

THE CHURCH AND POWERLESSNESS

An exploration in spirituality

By AUSTIN SMITH

The prologue

ONE FRIDAY night, in the summer of 1981, a young man was stopped by the police on Granby Street in Liverpool. He was riding a motorcycle. Some say the police knocked him off it, others say he was just stopped. A crowd gathered. Everyone agrees the crowd got angry. The anger built up into skirmishes with the police. Was this incident, so caught in the predictable rumours of inner city communication, the cause of Toxteth's midsummer, rioting madness? I do not think so. Police/community tension is but a symptom, though a vital one, of inner city decay.

Unemployment, outright vandalism, bad education, lack of communal facilities, failure of parental control, left-wing outside trouble makers — these were just some of the reasons given, and often fiercely defended, for the whole problem.

Further away the river lies desolate and abandoned. Broken-down warehouses, grass growing out of the gutters and the silence of solitariness and failure. Why is it like it is? It is a very complicated story we are told. Change of trade routes; docks never kept up to their mark to take contemporary cargoes; too many strikes; just not the demand for shipping in the world of our times.

'Thanks for calling', she said to me, 'I'm really worried about Tommy . . . I just can't understand it. . . . He wasn't even out that night'. Tommy is in prison, taken during the riots. I am calling because I am also a prison chaplain. The magistrate had said he was from a broken home. She continued, 'It is not his home that's broken, it's his area that's broken'.

Don't you feel sometimes that we are living . . . if you can call it living . . . in a broken world? Yes, broken like a broken watch. The mainspring has stopped working. Just to look at it, nothing has changed. Everything is in place. But put the watch to your ear, and you don't hear any ticking. You know what I am talking about, the

world, what we call the world, the world of human creatures . . . it seems to me it must have had a heart at one time, but today you would say the heart had stopped beating.¹

Actually the heart is still beating in many human creatures. But there is such a vast puzzlement in the midst of this social, economic and political mess in which we are called to live. That mother cried that day *Stabat Mater* tears; tears belonging to a perceptive though silent vigil 'beside a broken world'.

An analysis

To live the truly human life, a reverential respect for history is surely important. The difficulty is making sure that such a respect does not turn into enslavement. Authentic memory can so easily slip into romantic nostalgia. Not only am I called to be critical of my present, there is also a like demand to be critical of my past.

The western world in our age has been living under the dominion of two institutions: the industrial system of economy and a hardly less complicated system of politics which we call 'democracy'. . . . In the industrial system and the parliamentary national state we still live and move and have our being; and the power of these two inherited institutions over our lives is reflected in the hold they possess over our imaginations.²

It is true that each human being is born for infinity. It is equally true that I can make fundamental and radical choices which determine my life. I am also conscious of the reality of my own richness, in that I believe God has called me into a participation with him in a wonderful and inspiring task of creative power. All this is further enriched by my belief in the God who became part of my own human condition. Social, economic and political theories, along with the structures and institutions which they spawn, cannot change such profound and breath-taking truths. Nevertheless they can bring about, existentially, a helplessness and hopelessness which bar and bolt the human spirit into a prison of living futility. Faith may well have victory in an imperfect world. But faith would be mocked if those who have the power to make the world more perfect selfishly agree to live with the imperfections to the detriment of the less powerful and the perpetuation of the totally powerless. It is for this reason that ideological and institutional criticism and change are

part and parcel of the Church's mission. And it is equally important that the Church remains reflective at all times when it comes to its own institutional alliances. If inherited institutions are challenged, one needs to be careful not to give the benefit of the doubt to the institutions. It has been pointed out that Catholics in authority remained blind during most of the nineteenth century to the need for great social change, 'due, it may be remarked, not so much to lack of generosity or ignorance of the wretched condition of the workers as to sheer incomprehension of the new problems posed by the industrial revolution'.³

Two cautions are worthwhile stating. Simplification is so very dangerous face to face with the movements of history. And, what is much more important, there were good things happening on the christian and catholic fronts. Efforts, and massive efforts at that, were part of the story of England, France, Germany and Belgium. There was some promise in the air. Yet the tendency held the stage which saw social, economic and political engagement, especially at the institutional level, as outside the domain of the theological. And certainly the world of the 'spiritual' was left untouched. I use that word 'spiritual' with some deliberation. It is a major point of these pages.

The fact of the matter is: rumouring and riot-torn cities, decaying dockland and puzzled tears in the face of human 'brokenness' are intrinsically caught up in the process of institutional and structural failure. Two facts alone will give some indication of the political tares planted with the harvest of Liverpool endeavour in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Every year we strike off 1500 names in Liverpool of those who have received this description of assistance (Poor Law). They are the scum of the place, the drunkards, the idle and the dissolute. The respectable poor, if they have one penny in their pocket, can obtain advice and medicine for this fee at our dispensaries, supported by the charitable. If they have no money and can prove respectability our numerous medical charities will care for them on the recommendation of a minister or subscriber. Those who apply to the Parish are the squalid and undeserving, and better almost anything than flood the register with such a class.⁴

And should we now in this time and place have doubts about the racism which our historical consciences carry, it is worthwhile remembering:

Liverpool generally backed the South because of the cotton trade (during the American Civil War). The *Alabama* and many other privateers were built and manned on Merseyside; and a bazaar held in St George's Hall realized £30,000 to aid confederate soldiers. It was charity creamed off profits. Vast rewards — and risks — attended blockade running. Cotton left the South at 3*d.* or 4*d.* and reached Liverpool at 2*s.* 6*d.* per pound.⁵

If now black voices are raised to protest we do no more than reap the harvest of hypocritically founded economic and democratic institutions which are unable to meet the demands of a new day. They are tired out with a kind of fatigue which not even a good night's sleep will cure. We need to face the fact that yesterday's answers simply will not do. They never did in matters of real justice.

A parenthesis

In the light of those statements let me offer this short section. Fr Chenu highlighted the tendency referred to, namely, that of not facing up to new days and new experiences.

It is thus not merely a question of broadening the scope of classical morality, or drawing from eternal verities, marginal applications to suit the situation of the moment. We must revalue this new human terrain of work, which has become, in the machine age, a reality lacking anything in common with its previous character over thousands of years, its function and purposes as much changed as its structure.⁶

My purpose in these pages is wider than the question of unemployment or employment. This is no more than a parenthesis to get at a wider question.

It is very right for the Church to express its concern, and follow this up with action and collaboration, in matters relating to the problem of unemployment. But caution is called for. The statement, 'unemployment is evil' is only valid within the context of the kind of society we have. For, I would suggest, the statement, 'employment is good' is not necessarily acceptable. The social, economic and political game we play, if one may lean on the thought of Wittgenstein, begets the rules and therefore the language of employment and unemployment. Such a game implies that some will have 'power', socially and economically, to hire others. Now this may well be the world we are forced to live in. But the Church must have an eye for

deeper concerns. Above all it must have an eye for the matters which lead to fundamental and radical equality.

In the present situation this implies two levels, simultaneously in existence, of criticism. One which reaches out into the world of the unemployed and condemns the alienation implied in that status in the contemporary patterns of society; the other must present a vision of life which demands an ever evolving process towards equality. Both are based upon the creative right, God given, which belongs to man and woman in the development of this world. To develop creation is not a sociological task. It is a theological task.

Crisis of participation

The final tragedy of our world, with its inherited institutions, is the exclusion of too many from truly participating in the development of the fulness of life.

To be free is no longer a matter of removal of restraints in individual initiative. To be free means being empowered by society to participate. This is the significance of the new preoccupation with participation. . . .⁷

It is the exclusion of low income people (from the broader social and economic participation which is open to others), when this is not voluntary on their part, which we define as being the essence of poverty.⁸

Any of us living, working and attempting to reflect in the inner city today would readily affirm this opinion. I may have difficulty with describing such a lack of participation as the essence of poverty, but as a working description I will accept it. The problem rests for the most part with the inherited institutions as described by Toynbee. They control our imaginations. And they abort, too often, our critique and action. I believe it was Claudel in the early years of this century who made the remark:

It is because it despised a part of God's work, the noble faculties of imagination and sensibility to which certain lunatics would like to have added reason itself, that religion has been through the long crisis from which it has hardly begun to emerge. This crisis which reached its culminating point in the nineteenth century was not in the main a crisis of intelligence. . . . I would prefer to call it the tragedy of a starved imagination.

Perhaps somewhat exaggerated. Nevertheless there seems to be a terrible fear of anything which begins to move outside the acceptable

norms of social, economic and political life set by our institutions. Community development work (and there is a great deal wanting in this area of influence), has given birth to imaginative work in the inner city. But at the end of the day it too often comes face to face in a state of confrontation with acceptable institutions. Or, worse still, institutions play one group off against the other. In essence it is about participation. Community development, liberation movements of women and blacks, Greenham Common, anti-racism, to mention but a few areas, are prophetic voices, which herald the death agony of our tired social, economic and political institutions. More and more people are refusing spiritual and mental colonization.⁹ That such a voice goes unheard is reason for sadness; that such a voice is being articulated is reason for hope. That the Church has become part of the voice in certain areas of the world is reason for joy; that such participation by the Church is not seen as an essential aspect of its mission is reason for regret. Such regret is not for any vague social reason. The regret, and the sadness, strike very deep spiritual chords in the spirit of christian humanity and humanity in general.

Struggle for the spiritual

Before I return to more personal matters let me attempt to develop this question of spirituality as I understand it.

What is spirituality in general and christian spirituality in particular? In what sense has it a history? It will be the history of the problem always newly posed in a dynamic humanity and a changing civilization — the problem of how to apply as integrally as possible to the life of the soul (and so, above all, also how to comprehend as authentically as possible, how to apprehend in as real a way as possible) the gospel of Jesus Christ, 'the same yesterday, today and forever'.¹⁰

So spirituality must realistically emerge from and with the times. By spirituality itself I understand: 'that basic or existential attitude . . . which is the consequence and expression of the way in which (we) understand (our) religious, or more generically (our) ethically committed, existence'.¹¹ I would stress that submission to historical reality. This historical reality today is two sides of the one coin. On one side is the phenomenon of powerlessness; on the other is the reality of institutions which I have understood as preventing or not fulfilling the desire for total participation in the development of life.

Thus my personal pilgrimage to God, and union with the God of all mercies and justice through Jesus, is made or articulated against the backdrop of institutional oppression.

An historical parenthesis

Such a link should not be seen as unusual, untried or original. The poverty movements, sometimes rather loosely gathered together under the title *Pauperes Christi* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were not without a strong flavour of institutional critique. Was Francis, and the movement he launched, so powerful a figure or so brilliant a diplomat as to have got away without the more terrible stigmatization of heresy? Probably a bit of both! He certainly demonstrated, almost to the point of neurosis, a fear of institutionalization when it came to the future of his own brethren. The subsequent battle between the spirituals and conventuals, following Francis's departure from this world (a battle not without relevance for our own time) may well have many sides to it. But the institutional connection was pretty strong. The same institutional connection can be identified in what has sometimes been called the 'apocalyptic spirituality' of later years.¹²

The fourteenth century, a century not unlike our own, is more subtle. It would clearly be ridiculous to suggest that the *Imitation of Christ* is a political document. But it is true to say in its stress upon union with the personal Christ that it only articulated what had been in so many movements of that era a total disillusionment with the institutional. To be sure such disillusionment fastened upon the failure of religious institutions. Yet if one looks close enough the failure of the religious institutions more often than not involved too great a readiness to compromise with the secular structures of the day. 'It has been noted how', writes Bouyer,

... during the last decades of the fourteenth century, there emerged such diverse leaders as Catherine of Siena, Gerard Groot, and the first great english spiritual writers. They appeared at the same time and quite independently, having had no contact with each other. They were linked, however, by one characteristic: the distrust they showed for abstract speculation, and for religious life of the traditional type.¹³

The reference to religious life is obvious enough. Not so obvious to everyone, perhaps, is the reference to abstract speculation. It may be better to substitute the word 'scholasticism'. It was indeed an

institution. It was an institution which bred some of the worst forms of spiritual élitism and theological snobbery. Like too many institutions it can be said to have got into the wrong hands. We are managing to escape its oppression now, struggling, one hopes, at the same time to preserve its glory. In all that has been said above I am not suggesting a spirituality which is not married to a sane theology. Indeed this was one of the faults of the reaction of those times (the same reaction felt in our own times): the separation of spirituality and theology and human experience.

The need for a spirituality

I would stress here that I am not making any kind of false distinction, still less separation, between the moral, the dogmatic and the spiritual. Thus there is a distinctive task to be done in the moral sphere when it comes to facing the institutional confusion and failures of our day in matters social, economic and political. But what I am suggesting is that such commitments must give birth to an existential attitude in terms of faith and in terms of union with Christ. In a word, I believe that if the Church is to be part defined, in the words of Metz, as a 'place and institution for socio-critical freedom' and socio-economic and political action, there is a deep spiritual challenge to be faced.

I do not make such remarks lightly. And I do not make them in an abstract manner. I make them as a priest and religious, who has lived for the past twelve years in the inner city of Liverpool, now popularly known as Toxteth.

For authentic inner city ministry one must cross a prepositional bridge. One must move from ministering 'for' to ministering 'with' the powerless of this world. Such prepositional preoccupation may seem no more than playing the community development game. And, indeed, this is often the case. But if it is real, then it is anything but a gimmicky game. For as soon as one seriously takes up this prepositional change in life one is forced to change the game of life itself. One has to face this not by way of methodology but by way of understanding the worst level of sinfulness which people of the inner city have suffered. 'Witness' highlights the presence or absence of participation in their lives. It comes across in residents' meetings, in community groupings, in educational projects and in co-operatives. The fundamental struggle is to make 'witness' real and authentic. Therefore one is called to be not only as close as possible to their action, but above all things to attempt to share the suffering. In my

own case there will always be a measure of simulation in this regard. But a warning light is forever flashing, especially when quicker methods seem called for. That light says, 'Do not resort to past patterns'. What especially it calls to in my own soul is a renewed understanding of the meaning of purgation to find a deeper union with God. This deeper union is looked for, and sometimes found, in a union with the suffering of a powerless people. It is a union which means enriching compassion with collaboration. And because it is a question of collaboration it has about it all the agony and the ecstasy of creation. It means attempting to seek a 'nothingness' within oneself, that 'nothingness' which is hidden under all the layers of a 'somethingness' that is superficial in its very meaning because it is given by the world of status and position and, indeed, power. One is asked to find the very nakedness of one's existence, held in the hand of God, until one finds a namelessness in terms of this world. But in terms of God it is the namelessness of sheer existence. It brings one face to face with the fact of the God who could only stammer that his name was 'I am, who am'. This name brings suffering in that one is reminded of the total equality of human existence in the sight of God. It is a terrible sin that thousands, indeed millions, who share that common existence have been denied by the structures and the institutions of this world the opportunity to live up to their name.

One night of the riots I came home and read the following notes which I had taken the night before. 'The trials described by John of the Cross — the "Dark Night"'. In this state, 1) the mind can no longer exercise itself in discursive reasoning as it did before. 2) The light of contemplation it receives is so faint and crucifying that the soul believes itself plunged into a night of darkness'. Of course, I am making analogies. I had come in from burning streets and the screams and all the sirens. But is the analogy to be made too much of, or should we be brave enough to say, 'that is the revelation of the Crucified', found in the terrible and terrifying world which ultimately leads us to such situations. . . ? Is there a mystic brokenness here in this city? I remember that night reading that poem of John:

How well I know the spring that brims and flows,
 Although by night
 This eternal spring is hidden deep,
 How well I know the course its water keep,
 Although by night. . . .¹⁴

Is the ghetto, perhaps, to give birth to the same spirit as a cubby-hole in a spanish Carmel produced? Is there a song of belief and contemplation still to be sung in the horror of our man-made madness — inner cities? Sometimes I have advised religious, community workers, teachers, social workers, of all denominations and none, to take a rest when it all seemed too much. But not always now. For they must be led, we all must be led, through a spiritual darkness to participate at a deeper level in the suffering of the powerless. And having suffered and having agreed to continue to suffer, stand side by side with them against the institutions which have oppressed them. God flows on in the depths of the sacredness of human existence. We all need to reach for it. And there will be no new day without that suffering. We find it so difficult to live in the midst of antithesis. We either wish to return to old and well worn theses or rush to temporary new syntheses of reconciliation. It is of no avail. We need to bear the horror and alienation and rejection of the antithesis. The Church cannot 'do differently' without 'being differently'.

I have watched the fatigue and depression of many friends and my own community as they struggled day by day with the task in hand. That task is that of living and working where they are. It is the struggle for that 'witness'. It can only be purchased by suffering supported by faith. But it is also something which participates in the paradox of Christianity. It is the paradox of having to live simultaneously in joy and sorrow, ease and pain. It is 'the simultaneous' which was dramatically offered to humankind by wounds on a glorified body.

The Church, I believe, is being called to understand this task throughout the world. It is a profound spiritual task. Let not those who will not attempt to understand it accuse those who suffer to understand it of a vague humanism, salted with a still more vague political theology! Christians like Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero have been witnesses in our age of a new ground of christian commitment. It is a commitment which is not within the category of specialization. It is the commitment which will have none of a world, ideological and institutional, which oppresses. It is a commitment which leads us to look at all our stupidities, and at perhaps one of the greatest: to live in a world which can transport moon-rock to earth for the curiosity of the scientist and cannot move grain around the world for the feeding of the hungry. The whole Church must make up its mind.

An epilogue

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother. . . . After this Jesus knew that everything had now been completed, and to fulfil scripture perfectly he said: 'I am thirsty'. . . . After Jesus had tasted the vinegar he said, 'It is accomplished' and bowing his head he gave up his Spirit. . . . As soon as they came ashore they saw that there was some bread there. . . . Jesus said, 'bring some of the fish you have just caught. . . . Come and have breakfast'.

In his suffering was to be found his rising. And in his suffering is to be found our suffering, and in our suffering his rising.

NOTES

- ¹ Marcel, G.: *The mystery of being, I. Reflection and mystery* (London, 1950), pp 21-22.
- ² Toynbee, A.: *A study of history* (New York, 1972), p 30.
- ³ Aubert, R.: *The christian centuries, vol v* (London, 1978), p 144.
- ⁴ Waller, P. J.: *Democracy and sectarianism. A political and social history of Liverpool, 1868-1938* (Liverpool University Press, 1981), p 57.
- ⁵ Waller, P. J.: *ibid.*, p 13.
- ⁶ Chenu, M. D.: *The theology of work* (Dublin, 1963), p 6.
- ⁷ Winter, G.: *Being free* (New York, 1970), p 27.
- ⁸ *Proceedings of the special Senate Committee on Poverty, no 21* (Ottawa Information, Canada, 1971), p 44.
- ⁹ Kerans, P.: *Sinful social structure* (New York, 1974). Both quotations under footnotes 7 and 8 are quoted in this little book on pp 87-88. But I think the separate references are worthwhile.
- ¹⁰ Bouyer, L.: *A history of christian spirituality, vol I* (London, 1963), pp vi and xi.
- ¹¹ Urs von Balthasar, Hans: in *Concilium*, vol 9, no 1 (London, 1965), p 5.
- ¹² McGinn, B.: *Apocalyptic spirituality* (London, 1980), pp 8-9.
- ¹³ Bouyer, L.: *op. cit.*, vol II, p 439.
- ¹⁴ Brennan, G.: *St John of the Cross: his life and poetry* (Cambridge University Press), p 165.