



# On Saving Sinners

By James V. Schall, S.J.

*"If one knew, he wondered, the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? If one reached what they called the heart of the matter?"<sup>1</sup>*

I. Plots of novels follow theses and enigmas found in theology. Even though we are all sinners, the question arises: "Is everyone, in the end, saved no matter what he does or thinks?" This issue arises indirectly from the famous position of Origen, somewhat revised in the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar, that, in the end, God will see to it that no one is lost. Stated in the form of a novel, the issue could be developed in many ways, in different eras and settings. One way might be that of Hamlet in which the sinner is deliberately killed in act of adultery so that his damnation, by common theological standards, could be assured as the most satisfying sort of human revenge. But could or would God still "save" him, even then?

While at a nephew's this summer in California, I was looking in the bookshelves for something to read. There I came across a Penguin edition of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, which I had not read before. After I finished it, I kept calling it, in my mind, *The End of the Affair*, the title of a later of Greene's novels. In a vivid sense, however, the plot of *The Heart of the Matter* is about the "end of an affair". It is about whether God can "save" us even in the direst sins, deliberately chosen?

The lady involved in an "affair" with Henry Scobie, a British colonial police officer in a dingy west African country during World War II, finishes the book conversing with the missionary priest, Father Rank. Henry has just committed suicide, the most unforgivable of sins. His justification for so doing was that he claimed to have loved two women, his wife, and his mistress. He did

not want to "hurt" either of them, a sin closer perhaps to vanity than pride.

His death, as it turns out, however, was not "natural" but contrived. Though he sought to make it look convincing, actually it was due to an overdose of pills. We are thus left with the classic plot: "Can God save even such a sinner, such a suicide?" Our sympathy and pity are certainly in Scobie's favor. We see ourselves in him.

Henry Scobie thought that the ending to his dilemma is a "deed" in which no one but himself would be "hurt". This act was, in fact, viewed finally by his mistress, Helen Rolt, simply as a "mess". At this point, the priest, who had earlier and rightly refused Scobie absolution because of the reservations of his repentance, tells Helen that even though Scobie was wrong in his suicide, he thought that Scobie "really loved God".<sup>2</sup>

To this startling observation, Helen replied that "he certainly loved no one else". That is, in her view, Scobie really loved neither his wife nor her. To this position, in the book's final passage, the priest observes that she might be right there also. That is, logically, the stated reason for Henry's suicide was not valid. We end up with a God who "sees" what is behind our sins. The implication is that indeed Henry Scobie, in spite of his doing away with himself, is saved, or at least we can suspect so.

II. Earlier in the novel a discussion about despair is found. This is the great sin. The suicide is usually considered to be the result of despair, of not finding anything worth living for. Chesterton called suicide the worst of sins because it was a rejection of the whole world, of life itself. Socrates said that our lives are in the hands of the gods, not our own. "Despair is the price one

pays for setting oneself an impossible aim," we read. "It is . . . the unforgivable sin but it is a sin that the corrupt or evil man never practices. He always has hope. He never reaches the freezing point of knowing absolute failure. Only the man of goodwill carries always in his heart the capacity for damnation".<sup>3</sup>

If we apply this thesis, itself a reversal of values, to Scobie, his justification for his suicide is an "impossible aim". He loves two women; itself impossible in its consequences. An evil man would not have any problem here. Thus, by implication, Scobie was not an evil man. So Scobie is indeed capable of "damnation" precisely because he has "goodwill". Scobie does not want to "hurt" anyone, but ends up, by his goodwill action, hurting everyone, including himself and those he says he loves.

In the novel, a young man by the name of Pemberton, a man of good family, also commits suicide. Scobie is sent out to investigate his death.

He thought of Pemberton. What an absurd thing to expect happiness in a world so full of misery. . . . Point me out the happy man and I will point you out either extreme egotism, evil—or else an absolute ignorance.<sup>4</sup>

We have to be redeemed in our unhappiness. We cannot wait till we are perfect. Perfection won't happen in this life.

The reason Scobie liked being in such a terrible African place was that one saw people there as they really are. No paradise is near. Only sins and evils are found. Even God loves us in our worst. If He didn't, He could not love us at all for we are generally in a wretched and sinful state. Scobie is like those he sees.

While "praying" over his contemplated suicide, Scobie tells us his reasoning:

O God, I am the only guilty one because I've known the answers all the time. I've preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can't observe your suffering. I can only imagine it. But there are limits to what I can do to you—or them. I can't desert either of them while I'm alive, but I can die and remove myself from their blood stream. They are ill with me and I can cure them.<sup>5</sup>

The "cure" is his self-inflicted death, the great sin of despair.

Henry Scobie no doubt makes up the rules. His rules go against what the Church teaches, the rules his wife stood for. The priest thinks that Scobie loved only God. His mistress was rather sure that he loved only himself. He loved Africa because there it was easy to see that if God loved us, He had to do so as sinners. What about hating the sin and loving the sinner? The novel does not romanticize suicide. It is a last resort that does not really "work" for its intended purpose. The hypothesis of the book is that it is possible to love two people all one's life at the same time. The facts in the narration, as it is carried out, do not embrace this conclusion. Henry does not really know what love is. Real love, to be what it is, follows the rules.

III. This book begins with a citation in French from the poet Charles Péguy. It reads: "*Le pécheur est au cœur même de chrétienté.... Nul n'est aussi compétent que le pécheur en matière de chrétienté. Nul, si ce n'est saint.*" This is obviously the theme of this book, of the life of Henry Scobie. He is portrayed as the "holy sinner."

"The sinner is at the very heart of Christendom. No one is so competent as the sinner about the essential matter of Christendom; no one but a saint is so holy." Christ came to save us from our sins in our sins. The sinner knows the score, knows the need of himself "being saved". Sinners can be "holy" if, in their sins, they search for God, who is, first, searching for them.

What sinners cannot do is make up the rules of reality, of *what is*. They cannot save

themselves. And if they do make up the rules by which they live, they cannot guarantee that their rules will make those who, with their rules, they sin against happy in this life or the next.

Are we all then Henry Scobies making up our own rules that do not work? No doubt, to a considerable extent, we are. On the other hand, is there any consolation in the idea that whatever we do, God will save us? I find little. We cannot be saved by our rules. Explicitly or implicitly, there must be an acknowledgment of God's rules themselves designed for our real good.



IV. Novelists pursue salvation in the midst of sin, for that is where most of us are, where salvation is most needed. Yet, as the tale of Henry Scobie shows us, when we reach the "end of the affair" and the "heart of the matter", "heaven remained rigidly on the other side of death".<sup>6</sup> Otherwise, all we have is this world.

"What an absurd thing it was to expect happiness in a world full of misery".<sup>7</sup> God loved Henry Scobie and Henry Scobie, in the end, may have loved God. But Scobie's way of loving God implies that he can "cure" those he claims to love. He says he can only "observe" God's suffering. The "heart of the matter" is that Henry Scobie did not know or accept the theology of the

Cross. His ignorance may have "saved" him, but it saved no one else.

The priest said that he "loved" God. His mistress said that he loved only himself. Christianity says that the love of God, neighbor, and self belong together. The sinner is only "holy" when he repents his sin. "Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim." This, not adultery, was Henry Scobie's real sin. With "goodwill" he did choose "damnation", thinking it was compassion for his dual loves.

Is then everybody saved? The "heart of the matter" is that this life is not the final location of our happiness. But it is the final location of whether, even in the miseries and particularities of our lives, we choose the conditions, the deeds, that will lead us to it. As the "second voice", in response to his prayer, tells Scobie in the Church, "I have been faithful to you for two thousand years. . . . The repentance is already there. . . . It's not repentance you lack, just a few simple actions . . .".<sup>8</sup>

What Graham Greene wanted to know was whether we could be saved even if we did not take the "few simple actions". Certainly we could be if we made up our own rules. The novel admits that making up our own rules will not make those we say that we love happy. Only those who have "goodwill" can be "damned". Scobie's eternity depended on his awareness of his own sophistry. Perhaps this is why, as the priest said, God could love him.

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#### References

- 1 Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), 124.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 272.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 258.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 259.