

THE EXPERIENCE OF ALIENATION

By GUY JARROSSON

SOME TWENTY years ago, J. H. Griffin, haunted by the condition of black people in the southern United States, decided to experience what it meant to be a negro, and darkened his skin. The result of his experience was given to the public in the form of a book called *Black like me*.¹ In the preface he wrote:

This may not be all of it. It may not cover all the questions, but it is what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down. Some whites will say this is not really it, they will say this is the white man's experience as a Negro in the South, not the Negroes. The Negro. The South. These are details. The real story is the universal one of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men (and in the process destroy themselves) for reasons neither really understands. It is the story of the persecuted, the defrauded, the feared and detested. I could have been a Jew in Germany, a Mexican in a number of States, or a member of any 'inferior' group. Only the details would have differed, the story would be the same.

. . . I publish here the journal of my own experiences living as a Negro. I offer it in all its crudity and rawness. It traces the changes that occur to heart and body and intelligence when a so called first-class citizen is cast on the junk-heap of second-class citizenship.

Are there any 'inferior' groups in Britain in 1983? Would the average person concede that the working class as a whole constitute an 'inferior' group relegated to second-class citizenship? My guess is that their answer would be 'no'. They would be prepared to accept though, that there is room for improvement in such areas as race relations and the position of women. There is no need to elaborate on the situation of women and their strong reaction against the role which has been imparted to them in a male dominated society. As far as race-relations are concerned the following piece of news appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper last autumn:

Y.O.P. girl has no right of complaint — the Youth Opportunity Programme gives no legal protection against race and sex discrim-

ination at work, an employment appeal tribunal in London ruled yesterday. . . . Miss Jean Daley, aged eighteen, claimed she was moved from a bacon counter and confined to shelf work after a customer objected to being served by a coloured girl. . . . The tribunal chairman, Mr Justice Neill, said there was no legal contract between Miss Daley and the store owners, Allied Supplies. . . . It also ruled that Miss Daley was not employed by the Manpower Services Commission.

So, sex discrimination, yes, race discrimination, yes, but as far as the working class are concerned, they would say that the Trade Unions have become too big for their boots and if there is a need for legislation, it is to curtail union power and certainly not to increase their protection. To quote J. H. Griffin again:

It was that bad then, despite the white southern legislators who insisted that they had a 'wonderfully harmonious relationship' with Negroes. . . . How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth? Though we lived side by side throughout the south, communications between the two races had simply ceased to exist. Neither really knew what went on with those of the other race. . . . With my decision to become a Negro, I realized that I, a specialist in race issues, knew nothing of the Negro's real problem.

If they were true to themselves our legislators would acknowledge that likewise they know nothing of working people's problems. In both cases, of course, the real problem is alienation: through no fault of their own some of the community have become aliens in their own country. However, it is important to emphasize the point made by south american theologians that sex and race discriminations are by no means the most basic alienation. That comes from the economic set-up and it is through work that sex and race discrimination can manifest themselves.

And for us, this is particularly true in relation to the three great areas of class, sex, and race oppression. I am going to be a little bit provocative here perhaps. We have found in our experience that in the deep realities of race and sex we have had oppression throughout our history in many different ways . . . but we think that in our particular history sex oppression has taken place through economic oppression. That is, we do not suffer from race oppression in general, we suffer from capitalist race oppression. We do not suffer from sex oppression in general, we suffer from capitalist sex

oppression. It does not mean that automatically a change in the economic system will make this problem disappear. It means that the struggle for racial justice and the struggle for sex-liberation take place *within* this struggle for change in the system which has shaped oppression in our time. This is open to discussion certainly. I think that whatever the analysis is, unless it brings together these elements it makes the struggle against oppression so unconnected and so vulnerable that we can hardly get anywhere.²

After all, why are there black people in the United States if not because they were brought in from Africa to work as slaves in the rich plantations of North America? Why are there Indians, Pakistanis, West Indians in Britain, if not because they were brought in after the last war to make up for a shortage of labour?

There are times when I wish our legislators, experts or experts-to-be in industrial relations would, like J. H. Griffin, become 'one of us', disappear for a few years as time is essential, look for employment, or go on the dole, on Merseyside or Tyneside, and come back wiser as to what the working class's real problem is. Time is essential because only time will enable one to become an 'insider'. Out of the thirty-three years of his life Jesus Christ spent thirty years as a carpenter in Nazareth and he was born into it.

Here I hope that I will be forgiven if I become more personal. I was not born into it, my background is middle class. When I decided to follow a way of life that would make me share the lot of those who work on the shop-floor, I did not have to darken my skin. All I had to do was to come to England and look for a job. I found one and got a work permit. After six weeks I was made redundant. I had to find another job and I can remember stalking the streets of Leeds, ringing bells, asking if there were any vacancies and sincerely hoping that there would not be any. It was February and it was cold and I did not like the experience one little bit. Looking back I can say that I was really in my vocation then as I was the typical immigrant with a poor command of the language and nobody to turn to. Eventually I found a job, as employment was not a problem at that time. All the same, initiation into working class mentality is a life-long process and it started very late for me. I do not come from a home where a child will know what is in store for him even before he has set foot on the factory floor. During a tea break, one of my work-mates who comes from a very poor family told me that when he was at school he was entitled to free meals. But as the colour of the voucher was different for those who paid and for those who did not

pay, rather than suffer the humiliation of revealing that he was poor, he would do without his meal and go home in the evening pretending he had had his food. Such an experience would mark anybody for life, but this I have not known.

As I write these lines I have in front of me *The Guardian* newspaper of Saturday, 15 January, where it is revealed that Mr Bill Fieldhouse, sacked chairman of 'Letrasnet' and 'Carrington Viyella' who suffered combined losses of more than thirty million pounds last year, is to receive a golden handshake of over one million pounds. When the Secretary of State for Employment, Mr Norman Tebbit, wants to make the closed shop illegal, is he conscious that he belongs in fact to the biggest closed shop of all, the closed shop of the old boy network where a word in the ear of Mr So-and-so will still work wonders? People are not stupid and can judge for themselves.

Although my initiation started late, I have learnt a thing or two. It should be said from the outset that the first and biggest alienation is that of men and women from themselves by their incorporation into an economic system which makes financial gain prevail over creativity and job satisfaction. By making money the first motivation of work and by reducing to a bare minimum job satisfaction, creativity and self expression, men and women have been diverted from their true vocation as children of God which is, in the field of work, to be creative of beauty. A company does not really make cars or hi-fi equipment; they make money for the shareholders and they will want as much of it as possible. On the other hand the men and women who work in their factory are there to make money as well and they will want as much of it as possible. Once this has been understood the scene is set for disaster as there is no way of reconciling the interests of both parties; they are totally opposed.

The logic of maximum profit demands that the goods be produced at minimum cost and this entails three kinds of consequences. The organization of mass production and assembly lines with all that goes with it dehumanizes, as has been pointed out many times. Human dignity is brushed under the carpet and people are treated as mere cogs in the machinery. All I can say is that I spent nine years on a capstan doing the same work month in, month out on a range of about ten pieces. Looking back, I can say that it was maddening; my nerves went and I finished up on tablets; I had to get out.

The need is to squeeze as much as possible out of the workforce, in order to get maximum production at minimum cost. It is out of this squeezing that all the little confrontations which are reported daily

come about. They act like pinpricks, whose repetition creates a general itching of the body which makes it so sensitive that it tends to erupt at the first provocation. When I first started work, I was amazed by the fierce reaction of my work-mates to what appeared a trivial incident. Their body had reached saturation point while mine was new. I had to learn. Here I give instances of the pinpricks: losing two weeks' wages when we were laid off during the lorry drivers' strike, while the staff did not lose a penny; the refusal of the company to pay me the money of their own redundancy scheme on the grounds that, since I had taken the option of early retirement in connection with the pension scheme, they considered I had in fact retired. And yet, they had made me redundant and paid me the legal redundancy money (£1,030 for nine years' service). I 'lost' £380.

It should also be pointed out that the stigma of being 'working class' extends far beyond the shop-floor. At the end of my nine-year stint in engineering I was nervously exhausted and badly in need of a rest. I went to see the doctor and asked him for two weeks off. He gave me a week and told me to come back. When I went the following week he had forgotten why I had come; I explained to him why I wanted at least another week off but he replied, 'I cannot give you a week off at the expense of the tax-payer'. And yet he was supposed to be the responsible person and I the irresponsible one. Even the Church is not without sin. When I worked at the dyeworks, my hands and face were frequently coloured red or yellow and even bleach would not remove it. I once went to Communion and put my hand out — the priest went for my mouth. I put my hand higher; then the priest put his finger on my hand to show me that it was 'dirty'. At least I have suffered a little bit of humiliation because of the colour of my skin! Little wonder then, if after years of this treatment one is led to feel and react like a second-class citizen.

Unemployment is a necessary by-product of such a system. The 'needs' of the shareholders are paramount and a pool of unemployed will ensure that wages are kept down. Unemployment is the biggest alienation of all. What it means is this: there is no place for you in our system. A major campaign is now under way aimed at spreading the idea that if people do not work, it is because they do not want to work. 'Get on your bikes' is the order of the day, together with a systematic witch-hunt of the so-called 'scroungers' — witness the Oxford City Social Security fraud swoop. Billed as the £1.5 million swindle it produced in fact £16,341. To put things in perspective it should be remembered that there is more money unclaimed than

swindled and that money swindled is but a drop in the ocean compared to the amount lost through tax evasion.

The massive rise in unemployment, taking place at the moment, coupled with the continuing impoverishment of the third world should lead us to take a more global view of the economic system within which we operate. What is happening is that the third world is now on our doorstep in the form of the unemployed, or rather, it would be more true to say, the working class has always been the third world in everything but name. Capitalism is no longer afraid to show its unacceptable face; the wheel has now turned full circle and the truth of the system has become more evident. Whereas the third world can easily be identified geographically, the working class is much more difficult to define because they are scattered all over the country and live within national boundaries. Their position is also much more ambiguous because they are caught between the first and the third world and are potential candidates for both. When the economy was booming the working class was sucked into first world citizenship; come hard times they are pushed back again into what is their rightful place — the scrap heap of unemployment. Little wonder then that occasionally the third world in our midst will blow up to the amazement of everyone. Witness the 1981 riots in Brixton, Toxteth, St Paul. Two worlds live side by side and ignore each other. Was it not Disraeli who warned against the danger of having two nations? But the two nations were there alright, as anyone who has read Engels' report on the conditions he found in this country can see for himself.³ Whether we care to call the nation within the nation 'working class' or 'third world' is immaterial.

Of course with the advent of the Trade Union movement things changed a great deal. But all these changes ran *against* the grain of true capitalism. They were concessions, but concessions worth making because it was better to share a little rather than run the risk of a head on confrontation and in any case the ample resources of the 'third world' were there to be exploited. But now that the cake has shrunk in size all the concessions are slowly and surely taken away. Hospitals are being closed. Companies are privatized. Victorian values are exalted by the Prime Minister and the working class is pushed more and more into third-world citizenship.⁴

Faced with a community so deeply divided between 'them and us', 'haves and have-nots', 'first world and third world' both nationally and internationally, what should a Christian do? One possible answer consists in saying that although capitalism is exploi-

tative and has many shortcomings, it is the lesser of two evils as the only alternative available. Marxism is unacceptable on ideological grounds. In this context, a 'good Christian' will be a person trying to see the rights and wrongs of each side in a 'them and us' situation and acting as a kind of peace-maker or ombudsman. This attitude may serve a useful purpose but it is totally insufficient if it stops there. Jesus Christ did not come as an ombudsman but he came to proclaim with authority the demands of the Kingdom. 'Master, tell my brother to give me a share of our inheritance'. 'My friend', he replied, 'who has appointed me your judge or the arbitrator of your claims?' He goes on to warn against making money and the acquisition of goods one's motivation in life which is capitalism's deadly sin. 'Watch and be on your guard against avarice of any kind, for a man's life is not made secure by what he owns even when he has more than he needs' (Lk 12,13.15). He goes even further and points out that an excessive concern with fairness (a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, whatever this means in practice) may blind one to the much more important issue of justice. 'Alas for you, Pharisees, you who pay your tithe of mint and rue and all sorts of garden herbs and overlook justice and the love of God' (Lk 11,42). In other words, all that makes newspaper headlines will never be resolved on a sound basis unless the basic issue of justice is tackled.

Capitalism *seems* to have been acquitted without trial. The Church's utter condemnation of marxism as an alternative to capitalism has given socialism a bad name and as a result it seems to have given capitalism its credentials. But to say that marxism, as distinct from socialism, is wrong does not mean that capitalism is right. Marxism is but one form of common ownership and capitalism is but one form of private ownership, both pushed to the extreme. Both capitalism and marxism can be dismissed as unacceptable from a christian point of view. The acid test of any economic system should be whether it provides for the needs of all and for all the needs — 'I come so that they may have life and have it to the full' (Jn 10,10).

If the Church has always upheld the principle of private property it is because it proved to be the best tool to ensure the fulfilment of all the needs of each individual. Men and women have a series of needs ranging from the material (food, clothes) to the immaterial (spiritual, intellectual). These will be catered for through their work. It is therefore important that the means of production be privately owned because to leave them in the hands of a stranger will produce 'alienation' because he or she may either take them back and throw

me out of work or put the rent up if leased and oblige me to struggle all my life just to keep my head above water. In other words, private ownership was meant to preserve my autonomy and this worked well in the context of a pre-industrial society where the typical worker was the artisan who owned, managed and worked in his own shop. The advent of industrialism and capitalism changed all that. What was united in one person has been divided between owners (shareholders), boards of directors, management and shop floor, so that what was meant to preserve a person's autonomy now has exactly the opposite effect. In the social encyclicals of the popes (for example *Rerum Novarum*), dealing with the *new* situation facing the Church, the emphasis has been altered and is expressed through three underlying themes: human dignity, common good, and stewardship. Although private property is reaffirmed, we are much more stewards, working for the common good and the human dignity of all, than owners. 'I came so that they may have life and have it to the full'.

It is easy to understand in this context why co-operatives have always been seen by the popes as ideal for an industrial society. It is because the unity between ownership and workforce has been restored, and, therefore, the seeds of confrontation have been removed. However, co-operatives are not the only solution available; what the popes are really saying is that the more the economic set-up, within which we operate, wanders away from the co-operative ideal, the more we are likely to break our necks. It is in this field of real reconciliation that Christians must exercise their ingenuity.

There is a deep craving for unity in our society. Indeed, ecumenism came top of the list for the 1980 Pastoral Congress in Liverpool and it is a source of wonder to me that people want to be united with their fellow-Christians yet do not even question the much deeper social divisions within their own denomination. My work-mates are Anglican, Methodist, no church, anti-church and yet I feel at one with them, while I have nothing in common with a Catholic who may be on the board of some multi-national company. The circles in which we move, housing, even the parishes we go to, everything separates us — except our faith! Is it not time we paused and reflected?

From the beginning the christian message has been one of de-alienation. 'So you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors: you are citizens like all the saints and part of God's household' (Eph 2,19).

Yet, after nearly two thousand years of Christianity, the word 'alienation' has come into fashion again, because of an economic system which creates first and second-class citizens, 'them and us', 'haves and have-nots' even within the same denomination. The Exodus towards the promised land started with a labour dispute and it is interesting in that context to re-read Exodus 5 (also 3,7-8 and 6,23). Harassed by the Egyptians, the Israelites decided to down tools. Indeed God took such a serious view of the situation that he ordered them to quit altogether. In recent times, some have taken a very serious view of the situation and decided to make their own promised land. No 'religion' has spread more quickly than marxism; in the space of sixty-five years, Russia, China and many others have been 'converted'. We have two options; one is to sit tight, hoping that the problem will blow over, but we are likely to be bitterly disappointed. The other one is to take as serious a view of the situation as God did when he ordered the Israelites to leave a land where they were oppressed, to go to a land where 'they could have life and have it to the full'.

To leave the final word to Pope John Paul II:

We have before us here a great drama that can leave no one indifferent. The person who, on the one hand, is trying to draw the maximum profit, is man; and on the other hand the person who is paying the price in damage and injury, is again man. The drama is made still greater by the fact that privileged social classes and the rich countries which accumulate goods to an excessive degree are in the same area. It is very often the misuse of their riches which becomes the cause of various ills. Add to this the fever of inflation, and the plague of unemployment. These are the symptoms of the moral disorder in the world. The moral disorder requires daring creative resolutions, which themselves take full account of man's authentic dignity. . . . The transformation of the structure of economic life is difficult but indispensable. It will not be easy to go forward unless there is a true conversion of mind, will and heart. The task requires resolute commitment by individuals and peoples linked together in free brotherhood.⁵

NOTES

¹ Griffin, J. H.: *Black like me* (London, 1962).

² Bonino, J. M.: in *A theology for Britain in the 80's*, p 61 (obtainable from ATFB: 80s, 232, Burley Road, Leeds 4, U.K.).

³ Engels, F.: *The condition of the working class in England*.

⁴ Fitzgerald, V.: in *A theology for Britain*, pp 63-75.

⁵ John Paul II: *Redemptor Hominis*, n 16.