

NOT PEACE BUT THE SWORD

By JOHN DALRYMPLE

SOME YEARS AGO a television series on the progress of Christianity through the ages made the point that Christianity has only survived by being infinitely adaptable to the spirit of each successive age. Bamber Gascoigne, who presented the series, saw Christianity as a chameleon which took on the colouring of each age in history and thus secured its survival into the next age. Whether this be true of Christianity in general, it is an undoubted fact that christian spirituality is chameleon-like. In the ages of platonic philosophy its predominant message was flight from the world: monks and anchorites were the heroes of the Church. In the Middle Ages the predominant feudalism produced a spirituality of knighthood and fealty to Christ as sovereign lord. In the age of the european monarchies the Deity was absolute king: for St Teresa of Avila God was 'His Majesty'. Then came the enlightenment and christian thinking was slowly transformed into a critical, liberal pursuit for the Truth without myths. The Catholic Church made a belated accommodation to the spirit of the modern age at Vatican II after the backtracking of Pius X, and our spiritual approach is now nothing if not enlightened and liberal. It is all the more ironic that just when Catholics have become accommodated to the european liberal spirit, the predominant world philosophy is changing into something less liberal and more aggressive as the teaching of Marx permeates world thought. The new spirit of the eighties is more dialectical, uncompromising and conflictive than we ever expected in the heady liberal sixties.

There is no need for Christians to be ashamed of the adaptability of the christian message to each intellectual age. It is, surely, part and parcel of the Incarnation. The Word was made flesh at a moment in history. God's truth thus subjected itself to progressive human analysis and understanding. This means that God's truth subjected itself to being questioned by people, and what we may, slightly cynically, call the chameleon-like quality of Christians may also be seen as the proper unfolding of the christian message as

the ages succeed each other. In one sense the Incarnation was God's last Word to mankind with no further revelation to be expected, but in another sense the very finality of that Word which came to us in the gospel means that we will endlessly question and analyze it, and constantly be seeing it in a new light, from all the possible angles provided by developing human philosophy. Hence progress in human secular knowledge will have its impact upon progress in understanding the christian message. New questions will give new insights into the gospel. The gospel, of course, remains the same: God's final revelation to us about himself and us. But our understanding grows enormously as we ask questions that previous generations did not ask. Pope John XXIII called this successive analysis of Christianity 'reading the signs of the times'. Gustavo Gutierrez says,

Every great spirituality is connected with the great historical movement of the age in which it was formulated. This linkage is not to be understood in the sense of mechanical dependence, but the following of Jesus is something that penetrates deeply into the course of human history.¹

This rather lengthy introduction is by way of explaining why it is that in recent times our understanding of Jesus and his gospel has moved from: 'gentle Jesus meek and mild', the man of peace, to a considerably more conflictive model, the opponent of the Pharisees, the one who came to bring not peace but the sword, the espouser of the cause of the poor, the man of divisions. Is this simply because 'conflict' is now fashionable, or is it, as I believe, because our age is sensitive to the positive value of conflict and struggle, and so is able to discern that element in Christ's life where former generations were blind to it because they did not look for it? It has been said that Christ came to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. He can be seen to be doing both in the gospels. Hitherto we have concentrated in spirituality on the former type of activity: comfort for the disturbed. Charismatic spirituality is a notable example of that. 'Do not be afraid', 'You are precious in my eyes', 'I have loved you with an everlasting love'—these are the sentiments which predominate at meetings of charismatics. There is much oil poured to soothe and heal the wounds of broken humanity. What is notably absent in charismatic spirituality is vinegar to disturb, that element of jolt

and challenge which Christ also put into his preaching. Without that element, in equal measure, the words of comfort run the risk of being superficial, mere oiling of the surface without regard to the immense need for change which both individuals and society have to undergo before they can be truly christian. To shout 'peace, peace' too soon is inimical to the gospel of Jesus Christ and, in fact, a false path leading away from real peace. We would indeed be false prophets if we gave our contemporaries Jesus's comforting words of peace without his disturbing words about truth and justice. If in this article I concentrate upon the latter message of conflict, it is because I know that that is the only way for the true goal of peace to be achieved and for the words of peace to make sense.

Growth through struggle

Here below no growth takes place without struggle and death. The caterpillar has to struggle, be defeated, before it becomes a butterfly. The adolescent has to struggle out of his or her childhood, let the child die, before adulthood is born. In the same way, spiritually, virtue is not easily won by any person, but only comes as the fruits of victory over vice. Although theologically it is a gift from God, phenomenologically it is an achievement against odds. Chastity comes after, not without, the struggle against impurity. Fortitude is for the fearful person who overcomes fear, not for the (non-existent) 'fearless' person. In other words struggle is the law of growth in human affairs. The Church has always understood that and been quick to eradicate the, sometimes seductive, appeal of quietism for religious-minded people. Quietism has been condemned not because surrender to God is wrong, but because surrender to God is not the same as surrender to passivity, or the line of least resistance when confronted with evil in this world. Faced with evil, Christians must not give in, as if that were abandonment to God's will. They must actively fight against evil, take up arms against it, in themselves, and in society. The surrender element comes not in putting up with evil but in putting up with the difficulties, unpopuliarities, slanders, pains, even deaths, which are incurred when we enter the struggle against evil. Our surrender to God's will makes us passive to his Spirit but fiercely active and combative in carrying out the promptings of that same Holy Spirit. As de Caussade said, 'When the Divine Order causes us to act, holiness is in activity'.²

Conflict with evil, then, is central to christian spirituality. Does this mean conflict with persons? Do we have to take up a hostile attitude to fellow human beings, fight against them, in following Christ? Are Christians sometimes commanded to be unpleasant to people or should we maintain an attitude of sweetness and light at all times to all people? The short answer to this is to notice that Jesus was hostile and thoroughly unpleasant both to his friends at times ('Get behind me, Satan') and to his enemies, the Pharisees, a lot of the time. We should note, too, that he had enemies. In other words Jesus saw that being faithful to his Father's will to usher in the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love, justice and peace, meant a constant struggle not only against the 'forces of evil' abroad in the world, but also against the persons who, in his judgment, were fighting on the wrong side, for evil and against good. So he unashamedly and vigorously attacked people with his tongue, marshalled his followers against them and what they stood for, even used a whip to drive erring folk out of the Temple. He saw no contradiction in telling his followers to love their enemies but at the same time fight against them. In Jesus's teaching love was absolutely central, but love was not a business of surface smiles and patience, but rather of deep-down love which on the surface could take the form of impatient hostility. In this Christians have too often failed, and have reversed the order of priorities, being all smiles on the surface and all malice below it, thinking themselves truly christian in doing so. I have encountered religious communities where the surface of the communal life was beautifully polite but deep down was seething with mutual enmity, and when I temerarily pointed this fact out I received the same treatment: surface politeness continued but the knives were out below it.

The answer to the conundrum of loving our enemies lies, I suggest, in recognizing that the forces of evil are most of the time embedded in the structures of society, rather like woodworm in the furniture; and when we denounce evil in people we are not denouncing them as fellow human beings as such, but as victims of evil. We denounce them both to eradicate the evil which they are supporting, and to save them, our temporary enemies whom we love, from that evil. The only way we can get at the evil is often by denouncing the people who propagate it, but the real enemy is not the person who has embraced the evil, but the evil, unjust way in which human society is structured. The real enemy is structural evil, the 'sin of society' denounced by Pope John Paul

II at Puebla. That is how Jesus acted. He did not fight against the Pharisees and Scribes themselves so much as against the appallingly unjust and unspiritual way in which Jewish religion was officially interpreted, the godless paths into which it had run. In the same way when Christians in the world denounce Ronald Reagan for his murderous policies in Central America or Piet Botha for his oppression of black South Africans, we are not denouncing, still less hating, those two persons. What we are denouncing is the awful system of oppression which exists, for we know that should Reagan or Botha die tomorrow the oppression will go on with new 'presidents' in charge. Like Jesus, however, our denunciation has to be against identifiable leaders in order for it to be embodied and real. But like Jesus, too, it ought to be conducted from start to finish in love.

Conflict in the Church

There are at least four reasons why conflict in the Church is a good thing. Firstly because conflict is often the only way in which injustice can be tackled. People gently point out the existence of an unjust state of affairs, but it is usually only when they become hostile and actively campaign for justice that they are taken seriously. The advocates of women's rights in the Church understand this, as did the bishops at the Vatican Council on that second day when they revolted against the curial 'arrangements' with which they were confronted. In other words, the gospel which we all try to serve is not about peace at any price but about peace as the fruit of justice and love, the Hebrew *shalom*.

Secondly, the gospel of Jesus Christ demands taking sides for truth and love, against evil. Diplomacy plays its part when the matter of conflict is neutral and mutual adjustment about morally indifferent claims is required. But there should be no diplomacy when one side is right and the other side is wrong. Does this ever happen? I think it does. Sadly there is an instinct in us all which tries to play the diplomat between sides which are not morally equal. Twenty years ago I was sometimes involved in the pastoral oversight of young priests just out of the seminary. The chief area of agony, and therefore of conflict, for those young men was that they had been taught the insights and ethos of Vatican II in the seminary and then found themselves with parish priests who had set their face against Vatican II and, incidentally, had usually not read a single thing about it. The bishop was brought in to mediate,

which was his job. Too often the bishops would play the diplomat and urge accommodation on both sides. 'Learn to live together in love' was the reiterated message, as if both sides of the conflict were equally weighted. But the conflict in question was not about a neutral matter, but about being for or against the Vatican Council, and the bishops' plain duty was to take sides for the young priests against the theologically illiterate older priests. A few did, but many did not. They voted in Rome for the council measures but back in their dioceses balked at the conflict which implementing those measures involved. They came from a generation which saw no good in conflict and in all sincerity sought to play it down. Their words were nearly always enthusiastically in favour of the council measures but their deeds fell short because of fear of conflict. This disillusioned not a few young priests in their dioceses.

A third reason why conflict is good for the Church is because the Church has to be *semper reformanda* and, human nature being what it is, reform is seldom undertaken by those in power without first of all open discussion, and then some battling. It is not often easy for those in authority to see reformers as loyal, but in fact they are nearly always deeply loyal people who care enough about the institution they belong to to want it to be better. In my days as university chaplain I used to have to force myself to be warm to those reforming students who frequented the chaplaincy with radical plans to reform me, the chaplaincy and the Church. I had to stop myself classing them as disloyal. They were in fact very loyal and cared greatly about our Mother the Church. But sometimes I dreaded their appearance and found myself preferring their less loyal, more docile companions who did not care enough about the Church to want to reform it, and so did not upset me. A visiting prelate who had been given a rough ride by my flock commented, 'I wouldn't have your job for anything. I'd shoot the lot'. The irony was that it was he who had given me the job!

A fourth reason for risking conflict in the Church rather than postponing confrontation is that a stitch in time saves nine. In the history of the Church how often disasters could have been avoided if the need for short-term conflict had been recognized and faced, so that reform could be implemented in time! The history of the sixteenth century Reformation is largely a history of 'too little, too late', the besetting sin of traditional institutions. I believe that it is fear of conflict itself rather than fear of its outcome which makes

us shy away from needed reform. Often we want the reform but cannot face the struggles involved in getting to it. An unworthy attitude for a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Conflict in society

If there is need for the recognition of healthy conflict in the Church in order to help it to be a fit instrument of God, it is even more important to recognize the need for conflict which we Christians may have to engage in as we do Christ's work in the world. Our task is not to be good Catholics in the Church but, following Cardinal Suenens's lead at Vatican II, to be good Christians in the world. In that work we have to accept that struggle with evil is paramount and completely unavoidable. In a short article like this it is not possible to delineate adequately the place that evil holds in our world, and the inescapable element of clash with evil which discipleship of Christ brings with it. The latin american theologians, from within the battlefield, have alerted us all to the centrality of this conflict. For them, and for us, the first step in *announcing* the Good News of the gospel is *denouncing* the evil that is in society. This makes enemies; and you are in conflict straight away. The path to peace and justice is through unpopularity and persecution.

Not only do individual Christians have to embrace struggle with the powers of evil, but so does the Church as a whole. A notable development in the last twenty years in our country has been the way our church leaders have passed from fighting for the rights of the Church in Great Britain (catholic schools, exemption of clergy from military service) to fighting for human rights for all. Cardinal Hume lobbies the government over the arms trade and south african apartheid; Archbishop Worlock joins his anglican colleague in a relentless fight with the government over unemployment on Merseyside. They see this sort of work as part of their task as bishops of the Church. A revolution is in fact quietly taking place in the catholic mentality *vis-à-vis* the 'Establishment'. As an immigrant Church we were distressingly anxious to get on well with the powers that be, were not above kow-towing at local and national level to the rich and influential, showed disproportional pleasure if Catholics were seen in high places (the Knights of Malta syndrome). Now that we are more self-confident we can begin to rejoice that as a Church we are independent of the state and of the establishment ethos. This makes it more possible for us

to follow Christ in the difficult task of the 'preferential option for the poor', which is clearly seen in the gospel, but which since Constantine has been obscured in the Church's mission.

An essential element in the struggle against evil is awareness. In our fragmented society, where modern transport enables the well-off to live in pleasant countryside, while the poor and unemployed live in appalling housing estates rife with the drug trade and violent muggings and stealings, it is not easy for the members of society to be aware of each other. Out of sight can mean out of mind. We do not see the people whom by our very way of life we are exploiting. In Jesus's parable of the rich man and Lazarus, at least the two protagonists met each other every day. That was the rich man's sin. He passed Lazarus every day but did nothing to help him. Modern society has altered the scenario. The rich man lives miles away from Lazarus; they never meet. Does this make the former's sin greater or less? Perhaps the rich man's personal sin is less, because his day passes without a conscious decision to ignore the poverty of Lazarus. But the 'sin of society' is greater, precisely because it has insulated the rich from the poor, so that they need never meet nor think about each other. When you consider that this parable has a worldwide application, you can see even more the need for awareness. It is not just that business men who commute from Wiltshire to their London offices never meet the unemployed living in rotting housing estates in Teesside. It is that we in affluent western Europe never meet our starving fellow members of the human race in the Third World. But we depend on them. The brightly packaged cheap commodities, sugar, tea, coffee, chocolate, on the shelves of our supermarkets are one end of a chain which leads through multinational trading companies to the other end of the chain which is exploited, underfed, illiterate 'labour' in third world countries miles away. We can, for instance, eat bananas galore for next to nothing in Europe because in places like Honduras the banana plantations are owned by a few north american companies who have taken the land and developed it for their own purposes, while Hondurans starve.

After awareness comes action, action to alter the structures of our world, because it is not individual sins which cause the glaring injustices of our world which cry out to heaven for vengeance. If it were it would be easy to tackle. What is needed is collective action on an international scale to combat the situation, alter the structures and make a better world. It is a hugely daunting task,

so huge that many understandably draw back from it. That problem is a subject for another article. Suffice to say that, whether we draw back from the task or embrace it with prayer, there is no question but that it will involve the element of conflict centrally.

Mystical union

The last point that needs to be made is to note that the call to combat and struggle by Christians in the world today is not a concession to imperfect people in an evil age, as if a more mature Christianity would feel no need for conflict. It is, on the contrary, the very stuff of the gospel and the direct result of union with God by baptism. When we are baptized we are given the gift of the Spirit, united deeply with the risen Christ. Thereafter the spiritual life is an unfolding and development of this deep union with God, and it is meant to result in mystical union. It is a great mistake to think that mystical union with God means being elevated above the human struggle into some sort of detached seventh heaven where we are no longer interested in this world. It may well be that in non-christian mysticism. But christian mysticism is union with the God of the Old and New Testaments, a God who is not aloof from this world but present in it and intensely interested in what goes on, committedly for good and against evil. Christian prayer unites us with that God; gives us, in St Paul's telling phrase, the *mind of Christ*. This means that the christian mystic will see the world as God sees it, nay, feel about the world as God feels about it. How does God feel about the world? Intensely compassionate and sad about those who are oppressed, intensely angry about the oppressors, intensely thirsty for sinners to repent, intensely in love with all his creatures and desirous of their turning away from sin and back to him in free love.³ Prayer gives us those same thoughts and feelings in our limited human way, and therefore impels us into combat when we have to fight, and reconciliation when we have to be reconciled. Especially it gives us a maturity of judgment which will ensure that we do not fight simply for the sake of fighting, out of unregenerate aggressiveness, but will enter the conflict against evil with love in our hearts and always reluctantly.

NOTES

¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We drink from our own wells* (SCM Press, 1984) p 26.

² De Caussade, Jean: *Self-abandonment to divine providence* (Burns Oates, 1933) p 20.

³ 'The Spirit of God enabled the prophets to feel with God. They were able to share God's attitudes, God's values, God's feelings, God's emotions. This enabled them to see the events of their time as God saw them and to feel the same way about these events as God felt. They shared God's anger, God's compassion, God's sorrow, God's disappointment, God's revulsion, God's sensitivity for people, God's seriousness. Nor did they share these things in the abstract, they shared God's feelings about the concrete events of their time. You could say that they had a kind of *empathy* with God which enabled them to see the world through God's eyes. The Bible does not separate emotions and thoughts. God's word expresses how he feels and thinks. The prophets thought God's thoughts because they shared God's feelings and values. This is what it meant to be filled with the Spirit of God and this is what enables one to read the signs of the times with honesty and truth. This too is what mystical union with God means.' *Biblical Spirituality*—by Albert Nolan O.P., p 23.

John Dalrymple completed this article shortly before his sudden death in the United States in September 1985. Without doubt he was one of the most able and stimulating writers on spirituality in the United Kingdom. We would like to record our gratitude for his contributions to The Way/Way Supplements over the years.

The Editors