

# JESUS AND CONFLICT

By GEORGE SOARES-PRABHU

**C**ONFLICT plays a large part in the gospel narratives of the ministry of Jesus. All four of our canonical gospels describe the ministry of Jesus as a time of intense and mounting conflict, culminating in his death upon the cross. The conflict they describe is pluriform. Jesus is shown in conflict with Satan (Mt 12,28). In the apocalyptic world-view of the times Satan was 'the ruler of the world' (Jn 12,31), who through his demons afflicted humankind with sickness (Jesus 'rebukes' a fever in Lk 4,39), with natural calamities like storms (Jesus 'rebukes' a storm in Mk 4,39), with mental illnesses which were then thought to be cases of spirit possession (Jesus heals an epileptic boy by freeing him from 'a deaf and dumb spirit' in Mk 9,25). The miracles of Jesus are thus episodes in this cosmic conflict, indications that Satan's rule has been well and truly ended. Jesus is shown in conflict too with the religious leaders of his people, whose casuistic interpretation of the Law and whose thoroughly legalistic understanding of religion he opposes vigorously (Mt 5,21-48; Mk 7,1-23). He is in conflict with the crowds he draws, whose popular messianic, consumer expectations he refuses to gratify (Jn 6,15; 6,26); with his family whose preferential claims on him he firmly rejects (Lk 2,41-52; Mk 3,31-35); and with his disciples, whose persistent and exasperating misunderstanding of his teaching he must repeatedly correct (Mk 4,13; 8,14-21; 10,35-45). And he is in conflict with his own instinctive clinging to life and his natural aversion to suffering, when these threaten to come in the way of his Father's will (Mk 14,32-42; Mt 4,1-11). Conflict, then, is not a secondary dispensable element in the ministry of Jesus; it is of its essence. Not for Jesus the ecstasy of the frolicking Krishna who is beyond all conflict; nor the serene smile of the Buddha who is wholly untouched by it. His is a short and agitated ministry, ending in a violent and untimely death.

Indeed so important is this theme of conflict in the gospel narratives of the ministry of Jesus that it spills over into the more or less legendary traditions about his infancy that have grown up in the early Church. The infancy narrative of Matthew has been

described appropriately by Adolf Schlatter, in a now classic expression, 'the conflict of the Two Kings' (Herod and Jesus).<sup>1</sup> And though such sustained conflict is missing in the very different infancy narrative of Luke, conflict erupts powerfully into it when Simeon prophesies that 'this child is set (like the 'rock of stumbling' of Isai 8,14 and the 'precious corner stone' of Isai 28,16) for the fall and for the rising up of many in Israel', and is to be 'a sign that is spoken against' (Lk 2,34-35).

*The source of conflict: the God-experience of Jesus*

Simeon's sombre prophecy suggests that it is Jesus himself who is to be the focus and the occasion of the conflict that will invest his life. He is the stone on which people will stumble; he is the sign that will be spoken against. This becomes explicit in one of the rare I-sayings of Jesus in the synoptic tradition: 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth: I have not come to bring peace but the sword' (Mt 10,34; Lk 12,51). The 'peace' that Jesus does not come to bring is the peace that most of his followers seem to have opted for: the peace of a happy compromise with Mammon (Mt 6,24), and of a contented adjustment to a radically unjust and oppressive society, powered not by love but by greed. The 'sword' that he brings is the sword of division (Lk 12,51), sharp enough to divide even the members of a closely knit oriental family into fiercely antagonistic groups who take up sides for or against him (Mt 10,35-36).

Such sharp divisions in which 'a person's enemies are those of his own family' (Mt 10,36) are inevitable, because of the radically new experience of God which Jesus has, and which he communicates to his disciples as the foundational experience of his community (Mt 11,27). For the experience of God as *abba* is not the soothing anodyne that long familiarity and centuries of the sentimentalizing of compassion by Christianity have made it.<sup>2</sup> It is a profoundly unsettling experience, because of the radical demands it makes on the self and on society.

*The universality of love*

The experience God as *abba* is to experience people (and not just to speak or even think about them) as brothers and sisters. True, the 'Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ' reveals himself as *abba* to the followers of Jesus, to whom he communicates his spirit of 'sonship', so that they can cry out in ecstatic prayer, 'Abba,

Father!' It is they (but surely not they alone) who experience God as unconditional, accepting and forgiving love. But the compassion which this experience creates (1 Jn 4,7-12) is certainly not to be confined to the christian community. Like the love of the Father himself it must reach out to all humankind, to 'the evil and the good' and to 'the just and the unjust' (Mt 5,45).

That such an attitude calls for a radical conversion, that is, a sharp dislocation of our normal patterns of perception and behaviour, is obvious. We do not normally experience our fellow human beings in this way! Indians still spontaneously perceive their people as part of a complex, highly stratified system of caste. Africans, I am told, see them as members of a tribe. The Jews at the time of Jesus experienced their contemporaries as Jew or Gentile; the Greeks as Greek or barbarian. The pale-faced overlords of the massive pigmentocracies which european colonialism built up all over the world perceived their subject peoples ('the lesser breeds without the law!') along a value-loaded spectrum of skin colours, ranging from white to yellow, red, brown and black.<sup>3</sup>

To affirm then the radical equality of all human beings beyond all differences of sex, race, culture, class, rank or caste, is a profoundly radical and therefore conflict-provoking act. Jesus lived out such radicalism when he dined with tax-collectors and sinners (Mk 2,15-17; Lk 15,1-2); called women to be his disciples (Lk 10,38-42; Mt 28,9-10; Jn 20,11-18);<sup>4</sup> held up a Gentile as a model of faith (Mt 8,15) and a Samaritan as a model of compassion (Lk 10,29-37); renounced domination for service (Mt 10,35-45); and projected the vision of a community that would be free of all father, *Führer*, or guru figures, because it would acknowledge only one Father who is in heaven, and only one Master, the Christ (Mt 23,8-10).

### *The primacy of love*

Other radical, conflict-laden consequences follow from the God-experience of Jesus. To experience God as *abba* is to grasp the absolute primacy of love. Interhuman concern as our appropriate response to God's love for us—'loving God by loving neighbour', as I would paraphrase the love-commandment of Jesus<sup>5</sup>—becomes the basis of all law (Mt 22,40), and takes precedence over all cult (Mk 12,33). Every institution then becomes subordinate to human need—for 'the sabbath is made for the human person, not the human person for the sabbath' (Mk 2,27). 'Mercy', that is,

interhuman concern shown in concrete acts of active compassion towards the hungry and the outcast, is to be preferred to 'sacrifice' (Mt 9,13; 12,7). Reconciliation with an injured brother or sister must precede reconciliation with God (Mt 5,23-24). Unlimited forgiveness of others is a necessary precondition for effective prayer (Mk 11,25; Mt 6,14-15). In a word, our relationship with God is mediated through our relationships with one another, for humankind is now the new Temple, the 'sacred place' of our encounter with God.

To experience God as *abba* is therefore to experience the 'wholly other' in the give and take of human history. It is to realize the absolute closeness of the utterly transcendent God. This leads to the tearing down of the ritual barriers that religions tend to build up round God in order to safeguard his 'holiness'. The curtain of the Temple, which blocks the way to the Holy of Holies, is torn in two from top to bottom at the death of Jesus, allowing us untrammelled access to the Father (Mk 15,38). All the laws of ritual cleanliness are abrogated by Jesus (Mk 7,1-23), so that 'nothing in itself is unclean' (Rom 14,14). The whole system of pollution which sets aside persons, places and things as 'untouchable' and 'unclean', because they belong to the realm of disorder, formlessness, non-being and death,<sup>6</sup> is abolished at a stroke.

### *The conflict of love and of law*

Such radicalism would be disturbing in any traditional society. It would have been specially so in the Judaism of the time of Jesus, a Judaism scarred by its experience of the Exile and disfigured by three centuries of greek and roman rule. Colonial rule always distorts the social system of the colonized. To systematic economic exploitation it adds massive racist and cultural aggression, which creates deep psychic stress in the colonized peoples and drives them into rigidly defensive attitudes.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, then, all the major religious movements of Palestine at the time of Jesus (the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Qumran sectarians and the Zealots) were movements of renewal which sought to affirm the ethnic, cultural and religious identity of Judaism, and insisted on the observance of the Torah more strictly than before.<sup>8</sup>

The radicalism of Jesus, who brushed aside the letter of the Law in order to grasp its spirit (radical obedience to God shown by radical concern for the neighbour) would have collided head-on

with the rigorism of the sects. His universalism, with its sympathy for the outcasts within Jewish society and its openness to Samaritans and Gentiles outside it, would have clashed with the particularism of the Jewish groups, whose bigoted insistence on the strict observance of the Law turned them into closed élitist or fanatical communities, which excluded from their fellowship not only gentiles but even Jews who failed to live up to their own exacting standards. The Pharisees looked down upon the 'people of the land' (*ʿām hā-āreṣ*) as a 'rabble who do not know the law' (Jn 7,49); the Qumran sectarians lumped together as 'children of darkness' all those (Jews and gentiles) who did not belong to their dissident group (1 QS III, 20-26); the Zealots were violently opposed to all collaborators with Rome. Jesus welcomed tax-collectors and sinners into his movement, and showed himself unusually appreciative of Samaritans and Gentiles.

*The consequences of conflict: Jesus and violence*

The conflict that the universalism and the radicalism of Jesus ignited among his people led inevitably to violence and culminated in his violent death on the cross. That Jesus foresaw such violence (though probably not its precise outcome) is clear from several of his sayings. Even if the synoptic passion predictions (Mk 8,31; 9,31; 10,33-34) are not predictions made by Jesus, but early Christian references to the passion of Jesus formulated after the event, it is certain that Jesus did in fact reckon with a violent death as part of his prophetic mission (Lk 13,31-33). Indeed the fate of John the Baptist would have been for Jesus (as the death of Jesus ought to be for us) evidence enough of the violence that the authentic proclamation of the Kingdom inevitably arouses (Mk 9,9-14).

What is less clear is how such violence is to be met. Jesus, it would seem, met it non-violently. In spite of attempts to associate him with the Zealots, it seems certain that Jesus did not initiate or support armed insurrection.<sup>9</sup> Instead of countering violence with violence Jesus overcomes violence by freely submitting to it (Mt 26, 51-54). He thus becomes the 'scapegoat' who, by taking upon himself all the innate violence of humankind, purges the world of violence and makes human reconciliation possible.<sup>10</sup> Faithful to his experience of God as the *abba* who comes 'not to carry out just revenge upon evil, but to justify sinners by grace, whether they are Zealots, tax-collectors, Pharisees or sinners',<sup>11</sup> Jesus commands

his followers to love their enemies—and not just their personal enemies, hostile to them as individuals, but (and explicitly) their group enemies who ‘hate’, ‘ostracize’ and ‘persecute’ their group (Lk 6,27–28). He urges them to accept uncomplainingly even extreme forms of personal injury—to turn the other cheek when struck a particularly insulting backhand blow on the right one; to give up one’s cloak when one is sued for one’s tunic (leaving oneself naked!); to carry a burden two miles, when forced by a much resented law of the occupying power to carry it one (Mt 5,39–41). Insistence of non-violence could scarcely, it would seem, go further.

### *Non-resistance?*

But the non-violence of Jesus is more ambiguous than might, at first sight, appear. The examples of non-resistance that he gives are obviously not meant to be taken literally, for they are so extreme that they verge on the ridiculous. John Dominic Crossan has in fact suggested that they are meant to be case-parodies which deliberately make fun of case law by juxtaposing sober, true to life cases (‘if anyone would sue you and take your tunic’) with solutions that are hilariously impractical (‘give him your cloak also’)! By doing this they prevent us from idolizing law, for they ‘remind us again and again that to abide with God is more fundamental than any case law and is itself fundamental ethics and morality’.<sup>12</sup>

Even if we should find Crossan’s fascinating explanation a shade too fanciful to be convincing, he is surely right in refusing to identify Jesus’s instructions on non-resistance with ‘legal rules’ which set down precise norms to be observed in designated situations. They are probably best taken as ‘focal instances’: that is, as graphic examples of christian behaviour in extreme and specific hypothetical situations, which, because of their ‘unreasonableness’, shock us into becoming imaginatively aware of the kind of non-aggressive behaviour that the following of Jesus implies.<sup>13</sup>

Such behaviour certainly implies a refusal to retaliate. One does not return evil for evil—‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ (Mt 5,38). It does not, I believe, necessarily imply passive non-violence, or the non-resistance to evil which a literal understanding of the ‘non-violent’ sayings of Jesus might suggest. Not only would such a literal understanding be untrue to the form of these sayings (which are, we have seen, ‘focal instances’ not ‘legal rules’) but it

would conflict with the closely related and utterly basic command of Jesus that we are to love our enemies (Mt 5,43-48). For to love our enemies means to 'do good' to them (Lk 6,27). It means not allowing ourselves to be overcome by their evil but overcoming their evil with good (Rom 12,21). To turn the other cheek might on occasion disarm the aggressor and convert him; but it is more likely to aggravate his violence. This would not be loving him. The Jesus of the gospels, significantly, does not turn the other cheek when he is struck at his trial but sharply pulls up the guard who strikes him (Jn 18,22-23). Paul is even less non-resistant. He reacts to a blow on the mouth by roundly abusing the High Priest who has ordered the blow (Acts 23,2-3)!

*Non-violent resistance?*

Does Jesus, then, demand active non-violence from his followers? Does he expect them to resist aggression—but always in a strictly non-violent way? I am not sure that he does. The problem of the non-violence of the gospels is more complex than the spate of pacifist tracts pouring out of the Christian Churches of the West, under the threat of nuclear destruction and third world revolution, would lead us to suspect. Before we subscribe to the blanket condemnation of violence that they pronounce, it might be worth reflecting on the frightening violence of the God of the Bible, and even of Jesus in the gospels.

For to Asian sensibilities at least, Jesus is by no means a non-violent person. Compared to the Buddha (always patient, never angry, always courteous and serene), or even to Mahatma Gandhi (who could say very hard things about his people and their colonial oppressors, but always in measured and dispassionate words), the Jesus of the gospels is violent indeed. He may not have encouraged armed rebellion, but he certainly did not avoid inflammatory speech and action (Mt 12,34; Mk 11,15-19). His language is full of verbal violence, sometimes shockingly so (Mt 23,13-33), and betrays an assertiveness that sometimes seems to spill over into overt aggression. Only if we define violence narrowly, restricting it to mean merely lethal physical injury done to human beings—only then could Jesus be said to be truly non-violent. But this is not how violence is understood in the non-semitic religious traditions of Asia. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism (I cannot speak for Confucianism or Taoism, though I suspect that they too would not be very different), non-violence (*ahimsā*) would exclude injury

not just to humankind but to any living being, and not just in action but equally in thought and in word.<sup>14</sup>

### *Love and violence*

This difference between the non-violent Buddha and the violent Jesus is due to the different value-systems to which they subscribe. For Buddhism (as indeed for all the great traditions of India) the supreme goal of life is the absolute and unconditioned freedom which results from the experiential realization of the ultimate relativity of the empirical self and of the world it inhabits. Such a 'perceiving of the emptiness of the transitory' (*Dhammapada* v.92) results in the immediate dissolution of all binding attachments, and leads to the state of 'steadfast wisdom' (*stith-prajña*). In this, the enlightened individual is supremely free, wholly untroubled by the 'pairs of opposites' which he encounters in life, so that he holds 'pleasure and pain, profit and loss, victory and defeat' to be exactly the same (*Bhagavadgita* ii.38). Yet he is profoundly committed to the well-being of the universe, because he has acquired the basic disposition of the enlightened individual, 'a passionate desire for the welfare of all beings' (*Bhagavadgita* v.25). Aggression of any kind towards any being whatsoever would be unthinkable in a person so disposed.

For Jesus, on the other hand, the supreme goal of life is not unconditional freedom but unconditional love. The basic religious experience that shapes his life and gives form to the movement he founds is the experience of God's unconditional love which empowers us (to the extent we experience it) to love our fellow human beings as unconditionally as God does (Lk 6,32-36). The fully 'realized' follower of Jesus will be the person who fully loves. But love does not necessarily rule out violence. Indeed it may, as the life of Jesus shows us, demand violence for the defence or the correction of the person loved. The problem then is to determine just how much and what kind of violence love permits or requires in any given situation. In a world full of ambiguity and conflicting values this cannot be decided by blanket judgments on the use of violence issued from the outside, but only through agonizing discernment from within the situation of conflict.

In a world as overrun by violence as our planet earth today, such discernment might well lead to an option for non-violence. It may be that the 'politics of forgiveness' taught us by Mahatma Gandhi is the only way we have to break out of the spiral of



violence that is threatening to tear our world apart. But such an option, if it is to be genuine, must come from the victims of unjust and oppressive violence, who in their suffering and struggle learn to overcome violence through love. It cannot be preached to them from the outside—least of all by affluent first world Christians who, like it or not, have a vested interest in the massive systems of exploitation which the wretched of the earth are revolting against, and whose long complicity in violence has surely deprived them of the right to preach.

For whether or not Jesus taught non-violence, Christians, from the time of Constantine at least, have been fiercely violent. With the exception of a few unfashionable and sometimes persecuted sects who have consistently and honourably practised pacifism, and occasional off-beat individuals who have suffered in its cause, western Christianity has not merely allowed 'just wars' of defence ('the only defensible war', Chesterton reminded us, 'is a war of defence'), but it has initiated aggressive crusades (invoking the biblical tradition of the 'holy war'), and has provided incentive for and legitimation of the great marauding expeditions of western colonialism which have devastated and depopulated large areas of our world.<sup>15</sup> That is why gandhian *ahimsā*, which emerged from a long hindu-jain tradition of reverence for life, and was proclaimed from within an exploited and struggling people by someone who shared in their lot, is consistent and credible. Passionate (even violent!) denunciations of violence addressed to third world revolutionaries by western Christians who have no constructive alternative to offer, are in my opinion, neither.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Schlatter, A.: *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (Stuttgart, 1963), p 25.

<sup>2</sup> Fox, M.: *A spirituality named compassion and the healing of the global village, Humpty Dumpty and us* (Minneapolis, 1979), pp 4-6.

<sup>3</sup> Boxer, C.R.: *The Church militant and iberian expansion* (Baltimore, 1978), p 38.

<sup>4</sup> The 'better part' which Mary chooses in Lk 10, 38-42 is not a 'contemplative' as opposed to an 'active' life. This would have made little sense at the time of Jesus or of Luke. Rather it is a life of a 'disciple' who sits at the feet of the master, rather than that of a 'sympathizer' who merely serves him (cf Lk 8,1-2).

<sup>5</sup> Soares-Prabhu, G.M.: 'The synoptic love-commandment: the dimension of love in the teaching of Jesus', *Jeevadhara* 13 (1983), pp 87-91.

<sup>6</sup> Belo, F.: *A materialist reading of the Gospel of Mark* (New York, 1981), pp 37-39.

<sup>7</sup> Fanon, F.: *Black skin, white masks* (New York, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Theissen, G.: *The first followers of Jesus: a sociological analysis of the earliest Christianity* (London, 1980), p 80.

<sup>9</sup> Hengel, M.: *Was Jesus a revolutionist?* (Philadelphia 1971).

<sup>10</sup> Schwager, R.: *Brauchen wir einen Sündenbock?* (Munich, 1978), pp 143-231, which applies René Girard's 'scapegoat' theory for the origins and the resolution of violence in human society to the Bible.

<sup>11</sup> Moltmann, J.: *The crucified God* (London, 1974), p 142.

<sup>12</sup> Crossan, J.D.: 'Jesus and pacifism', in Flanagan, W. and Robinson A.W. (eds): *No famine in the land: studies in honour of John L. McKenzie* (Missoula, 1973), pp 195-208.

<sup>13</sup> Tennehill, R.C.: 'The focal "instance"' as a form of New Testament speech: a study of Matthew 5,39b-42', *Journal of religion* 50 (1970) pp 372-85.

<sup>14</sup> Tähtinen, U.: *Ahimsā: non-violence in indian tradition* (London, 1976), pp 50-69.

<sup>15</sup> Boxer, C.R.: *The portuguese seaborne empire, 1415-1825* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp 20-24, which shows how the papal Bulls legitimizing spanish and portuguese colonial expansion 'established guide-lines for subsequent european behaviour (or misbehaviour) in the tropical world' (p 23).