

# Christianity and the Limits of Tragedy

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## *1: The debate*

I wish to argue for two related theses. Both concern the debate that has been conducted in recent times about the compatibility of Christianity and tragedy; as typical protagonists we might select Steiner from the side of those viewing an unbridgeable chasm<sup>1</sup>, and MacKinnon as a seeker of common ground<sup>2</sup>. The first thesis for which I am arguing is that much Christian defence of the compatibility of the tragic insight with the truth of the gospel too easily accepts the definition of the tragic insight supplied by critics such as Steiner; a brief survey of actual texts, for the purposes of this article the works of the Greek tragedians, uncovers a far more intricate and ambiguous picture. The study of this new picture paves the way for the second thesis: that the core of the good news, the resurrection of the crucified one, only constitutes the negation of tragedy in so far as it remains its perfection, its completion, its limit, and to that extent its affirmation.

At the heart of the argument lies the question of evil, of how, if at all, it is to be understood. In tragic drama, evil appears with three faces apparently alien to Christian faith: the face of incomprehensibility, the face of ineluctability, and the face of irrevocability<sup>3</sup>. We shall take each of them in turn.

## *2: Evil's incomprehensibility*

As far as the first aspect, the incomprehensibility of evil, is concerned, it would seem that this must be denied by Christianity. Christianity is the religion of a God who is at once transcendent and benevolent, i.e. providential. Neither of these epithets apply to the gods of the Greek stage, nor even of Shakespeare's. A transcendent deity means that there is always a 'total context' beyond this world, within which we must presume there is no place for absurdity or disorder; it is a context into which all the strange vagaries of life somehow fit without disturbing its harmony and balance. The most that Christianity can claim is that the ways of God are unknowable to us, that our perspective is too poor to allow us to account satisfactorily for the terrible events in the world; but that is a problem in us, not in the events themselves, which are all ultimately accounted for in the purposes of God. Similarly, the Christian

God is providential, devoid of all malice or caprice: there is no room in the Christian God's universe for meaningless destruction or an act irredeemably evil. Everything has its place in a total scheme which is good, if only in the end towards which it is tending. The notion of an 'intractable surd', which MacKinnon sees as the distinctively tragic understanding of moral evil, is simply ruled out as a possibility.

Yet although it is true that Greek tragedy, because there is no transcendent deity, has not total or providential context within which every act has a reason and a part, it is not true that evil and suffering are presented in these plays as simply incomprehensible. To begin with, there is a discernible transition from Aeschylus through Sophocles to Euripides in this respect. For the *Oresteia*, evil is indeed an intractable surd. Agamemnon at Aulis, and Orestes at Mycenae, are faced with the same terrible choice: either neglect the command of the gods and suffer dire consequences, or obey the gods' commands to suffer equally atrociously, in the end. But the gods themselves are not wanton or vindictive, and there is a clear causal history to the suffering which besets the plays' protagonists at every turn. Some suggestion too that a distant act of initial *hybris* has now locked the race of Atreus in an inescapable cycle of bloodshed and violence; the gods merely preside, until Apollo's final intervention, in dark and unrelenting indifference over the working out of the curse. Fate appears more wantonly and causelessly cruel in Sophocles, while finally in plays such as Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae* the tragedy springs solely from the lightly slighted but terribly vindictive deities who rule mortal affairs.

There is already a danger, then, in taking what is true of Euripides and making it determinative of Greek tragedy as a whole, let alone tragedy in general. Yet, while pointing out the contrasts between Aeschylus and Euripides, and recognising that the place of the gods does indeed change, it is also important to recognise that the basic structure of the narrative of evil remains the same. The structure is this: on the borderlands between innocence and wilfulness, an individual sins. This sin is the known and direct cause of all the subsequent tragedy; but while evil is, as it were, simple and even just in its history, it is inscrutable and indiscriminate in its activity, wounding innocent and guilty alike, even inflicting blows on the guilty far exceeding any human conception of a just retribution. All our sorrow can be traced to Pandora's casual but still culpable lifting of the fateful lid; there is no mystery in that. But the release of its dreadful contents wreaks havoc which is random and even manifestly unjust. Of these effects there can be no comprehension.

The supposed contrast between Christian and tragic perspectives is weakened still further by a closer examination of the Christian tradition. The Church inherited in the Old Testament books such as Ecclesiastes and, most famously, Job which emphatically deny that even face to face with God there is a meaning or a reason for the evils of this life. Evil

is itself the denial of order and purpose; it can find no place within them. We can only acknowledge it and proclaim faith and hope in spite of it. Jesus himself, as recorded in Luke 13.1–4, accepts the ultimate link between sin and suffering, but explicitly denies that we can expect any straightforward correlation; the case of the man born blind is similarly unconnected to any sin committed by himself or by his parents (John 9.1–3). Jesus offers no explanation for the suffering in either instance, beyond making it an occasion to proclaim his message in word and deed. There is no theodicy in the gospels, or anywhere else in Scripture, in the sense of a reconciliation of the justice of God with the injustice of individual suffering: sin, death and the devil do not ‘play fair’, nor have some legitimate place within a cosmos which is, considered as a whole, a Good Thing. Rather, they threaten that cosmos to its very core, and the world can only be saved at the cost of their destruction. The Christian message consists in the hope of their exclusion, not stoic acquiescence in their presence. The Christian learns to resist them, to fight valiantly against them. They are a violent, invasive and anarchic force. We must understand that it is we who have let them in; but beyond that we cannot hope to comprehend them.

The most significant theological treatment of the inscrutability of evil begins with the work of the late Augustine, when theodicy is finally abandoned for a stark and frightful acceptance of the unutterable mercy of God<sup>4</sup>. For Augustine, as for the tragedian, the origin of sin, how it came into the world, is not mysterious; the ancient fruit is reason enough. But why some are abandoned to the full consequences of such sin, to die forever in the flames of eternal hell, and some plucked out, burning brands, to enjoy their Saviour forever, is entirely past finding out. The child of Christian parents dies before the water can be fetched, and descends to torment forever; a pagan child is brought to baptism against the will of its mother and father, dies and finds repose. In its consequences, in its laceration of one and its sparing of another, evil is utterly unknowable. Like Job, we can only trust, in spite of everything, to the justice and mercy of God.

It is a bleak vision, and not one which all or even most Christian theologians, past or present, would wish to endorse, but it surely contains a germ of truth: that the effects of evil are not accountable to reason. They are not to be domesticated by becoming part of some self-evidently benevolent divine scheme. The full horror of suffering has to be faced: we can neither deny that we deserve it, nor expect to find any justice or purpose in the toll that it takes.

Tragedy and Christianity, then, do not part fundamental company with regard to this first point. To say that tragedy views evil as inscrutable is an oversimplification. If evil was merely something which ‘happened’ to us, with no why and wherefore, no connection at all to us or our actions, there would be no tragedy, except in the newspaper-

headlines sense. Similarly, if evil only happened to us in direct and readily ascertainable proportion to our own misdeeds, there would be no tragedy, only morality plays. Tragic drama rests on the insight that suffering both is and is not of our own deserving, that evil takes its origin in the darkness of the human will, but exacts its penalty with blind injustice and savagery, in complete indifference to our merits and demerits; hence it is at once transparent and inscrutable, knowable in its beginning but unknowable in its end. It is that polarity, that tension, which makes tragedy possible, a tension implicitly acknowledged in the most profound documents of the Christian faith.

### 3: *Evil's ineluctability*

The second aspect under which it was claimed that tragedy distinctively viewed human suffering was its ineluctability. Here there seems, at first glance, to be an even stronger clash between the tragic and the Christian views of life. The paradigm for Greek tragedy is the story of Oedipus, enmeshed in a fate over which he has no control, and which finds its unlikely fulfilment in the pathetic attempts of the individuals concerned to evade it. Philoctetes makes a similarly foolish defiance of what is decreed for him and is crushed into cringing submission. Or consider the horrid relentlessness with which Euripides seals off every exit, every chink or light or ray of hope, from the hapless women of the *Troades*. And in those most brutal of all plays, the *Hippolytus* and the *Bacchae*, we know from the very beginning that because of the malicious caprice of the gods the central figures are doomed men, and watch them writhe and struggle in mocking impotence towards their appointed ends. The plays are suffused with a sense that there is no escape, no way out; the only termination of the fated evil, as Cassandra is uniquely aware in the *Agamemnon*, lies in the black sleep of death.

Christianity, however, is by its very definition a religion of salvation, of deliverance, and hence of hope. It is of the nature of Christianity to offer a precise antidote to tragedy, namely a way out, an escape, a letting off the awful hook, through repentance and final reward, in this life or the next. Hence it is also of the nature of Christianity to place man at the centre, to make him the master of his own destiny: 'He hath set fire and water before thee: stretch forth thy hand unto whether thou wilt. Before man is life and death; and whether him liketh shall be given him' (Ecclus. 15.16—17). All the preaching of the Bible, from Moses in the wilderness to Jesus in Galilee and Peter in Jerusalem, is a call to choose, a call to change. It has no place for the tragic conception of man locked in a destiny beyond his control.

It is again the theology of the late Augustine which provides perhaps the closest approximation within the Christian camp to the tragic model. For here we find that man's final lot, his eternal status before God, is

once more a matter for powers outside himself. Sin and grace alike are things over which he no longer has any control. In the garden of Eden he chose to lose his own capacity to choose by implicating himself helplessly in the slavery of disobedience. Everything he has done since then is inalienably stained with the nature of sin, excepting that which God in his wisdom has chosen graciously to redeem. If we are bound for hell it is because of sins we cannot help but commit; if we are bound for heaven it is because of grace which we are powerless to resist. Whatever we do in this short life will conspire to ensure that our ultimate destiny is an appropriate one. The reprobate will as surely apostasize as the elect will surely repent. Nothing is outside the fearful predestination of God.

Yet even in this utterly bleak picture of the condition of man it is to be noted that he remains a willing being, a being capable of choosing and deciding. It is just that in the exercise of choice and decision he has rendered himself subject to the powers of sin and death, of his moral and physical annihilation, and thereby lost the capacity to choose and decide for that which would place him above those powers once more. That is, at the beginning of this tragedy (for it is not unreasonable so to call it) stands an act of the human will; and at every stage of its development, the human will is an active performer. But at the outset it has determined that the outcome cannot be in doubt and cannot be anything other than its own destruction.

Surely the view which Greek tragedy presents is not so very distant from this. There is no suggestion that either Oedipus or Philoctetes is a puppet, that their capacity for freedom or choice is an illusion; rather, whatever they choose in genuine freedom to do can only take them one step further along the road decreed for them. But again, it is the very polarity, this time of choice and inevitability, that makes tragedy tragic. Oedipus acts and chooses to act; there is nothing spineless or 'fatalistic' about his attitude, nor is it ever suggested that there should be. Yet neither can he avoid his destiny. Philoctetes and Cassandra, unlike Oedipus, are fully aware of the fatal path which they must of necessity walk down; but their consciousness of that necessity only serves to underline the paradox. By accepting it they choose to accept it; but they cannot choose otherwise. The inevitability is made tragic by the presence, in Oedipus' murder of his father, in Cassandra's slow ascent of the steps, of a human consciousness and a human will.

Nor do the plays of Euripides negate this conclusion. Surely the playwright cannot have been unaware of the obvious 'psychological' reading of his tragedies as a demonstration of the Heraclitean maxim *theos anthrōpō daimōn*: what destroys both Hippolytus and Pentheus is not so much the vindictiveness of mythological divinities, as their own deliberate suppression of those most turbulent aspects of the human persona, the yearning for ecstatic release in sex and religion. This allegorical quality is clearest in the case of Pentheus: the virulence of his

denial naturally yields to a secret and perverse fascination which can only lead to an ultimately destructive encounter with the forces he so loudly professes to loathe. And again it is the delicately preserved polarity of outer and inner, choice and necessity, which makes possible the creation of classical tragedy: Hippolytus' destroyer is both within and beyond himself, his destruction a motiveless accident and the inevitable consequence of the kind of life he has made his own.

Once more, the tragic conception of evil properly understood is revealed as closely proximate to the Christian. Both seek to grasp, in differing ways and terms, the fundamental ambiguity of all human behaviour, that it is both determined and determining, that we choose yet choose in vain, that the necessity to which we find ourselves subject is a necessity we have made for ourselves, a necessity rooted deep within the pattern of our own personalities. Man is defined as a creature of will, and yet has become such that he can will nothing which does not work for his own destruction. Man's fallen will is nothing more than a drowning voyager's power of suicide: it is the power to will the end that is now inevitable.

#### *4: Evil's irrevocability*

With the third and final face we approach the heart of the matter. For tragedy's diagnosis of the human condition and Christianity's diagnosis of the fallen human condition may well be the same; but the whole point of Christianity is that the fall is by no means the end of the story. Christianity is precisely the rest of the story, one might say the great sweeping aside of all this marvellous and heroic admission of our own self-made hopelessness, in favour of the glib succour of the grace of God. Man's will, though fallen irreparably in Adam, is miraculously repaired in Christ; and man's destiny, though ineluctably ending in hell, is speedily switched to heaven, with no further justification than the good pleasure of the divine will. Christianity may well say 'yes' to tragedy, yet it is always 'yes, but ....'. Arguably, it always looks beyond the perspective of tragedy to the spurious happy-ever-after, and thereby destroys the most important insight which tragedy has to offer: the irredeemable finality of human suffering, demonstrated most starkly in death. All attempts to negate that finality (and—according to this understanding—Christianity is one such attempt) are evasions of the truth in which alone lies the hope of human maturity.

Finality, then, rather than inscrutability or inevitability, becomes the final issue dividing Christianity from tragedy in its treatment of suffering and evil. At the end of *King Lear* there is simply nothing to be said, because there is nothing beyond or behind the terrible events which the audience have just witnessed. They fit into no design, and they yield to no hope that could ever atone for or mitigate them. Yet Christianity cannot let this be the last word. It has traditionally asserted both design

and hope in the face of the most monstrous of evils. To do so is to deny the tragic insight.

I argued earlier that it is not part of Christianity proper to offer a theodicy, nor has the most penetrating Christian thought attempted to do so. In that sense it does not assert design; it does not pretend that the horrors of the Somme or of Auschwitz serve some higher moral purpose which for the moment escapes us, or that they were somehow deserved by those who became their victims. Yet it does and always will assert hope, hope for a final salvation which will restore all things in Christ, all the legions of the dead and dying. Is this the final point of separation, the parting of the ways for tragedy and Christianity?

Perhaps it is. But let us explore a little further yet. On the basis of the texts themselves, it is not entirely true that hopelessness characterises tragedy. One need only think of the conclusions to some of the more notorious of the Greek plays, for instance Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Suffering and death do not ubiquitously take the final word, but become the basis for a strange kind of optimism. This is not only done by finishing the play on a note other than one of black despair (I think you will find the tragedies that do so end surprisingly rare): it is done by endowing the tragic action with some positive significance for the present. An aspect of the plays frequently lost on the modern reader is that the final scene often relates to the founding of a cult or ritual which is a part of the living community's life; thus the terrible events which the audience behold lie at the basis of those aspects of their society which stabilise its relationship to the divine and the unknown and render them propitious. More rarely, there is an explicit political connection with the present day, most notably in the *Oresteia* but also in the *Oedipus at Colonus*: again, the moral is clear that from the tragic event springs the order which preserves and ennobles our own existence. The Greek tragedies (Aeschylus' *Persians* apart) draw on the myths of a culture, those stories a society tells to justify and explain its own condition; hence the 'historical' event in the tragedy always has some positive relation to the present. The tragic is somehow incorporated into, and indeed made the foundation of, normal and good existence; the bloodthirsty Furies become the kindly guardians of the city, though only present deep beneath it. Hence the death and disaster presented in Greek tragedy are never the final word, because they stand in this affirmative relation with all that is best and most important in the community's life.

Let me take this a stage further. Tragedy (in the sense of tragic drama) is in itself not the acknowledgement but rather the denial of the finality of suffering and death. For in the very act of narrating the story, of giving it form, order, coherence, of re-presenting the past to the present, the suffering and the death are endowed with meaning and significance. Tragedy takes the matter of destruction, and makes of it the



basis for our history, our society, our self-understanding. Tragedy is in itself this attempt to make evil 'mean' something: not through positing anything behind it or beyond it which makes it comprehensible or acceptable, but by using the structure of narrative to relate it to the present, to fashion from it a thing of beauty and moment for the audience. The fact that tragedy is written, performed and watched witnesses to the fact that its subject is not the final word, for the final word is the play itself, which mediates that subject to the audience. 'The worst is not,/So long as I can say this is the worst' (*King Lear*, IV i). It is in that mediation that the significance lies.

### *5: The death of Jesus*

Consider finally the story of Jesus as it is told in the gospels. Incomprehensibility, ineluctability, irrevocability were given as the hallmarks of tragedy: his sufferings too are without sense, without escape, and at the last without hope. Yet his life is also pregnant with the ambiguities which we discovered in the way these motifs are handled in tragedy. Despite his innocence, he becomes another victim of the random violence which sweeps through human society, through no fault of his own; nor was any lesson gained through his death. Yet although it is hard to see why he had to suffer, it is easy to see the causes of the forces which destroyed him: the hate, the folly, the envy, the malice which lurk in the heart of man. Similarly, there was no flinching from the cup which was given him to drink. He died because it was decreed by the will of his Heavenly Father, he died the victim of forces beyond his control, he died because he was bound to die by the very nature of his approach to life; yet he died because he chose to. 'No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (John 10.18). Finally, he died in hopelessness and desolation, abandoned by his Father to the awful blackness of extinction, burdened beyond words by the sins and sufferings of a bleeding world.

But this life which ends in hopelessness becomes the sole grounds for hope. We should not, as MacKinnon reminds us<sup>5</sup>, see the resurrection as the negation of what had gone before, but rather as its vindication. The resurrection is not the revelation that the death of God's Son was an elaborate and unfortunately necessary charade. Rather, the resurrection is the mediation of Christ's life of suffering and its terrible end to the present, to his Church, to his body caught in the same patterns of destructive darkness. The resurrection is not the denial but the affirmation of the essential truth of tragedy: that it is only by facing in the present the reality of the evil before us that there can be any true or reliable hope; that any vision for restoration, for the mending of evil, must be founded on the repeated retelling and re-enacting of a narrative representing its most violent irruption.



The resurrection, however, may not be considered merely as the mediation of the saving significance of the cross to the present community, for it is in itself the actual accomplishment of our salvation. In Christ, the divine Logos became incarnate; the story of God became the story of all flesh. Which is to say that it became tragedy, for to be flesh is to experience evil in all its incomprehensibility, its ineluctability, its finality. And the story ends on the cross, where the light of creation is at last eclipsed by the annihilating darkness into which he has descended, where the cup of its bitterness is tasted and drained for all time. The history of evil which, told by man, is the story of tragedy, runs its furthest course, wins its ultimate victory, and is thereby complete; so that the cross becomes at once the limit of cosmic evil and the limit of the tragic tale which is man's. It is precisely because the cross stands in the centre of history as the once-for-all completion of man's tragic destiny that it becomes its limit, and therefore, with the dawn of Easter morning, its reversal. 'It is finished': the logos of sin and death is decisively past, and the world of the dead must now deliver up its dead, can no longer hold its captives. But the risen Lord forever remains the lamb slain before the foundation of the world, known only in the breaking of bread, of his body; in the memorial of his cross, the limit of all tragedy.

- 1 See Steiner's book *The Death of Tragedy* (London, 1961); e.g. 'Christianity is an anti-tragic vision of the world' (p. 331).
- 2 MacKinnon has written various pieces on this theme. So, for instance, 'Order and Evil in the Gospel' and 'Atonement and Tragedy' in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (London, 1968), pp. 90—104; 'Tillich, Frege, Kittel: Some Reflections on a Dark Theme' and 'Ethics and Tragedy' in *Explorations in Theology V* (London 1979), pp. 129—137, 182—195; 'Creon and Antigone' in *Themes in Theology; the Threefold Cord* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 110—134.
- 3 Cf. Steiner, op. cit., p. 8: 'Tragedies end badly. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence'.
- 4 On this subject see the second chapter of P.A.J. Feeney's *Theism, Tragedy and Neo-Tragedy, with Special Reference to Lucien Goldmann's Critique of Pascal* (Diss, U. of Cambridge, 1981).
- 5 *Borderlands Of Theology And Other Essays*, p. 96.