

# THE UNPREJUDICED JESUS AND THE PREJUDICED CHURCH

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GORDON ALLPORT begins his massive study on prejudice with a preliminary definition of the word, which can serve as a convenient starting-point for our own reflections on the subject. He defines prejudice as 'a feeling, favourable or unfavourable, towards a person or thing, prior to or not based on actual experience'.<sup>1</sup> The heart of all prejudice is thus a prejudgment. This is usually the result of an unwarranted generalization from some particular set of experiences. Because we meet some Indians who are servile or some Englishmen who are snobs, we conclude that all Indians are servile and that all Englishmen are snobs—stereotypes common in India in the days of the Raj. We are, all of us, prone to such generalizations because of our need to categorize reality. We cannot possibly handle the immense mass of complex and confused information that is being beamed at us from our environment each moment, unless we learn to perceive things not in their bewildering individuality (no two sea-shells, no two trees, no two people are exactly alike), but as parts of large interrelated groups or categories. We *label* persons and things—and come to see not the things themselves but the standardized labels we have given them.

Categories work well until they harden into stereotypes. This happens when our labels become so clear-cut that no allowance is made for variations in their identifying features; so rigid that they are impervious to change even when contradicted by new inputs of information; and so simplistic that they divide up reality into polar opposites (good/bad, right/wrong, wise/foolish) with no intermediate types between them.

Stereotypes, which are over-simplified cognitive categories, generate prejudices, that is, affective attitudes, when they are associated with value judgments. This almost always happens because

we rarely categorize without judging. Our categories are value-loaded in terms of our own personal or group systems of values and beliefs. 'As partisans of our way of life', writes Allport, 'we cannot help thinking in a partisan manner . . . so that the very act of affirming our way of life often leads us to the brink of prejudice'<sup>2</sup>—indeed usually carries us over the brink! Our value systems thus become significant sources of our prejudices. That is why religion, which is a primary source of our values, is a primary source of our prejudices too.

Religious prejudices are usually negative group prejudices. That is, they are 'aversive or hostile attitudes' assumed by a person because he or she is the member of a particular group (their in-group), towards members of other rival groups (out-groups).<sup>3</sup> Such group prejudices too probably originate ultimately from the kind of unwarranted generalization of particular experiences that has been described above, but they are disseminated, that is, communicated to the members of the group, through its tradition. The tradition of a group, that is, the set of shared perceptions (group stereotypes), beliefs and values which the group has made its own and which serve to distinguish it from other similar groups, thus becomes a fruitful source of its prejudices.

### *The Christian dilemma*

Here precisely lies the dilemma of the Christian tradition. As a summons to experience 'the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ' as *abba* (Mt 11, 25-27), and therefore to experience humankind as brothers and sisters (Mt 23, 8-10), Christianity can be understood as a sustained protest against prejudice of any kind. Paul in his letter to the Galatians quotes from an ancient baptismal liturgy to remind his readers that through baptism they have been initiated into the end-time community in which all ethnic, class and sexist discrimination has been overcome (Gal 3, 28). Because they have 'put on Christ', that is, because they have undergone the radically transforming experience of having encountered Jesus, Christians are able to experience each other (and ultimately all humankind) as members of the same free, fraternal and non-exploitative community in which 'there is neither Jew nor gentile, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female'. People are no longer perceived nor experienced as 'outcasts' or 'outsiders', as 'superior' or 'inferior'—because all are experienced as 'one (equal and united) in Christ'. Christ, Paul might have said, is the end of

prejudice—just as he has said that Christ is the end of law (Rom 10, 4).

But to the extent that the followers of Jesus become aware of themselves as a distinct religious group, they inevitably develop prejudices against rival groups—against the ‘perfidious’ Jews (Mt 27, 24–25) and the ‘depraved’ gentiles (Rom 1, 18–32). A strong antipharisaic bias runs through the whole of Matthew’s Gospel. It comes out very clearly in the ‘woes’ against the Pharisees (23, 3–36), which, in their sweeping and historically unjustified condemnation of a competing group, show all the marks (denigration, over-categorization and inflexibility)<sup>4</sup> of a typically prejudiced judgment. Almost as prejudiced is Paul’s indiscriminate condemnation of Hellenistic religion as a form of culpable idolatry, which leads to every kind of moral depravity (Rom 1, 18–32). This is not how the Hellenistic cults would have appeared to a disinterested contemporary of Paul, less concerned than he was in drawing up a charge sheet against the pre-Christian world. Nor indeed do they appear like this to the Paul of Acts, who welcomes the insights of Hellenistic religion and is even prepared to justify the worship of ‘an unknown god’ (Acts 17, 22–23).

We find in the New Testament, then, the curious paradox of Christ proclaimed as the end of prejudice by an increasingly prejudiced Church. I propose to explore the implications of this paradox by reflecting on each of its two terms—on the ‘unprejudiced Jesus’, who is the basis of our proclamation of Christ as the end of prejudice; and on the ‘prejudiced Church’ which proclaims him.

### *The unprejudiced Jesus*

Jesus appears in the gospels as a person remarkably free from the individual and group prejudices of his people and his times. Unlike the Pharisees, the Jews of strict observance, Jesus shows no aversion towards ‘sinners’, that is, towards notorious violators of the moral or ritual code; nor does he look down upon the ‘*ammê hā-’āres*’ (‘the people of the land’), that is, the rural masses unschooled in the Law and so unable to observe its elaborate prescriptions fully. He shows special concern for the illiterate ‘little ones’ (Mk 9, 42), and is prepared to offend the respectable by ‘receiving tax collectors and sinners and eating with them’ (Lk 15, 1–2). Where even a liberal rabbi like Hillel could say, ‘no ignorant person (‘*am hā-’āres*) is ever religious (*hāsīd*)’,<sup>5</sup> Jesus tells the

religious and the secular aristocracy of his people ('the chief priests and the elders') that 'the tax collectors and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you' (Mt 21, 31).

This clear option of Jesus for the poor and the outcast does not prejudice him against the elite, even though it brings him into open conflict with them. He engages in sharp controversy with the scribes and the Pharisees on a wide range of theological issues (Mk 2, 1-3. 6; 12, 13-40), but rarely if ever indulges in personal attacks on them. When he is shown doing this—conspicuously in Matthew (6, 1-18; 23, 3-36), rarely elsewhere (Mk 12, 38-40)—these obviously prejudiced charges are usually not the words of Jesus himself. They are polemic formulations of early Jewish Christianity, struggling for self-definition against a hostile 'normative' Judaism reconstituting itself after the great débâcle of the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-74 C.E.). For the gospels give us revealing glimpses of Jesus in such friendly association with the scribes and the Pharisees that it is impossible to think of him as 'prejudiced', that is, as nursing an intransigent, generalized aversion towards them. He dines with a Pharisee, always in the East a sign of acceptance and friendship (Lk 7, 36). He engages in a friendly and approving discussion with a scribe (Mk 12, 28-34). He is warned by concerned Pharisees of Herod's threat to his life (Lk 13,31). The relations of Jesus towards the scribes and the Pharisees were obviously a great deal friendlier than an increasingly anti-Jewish gospel tradition makes them out to be.

The close disciples of Jesus, the circle of the Twelve, chosen by him to symbolize the 'new Israel', the end-time community that he intends to inaugurate, are drawn from an astonishingly wide range of ideological backgrounds. One of them is called 'the Zealot' (Lk 6, 15), and had obviously belonged (perhaps still belonged) to an extremist group engaged in preparing an armed revolt against Rome. Another may have been a customs toll-collector (Mt 9,9), who, by profession at least, would have been a faithful collaborator with Roman rule. Many, like Jesus himself, had been followers of John the Baptist (Jn 1, 29-51), a revivalist preacher who may have been connected with the dissident monastic group living in a commune on the desolate slopes of the Wadi Qumran, overlooking the Dead Sea.

Most of these disciples would have come from the poor artisan class to which Jesus himself belonged. With him they exercised their ministry among the poor of rural Palestine in the countryside

(the *chōra*), away from the prosperous Hellenized cities which Jesus rarely if ever visited.<sup>6</sup> Jesus and his disciples were thus a destitute group of itinerant preachers proclaiming the good news to the very poor. Yet, for all his severe warnings against the mortal danger of riches (Mk 10, 23-27), which make a person godless (Lk 13, 17-21) and heartless (Lk 16, 17-31); and despite his implacable opposition to consumerism and greed, personified by him as *mammon*, the great opponent of *abba* (Mt 6, 24), Jesus has time for rich sympathizers. Zaccheus, the chief customs tax-collector of the important township of Jericho receives him as a guest (Lk 19, 1-9); Joseph of Arimathea (Mk 15, 43) and Nicodemus (Jn 3, 1), wealthy members of the Jewish aristocracy, both of whom belonged to the Council, the supreme governing body of the Jews, are his friends.

Jesus shows an extraordinary appreciation for the Samaritans (Lk 9, 51-56; 10, 29-37; 17, 11-19; Jn 4, 4-42)—a people written off in the deuterocanonical Old Testament as a 'foolish people' which is 'no nation' (Sir 50, 25-26), and treated as untouchable by the Jews of his time (Jn 4, 9). Although he restricts his preaching to the Jews he shows (unlike the Zealots or the sectarians of Qumran) no particular hostility towards gentiles. Indeed his appreciative references to them (Mt 8, 10; Lk 13, 29) suggest that his seemingly harsh refusal of the Syro-Phoenician woman's request for the healing of her daughter (Mk 7, 27) is to be read not as a racist insult, but as a provocative challenge to the woman's faith. Jesus's enthusiastic reaction to her quick-witted reply could not possibly have come from a prejudiced person.

Women too, who in the Judaism of his time were lumped together with children and slaves as people 'inferior to men in mind, in function and in status',<sup>7</sup> are accepted by him as disciples (Lk 8, 1-2; 10, 46-50); and, as the sole continuing witnesses of his death, burial and resurrection (Mk 15, 40, 47; 16, 1-8), play a significant role in furthering his mission. Nowhere in the words of Jesus do we ever find the slightest hint of any condescension towards them.

So Jesus comes across to us in the gospels as unusually free from the ethnic, class and sexist prejudices harboured by the people of his time. For him there was indeed 'neither Jew nor gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female'—for all were experienced by him as children of the one Father in heaven. The radical openness of Jesus towards all humankind is rooted in his

radical experience of God as *abba*, because to experience God as 'father' implies that we experience all human beings as brothers and sisters who have a claim on our acceptance and our love. The *dharma* of Jesus—his understanding of existence and his way of life—is a *dharma* of unconditional and therefore of absolutely universal love. Such love will not tolerate prejudice.

### *The prejudiced Church*

But prejudice flourished in the early Christian community, just as it flourishes in the Church today. The New Testament gives ample evidence of this. Sexist and class biases appear in the household codes of the deutero-Pauline letters (Col 3, 18-4, 1; Eph 5, 21-6, 9) and of the First Letter of Peter (1 Pet 2, 13-3, 12), which urge the submission of wives to their husbands, of children to their parents and of slaves to their masters. They thus take up the class- and male-biased household regulations of contemporary upper class Hellenistic society, and legitimize them by making them expressions of God's will, exemplified in the conduct of Jesus (Col 3, 18. 22-24; Eph 5, 22-24; 6, 5-6).<sup>8</sup> Narrow Jewish particularism not uninfected by a strong anti-gentile prejudice colours the sayings attributed to Jesus by early Palestinian Christianity, in which he limits the scope of his mission to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 10, 5; 15, 24), and refuses to give 'children's bread' to 'household dogs' (Mk 7, 27). And anti-Jewish tendencies show up frequently, we have seen, in the gospels of Matthew and of John.

Such prejudices are easily understood. They are symptoms of the early Church's capitulation to the 'cultural nationalisms' of its time,<sup>9</sup> because of its inability to live up to the radical freedom of Jesus. The freedom of Jesus is grounded on the experience of a total love which casts out all prejudice. But the Church which is always of 'little faith' (Mt 8, 26; 14, 31; 16, 8) is also of little love. Poised between the 'already' of the Resurrection of Jesus and the 'not yet' of his Parousia, it is a community that is 'living and partly living' the life of the Spirit, or (to change the image and the allusion), it is a pilgrim people that 'must go always a little further'.

But the real paradox of the unprejudiced Jesus and the prejudiced Church does not lie here. It is not these 'prejudices of weakness'—prejudices that the Church picks up from the world it inhabits because of its failure to live up to the love and freedom of Jesus—

that are the problem. The problem lies in its 'prejudices of strength'—that is in those prejudices that appear in the Church precisely because it has succeeded in becoming a Church. For to the extent that the Church becomes 'Church', that is, to the extent that it becomes aware of itself as distinct religious group with its own specific identity and mission, and not merely as a reform movement within Judaism, it inevitably develops a competitive and hostile attitude towards other rival groups which contest its claims. It grows prejudiced against them.

We see this happening in the New Testament itself. The radical universality of the inter-human concern proclaimed by Jesus (Lk 10, 25-37) is toned down by Paul into a preferential love for Christians. 'Do good to one another and to all', he writes to the Christians of Thessalonica (1 Thess 5, 15), distinguishing 'one another' from 'all'; and four years later, he tells the Churches of Galatia even more clearly, to 'do good to all human beings, but specially to those who are of the household of the faith' (Gal 6, 10). The distinction between 'one another' and 'all' becomes alarmingly explicit in the First Letter of Peter which urges its readers to 'honour all men' but to 'love the brotherhood' (1 Pet 2, 17). And it is carried to its ultimate conclusion in the literature of the Johannine circle, whose specific formulation of the love commandment, 'love one another as I have loved you' (Jn 13, 34; 15, 12; 1 Jn 3, 23; 2 Jn 5), restricts the exercise of love to the Christian community ('one another') alone.

So we find in the New Testament a clearly defined tendency towards an in-group exclusivism. This may have been (partly) the result of the persecution suffered by the early Christian community (Mt 10, 16-22), of the abundant charismatic phenomena it undoubtedly experienced (Acts 2, 1-13; 1 Cor 12, 1-31), and of the clear-cut dichotomies of the apocalyptic world-view to which it largely subscribed. For persecution tends to turn a group in upon itself; charismatic togetherness fosters in-group solidarity at the expense of those outside, and apocalyptic sees the world sharply divided into embattled camps of the good and the evil.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly 'what had been after the fourth century the extreme racial exclusivism of the Old Israel became', Alan Watts suggests, 'the extreme spiritual exclusivism of the New Israel—the inferiority complex of a repressed nation becoming that of a repressed religion'.<sup>11</sup> Such exclusivism would in moments of stress generate attitudes of insecurity and hostility towards other competing

groups. This would explain the violent 'anti-Judaism' of Matthew and John, which then becomes the biblical justification for the vicious anti-Semitism which plagues the Christian Churches of the West throughout their history, until it bears its last dreadful fruit in the stupefying horror of the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup>

Anti-Semitism is the most dramatic and publicized expression of Christian prejudice. But it is by no means its only one. The history of western colonialism is scarred with the tragic fall-out of many other of its catastrophic manifestations. Many factors, economic, social, cultural and ethnic obviously contributed to the colonial explosion of sixteenth-century Europe and influenced the way in which it developed. But there can be no doubt at all that Christianity played a major part in legitimizing western colonialism and in shaping it. Papal bulls unleashed the dogs of colonial war (whether we identify the beginnings of the colonial movement with the Crusades in the twelfth century or the so-called Age of Discovery in the sixteenth century) and 'established the guide-lines for subsequent European behaviour (or misbehaviour) in the tropical world';<sup>13</sup> and well-meant but highly damaging missionary propaganda played a significant part in creating the 'benighted heathen' image of coloured peoples, which was then exploited to justify 'a wide range of prejudiced attitudes and policies' towards them.<sup>14</sup> For if the heathens were children of Satan, condemned to eternal fire, what claim had they to human rights? João de Barros, the sixteenth-century chronicler of the Portuguese conquest, is at pains to explain this. 'The Moors and Gentiles', he tells us, 'are outside the law of Jesus Christ—which is the law that everyone must keep under pain of damnation and eternal fire. If then the soul be so condemned what right has the body to the privileges of our laws?'<sup>15</sup> This may not have been the official policy of Church or State, but it was certainly a part of common colonial prejudice.

The results of such prejudice were deadly. The immediate outcome of the first encounter between the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas and Europeans was 'an extermination of human beings in proportions that had never been seen before and had never been attained afterwards in spite of the efforts made in this regard in the twentieth century'.<sup>16</sup> And like the spectacularly savage Portuguese onslaught on the 'dazzling rich empires of the East', it stirred few Christian consciences. For to their Portuguese and



Spanish (and later Dutch, French, English and German) conquerors, 'these orientals [or Amerindians, or Polynesians, or Africans] were heathens, blacks, Moors, Turks, containing, as one of them wrote, "the badness of all bad men"''.<sup>17</sup>

Prejudice and violence, as recent events in India have shown all too well, are not the prerogatives of any one people or religion. But it is, I think, certain that Christianity has been the most violent of all the great religions of humankind; and it is at least arguable that a Christian-inspired western colonialism has been unparalleled in recorded human history for the sheer massiveness of the damage it has inflicted on the lives, the property and the psyche of its victims. In *The Sirian experiments*, the third in a series of novels (*Canopus in Argos; Archives*) which attempts to construct a sort of cosmic history of the earth from an extraplanetary point of view, Doris Lessing has said this chillingly. Ambien II of Sirius is shown the future of Shikasta (the earth) by Klorathy of Canopus. A map of Shikasta appears on a blank wall, and running his finger along the edge of the great northern land mass (Eurasia today), Klorathy says:

Here, in the Northwest fringes, in these islands in this little space, a race is being formed even now. It will overrun the whole world, but all the world, not just the central part of it, as with the horsemen of the plains. This race will destroy everything. The creed of this white race will be: if it is there, it belongs to us. If I want it, I must have it. If what I see is different from myself then it must be punished or wiped out. Anything that is not me, is primitive and bad . . . and this is the creed that they will teach to the whole of Shikasta.<sup>18</sup>

'Everything that is not me is primitive and bad': could there be a neater description of the Christian-colonial prejudice that inspired both *conquistador* and missionary alike? Was not just this the attitude of Teilhard de Chardin, aspiring after 'a white earth', and loving the 'primitive' and 'childish' Chinese 'out of Christian obligation and by an effort, [what a desperate effort!] of will'?<sup>19</sup> Do we not find here the hidden roots of the beery, bellicose and unashamedly racist version of Christianity, loudly trumpeted by Chesterton and Belloc, text-book examples of the Catholic prejudice of their times? Does this not explain the glorification of western colonialism as 'the corruption of a great idea' by François Mauriac and the

French *integrists*, sighing after the civilizing mission of Europe amid torture in Algeria and terror bombing in Vietnam?<sup>20</sup>

The roots of the great tree of Christian prejudice run deep and its fruits, to those who have tasted them, are bitter. We need to look at the tree squarely and ask ourselves how is it that the seed sown by the unprejudiced and non-violent Jesus has grown to this. What evil force has nurtured its monstrous growth? Was it the native aggressiveness of the western peoples, as Doris Lessing seems to say, or the implacable intransigence of their religion, as Alan Watts suggests? Perhaps a little of both. Certainly Christianity's awareness of itself as a 'chosen people', with a privileged access to salvation and an exclusive claim on the truth, has not helped to reduce prejudice and violence. For religious intolerance breeds violence whether in Amritsar or in Belfast; fanatical Ayatullahs are not all that different from zealous Grand Inquisitors; and a 'chosen people' is only a step away from a *Herrenvolk*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Allport, Gordon: *The nature of prejudice* (New York, 1958), p 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 8. <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Mishna*, Abot 11.6.

<sup>6</sup> Theissen, G.: *The first followers of Jesus* (London, 1980), p 47.

<sup>7</sup> Montefiore, C.G. & Loewe, H.: *A rabbinic anthology* (New York, 1974), p xviii.

<sup>8</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, E.: *In memory of her* (New York, 1984), pp 251-70.

<sup>9</sup> Song, Choan-Seng: *The compassionate God* (London, 1982), pp 127-41, which makes an excellent analysis of the 'centrism' resulting from such a capitulation.

<sup>10</sup> Montefiore, H.: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself', *Novum Testamentum* 5 (1962), pp 157-70. <sup>11</sup> Watts, Alan: *Myth and ritual in Christianity* (Boston, 1968), p 130.

<sup>12</sup> Levenson, John D.: 'Is there a counterpart in the Hebrew bible to New Testament antisemitism?', *Journal of ecumenical studies* 22 (1985), pp 242-48. Levenson makes an illuminating distinction between New Testament anti-Judaism, which is a theological judgment, and antisemitism which is an ethnic prejudice; and goes on to remark, correctly, that 'the distinction between anti-Judaism and antisemitism is real, but so is the connection between them' (p 244). Anti-Judaism serves as the religious legitimation for antisemitism.

<sup>13</sup> Boxer, C.R.: *The Portuguese seaborne empire, 1415-1825* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p 23.

<sup>14</sup> Singer, Milton: *When a great tradition modernizes* (Delhi, 1972), p 21.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Panikkar, K.M.: *Malabar and the Portuguese* (Bombay, 1929), pp 170-71.

<sup>16</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan: 'The morality of conquest', *Diogenes* 125, (1984) p 89.

<sup>17</sup> Plumb, J.H.: 'Introduction' to C. R. Boxer (see note 3 above) p xxiii.

<sup>18</sup> Lessing, Doris: *The Sirian experiments* (London, 1982), p 292.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in a review of Rivière, Claude: *En Chine avec Teilhard* (Paris, 1968), by Louis Allen in *New Blackfriars* 50 (1969) pp 726-27.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Merleau-Ponty: *Signs* (Evanston, 1964), p 325. It is worth listening to Merleau-Ponty's comment: 'But the idea is in François Mauriac's mind or in our history books. The Vietnamese themselves have above all seen the "corruption" of it. It is in the precise sense scandalous that a Christian should show himself so incapable of getting outside himself and his "ideas" and should refuse to see himself even for an instance through the eyes of others'.