


# CAPITALIST CULTURE AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

By JOHN KAVANAUGH

*Consider the address he makes to them, how he goads them on to lay snares for men and bind them with chains. First they are to tempt them to covet riches (as Satan himself is accustomed to do in most cases) that they may the more easily attain the empty honours of the world, and then come to overweening pride . . . (Ignatius of Loyola)*

OUR EXPERIENCE OF Jesus Christ as well as the exercise of our faith in him both occur in space and time. The contexts of family, psychological disposition, formal training and informal relationships are readily acknowledged as spiritually significant arenas from which we enter into the mystery of God's saving action. Our lived contexts are not only those realities which we *bring* to God. They provide the very possibility and manner of our approach. The historical and environmental dimensions of our lives are themselves graced invitations. They may also be formidable barriers to conversion. Finally, if we do experience a conversion to the following of Jesus, it will be these very contexts that are dramatically challenged and transformed by such a 'turning around' of our lives.

Reflection upon the empowering and debilitating contexts of faith is often limited to the interpersonal, familial and psychological realms. This limitation, however, unfortunately restricts our understanding of grace and sin as they work in human history. For our human existence in history is characterized by other powerful and pervasive influences, the force of which is most assuredly felt but seldom named or comprehended.

I am speaking of the social, political and economic influences which, to a great extent, comprise all human undertakings and institutions that go by the name of 'cultural reality'. The economic, political, and social life-forms which in so many ways constitute 'culture' modify our relation to God just as significantly as our psychological development modifies it. Cultural beliefs and symbols also frame and contextualize our response to God. They subtly

nuance our expectations, they condition our openness to conversion, and they most assuredly function as parts of the 'whole world' that is to be claimed by Jesus Christ—so powerfully depicted by Ignatius Loyola's meditation on the Two Standards and so brilliantly emphasized in a contemporary manner by the preaching and teaching of John Paul II.

Our social, political and economic order is the staging ground for the crucially spiritual issues of power and love, of generosity and selfishness, of violence and compassion—all of which are intimately related to our experience of God in Jesus. Social, political and economic practices also provide the dominant cultural expressions of our corporate myths, values, goals and dreams of self-validation. They provide a lived environment of meaning wherein we express and elaborate our conversion experience, our encountering of God in prayer and our responding to God in action. They, too, will be inevitably affected by any deepening or radicalization of our faith. If we ignore the cultural context, we will shortcircuit the action of God in our lives, we will fail to comprehend the depth of our resistance to grace, and we will disastrously evade the full engagement of our human powers in exercising an integrated faith.

In advanced industrial western societies (those which both cultivate and are cultivated by capitalist culture) we must be especially aware that there is a latent 'spirituality' of culture. There is a spirituality of capitalism, of the marketplace, of international and local politics, of a media-saturated collective consciousness.

Our failure to understand the manifold ways that cultural compulsions affect us is, I believe, at the heart of our resistance, as western capitalist Christians, to the call of Christ and his standard. If we were to be terribly honest, we would admit that, compared to the standards of human identity and fulfilment proposed by our economic, political and social worlds, the standard of Christ appears as pure idiocy. Moreover, if we have actually taken upon ourselves an acculturated 'reality principle' or 'spirituality' which is grounded in the received wisdom of capitalism, then the very standard under which we are invited into discipleship will seem incomprehensible, irrational and unreal. Our categories of what is 'acceptable', 'realistic', and 'practical' will be ruled by values which are intractably antagonistic to the standard of Christ. We may feel uncomfortable or ill at ease, not only in the presence of the prayer of 'oblation' in the Kingdom or Two Standard meditations

in the Spiritual Exercises but also in the presence of the beatitudes, the last judgment scene of Matthew 25, and even the crucifixion.

Jesus, quite simply, just does not make sense in the light of the cultural belief system which is expressed in the political and economic life of technologically advanced western societies. Men and women, in encountering the word of Christ, invariably experience an 'estrangement' or alienation from his message. It is an alienation not merely reducible to human resistance in the face of faith's challenge. Far more subtly, it is due to the inescapable fact that much of what Jesus proclaims about himself as way, truth and life is in utter and confounding contradiction to the ways, the truths and the life of capitalist culture.

This is not to deny that the content of our faith as well as the act of faith, if they are to be truly incarnate, must be elaborated within culture. Every culture, if it is human, is in some way graced, and in countless ways redeemable. To be sure, faith must be inculturated. But faith is always beyond and not reducible to culture as human expression. The content and act of faith is ultimately not an act of human production or human culture: it is, as grace in us, the act of God. Thus, the content and act of faith, while being inculturated as human and inserted in space and time, must not become merely *acculturated*, reduced to the culture, or domesticated by cultural tyranny. As such, acculturated faith becomes a mere fetish or, in its most intense forms, a mad idolatry—the worshipping of a part mistaken for the whole and the adoring of the product of human hands. When faith is embodied in space and time, consequently, there will always be a tension between the dynamics of inculturation and what might be called 'acculturation'. That tension becomes conflict when one discovers that one's faith is experienced and exercised only in contradiction to the 'reality principles' of one's culture.

This is the condition of christian faith in advanced industrial western culture. The professed and lived values of the culture—success, power, prestige, nationalist and personal and class pride, riches and self-aggrandizement—clash so extensively and profoundly with the values of Jesus, that the follower of Christ can only experience culture as assault upon religious belief.

#### *Faith in culture shock*

An urbane, sophisticated priest shakes his head at the fact that the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States

have tried to apply their christian commitment to the evil of nuclear war. 'John, these bishops are going off the deep end'. To the question why he thought that the bishops were so misled, the priest answered, 'This "Jesus stuff" can only get you so far'.

A confusion comes upon a young university student who desires to follow Christ when she discovers that one of the more common ways to insult people who are working for peace is to throw a contemptuous allusion about Christ at them: 'You "do-gooders"'. 'You bleeding hearts'. 'You "turn-the-other-cheekers"': 'What are you trying to be—"Good Samaritans" or something?' Thus a woman encounters the phenomenon that the following of Jesus has become a cultural embarrassment.

A successful Catholic says to a young man who hopes to help the poor: 'The greatest tragedy that could happen to you would be to end up somewhere dishing out food in a soup kitchen or winding up in jail for civil disobedience. You have a great future. Don't waste it'. Here, as in other instances, the assault of a cultural 'reality principle' is made upon the faith of a young person who yet clings to the frail belief that the greatest tragedy would be not to follow Jesus—or, at least as others might once have put it, to lose one's soul.

A catholic newspaper columnist writes of the fact that the example of Jesus has led him to the conviction that a human person may never intentionally be killed, no matter whether the person be criminal or enemy or unwanted or unborn. He suggests that even the 'least' human being is not only the image of God, but the very presence of the Word yet made flesh. Hot letters are received in response from 'good Catholics', of both liberal and conservative persuasions. They are strangely similar in logic and argument: each side insisting that the standards of Jesus are unrealistic and inapplicable in our 'given world'.

Right-wing and left—all who so sincerely profess to follow Christ, even kill for him—agree with each other on only one profoundly significant proposition: Christ does not apply. Christ is not realistic. Christ and his standard are impractical in matters of life and death. They are unrealistic in matters of security and trust. They are not relevant in any matter that really counts.

A frightened man who shoots four would-be muggers on a subway train becomes a national hero, a noble vigilante of popular songs and talk shows on the radio. A psychiatrist notes that he is the symbol of what we all want to be.

The Falklands war was proclaimed a 'just war' by many of the christian bishops of Great Britain. In England it was noted that some people were distressed by the Holy Father's continual praying for the victims of both sides. When John Paul II in Argentina stood next to the militarists who have made the Blessed Virgin Mary a 'general of the army', and embraced the argentine bishops who had judged the war to be a just enterprise, he could read the placard signs of: 'Dear Holy Father, bless our just war'.

The Christmas issue of the *Tatler* in an article called 'The seriously rich' notes that 'the old and the new have this in common: they are possessed by possession . . . After money, after possessions, what? Happiness. Money *can* bring happiness'. Americans, by the way, have a hair conditioner called 'Happiness', a perfume named 'Joy'.

The Christmas issue of *Rolling Stone* notes that 'Today's video-influenced filmmakers couldn't care less about personal conflict; they want to dazzle the eye to the exclusion of everything else. In the process, they are creating a generation of gratification-hungry sensation junkies with atrophied attention spans who won't sit still for anything'. This is the video revolution, wherein video recorders are the most desired object for british and japanese consumers: forty per cent of japanese households, twenty-five per cent of british households and sixty per cent of white south african households have now purchased the dream.

A prominent conservative Catholic in America writes: 'I do not give a damn what the american catholic bishops think about nuclear strategy or about the american economy. If [bishops] have some illuminating thoughts about the Trinity, the Incarnation, or the Resurrection, well, I would be glad to hear them . . . We Catholics take the Church too seriously to tolerate junk-thought. There comes a time when you just have to say, as Oliver Cromwell told the Rump Parliament, go away'.

The real question in all of this is, however: just what is it that we want to 'go away'? Is it not, in the last analysis, 'this Jesus stuff'? Is it not that 'bleeding heart' of Christ which embarrasses us and even enrages us? Is it not the standard of Jesus which we find wholly inadequate to our nationalized, commercialized, and acculturated wisdom? Is it not the claim Christ makes upon our allegiance—a claim which must be greater than any attachment, personal security, national priority, dream of success, economic strategem, or approval of our cultural myth-makers?

Upon what terrain of our experience will we allow the standard of Jesus Christ to be planted? How much of our lives are we willing to have touched, challenged, transformed and redeemed by the invitation of the 'sovereign and true commander'? Can we permit Christ to be both our saviour and our leader in each of the arenas of our lives? For Ignatius Loyola, as for the gospels, there is no hesitation or qualification as to the answer: the claim of Christ is totalizing and the response required is wholehearted. A wholehearted spirituality is a spirituality that informs the totality of our lives. It will transform us only to the extent that we allow it to confront and penetrate our experience. At those moments of confrontation and transformation—whether they be in the interior, inter-subjective or corporate worlds—we will find competing standards of life, love and purpose. One of those standards will be expressive of evangelical life. The other, more often that not, will be expressive of capitalist culture, its ideologies, its values and its myths of salvation.

*The counter-cultural experience of an integrated faith*

*The interior world.* It is in solitude, to be sure, where we are frequently found most willing to hear the call of Christ and respond to his standard. But even here, there is no solitary citadel which is protected from the received spiritual wisdom of culture. The counsel of a culture which extols 'looking good' as being everything, and which legitimates dominance, security and riches as the insurers of happiness, will suggest that it is impractical and impossible to accept the frailty of our creatureliness and the admission of sin as the condition for encountering the love of God.

Thus, even in the experience of solitude, the faith and culture conflict emerges. We encounter our shame and sinfulness in the midst of the massive cultural repression of our desperate need for repentance and salvation. We become aware of our resentments at being overlooked, passed over, unappreciated, misjudged, lonely and unapproved in a culture that ordains such experiences as the greatest outrages. If we are young, we may reflect upon our apprehensions concerning the future. If we are old, we may consider the prospect of forced retirement, community exclusion and neglect. In each of these crises, the culture advises defence and flight.

It will be startling and shocking to ask ourselves whether the standard of Jesus, whether his redeeming life and example, apply

here—especially if this is the place where we feel most deeply that it is unrealistic and impractical to trust, especially if here it seems most utopian to embrace the cross, especially if here it seems most foolish and reckless to abandon ourselves into the hands of God.

At least in our interior lives, however, most Christians seem willing to acknowledge that Christ does indeed apply and enter—even if we are aware that there are countless blandishments from the cultural myths that subvert and contradict the wisdom of Jesus.

Nonetheless, there will always be lingering suspicions. How can the 'self-made' man or woman dare to believe the promises of Jesus? How can someone who, in every other arena of his or her life, places hope in controlling power, personal or corporate defensiveness and financial security dare risk the deepest act of faith?

*The inter-subjective world.* In an organic life of faith, it is crucial that the realm of personal relationships be terrain upon which the standard of Christ is planted. Here again, the bondage and confusion of our fears inhibit us. The wisdom of being first and safe, of being best and highest, the hunger for security, all advise us that the way of Jesus just will not work.

Thus, if we reflect upon those whom we cannot forgive—family, superiors, community members, enemies and all who seem somehow more clever or selfish, more abrasive or lazy: do Christ and his standard apply here? Or do we fall into that pattern of cultural 'realism' where it is contended that if we place our trust in Christ, these others will 'walk all over us'? 'They will make a door-mat out of us'. 'They will take advantage of us'. 'These people only understand force and strength'. The ideological jargon of a culture or a nation will inevitably be mirrored in the justifications of failed relationships just as it inhabits the soul in solitude before God.

At a yet deeper level, if we attempt to reflect upon those of our relationships which may be in some ways untrue or unfaithful, exploitative or deceptive, unchaste or unloving, will the standard of Christ have any place there? Or will his way be simply too 'unrealistic'? Prompted by cultural standards of self-maintenance will we cling to the securities of pretended honour and control which have only become our chains? Or will we allow ourselves to be called to a poverty of heart and soul, of radical dependence upon Jesus? Can we even imagine accepting the possibility of rejection or ridicule as a result of our radical faith, or could we

embrace the humility that is tasted in such radicalism? Can we embrace a truth that will finally set us free of fears, repressions and drivenness? It will depend, once again, on our willingness to hear the Word made flesh and attend to it in this context of our lives.

But the clashing sound of a culture which evangelizes in its best sellers, its political ideologies, its soap operas, its videos, its pop-cult heroes is also heard; and it is most often the voice of violence, betrayal and arrogant pride. Faith, in the midst of such clamour, may not even seem feasible.

*The social, political and economic world of culture.* Perhaps our greatest resistance to the standard of Christ is felt when he challenges the dominant corporate patterns of our lives: in social or economic class, as nation or racial group, or as political party. The slogans we live by are not only indications of what we consider the 'real world'; they are also, and more significantly, the axioms of our cultural ideology, the unquestioned principles of our cultural 'formation system'. In many ways, the popular slogans which are often unthinkingly applied to politics and economics are often the very embodiment of the methodology described in Ignatius's presentation of Satan's standard: the coveting of riches, the husbanding of honours and the legitimizing of overweening pride. If modern polls consistently record the fact that advanced western societies are populated by people who hunger for, more than anything else, pleasure, power and riches, will not the standard of Christ seem unreal, nonsensical, and even distasteful?

Imagine a person attempting to enter the presence of God in the context of a lived cultural world which grounds its very intelligibility and purpose in the accumulation of securities and power. 'Winning through intimidation'. 'Looking out for Number One'. 'We can only negotiate through strength'. 'Money talks'. 'Power talks'. These have become the sentences we live by as nations. And it is impossible to split ourselves off from them when we seek words to pray by. Such slogans are the articulation of encrusted cultural belief. They often draw the greatest applause for the political leaders who use them. Elections are won by them. And the life of spirit is extinguished by them.

Even with respect to institutionalized religious orders, the observation could be and has been made that it is precisely our financial security, the solvency of our institutions, the social approval of influential people, the garnishing of tributes from the lords of



culture, the stability of our retirement programmes, and the ease with which we can move among the corridors of power that give us our value, our importance and our security. It would not be entirely unlikely for such to be the case, since religious congregations often inhabit and daily affirm the wealthiest and most secure societies in the history of the earth. As members of these social systems, it is difficult for us to acknowledge and criticize our own dependency on national riches and munitions in the midst of devastating world starvation. It is this aching conflict of our own inculturated faith, dangerously close to being acculturated by nationalism, that we would rather not face. And yet it is this very conflict of culture and christian spirituality which energizes Pope John Paul II and prompts him to challenge the nations. Thus he indicted the wealthiest of cultures when, with voice soaring and arms raised, in Edmonton, Ontario, he said:

Yes, the South—becoming always poorer—and the North—becoming always richer . . . Richer, too, in the resources of weapons with which the superpowers and blocs can mutually threaten each other. In the light of Christ's words [Mt 25]: this poor South will judge the rich North. And the poor people and poor nations—poor in different ways, not only lacking food, but also deprived of freedom and other human rights—will judge those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the imperialist monopoly and political supremacy at the expense of others.

In so many ways, advanced industrial capitalist societies form a culture whose covert spirituality has inverted the universe of virtue in such a way that pride, arrogance, revenge, greed, lust, covetousness and self-righteous hatred have become moral aspirations. It is true, advanced industrial communist societies have their own version of an inverted (and often more dangerously encapsulated) spirituality. But in the wealthy North and West, political systems are arranged so as to legitimize the inversion of virtue. Production systems are built on it. Advertising both fosters and exploits it. And the media enthrone and exalt it.

If, individually and corporately, we underwrite and support the cultural standards of riches, domination and pride, dare we expect any other outcome but this: our interior lives, our lives of prayer, our lives of relationship with God and with other humans, are all infected by the standard of Satan? How could it be possible that

these more interior and interpersonal expressions of our spirituality might yield a transforming conversion of our lives—when so much of our energy, our attention and our human resources are serving, overtly and latently, the gods of Caesar, Mars and Bacchus?

In our experiences of giving and receiving spiritual direction, we will often discover that there are subterranean forces of resistance to the reality of Christ as saviour and leader. These forces are generated by a world view that goes unquestioned because it has mysteriously and protectively been partitioned from the realities of faith. Following Jesus may be deemed suitable for some isolated and fragmentary struggle in the 'interiority' of a person, but it is not permitted to have anything to do with the 'real world'.

Yet, since it is precisely the 'real world' in which we are lodged and in which our efforts are expended, the following of Christ, in actuality, becomes paradoxically closed off from historical and social integration. Capitalism, when it functions as a total spirituality, requires that our faith be either segregated from culture or domesticated by it. This is why it has become fashionable, in some quarters, to say that Christ has no application at all to matters of violence or economics or justice or sexuality—depending upon the particular vested interest of the person uttering the claim. The result is that we parcel out little pieces of our experience, attempting to give them to the Lord, but always incompletely, unsatisfactorily, and unsatisfyingly. The meagreness of consolation at prayer, the dampening of zeal among religious communities, the sheepishness of priests in the presence of youth who ask them to speak of Jesus, the sadness of disillusioned Christians, the lassitude of believers who 'might have been' dynamic communities of faith are all expressions of the fact that we have not allowed the standard of Jesus to claim every level of our lives.

Wholeheartedness is the issue. The standard of Christ must apply to our social, economic, political and cultural lives as faithfully as it does to our interior, intersubjective and affective lives. From no territory should his standards be excluded. And, more precisely to the point of our cultural and nationalist gospels: when we reflect upon the nature of militarism, violence, capital punishment, equitable distribution of wealth, nuclear armaments, national supremacy, we must entertain the criteria of the Two Standards if our faith in Jesus is to be real and effective.

It is something really as simple as this, which, in a more global and ecclesiastical context, leads the pope to speak out so forcefully

against world poverty, militarism, and armaments as pre-eminently *spiritual* issues of *faith*, even though they are played out on the stage of nations and cultures. As he said to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in November 1982:

Unarmed prophets have been the object of derision in every age, especially on the part of shrewd politicians, the supporters of power. But today must not our civilization recognize that humanity has need of them? Should not they alone be heard by the whole of the world's scientific community, so that the laboratories of death may give place to laboratories of life. . .

Such words are the product of faith's convergence with history in the concrete living believer. They result from an understanding that the values of spiritual and material poverty, of personal self-relinquishment, of humility and interior freedom cannot be incarnate, cannot be given flesh in culture, unless they are applied to every dimension of our lives as cultural beings.

The stirring challenge of the Two Standards meditation is not made to disembodied spirits, but to men and women in history. If the challenge is taken up with a wholehearted openness to the truth of Jesus, not only we, but history and culture will be challenged. The standard of Christ is struck on this earth not only for the solitary human heart—if such a being might even be conceived. Nor can it be constricted to being a mere hallmark of our simple communal relations of friends, family, community and Church. It is made for the world. And only if it is engaged in the context of our entire world, with its counter-gospels of culture, nation, politics, class or station, does Christ become lord of history as well as the lord of hearts. At that moment, even though it is most dangerous, spirituality becomes most real.