

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *THE PITFALLS OF CHRISTIANITY*

**A**S WE approach the fourth ethical system, some disclaimer seems advisable. The intent of this chapter is not to analyze Christianity once again, but to examine a few varied pictures of it that have appeared in literature, and to see whether they throw any light on the strong and weak points of the ethic. We should not forget that Christianity is the hardest of the four theories to regard objectively, partly because it is more involved with emotion than the others, chiefly because it is bound up with the personal habits and adolescent experiences of almost everyone. It is not hard to detach ourselves from hedonism, Stoicism, or Socratic ethics and to weigh their respective merits; but it is hard to allow for a subconscious mental set, whether positive or negative, toward Christianity. Some people associate it with happily remembered church experiences, loving parents, or admired teachers; others react strongly against theological dogmas, harsh moral restrictions, or the hypocrisy of society. Either state of mind militates against a fair discussion.

Authorities argue even over whether there is such a thing as Christian ethics apart from the Christian religion. Naturally the two cannot be completely separated, but for our

purposes we shall assume that the moral teachings of Christ are complete in themselves and can be studied in comparison with the three other systems already considered. This relation has been previously outlined, when we said that the highest good of Christianity springs not from the senses, the will, or the intellect, but primarily from emotion, and that it seeks the ideal of love or benevolence. Christ summed this up in his admonition to love your neighbor as yourself, a neighbor being defined as any other human being.

We should remember, however, that this involves, not a rejection of the previous systems, but rather a shift of emphasis and an addition to them. Christianity is rightly proud of its inclusion of many elements in Greek ethics. Hedonistic pleasure or happiness, now called the abundant life, is one reward of a life of perfect love. Stoic duty, now righteousness, is as important as ever, though differently motivated. Socratic wisdom is kept as the rational basis necessary to prevent emotion from going to excess, and becomes a view of society as a system of mutually dependent parts, "members of one another," among which voluntary co-operation is essential to keep them from disruption. The specific Christian addition to all these lies in its point of view toward emotion. The Cyrenaics gave way to their emotions. The Epicureans fled from the emotions to avoid pain. The Stoics repressed emotions. Plato put them under the control of reason. Aristotle trained them by practice. But Christianity was the first to recognize the power of emotions for good. Plato and Aristotle both somewhat lacked motive power, both tried to find something to induce a person to perform what his reason told him was right. This is supplied in Christian love, the active good will which leads one to help others, not because it is his duty or because he has completed a train of argument, but because he wants to.

Of the moral systems we have considered, Christianity is the only one fundamentally associated with a specific religious

belief, and therefore with the church whose members hold that belief. Consequently an attempt to estimate its value always gets involved with a critique of the Christian Church as such. Though unfortunate, this fact is not irrelevant, for from it spring part of the strength and much of the weakness of Christian ethics. Let us see how it resulted in a dilemma.

Christianity started with a metaphysical belief that the substance and the motive power of the universe is love. Whereas Plato had asserted that reality is composed of ideas, Jesus taught that God is love; in other words, Christianity substituted an emotional for an intellectual metaphysic. The belief that the essence of reality is a benevolent feeling provided a powerful new motive for good action; God loves us, and we must correspondingly love others. The difficulty was that such a view of the world was hard to reconcile with the facts. By sending us undeserved misfortune, God often acts as if he did not love us after all; and in the world most people do not love others enough to let that feeling govern their actions. For this reason it was necessary at the very outset to reinforce the Christian motive by belittling the value of man's present life on earth and making it a mere testing ground for eternal life later. That shift of emphasis marks the most characteristic difference between classical and medieval thinking. Probably more than any other one factor, it helped keep civilization alive during the Dark Ages. It apparently solved Christianity's initial difficulty: for now God's love was exhibited, not by His treatment of human beings during their lifetime, but by the reward they might anticipate in heaven, a reward justly proportioned to their faith and virtues on earth. And this fortified Christian ethics by providing it with the powerful new motive of desire for that reward and endeavor to be worthy of it. Thus sinewed, Christianity conquered the world.

As often happens, however, the solution engendered the seeds of new and worse difficulties. For one thing, it under-

mined the original basis of Christian ethics, the doctrine that action must be governed by love of God and one's fellow men and nothing else. The hope of a reward in heaven, however it may be rationalized, is a hedonistic motive; the emphasis on life eternal inserted an element of self-interest which, though indispensable in curbing the excesses of a barbaric society, was inconsistent with Christianity. Still worse, the solution produced a disturbing corollary, emerging from a particular folklore and appealing widely to popular imagination. To postulate a heaven of reward at once made necessary a hell of punishment—otherwise why strive for the reward? To make heaven more desirable, it was set off against its opposite; and the vivid medieval imagination ran wild in picturing the tortures of the damned. At least three bad results followed. First, God was again demoted from being a power of love to one of punishment, a change which reams of medieval dialectic sought to justify. Second, the change introduced as a motive for action not only self-interest, but also fear; and, potent as fear may be in deterring men from evil, it has seemed to many people essentially non-Christian. Third, the emphasis on hell introduced an opportunity to rationalize the hatred and resentment which are suppressed but not killed by the constant necessity of loving one's neighbor. Since by definition Christianity seeks to foster desirable emotions, it runs the risk of simultaneously arousing undesirable ones which it finds hard to control.

It may be said that these ideas of heaven and hell are mere excrescences on Christianity, irrelevant to its central ethical teaching. Possibly they are; Christian writers disagree on the question. At any rate they have been taught by the majority of Christian sects, and are an ever-present possibility in the ethic. Their emergence illustrates the main point of the present chapter, which is that Christianity, more than other ethical systems, is subject to distortions and vagaries, and yet, paradoxically, that this very danger is one source of

its strength. No basis of action could be more slippery and undependable than emotion. At any moment it may turn itself inside out. Love goes hand in hand with hatred, humility reverses itself to pride, asceticism is a mask for lust, forgiveness becomes the worst form of revenge. Into one or more of these pitfalls Christianity has frequently fallen. Yet, as happened to Joseph during his three-day sojourn in the pit, Christianity has generally emerged the better for the experience. We may now examine three of these special dangers as they are reflected in literature.

The first one has already been mentioned as the danger inherent in the notion of heaven and hell. Of these realms we can learn by consulting the one man who visited both of them, and purgatory into the bargain: Dante Alighieri. This will be less presumptuous than it seems if we are careful to distinguish between Dante as an artist and his poem as an illustration of ethics. In splendor of poetic imagination, *The Divine Comedy* is unsurpassed in the Middle Ages; its very vividness accentuates the danger with which we are concerned.

For modern readers the poem is difficult because of its complicated symbolism and because it is filled with contemporary allusions that necessitate constant reference to footnotes. A brief summary of its background and structure may therefore be helpful.<sup>1</sup> Like many great works of literature, it appeared just after the highest point of an era, at the proper time to sum up and crystallize the thought of its age. In the thirteenth century many medieval institutions reached their climax and began imperceptibly to be undermined by forces which led to the Renaissance. In that century lived Innocent III, the most powerful Pope; Richard Coeur-de-Lion, the most picturesque Crusader; and Thomas Aquinas, the most comprehensive theologian. The universities were established, the various orders of Friars appeared on the European scene, the Empire and the Papacy pursued their bitter quarrel, and the

first precursor of the Renaissance arrived in the person of the Italian artist Cimabue. Dante lived from 1256 to 1321, and wrote *The Divine Comedy* in the last decade of his life. To him his native city of Florence, as well as the European civilization surrounding it, seemed corrupt and decadent. Florence had tainted its original, simple Roman purity with foreign blood and evil manners. The two world rulers, Pope and Emperor, were not only at sword's points with each other, but were false to their high responsibility of governing respectively the spiritual and the temporal life of mankind. On every side the wicked flourished, so strongly that in 1302 Dante's political enemies, backed by the venal Pope Boniface VIII, were able to exile him forever from Florence. If any justice existed, it must be not in this world but in eternity. Yet Dante believed that it did exist; he had faith in an abstract moral order, a Christianized version of Plato's absolute good, which fortified him in his embittered wanderings.

Moreover, in his mind was an incarnation of this moral perfection. Twice in his life he had seen the lady whom he calls Beatrice: once when she was nine years old, again when she was eighteen and married. After that he idealized her as a symbol of perfect goodness, wrote for her a series of poems called *Vita Nuova*, and promised therein to praise her as no other woman was ever praised. This promise he fulfills in *The Divine Comedy* by placing her next to the Virgin Mary in heaven and symbolizing her as Christian Theology, his guide and sponsor in paradise.

*The Divine Comedy* has so many overlapping meanings that a thorough understanding of it requires long study. We shall disregard most of its elaborate symbolism, its panorama of social and political life, and much of its theology; our purpose is to examine it as a picture of Christian ethics. In outline, of course, it recounts Dante's journey, guided by Virgil and Beatrice, through hell and purgatory to the pinnacle of heaven; on the way it defines by explanation and

example what Christian goodness and badness are. In a letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala, Dante wrote, "The subject of the whole work, taken merely in its literal sense, is the state of souls after death. But if the work is understood in its allegorical intention, the subject of it is man, according as, by his deserts and demerits in the use of his free will, he is justly open to rewards and punishments." What are these deserts and demerits, and what is their effect on a man's soul? The events of the journey which answer this question are meant to be at the same time factual and allegorical; we must try not to stress either of these aspects at the expense of the other.

The setting of the poem is nothing less than the universe. According to the Ptolemaic astronomy which Dante followed, the spherical earth is motionless in the center of things. Around it are placed seven concentric spheres, made of transparent material and revolving from west to east at varying speeds; around these is an eighth sphere, also transparent but having no movement of its own; and finally comes a ninth opaque sphere called the "Original Mover," which revolves rapidly from east to west, carrying all the others with it by a kind of magnetic attraction. In the first seven spheres are embedded the sun, moon, and five planets, whose motions are accounted for by the interaction of forces between their own spheres and the Original Mover. In the eighth sphere are the fixed stars. Surrounding this whole structure is a spiritual realm called the Empyrean, where dwell God and the angels. Long ago, just after the earth was created, the angel Lucifer, impelled by pride, revolted against God and was hurled down from the Empyrean through the nine spheres to the earth; there his velocity was great enough to drive him down to the very center, where he stuck fast. This projectile of evil excavated a huge crater on one side of the earth, and forced up a correspondingly large mountain on the opposite side. The cone-shaped crater is hell; the mountain

is purgatory; the revolving spheres are heaven, culminating in the Emyrean. These are the three main divisions of Dante's journey.

Each division is an elaborately organized realm embodying the logical results of every shade of human conduct. Dante takes pains to avoid merely arbitrary punishment and reward by showing that certain courses of action produce corresponding states of mind, which in turn lead to a final existence inevitably fitted to the soul in question. The unrepentant sinners in hell have never extricated their minds from worldly desires; therefore they would not like heaven if they were in it, and are inherently adapted to the suffering of hell. In purgatory the repentant sinners welcome their tortures willingly, because only through suffering can they learn to appreciate heaven by harmonizing their wills with God's will. This the blessed souls in heaven have achieved; they are integrated, perfectly adjusted to the happiness of God's universe, and at peace.

A reader of the *Inferno* is impressed by the beautiful logic of its structure, with numberless details fitting into the general plan. It consists of nine concentric circles or terraces, winding around the conical pit toward the center of the earth. In each circle dwells a certain type of sinner.<sup>2</sup> Two of them, Numbers 1 and 6, are reserved for the technical sins of paganism and heresy. In Number 1 (Limbo) are good pagans who, being unbaptized, suffer from unforgiven "original sin," and whose only punishment is an unfulfilled desire to enter heaven. In Number 6 (the City of Dis) are the heretics who, having heard divine truth, nevertheless reject it. The other seven circles include three main types of sinners, according as they have allowed one of the three faculties of the mind to become distorted and rule their actions. These faculties are desire, will, and reason. If animal desire gains control, then the person commits sins of *incontinence* and is punished in the second, third, fourth, or fifth circle. Here Dante sees the

following: Number 2, the lustful or carnal sinners; Number 3, the gluttons; Number 4, the misers and spendthrifts, both lacking restraint; Number 5, those who could not control their tempers. These sinners hurt themselves more than they hurt others. If, however, the combative will gets out of hand and leads to acts of aggression such as murder, then the soul sinks to Circle Number 7, the home of doers of *violence*. Finally, if the reason itself is distorted against the will of God, the most human quality is turned to anti-human uses, and the resulting sins of *fraud* or deception are punished in the eighth and ninth circles.

Two or three examples will show Dante's attempt to make the punishments logical. The carnal sinners in Circle 2 are those who have sacrificed all other phases of life for the sake of sexual pleasure. In punishment, each pair of lovers, clasped in an eternal embrace, is whirled to and fro by the wind. This is doubly symbolic. The wind is the power of passion to which they surrendered themselves on earth. The embrace is the consummation which the lovers thought they wanted more than a life of Christian service; but now, eternally prolonged, it becomes intolerable. As another illustration, in one chasm of the eighth circle appear the hypocrites, walking forward forever bent down by the weight of their cloaks, which are shining gold on the outside but made of thick lead within. The most pertinent example of all is the ninth circle, for those guilty of treacherous fraud, or guile against someone who trusted them. Since hell is traditionally associated with fire, we might expect the flames to be hottest in this region. On the contrary, the whole circle is a frozen lake, with the souls embedded in the ice; for by their deeds they have shown that all human feeling is frozen in them, and all Christian love congealed. The coldness of their own hearts has created its inevitable environment.

While the punishments of hell are eternal, those of purgatory last only long enough to reburnish a sinful but

repentant character that honestly desires to achieve Christian love. Again the painful moral exercises are carefully fitted to the sins. For example, souls repenting of their pride must bow their stubborn necks under the weight of huge stones. This they do willingly, just as a proud person, wishing to cure himself of his arrogance, might undergo humiliating experiences or subject himself to ridicule. These proud souls regret only that they cannot support still heavier weights and so proceed to heaven more quickly.

Hell is a downward slope, purgatory a mountain to be climbed; for it is easier to slip into sin than to extricate oneself from it. On the mountain are seven cornices or ledges, corresponding to the seven deadly sins, and each representing a lapse from perfect Christian love. The result, as usual in Dante, is a methodical and inclusive outline, as follows:

If the love is distorted, we have

1. *Pride*—love of oneself
2. *Envy*—sullenness at another's good fortune
3. *Anger*—appetite for vengeance

If the love is weak or defective, we have

4. *Sloth*—lack of proper enthusiasm for heavenly things

If the love is excessive toward things that are good in moderation we have

5. *Avarice*—love of money
6. *Gluttony*—love of food and drink
7. *Lust*—love of sexual pleasure

Here the worst sin comes at the beginning, which is farthest from heaven; and the slope, at first steep, grows gentler as Dante approaches the top. When he has completed the climb, he enters the Earthly Paradise, the garden where man lived until he sinned. At this point Virgil (human reason) departs; henceforth Dante's guide is Beatrice (religious faith), who has descended for this purpose from her abode beside the

Virgin Mary. Though reason can lead one toward heaven, only faith can enter it. Drawn upward by the love of God, Dante and Beatrice ascend through the celestial spheres to the Empyrean.

Although most critics rightly regard the *Paradiso* as the climax of Dante's imaginative splendor, it is somewhat less interesting than the first two parts, both because it involves some long discussions of theological dogma, and because complete goodness is always harder to portray than a human mixture of good and evil. The blessed souls are classified by type in the nine spheres, just as are those in the circles of hell and the cornices of purgatory. But there is a difference. Whereas in the former realms there is a distinction in the amount and severity of the punishment, in heaven there is no variation in happiness. Denizens of Sphere 3 experience the same contentment as those of Sphere 8, because each is so perfectly adjusted to his environment that all desire has ceased. In his final vision of the Empyrean, Dante refers to God as "the limit where all wishes end." After this momentary glimpse of divine perfection, Dante ends the poem suddenly, with no attempt to trace his return to earth.

Turning now from summary to judgment, let us consider the ethical implications of Dante's universe. Our object is not to criticize *The Divine Comedy* as a literary work; in range and detail of imagination, it is one of the greatest poems ever written. But this fact does not prevent it from containing certain ethical weaknesses which illustrate the dangers of the Christian system, and which should be examined with care and sympathy. To be fair to the poem, we must try to understand its author's intention, so as not to interpret it too literally and yet not regard it as wholly divorced from reality. Presumably a poem of this sort may be understood in three ways: as literal fact, as symbolic fact, or as pure allegory. The first point of view, however, we may discard; no one would regard the poem as a description of actual detailed rewards

and punishments taking place after death. The scenes of the poem are certainly symbolic; the question is, to what extent? Did Dante regard them as entirely allegorical, meaning that human souls are so moulded by their own moral qualities that some are enmeshed and tortured by sin, others working painfully to conquer their selfish impulses, and still others integrated by discovering the will of God and adapting their own wills to it? Or did he view them as partially symbolic, representing not the detailed but the essential fate of souls after death by showing how the inner nature of a soul creates its own eternal environment?

Dante's own statement on the question, though not conclusive, leans toward this latter interpretation, a mixture of allegory and fact. In the letter to his patron, he implies that the poem has both a literal and an allegorical intention. From either point of view *The Divine Comedy* is a beautifully logical framework. But if we examine the ethical implications of both, we find that they are in the one case ineffective, and in the other, questionable.

If the poem is regarded as allegorical rather than factual, then it loses some of its ethical effectiveness, because it takes Christianity back to its original dilemma and discards all the motivation furnished by the shift of emphasis from this life to the next. If post-mortem rewards and punishment are merely figures of speech, they are poetically interesting rather than morally forceful; and they avail little in convincing people of the presence of a loving God or the possibility of human love being widespread enough to create a successful society.

Besides this general difficulty, two specific questions appear in this interpretation of the poem. The first is that the allegory is inconsistent about free will. Dante's pictures of evil continually imply that sin is a form of slavery, slavery to bad habits, and that the goal of moral effort is to achieve freedom by extricating oneself from such habits. Yet his pictures of heaven demonstrate that virtue means a complete

absorption in the will of God and a consequent cessation of effort. This is another kind of slavery—a better kind, it is true, but no more essentially free. A cruel dictatorship is bad, a benevolent dictatorship is better, but neither one is democracy. When Dante visits the sphere of the moon, he asks the spirit of Piccarda Donati whether she does not desire to become even better so that she might rise to a higher sphere, nearer to the love of God. Piccarda deprecates the idea, explaining that “God makes us will only what we possess, and nothing beyond . . . . It is inherent in this state of blessedness to keep ourselves within the Divine Will,” and summing up in the famous line: “And in His Will is our tranquillity.” This is beautiful; but it is also a relinquishment of moral initiative. Further evidence is found in Dante’s conversation with a composite eagle made up of the souls of just rulers in the sphere of Jupiter. He asks them a question that has troubled him since he passed through Limbo, where he found the souls of good pagans: What justice is there in excluding from heaven persons who wish to go there, are worthy of it, and are prevented only by the accident of having been born before Christ? The souls reply that this question shows Dante’s insufficient deference to God’s will. It is true that human reason can see no justice in such a decree; nevertheless we must assume its fairness, because God has ordered it, and because the Bible says that God is just! Circular reasoning of this sort is ruinous of Christian ethics because it condones an obviously non-loving act by advocating a blind absorption in something we assume to be perfect. Thus easily is an ethic of freedom distorted into one of slavery.

The second question is a consequence of the first. What is the moral effect of the “absorption principle”? Too often it turns out to be self-defeating, subversive of the real Christian aim of a society based on sympathetic good will. The saved souls in heaven, integrated and morally satisfied, absorbed in their own fruition, become ethically sterile because they have

lost touch with humanity and therefore have no sympathy or sorrow toward sinners. When Beatrice descends to Limbo to instruct Virgil how to be Dante's guide, she remarks apropos of the fact that being in hell causes her no uneasiness, "I am made by God so that no pity of your misery touches me." Dante, however, is less fortunate. Seeing the painfully racked soothsayers in the eighth circle of hell, he weeps for pity. Virgil rebukes him, because such pity implies disapproval of God's justice: "Who is more criminal than one who feels emotion against a Divine judgment?" Yet, strangely enough, this emotion of pity for suffering is one which Christianity particularly fosters. Thus, treated as an allegory, the poem loses ethical effectiveness.

If, on the other hand, it is interpreted as symbolic or semi-literal fact, reflecting some kind of immortality governed somehow by what a person has done morally, then it is more effective, but also more questionable as an illustration of Christian ethics. To many people it is repugnant, not only as false to the ethical ideal of Christianity, but as ethically harmful by any standard. Hardly Christian are its emphasis on motives like fear and vengeance; the fact that many of the punishments, such as those for gluttony and for bad temper, are unfairly great for the crimes; and especially its lack of sympathetic love shown in the fact that it disregards complex personalities and punishes any unrepented sin. For example, the admitted virtues of the Florentine philosopher and statesman Brunetto Latini count for nothing; he is condemned to the seventh circle of hell on the sole ground that he was homosexual.

It is not only by Christian principles, moreover, that the system is questionable. The essential difficulty lies in the fact that it regards both good and evil as fixed after death. Whether in heaven or in hell, though existence goes on, initiative is gone. Even purgatory is motivated by the desire to reach the static perfection of heaven. And from the standpoint

of ethics this cancellation of initiative has serious consequences. Punishment continued forever, with no chance for reform, is useless to anyone except for revenge. And even as a bait or a lure for sinners, it is questionable what moral good can be found in an eternal frozen perfection, an inactive absorption in absolute motionless tranquillity—a form of death rather than eternal life.

We have now examined one of the pitfalls that beset Christian ethics. The second one is a psychological difficulty based on the familiar fact that strong emotions tend to reverse themselves by a subconscious mental process. Sincere Christian love involves humility and self-denial, forgiveness and sacrifice. Yet the farther these qualities are stretched, the more likely they are to rebound like an elastic band. Many self-sacrificing Christians have been startled to discover how proud they are of their self-sacrifice and how much pitying contempt they feel for their more selfish neighbors. Many forgiving Christians are perplexed because the neighbors whom they forgive seem to find that fact a special reason for disliking them. Love has an affinity for hatred, asceticism for lust, forgiveness for revenge.

To illustrate these obvious facts, we turn from Dante's famous poem to a little-known modern book called *The Return of the Hero* by the Irish author Darrell Figgis. Though it has never been a best seller and is now hard to obtain, everyone who is privileged to read it falls under its spell.<sup>8</sup> In his style, Figgis has an unusual gift for combining terseness and humor with imaginative beauty. His touch is light and sure, his mood always on the borderline between mockery and sincere feeling, his sentences often epigrammatic. "To flatter and to abuse," he writes, "it is all one; for it is the one kind of man that is capable of both." Again: "To die is good, and can never be done again, but to regret is to be sick many times." And again, for the barb: "Merchants are people who stretch

their hand between the standing corn and the empty belly till they have first built a house with a different room to sleep in for each night of the year."

The material of this story is an episode from the series of Irish legends known as the Fenian Cycle, recounting the adventures of the hero Finn or Fingal, a third-century chieftain of a warrior band. These are known through a number of ballads supposedly sung by the bard Oisín or Ossian, Finn's son. After Finn was finally defeated and killed in battle, Oisín was transported by Niamh the Beautiful to the fairyland of Tir-na-nÓg, where he remained for two hundred years. Then, lured by memories of his home and his friends, the Fianna, he was allowed to return to Ireland on condition that he must never touch the earth. All went well until his saddle-girth broke and he put his foot to the ground to keep from falling; then the beautiful hero was transformed into an incredibly old man. In Tir-na-nÓg time had passed so swiftly that he had been unconscious of it, and now the changes which two centuries had effected in Ireland filled him with dismay. Not only had the Fianna disappeared and the inhabitants shrunk to the size of pigmies, but a strange new faith had entered the land. For during his absence St. Patrick had arrived in Ireland, and Christianity had replaced the old pagan ethics.

In the ballads Oisín is a defiant, contemptuous pagan, and Patrick a stupid fanatic. But Figgis portrays both as sincere, intelligent, and attractive men, honestly admiring each other but separated by the gulf of two centuries of history. Most of the book is a confrontation of paganism and Christianity as Patrick strives to convert the hero and Oisín scrutinizes the strange religion to find what is good and bad in it. Both are treated fairly; Figgis reserves his hatred for the group of narrow and petty bishops who surround Patrick and whose constant interference destroys the possibility of a mutual understanding. It is this distortion of Christianity that

the book attacks, and it is men like the severe Iserminus and the zealous Auxilius who illustrate the psychological reversal referred to above. Acquaintance with them under Oisin's steady gaze makes the reader uneasily aware of the peculiar dangers to which Christianity is subject.

For example, they all preach the doctrine of forgiveness and think they practice it. Yet in them it is warped into such an instrument of malice that they would have been ethically better had they never heard of this Christian idea. Better in Oisin's mind would have been a wiping of the slate by a clean revenge and a new start. He soon has an experience of how forgiveness works. Soichell, the steward of Patrick's household, brings him every morning a breakfast of "stirabout and whey-water," which at first Oisin accepts courteously, but against which his heroic appetite shortly revolts. When Soichell implies that a desire for food is of the flesh and a sign of wickedness, Oisin claps the bowl of stirabout on his head and propels him out of the room at dizzying speed. The next evening Soichell, looking pious and self-satisfied, brings his supper and then announces: "I forgive you, O Oisin, for lifting your foot against me."

Oisin remarks that people should tell the truth, and, when Soichell looks puzzled, utters this pointed critique of the forgiveness-revenge confusion: "It seems to me that you do not forgive me at all. If you did, you would act as if that little scene had never occurred. Instead of this, you come to be revenged on me by seeking to assert a superiority over me. To say that you forgive me is to exult over me, and to exult over me is to be revenged on me. . . . I will not permit myself to be debased by your humility. I will not be enslaved by your meekness."

Forgiveness, however, is a minor instance of such distortion. Figgis goes on to unmask the shams in the bishops' asceticism and humility, showing them as over-compensations for lust and pride; he has Oisin make a kind of psychiatric

diagnosis. When Oisín tells of his idyllic life in Tir-na-nÓg with the lady Niamh, both Auxilius and Iserninus are shocked, and hint that he should have had a chaperon. "The desires of the body," they say, "are devils that must be choked back into their lair. By the grace of God alone can this be done." And with a faint smile Oisín answers: "Perhaps the devils you create of old and simple things may be choked in the lair; but they will not be killed—they are too old and they are too young. They are eternal as birth and renewal. They will come out again; but they will come out cold and lean and cruel toward men. I did not think of that before, but I see that it is so now." And he "looked at Iserninus in a significant way that caused the pale episcopal face to be covered with the faintest flush of anger."

Most significant of all is the passage describing the vision which each churchman has during the night of wakefulness and prayer that precedes the great debate between Patrick and Oisín. These visions reveal the subconscious desires of the bishops. Iserninus, for example, whose Christian humility is a mask for his pride, sees God sitting on a Great White Throne, attired as a bishop, with a severe, cruel face like Iserninus' own; and this God, who is himself, finds satisfaction in casting Oisín into hell. But Patrick, the true Christian, sees God as the sun breaking through the clouds over the eastern horizon, a light-bringer to the earth and an awakener of all men, Christian or pagan, to good actions. As for Oisín, he slept sweetly all night; consequently he was refreshed the next morning when the others were tired and confused.

At the climax of the book, Christianity is defeated by the same sad element in it which we analyzed in Dante: the inconsistency between an ethic of love and a religion of hell. Patrick, outvoted three to two by the Council of Bishops, is forced to tell Oisín that God has condemned Finn to eternal torment because he was born too soon to be saved by Christ. To this Oisín replies calmly that he has had enough, since, if

God wishes or even permits Finn to suffer, then He is more evil than Finn. After Oisín reassumes his original heroic proportions and vanishes, the reader is left with a sense of the ironic inability of two great men to understand each other because of the network of distortions and hypocrisy in which Christian ethics was entangled in the process of institutionalizing itself. It seems particularly tragic that a moral standard with possibilities more rewarding than any we have yet examined should seem inevitably exposed to more pitfalls than the others.

For the third danger confronting Christianity we must consult another Irishman, Bernard Shaw, who expresses challenging opinions on almost every subject. Many people regard him as either a conceited trifler or a wild iconoclast. He is neither. His style of writing is based on the theory that people will pay no attention to you unless you first irritate them, and his vanity, his exaggeration, and his monkey-shines are part of the irritation. If by these means he can attract your attention, he then hopes to insert some ideas into your mind while you are preoccupied with resenting him; and the method sometimes works. It is never safe to dismiss him lightly; for on many occasions he has been many years ahead of the times, and we now are habituated to ideas which he advanced as revolutionary in the eighties or nineties. Ideas on Christianity are scattered widely through the plays, prefaces, and essays.<sup>4</sup> Usually he upholds Christian ethics against the Christian Church, on grounds slightly different from those we have already seen. The best place to examine his approach is the Preface to *Androcles and the Lion*.

Readers are both fascinated and repelled by this essay, fascinated by the lucidity, boldness, and logical cogency of the argument, but repelled by some of the specific conclusions to which it comes. One of them, for example, is that a prerequisite for the success of Christianity is a socialist state.

Yes, of course, we say; Shaw, being a Socialist, would naturally ride his hobby everywhere. If we happen to be ardent capitalists, we tend to discount the whole essay because of this one point. But to do so would be a mistake. Though many of the issues Shaw raises are controversial, his main contention is sound and important. It is this: The spread and adoption of Christian ethics is the one hope for human society, because the central Christian idea is the only one under which civilization can endure; yet its success has been vitiated because at the very outset its practitioners lost sight of this central idea and went in pursuit of a will-o'-the-wisp. To some extent, indeed, Jesus himself was enticed into the same error.

The core of the ethic is summed up in the fact that every individual is equally important as a human soul, and is responsible for the welfare of other human souls. A man is his brother's keeper whether he likes it or not. This fact is clear whether we accept literally or figuratively Jesus' statement that all men are brothers because they are children of the same father. We cannot injure our neighbor without injuring ourselves in the process. If so, then it follows that a man's every action must be judged primarily by its effect on all other men. This is the essence of Christ's social teaching.

Now, Shaw asks, what has stood in the way of this doctrine for two thousand years? Why has it never been practiced on a really large scale? His answer is that, along with this valuable essence, Christianity has deeply embedded in it another, and a disastrous, element. This he calls "Salvationism." Its danger is the greater in that it sprang sincerely from Christian love. Jesus himself sympathized so deeply with erring humanity that he desired to take all their troubles on himself, to assume their sins and draw away their suffering to him, to permit them to pay for their mistakes vicariously by transferring them to his shoulders. Thus he became the Redeemer, a figure already familiar in racial folklore because man has always dreamed of escaping the

consequences of his own acts through some divine intervention. This folklore background Shaw analyzes at length. Its details are less important than its fatal results. For ever since Jesus died, his followers have emphasized the folklore at the expense of the ethics, and have always begun an attempted conversion by asking first, "Are you saved?" and only secondly, "Are you sincerely interested in the welfare of other men?" And this stress on personal salvation has undone much of the good in the whole system. For the opportunity of vicarious redemption is a selfish, not a Christian, motive. How convenient to have a scapegoat to suffer for us! How exciting to have the emotional experience of conversion and cancel all our debts! So pleasant is it that many people try it a second and a third time just to get the thrill. Thus Shaw reaches his conclusion that the real danger of salvation is that it puts a premium on sin, and ironically reverses Christ's original intentions.

We have now examined some of the traps that lie in wait for one who would construct ethical behavior on the motive of Christian love: the danger of heaven and hell, the probability of emotional reversals, and the facile salvationist escape from the consequences of our actions. Why is Christianity so particularly subject to these distortions? The answer seems to lie in the fact of its being based on emotion, that most wayward and unreliable of human faculties. Christian ethics presupposes a sincere feeling of love or active good will, and such a feeling cannot be forced or synthesized. It comes or not, depending on one's own temperament. A conscious attempt to create it is likely to destroy it. A son who does not care much for his mother may feel a sense of guilt and so strive to make himself love her; the result usually is that he dislikes her even more strongly than before, feels still more guilty, and makes both of them miserable. The process is intensified when it is a brother or sister for whom one tries

to force affection. And when we decide that we ought to love everyone because all human beings are our brothers and sisters, the normal person either balks entirely or deceives himself by giving lip service to this duty and then quietly continuing in his likes and dislikes. It is no wonder, then, that Christianity has succeeded better as a formal creed than as a living motive of conduct.

If so, why has it survived and flourished for two thousand years? Partly because it has been associated with a powerful religious institution. Partly because it has remained an ideal which people admit ought to govern conduct even though it often does not. Partly because no more successful or promising ethic has yet been found. But beyond these reasons lies the further fact that it has proved to be harmonious with a recurrent human need, a need so vital that it outlives all attempts to stifle it and reappears just when it seems to have been stamped out. This is the need for moral freedom, which asserts itself against every attempt to reduce human conduct to a pattern—even when it is the Christian Church that makes the attempt. Christianity at its best upholds this freedom and our discussion may be concluded by an illustration of this idea in literature.

The Russian novelist Dostoevsky is known for his portrayals of intensely emotional persons. His characters live in a world of feverish passion; even their sleep is filled with such vivid dreams that they awaken exhausted. Often this emotion is morbid and evil; many of his characters are criminals, sadists, or wastrels. But along with this interest in the abnormal and unhealthy, Dostoevsky had a strain of religious feeling which led him to describe religious emotion as vividly as he did the depths of depravity. He was a writer of extremes. While he was picturing creatures like the distorted Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment* or the demonic Stavrogin in *The Possessed*, one of his constant ambitions was to create the character of a real Christian that would satisfy

him as showing everything that a Christian might be. This he tried several times, never succeeding as he hoped to, but moving gradually closer to his ideal. Four examples will show his progress.

In *Crime and Punishment* appears a preliminary sketch of the perfect Christian in the young girl Sonia Marmeladov. Characteristically, Dostoevsky startles the reader by making her a prostitute and then showing her possessed of humility, forgiveness, and altruism. Her father is a drunken good-for-nothing, unable to hold a job, who spends his time in an ecstasy of remorse, self-pity, and pious resolutions for the future. Her stepmother, an hysterical woman of some education, who marries Marmeladov in desperation as a means of supporting her three children, taunts Sonia with being as useless as her father in providing for the family, and suggests that she might as well get a "yellow ticket" as continue to be a parasite. One night when the children are crying with hunger she quietly follows this advice, entering the life of technical sin without bitterness or an impression of martyrdom, and from the most altruistic of motives. The ill treatment of her parents she repays only with love and care. She is so devoid of rancor and self-will that her deliberate sacrifice of worldly pride convinces even a skeptical reader that her temperament is sincerely Christian. The same conviction grows in the mind of the student Raskolnikov, who, having committed murder to discover whether or not he is a superman above the necessity of moral standards, is now trying to stave off remorse by intellectual self-justification. She is the only person whom he instinctively trusts and confides in, and her reaction to knowledge of his deed is so straightforwardly horrified and yet sympathetic that she is a major influence leading to his final confession of guilt to himself as well as to the world. With all this she is not sentimentalized, and seems in most respects a successful portrait of a Christian. There is only one drawback: she is so pathetic and helpless, that though admirable, she gives the impression of Christianity as some-

thing weak and passive. Therefore she did not satisfy Dostoevsky.

He tried again on a larger scale in the character of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, a much more elaborate attempt to analyze a complete Christian. In trying harder, however, Dostoevsky accomplished less; though it contains vivid scenes and flashes of insight, the novel is chaotic and unconvincing. This time the Christian is the central character. He is regarded as a madman, partly because he is an epileptic and partly because his actions are, by conventional standards, silly. He is more complex than Sonia because he is conscious of having a combination of base and noble motives for what he does; but in the main he is actuated by direct Christian love, often being fond of people in the older sense of foolish, and especially loving children and animals. His associates both like and ridicule his innocent, childlike charm, his naive seriousness, his tactless but disarming frankness. Most of his activities do good to the people around him, as when he induces a group of children to play with a timid consumptive girl instead of ostracising her. His avoidance of the forgiveness pitfall is seen when Ganya Ivolgin slaps him. Instead of forgiving, Myshkin exclaims impulsively, "Oh, how ashamed he will feel tomorrow!" Thus his sorrow is only because Ganya may have to suffer for his action. In addition to such evidences of his Christlike nature, he is directly compared to Christ by other characters, and utters such echo speeches as "let us be servants in order to be leaders." And yet a reader sees at once why he did not satisfy Dostoevsky's ambition: the character never really comes alive, never convinces the reader that he could have existed. Instead of being a person, he is a combination of traits illustrating an idea.

The other two attempts are in Dostoevsky's last and most powerful novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. One is Father Zossima, Elder of a monastery, whom Dostoevsky says he drew directly from life; the other is the youngest of the brothers, Alexey Karamazov.

Not only is Zossima an important influence in the whole novel, but the story is interrupted by a fifty-page section (Book VI, "The Russian Monk") devoted to an account of his life and character. Born of an aristocratic family, he is educated for a military career, which he abandons for the priesthood after a sudden conversion to Christianity. His wide influence and the devotion he inspires in all types of people result from the sympathetic understanding which enables him to allow for every variety of temperament. For him the best proof of God's love is active, energetic experience in loving others, which will come into any person's life when he realizes that the fact of his being born human makes him responsible for the welfare of every other individual. The emphasis is on experience, for love is at least partly a matter of practice, becoming easier and more natural the more it is tried. This, one of the most fruitful of Zossima's ideas, is extended to explain his interpretation of hell. If a person fails to practice an attitude of loving thoughtfulness of others, the habit becomes atrophied until he is no longer able to feel any generous impulse at all—and that unhappy state of mind is hell. One may ask wherein Dostoevsky fell short in this portrayal of a Christian; and the answer must be, only in the fact that Zossima is not in secular life. His monasticism might lead a reader to say: though this is all very well for a man segregated from the temptations of the world, it does not show the Christian ideal to be attainable by people in ordinary life.

Consequently Dostoevsky's final portrait is of a young man who, on Zossima's own advice, withdraws from monastic life to practice Christianity in the world. Alexey Karamazov is the most successful Christian and the most attractive character in Dostoevsky; his peculiar sweetness and strength cannot be described, but must be sensed in reading the novel. Like Sonia, he repays a selfish father with unselfish devotion, but he has none of Sonia's pathetic helplessness. Like Myshkin, he wins the trustful affection of children, not by being a child

himself, but by treating children with matter-of-fact serenity and easy friendliness. He is loved by both his brothers, the impulsive worldling Dmitri and the brilliant psychopath Ivan. From his school days he impresses everyone as a boy having no resentment, no sullenness, and no fear. Dostoevsky's description of him sums up several of the novelist's conclusions about the perfect Christian:

He seemed to put implicit trust in people; yet no one ever looked upon him as a simpleton or naive person. . . . He would never take it upon himself to criticize, and would never condemn anyone for anything . . . He was never afraid of anyone, yet the boys immediately understood that he was not proud of his fearlessness. . . . He never resented an insult. It would happen that an hour after the offence he would address the offender or answer some question with as trustful and candid an expression as though nothing had happened between them. And it was not that he seemed to have forgotten or intentionally forgiven the affront, but simply that he did not regard it as an affront.<sup>5</sup>

And the novel ends with the group of boys who have been won over from hostility to enthusiasm for Alexey shouting, "Hurrah for Karamazov!"

These repeated attempts to draw a Christian character reflect something of Dostoevsky's own recurrent struggle to understand the meaning of Christian ethics. Such a struggle, if successful, cannot follow any ready-made paths, but must fight its way through the jungles which lie all about it. For its essence is a free moral choice, a voluntary feeling of good will that cannot be made up for the occasion. This is what is meant by saying that its value as an ethic is inseparably connected with the dangers that confront it. Few men can endure freedom; they are afraid of it because it takes away their supports and confronts them with responsibility.<sup>6</sup> They must escape from it in submission to some creed, church, or

external authority that will force them to conform. Christian ethics is a daring attempt to regain man's necessary sense of security, not by force, but by spontaneous co-operation.

Book V of *The Brothers Karamazov* contains a fantasy written by Ivan, called "Christ and the Grand Inquisitor," in which Jesus returns to confront the head of the Spanish Inquisition, the institution which most completely distorted the ethic of love to one of force. The Inquisitor points out that Christ's fatal mistake lay in his rejection of the Devil's three temptations, and that the object of the Church is to rectify this error. The first temptation was, turn these stones into bread that men may follow you—sound wisdom, says the Inquisitor, since man is so depraved that he will act only for the material rewards of bread and games. Then the Devil suggested that Jesus cast himself from the tower to be rescued by angels, in order that men should be astonished into following him—and man is so credulous that he must be lured by the supernatural. Finally Satan urged Christ to gain control of the world by unscrupulous means, because man longs for authority to relieve him from responsibility.

But Christian ethics at its best rejects bribery, miracle, and power politics in favor of voluntary co-operation. It chooses the democratic method instead of the dictatorial or totalitarian. Thus it shares the strength and the weaknesses of democracy. While it satisfies the human need for freedom, at the same time it runs counter to the human desire to be told what to do. Freedom, as the twentieth century has re-discovered, makes people feel lonely and insecure; they are sometimes ready to sacrifice it for a firm, if irksome, set of rules. Christian ethics, then, would not be better if it could rid itself of its dangers of distortion. It would lose its identity, and must be accepted along with them or not at all. The value and the dangers are parts of a single organism.