbed into the one ocean of all-being. For God is creator, not manufacturer, and the nature of creativity is to produce difference. Why create at all if identity is the envisaged end?

5.

It is now, I hope, clear why I took this incidental passage from a Jewish law-book as a testimony for essentials. It rests on, presumes, recalls, ideas which both pertain to the basic outlook of the Scriptures and lie behind all that we recognise as religion.

(1) Numbers xvi, 22; xxvii, 16. The notes of the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi on these passages (following earlier authorities) are peculiarly apt.

Yet (and here I am advancing to the second part of my thesis) it would seem to represent the very opposite of what we hear so much about today. It brings us to the very heart of one of the most modern, as it is too one of the most ancient, of religious issues, that of the particularity of the human soul. In the history of Christian theology Aquinas argued it powerfully against the xiiith century Averroists. We should be arguing it (but, alas, we are not) with those of our contemporaries who are seeking an over-easy reconciliation between East and West. For Western religion – the 'religion of Abraham' – proceeds (if I may be permitted to repeat summarily my main points) from God conceived of as Creator, and creativity means novelty and difference. Its human centre is the reality of those novel and different finite spiritual entities which it knows as souls. Individual souls partake of the nature of their Creator who created them in his own likeness. Being created (not just 'made') they too are in some measure creators. They are gifted with spontaneity, a spontaneity which means free activity on the one hand, on the other (and as a necessary consequence) responsibility. Responsibility is answerability, both answerability *to* and answerability *for*, answerability *for* our actions, answerability *to* the God of creation. It is these ideas which emerge in their practical aspects in our key-passage; and they constitute, I submit, foundational ideas which, if sapped away, will cause our religions to collapse. Yet I submit that it is just these ideas which we in this generation, in our rush to reach a universal heaven, are *allowing* to be sapped away.

I can best illustrate this by reference to Lord Russell's anecdote of his first introduction to Her Majesty's prisons during the first world-war. He recounts that when, for the prison records, he was asked his religion, he replied 'agnostic.' The word was new to the warder, and Lord Russell had to spell it out and dictate it letter by letter. After writing it all down the official scratched his head meditatively and said: 'There are all sorts of religions about nowadays, but I suppose they all worship the same God.'

The remark is charming. Lord Russell says it kept his spirits up for a whole day. But I sometimes wonder whether it is true. *Do* we all worship the same God? Do we not perhaps, although we use the same word, understand by it different things? When my Hindu friends speak of "realising God" and (some of them) of themselves as having in fact "realised God," would Abraham have understood? Would Isaiah?

6.

I have suggested so far in this paper that the God of what I have ventured, quite unhistorically, to call the religion of Abraham is the purposeful creator of heaven and earth who created man in his own creative likeness and holds man, and himself, responsible for his creative actions. The idea of creation is philosophically a difficult one and recent writers have fought shy of it. So far as the *religious* interest in it is concerned, we may agree wholeheartedly with the Dean in his Studies in Christian Philosophy that it 'is the affirmation of the thoroughgoing dependence of all things on God'; while from the point of view of *Ethics* its apparent assertion of the reality of time, in the sense of the reaching out from past to future, allows meaning to moral effort. Yet these more rarified points apart, we should hold fast to the distinctive characteristic of creativity which the old Jewish court insisted on. The unity of origin remains active within and throughout the whole gamut of the diversity of creation, and it controls the exuberance of the diversity when it oversteps its permitted bounds. Creative freedom, as we are told by artists when recalling their own creative efforts, imposes a compelling principle of harmony or order; that is, as Plato never tired of saying, justice and law. Law may be external or internal, in the books or in the heart, 'not in heaven, that thou shouldst say, Who shall go up for us to heaven and bring it unto us and make us hear it that we may do it, neither beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us and bring it unto us and make us hear it that we may do it.' Yet, however much it is 'very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart that thou mayest do it,' it is yet compulsion, it is yet law, and without it life is self-defeating. As John Pym said at the Strafford trial some 320 years ago:

> If you take away the law, all things will fall into a confusion. Every man will become a law to himself . . . Lust will become a law, and envy will become a law; covetousness and ambition will become laws . . . The Law hath a power to prevent, to restrain, to repair evils. Without this, all kinds of mischiefs and distempers will break in upon a state.

We are witnessing in our day an eruption of just such 'mischiefs and distempers'; and their appearance is due largely to the growth of a contempt for law which is becoming a characteristic mark of our

civilization, and (possibly) of its decline. This contempt, which goes right through society and is not confined to any one class or age-group, is to be coupled with the prevalence of the view that law is only a social convenience. Both in the popular mind and in some academic teaching, law has become divorced from Justice. It is conceived of as proceeding from interest; and when law is regarded as proceeding from interest, whether of the state or of the community or of the individual, men take their chance and break it. But law, as we are reminded in our key-passage, is more than a useful convention. It is a primary and inescapable condition imposed on us by the very fact of our creatureliness. It is the impress of the unitary source of all being upon the infinite variety of his creation, the compulsion exerted by the idea of goodness which is implanted in our sorry humanity. In religious terms - and I quote Archbishop Temple - it derives from the care of the living God for persons created in his likeness. True, all flesh have different spirits; yet for all that, or perhaps by virtue of that, the different spirits have one creator, the God of the spirits of all flesh.

It was to teach us this, perhaps, that man was created one.

7.

I go back to take a last squeeze from our orange. We have seen it yielding at least two foundational ideas, the idea of individuality and the idea of responsibility. These ideas may seem at first sight to be diverse or even, possibly, contradictory; yet they are presented, and rightly presented, by our Mishnah together as proceeding together from the nature of the divine activity. The divine activity is not a mere making but creation, and creation means difference on the one hand, on the other, knowledge and care. God's works are manifold and made with wisdom and his tender mercies are therefore, in Biblical phrase, over them all; and in the same way we too, patterned as we are on our creator, have our 'tender mercies' engaged in our actions: we too are responsible for what we create.

But just as we ourselves are not mere things or casual happenings but the product of creative will; just as our actions, on their own scale, are not casual happenings but the product of creative will; so too the world in which we act and which in some measure, through our

actions, we create, is not a casual happening but a product of creative will. Our Mishnah's linking of human responsibility with divine creation means just that. For every thing and every act there is, it would say, a 'wherefore.'

And here again we are brought to one of the great watersheds in human thought, one of the dividing lines between fundamental conceptions. I have already suggested that the Abrahamic religions stand or fall together on the existence of the enduring and responsible individual soul. In the same way – I submit – they stand or fall together on the existence of intelligent purpose. As the Dean wrote[1] in continuation of the passage I have already drawn from: "Creation theories differ from theories of emanation precisely in this respect. Creation conceives the created world as depending upon an activity which is at least analogous to will; it exists by reason of the choice of its creator. Emanation, on the other hand, conceives the world as proceeding from the Absolute by a species of necessity."

To this statement I can only add the trite reflection that cosmic ends are admittedly beyond our grasp: where were *we* when God laid the foundations of earth? But if there are in fact no cosmic ends, it is doubtful whether religion, in our sense of the word, has meaning at all.

But here too, it seems to me, we surrender our essential positions far too easily. Perhaps here too our Mishnah is sound. We are told today – and I quote a very recent utterance[2] – that

> The universe is but the Thing of things,
> The things but balls all going round in rings,
> Some of them mighty huge, some mighty tiny,
> All of them radiant and mighty shiny.
>
> They mean to tell us all was rolling blind
> Till accidentally it hit on mind
> In an albino monkey in a jungle;
> And even then it had to grope and bungle

(1) W. R. Matthews, **Studies in Christian Philosophy**, Macmillan, 1921. p.198.
(2) Robert Frost in the **Atlantic Monthly**, 1961.

Till Darwin came to earth upon a year
To show the evolution how to steer.
They mean to tell us, though, the Omnibus
Had no real purpose till it got to us.

May I continue; and conclude ?

Don't you believe it! At the very worst
It must have had the purpose from the first
To produce purpose as the fitter bred.
We were just purpose coming to a head.

Whose purpose was it? His or Her's or Its?
Let's leave that to the scientific wits.
Grant me intention, purpose and design–
That's near enough for me to the Divine.

8.

'Near *enough*'? Perhaps not quite near *enough*, though it is certainly an excellent foundation which Mr. Robert Frost has so eloquently provided us with. For, as the purposeful is divine, so the divine is creative, and the creative creates in its creative likeness, and the one creates one, and man was created one in order to teach us that whoever destroys one life, it is as if he had destroyed a whole world, and whoever preserves one life, it is as if he had preserved a whole world; and for the sake of peace among men, for now no-one can say to his neighbour, my first ancestor was greater [or redder or bluer] than thine; and so that it should not be affirmed that there are many ruling powers in heaven; and in order to proclaim the greatness of - and here, if I may, I shall permit myself the use of the Mishnah's own grandiloquent phrase - the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he; for a man stamps many coins with one seal and they are all the same, but God stamps all men with the seal of the first man, and yet they – we – are all different.