

MYSTIQUE AND POLITIQUE: SPIRITUALITY LEFT OR RIGHT

By SIMON BARROW

EVERYTHING, declared the quixotic early twentieth-century French visionary Charles Péguy, ‘begins with a *mystique* and ends with a *politique*’.

Today, at the rear end of an era littered with the victims both of cynical pragmatism and brutal absolutism, these words continue to resonate with prophetic and interrogative ambiguity. Confronted with the rising tide of fundamentalism, for example, they serve as a timely warning against the frequent degeneration of religion into a wilful instrument of ideological convenience. Presented with the post-communist hubris of the free market, they stand against any and every regression of politics into a mire of visionless self-aggrandisement. And faced with a world-evading religiosity which will not take its political responsibility seriously, they certainly insist that the *mystique* itself, from an incarnational Christian perspective, entails ‘nothing less than the conjunction of the spirit of God at work in the world with the activities of men [and women] in the founding and practice of their institutions’.¹

For this reason, and in quiet opposition to the prevailing consensus in both his day and ours, Péguy also maintained that although mysticism is the laughing stock of the political world, in actual fact ‘it is the mystic who nourishes politics’.² To cherish the whole of life as God’s creative-redemptive act was, in his view, to raise the horizons involved in the social arrangement of human affairs above its tendencies to shrink or distort through neglect or intent.

By reasserting this way of looking at things, Péguy provided essential additional impetus for the cultivation of an authentic twentieth-century Christian spirituality (a contemporary life lived in the passionate spirit of Jesus) which would be, at one and the same time, politically mature and religiously meaningful. Some years later, in a rather different context, the great German theologian

Dietrich Bonhoeffer highlighted a further important implication of the necessary tension between *mystique* and *politique*. Confronted by the failure of traditional spiritual theology to engage with the crisis befalling it, he began to write about the need for Christianity to be re-understood and re-appropriated in the light of 'a world come of age'.³

Bonhoeffer's plea has been much misunderstood over the years. What it implies is not so much the casual baptism of unlimited human autonomy under the influence of scientific culture, but the provocative birth of what we might anachronistically call a Péguyan 'spirituality of experience'—one which accepts as an obligation of its *mystique* the full (political) responsibility of human beings for the kind of world they shape, in place of an anti-Péguyan 'spirituality of innocence'—one which feebly avoids the risk of *politique* (and therefore the possibility of a genuine *mystique*) by indulging the illusion of a magical god who rescues us from the consequences of our action. Such an infantilizing god is, of course, radically different from the biblical God who is depicted as setting before women and men the adult choices between life and death in and through the fabric of their existence as persons-in-community.

Moving from innocence to experience

Theological reflections of this kind are obviously vital in establishing the basis for a modern approach to Christian spirituality which is disposed towards taking politics seriously. But what sort of guide are they to the dramatic real-life divergences which rapidly emerge among those who seek to express their commitment to the *mystique* of the gospel by 'nourishing politics' in specific human settings? For the reality is that Christians throughout the ages have often chosen opposing sides and contradictory positions when faced with the unavoidable need to stake out some territory amidst the shaky polity of their day.

In the Nazi Germany of the 1930s, for example, the Reich Church found its enterprise increasingly identified with an ascendant Führer. The small Confessing Church, on the other hand, set its face against what it gradually perceived to be the nationalist and racist aspirations of National Socialism. Similarly, in recent years, we have witnessed the presence of Christians on all sides of the argument about *apartheid* in South Africa, we have heard church dissidents and church leaders taking entirely different stands on the matter of adaptation to Soviet communism in the old USSR, and we have even seen Christians killing each other across the bitterly contested chasm between revolution and reaction in Latin America.

Closer to home, faithful Christians convinced of the ethical weight of incarnational faith (but studiously intending to avoid partisan commitments) have often found it impossible *not* to be seen to endorse or to oppose particular policies, parties and governments. So it was that the Archbishop of Canterbury's 1985 *Faith in the city* report on urban deprivation and the US Catholic Bishops' pastoral letters on nuclear weapons (1983) and the economy (1986) caused huge political controversy among those who were otherwise identified as sharing the same 'household of faith'.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the issues involved in achieving an appropriate relationship between spirituality, morality and politics have been the subject of exhaustive theological investigation over the past thirty years. The influential and conservative-leaning US school of Christian Realism associated with Reinhold Niebuhr and the inherently more radical liberation theologies initiated against a backdrop of poverty and social inequality in the third world are just two of the many frameworks of interpretation to emerge from this intellectual attempt to hold together the ideological divisions of historic Christianity and the integrating claims of Christian revelation.

Yet in spite of these and other efforts at theological mediation the churches are probably as far away as ever from a general consensus on issues involving political allegiance. In these circumstances we may find it helpful to look beyond the traditional minefield of theological rationalizations and to search instead for the heartbeat which gives life to conviction. Rather than dissecting the biblical, traditional or existential arguments used by Christians to justify specific political commitments, we might therefore ask, inductively, what actual patterns of belief enable or motivate them to take up the attitudes they do? What picture of God, the world and the relationship between the two, for example, stands between the revolutionary and the reformist, the conservative and the radical? What values are implied in the different paths of involvement or non-involvement which it is possible to follow in connection with day-to-day issues of power and prejudice?

These questions do not alleviate the need for value judgements. Nor do they circumvent the requirement for careful theological argument. What they do is to cultivate a growing awareness that every significant intervention which Christians choose to make or forsake in the social arena is liable to hold some clue to the content of the religious or ideological loyalty which is named (or more fre-

quently, not named) through it. Conversely, every articulation of belief about the nature of religion and the condition of humanity will have some implications for the course of action which it points toward or legitimizes. It is in this sense that we may be able to make some initial tentative steps towards identifying the 'spiritualities' or 'world-views' which animate or accompany those who operate in the contrasting political spheres which we might broadly categorize as 'Left' and 'Right'.

A global drift to the Right

The collapse of command-economy communism in Eastern Europe and the subsequent visible unravelling of the Soviet Union represents a geopolitical sea-change of epochal significance. For the best part of a century European-dominated history revolved around the stand-off between capitalism and socialism. Now, with the defeat of fascism at the end of the Second World War and the disintegration of communism at the end of the Cold War, the old order has passed. Today, so the 'end of history' argument goes, the traditional polarities of Left and Right have been superseded through the universal triumph of market economics and the emergence of new agendas: nationalism, the green challenge, the battle for technological superiority. Whatever the truth of this scenario—and it evokes a series of conflicting opinions among informed commentators—there can be little doubt that the Right is everywhere ascendant. For this reason it is worth dwelling critically on what gives it spirit and energy as a particular expression of *politique*.

The forces of the Right form a common body of interest allied to the maintenance and development of western capitalism. In transatlantic terms they divide roughly into three camps. Christian Democracy (CD), with its appeal to Catholic social teaching, has deep roots in Western Europe. It champions a regulated market economy based on 'natural' rights to property and social obligation. CD often stands so close to the centre on the 'spectrum' view of politics that many ideologues on the Right argue that it barely qualifies for the epithet at all. A rather different animal is the classical Conservatism (known in Britain as high Toryism) which develops its creed of preservation around the traditional hierarchies of God, King, Country, Family, Property and the Rule of Law. Finally, the neo-liberal New Right eschews the traditional anti-ideological claims of both CD and Conservatism, aiming instead to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' through an avowedly anti-collectivist philoso-

phy which opposes all attempts at redistributive justice and asserts that the sole role of government is to preserve individual liberty and the market.

There is, however, considerable fluidity on the Right at the moment. In the 1980s, for example, Britain was dominated by Thatcherism, a socially harsh hybrid of New Right libertarian economics and classical Conservative 'strong government'. Now the drift is towards the socially tempered *laissez-faire* approach which US economists Robert Benne and Michael Novak have called 'democratic capitalism'. Similar trends can be seen in the United States, where the gung-ho Right-wing radicalism of the Reagan years, fuelled by an alliance between neoliberalism and revanchist fundamentalism, has been displaced by the more pragmatically conservative Bush administration.

Just as the political Right itself takes multiple forms, so there is no one clearly defined confessional rationale for Christians who move in its sphere. What we have instead is a patchwork of overlapping beliefs and values. Foremost among these is a negative conviction that the 'fallenness' of human beings is a—possibly *the*—controlling factor in social affairs. Sinfulness, according to free-market theologian Brian Griffiths, rules out 'any attempt to legislate the ideals of the Kingdom of God in practice'.⁴ For Professor Novak, too, it eliminates the very possibility of 'a social order based on reason, the social virtues and a Christian way of life'.⁵ Classical Conservative E. R. Norman, meanwhile, is even more direct in conceding that 'I do see humanity as rubbish'.⁶

This deep pessimism about human nature is frequently accompanied, however, by a high view of the human person as being of indefinite value in God's sight. Indeed the entrepreneurial capacity of the individual is the essence of the theological substructure of the Right. In advancing his argument for the spiritual value of the free market as a system specifically 'designed to liberate the creativity of the human mind', Michael Novak quotes approvingly Pope John Paul II's endorsement of the inalienable 'right to personal economic initiative' in his 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*.

But we are entitled to ask at what point this conviction about the worth of individuality degenerates into reductionist individualism: the effective denial that all persons are in fact persons-in-community, and that the meaning of an 'individual' therefore resides in the totality of that person's relationships and not just in the particular

features which define him or her over against someone else. Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, for example, subscribes to the view that the New Testament is 'preoccupied with the individual', that all biblical principles 'refer back to the individual' and that 'there is no such thing as society; there are individual men and women, and there are families'. This means, she declared with reference to the homeless and others, 'casting their problem on society', that 'there is no such thing as an entitlement unless someone has first met an obligation'.⁷ Such an outlook is wholly consistent with the New Right assault against social justice, which holds (somewhat casuistically) that the concept is incoherent because individuals entering a free market without a specific intention to wrong others cannot be held liable for any denial of basic needs which the market might occasion for someone else.¹³

However not all Christians on the Right share quite such an emaciated social vision. Thus Michael Novak, once again, while disavowing the language of injustice and ascribing Jesus's commendation of neighbourly love as a purely private obligation, sees in the business corporation and the voluntary association an appropriate modern outworking of the communal spirit. Brian Griffiths also criticizes 'possessive individualism' as 'a deeply non-Christian, if not anti-Christian philosophy'.⁸ But he does not think that it is a role of good government to seek to enforce an alternative ethic.

This points towards another key feature of many politically conservative spiritualities—their elevation and separation of the realm of God (mediated through the Church) from any and every human order. This division is intended to preserve both an appropriate realism about the human condition and an appropriate worshipfulness and transcendence for God. It draws strongly on Augustine of Hippo's Platonic (rather than biblical) separation of the earthly city from the City of God. Reflecting on this idea, the Conservative peer Lord Hailsham declares that whereas the *Civitas Dei* is a 'voluntary association . . . governed by the laws of morality', the *Civitas terrena* deals in 'sticks and carrots, that is suasions and disincentives such as we usually apply to donkeys'.⁹ The implied low view of human beings and of human attainment is, once again, very clear in this interpretation. And like Luther's 'two kingdoms' doctrine, which arguably disarmed German Christians in the face of Nazism by granting autonomy to the state and preserving the Church in spiritual quietism, it can turn out to be a double-edged sword.

Finally, another important spiritual inference underpinning much of the philosophy and practice of the Right is the emphasis on the

conjunction of 'natural order' and divine order. It is in this light that Novak interprets inequality between persons and nations as 'God's purpose', while other writers reserve a naturalistic argument for establishing the role of women, the inviolability of the nuclear family or the 'right to be governed'.¹⁰ Once more, the possibilities of transformation in the social or political sphere are severely circumscribed, and God's effective presence is restrictively encountered through creation ordinance, in the hearts of individuals and the liturgy of the Church, and as the future realization of a perfect heavenly realm. In this sense, what we could very loosely characterize as the dualistic emphasis in spiritualities of the Right coheres best with those elements in the Christian tradition which uphold the ultimate attainment of faith as an other-worldly and incorporeal state of grace.

The countervailing influence of the Left

If the Right has as its earthly concern the preservation of capitalism and as its heavenly interest a God who stands majestically above the limitations of human sinfulness, the Christian Left—in all its guises—aims for an altogether more transformatory approach both to life and faith. As with the designation 'Right', the term 'Left' conjures up a plurality of political expressions ranging from the voluntary ethic of primitive communism right through to collective managerialism of modern market-based social democracy. The mediating positions between these poles are basically two-fold. Democratic socialism, first of all, is a reformist creed which seeks the maximum social equality of outcome compatible with an efficient and accountable balance between public and private control of the economy. It asserts communal rights alongside individual ones, cooperation rather than competition, and redistributive justice as the central means of alleviating poverty and facilitating equality of opportunity.

Marxist-Leninist Communism, on the other hand, is a rapidly shrinking revolutionary theory which advocates the total seizure of economic and political control by the proletariat, the transfer of all resources to the state, and the eventual abolition of the state itself in favour of direct workers' control organized through soviets.

While social democracy continues to play a major role in Western Europe, much of the traditional Left has been thrown into a state of disarray by the terminal demise of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The collapse of Leninism has, for the

time-being at least, effectively terminated the historical probity of an absolute break between socialism and capitalism. It is this fact, rather than any necessary collusion with the former totalitarian communist regimes, which has undermined 'third way' socialist positions such as Eurocommunism. Meanwhile in the United States, the traditional Left has never made any significant inroads into the public consciousness. Insofar as the term has coinage in this context, it refers mostly to radical or liberal social (rather than economic) philosophies.

But if the forces of the Left tend to lack political and practical coherence in many parts of the world at the moment, their residual power most certainly lies in the sense of vision which they instil at the level of hopes and aspirations. And while it is true that there is no one theological or confessional rationale which can be ascribed to those whose orientation is to the Left, there is a strong sense in which it is easier to talk of 'a spirituality of the Left' than it is to talk of a corresponding 'spirituality of the Right'.

In the first instance, the beliefs and values of Christians who favour radical or Left-leaning political principles find much of their sense of direction in the biblical emphasis on Jesus's proclamation of the all-encompassing Reign of God. In this connection Kenneth Leech, the Anglo-Catholic spiritual writer, quotes the Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev as observing that 'a religion of merely *personal* salvation is an essential contradiction to the good news of the coming of God's Kingdom. That Kingdom means not only a personal but a social and cosmic transformation.'¹¹ On this view there is no ultimate separation of the divine order and the earthly one, since the implications of incarnational faith are that God in Christ foreshadows not the abandonment of creation but its fulfilment. This is certainly an integral and uplifting vision, but it is also imprecise. Where, exactly, is the conjunction between 'the politics of God and the politics of Humanity' (Jacques Ellul)? Is not the implicit utopianism of a spirituality of reification tantamount to 'lifting socialism from the world of events in order to locate it in the world of symbols' (Novak)?¹²

On the more precise issue of the nature and potential of human beings, the Christian Left is considerably more optimistic than the Right, in spite of its predominant conviction that sin is established in structural relationships as well as personal ones. The overriding emphasis is on the redemptive power of God overcoming sinfulness so that divine justice may be 'expressed within the context of earthly

societies, no matter how faltering and imperfect human efforts to achieve it may be' (Leech). Such a view requires a strong emphasis on the biblical category of 'justice', understood as the establishment of right relationships and the redistributive rectification of oppression and poverty. This in turn implies a view of human beings as essentially relational, an understanding which is frequently linked to the communal image of God as Trinity, the Eucharist as an expression of sharing, the Pauline evocation of a fully interdependent Body of Christ, and the liturgical emphasis on 'the common good' and 'our common life'.

For the Right, the obligations of modern government are often restricted to assisting with the alleviation of extreme hardship, maintaining order and upholding equality before the law. To do much more, it is felt, is to risk infringing the liberty of private property and individual economic initiative, both of which are frequently deemed to be part of the natural, and therefore divine, order. For the Left it is human equality, rather than individual economic freedom, which is held to mirror not the natural order but the eschatological [creative-redemptive] one. Therefore there is an obligation to work for social institutions which point towards this divine future. Moreover, it is not just sinners that the law must deal with, but the needs of those who are 'sinned against' (Raymond Fung).

Mystique, politique and the priority of the poor

There is a huge gap between the spiritual and theological priorities of Christians on the Right and Christians on the Left. That much should now be clear, even if my brief descriptions have entailed some considerable generalization and conceptual simplification. The central point to recognize here is that the kind of disagreements which invariably occur when the conjunction of *mystique* and *politique* is taken seriously are not just about technical socio-economic issues. They are also about our estimate of the true purpose of the human enterprise we seek to pursue and the true identity of the God we claim to worship. If this alone could be more openly and sensitively discussed within the Church we would have taken a major step forward in overcoming the dangerous vacuum which exists between religious and political rhetoric. That granted, what more can be said, in conclusion, concerning the 'spirituality of experience' which I have already argued is required and implied in facing up to the lesions of the world?

Well, firstly, it must be acknowledged that the demands of adult spirituality are not properly met either by the Left or the Right in the terms that I have described them. Nor could they be fulfilled by some half-hearted compromise between the two. Since ultimate neutrality is neither desirable nor possible, I should concede what must already be obvious by now—namely that I find the integral vision which animates the idealism of the Left infinitely more satisfying religiously and humanly than the implicit dualism which feeds the pessimism of the Right. But then again, the idealism of the Left has been found seriously and continuously wanting in the world of action, and it is now having to reconstruct itself on the unpromising territory carved out by the triumph of the very market system which has brought us to the brink of ecological catastrophe and the reality of global poverty.

That alone should make us re-examine, theologically and practically, the addictive productivism (anti-ecology) and the patriarchal reductionism (pro-misogyny) upon which most of the existing *politique* is still built. This requires realism, because a concrete way forward cannot avoid starting from the tangible, complex and ambiguous circumstances in which we now find ourselves. On the other hand it also requires radicalism, without which the need for transformation becomes mutated into a passive desire for accommodation. More than anything, it demands renewed attention to the unique focus of the gospel as news about a passionate God who unconditionally sides with those in most need. For above all, a 'spirituality of experience' will be a spirituality which quite specifically supports those for whom *mystique* usually means the mystification of suffering and *politique* normally entails the postponement of hope.¹³ Set against the harshness of that reality, adult spirituality calls for more. Much more.

NOTES

¹ Ecclestone, Alan: *A staircase for silence* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1977) p 88.

² Péguy, Charles: *Temporal and eternal*, trans Alexander Dru (Harvill Press, London, 1958) p 48.

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Letters and papers from prison*, abridged edition, ed Eberhard Bethge (SCM Press, London, 1981) pp 90-91, 114-115.

⁴ Griffiths, Brian, in Anderson, Digby (ed): *The kindness that kills* (SPCK, London, 1984) p 107.

⁵ Novak, Michael: *This hemisphere of liberty: a philosophy of the Americas* (AEI Press, Washington DC, 1990) p 38.

⁶ E. R. Norman quoted by John Kent in Willmer, Haddon (ed): *Christian faith and political hopes: a reply to E. R. Norman* (Epworth Press, London, 1979) p 104.

⁷ Margaret Thatcher quoted by Brian Griffiths in Alison, Michael & Edwards, David L.: *Christianity and conservatism* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1990) p 227.

⁸ See Griffiths, Brian: *ibid.*, pp 219-220.

⁹ See Lord Hailsham of St Marylebone: *ibid.*, p 23.

¹⁰ John Gummer in *ibid.*, pp 306-316; Scruton, Roger: *The meaning of conservatism* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980) p 67.

¹¹ Leech, Kenneth: *True God: an exploration in spiritual theology* (Sheldon Press, London, 1985) p 382.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 379.

¹³ As an example of this approach in a British setting, see Vaughan Jones's article 'A future in community' in *Changing the agenda: Christian reflections on mission and community work* (British Council of Churches, London, 1989) pp 47-56.