

# THE HUMAN TASK

By HUGH KAY

THESE ARE THREE common responses to social disorder. One is what the south americans call the tactic of the dramatic gesture, like capturing foreign ambassadors, or, on the noblest level, taking to the hills as Camilo Torres did, knowing he was going to his death. The object of such an exercise is to call the world's attention to the rebel's cause, to stimulate consciences everywhere, and to unnerve the domestic establishment. The second response to disorder is to try to restore order, either by way of reform, or else by revolution. The reformer works from within the existing system, like Van Straaten's Order of Builders in Belgium, who after the second world war built thousands of homes for displaced persons, thus enabling them to leave their camps and return to society. The revolutionary calls this 'tinkering', a waste of effort unless society's structures are dissolved and a new one built in its place. The problem is to draw the line between a reformable situation and one that is not. The revolution in China and Cuba was moral, essential, and, to a degree, successful, but some revolutions have a way of creating as many problems as they settle. Students in the West preach a revolution to be run, not on the basis of predetermined principles, whether christian or communist, but as a means of forging new systems 'spontaneously'. It is, however, dangerous, when blowing things up, not to have a replacement ready, for nature abhors a vacuum and, once the smoke has cleared, new devils are ready and waiting to claim the vacant site. The third response to disorder is not to act at all, but to *be* something, or nothing. Pope John was a sign, effectively. Britain's hippies and skinheads 'opt out of the system' and propose no alternative. Theirs is the sign of despair.

Their predicament is intelligible. Reforms have failed to change society's heart. The results of revolution are so unpredictable that only those with nothing left to lose will risk it, and even they will generally lack the money and men to mount an operation. The christian knows that opting out will not do, but he distrusts himself and finds a dubious refuge in the life of the spirit. The hackneyed, misapplied principle of divorcing church from politics becomes his

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excuse for inaction. His feeling is that much of what he and others have tried to do in the name of christianity has appeared to be somewhat 'forced' or destined to turn to ashes, and that non-christians seem to do it better anyway. Either he finds himself behaving like a decent humanist, with a veneer of liturgical words to make his actions specifically 'catholic', or he ends up like the Christian Democrats in Europe, who led a continent out of ruin, indeed, but have now become like any other party group: cynical, manoeuvring, pragmatic, and too preoccupied with the market place. Conscious of irrelevance, then, the christian abandons himself to divine providence, makes a retreat to discover God's will for him, and tells himself that 'they also serve who only stand and wait'. It can become a point of pride, in the pejorative sense, to be obscure for Christ's sake, a matter of high and self-conscious virtue to go out of one's way to seek the lowliest place, and to accept, with a sigh of resignation, promotions which are forced on one.

This somewhat cynical account is not an attempt to ridicule the Church's ascetical tradition, but to save it from what has been made of it. The underlying problem is that the christian has always been perplexed by the interplay of freedom and necessity, of his liberty of choice and the grace of God, of personal initiatives and the action of providence. If God is going to achieve his ends no matter what, if he can use to those ends the work of those who do not acknowledge him, and if the optimum mark of spirituality is submission to the will of God, then what positive contribution can the christian, as such, set out to make.

On the personal level, the problem occurs to the late Bishop of Woolwich when he tells us that, on getting into an aeroplane, he finds it less to the point to pray for a safe journey than to put his trust in the pilot's skill. What he seems to be saying is that the average christian has a distorted view of the way the action of God and man affect each other. The prayerful believer starting his flight is privately hoping for something of the miraculous order to happen, however normal it may look, God will in some way direct the pilot's mind and hand, or still an impending storm. There will be an unseen intervention to alter the natural course of events, and, because it is unseen, it is called providence rather than miracle. If our thinking is not quite so crude as to reduce the action of God to timetable terms, we tell ourselves that God foresaw this moment from all eternity, and that his master providential plan so ordered creation and history that the needs of this moment were caught up

in it. There are, of course, elements of truth in these ideas, but they become falsified when we try to see the mind of God responding in a mechanical way to specific pressures exerted by us through prayer and petition. The concept of vocation can be similarly misunderstood. I tell myself that God has a blueprint for me, and that, if I fail to comply with it, my entire relationship with him will be permanently distorted, even though I may still have a chance to redeem time by other kinds of service. The blueprint is made known to me through the gifts with which I am endowed and the opportunities I encounter. So the argument runs, but what I am really doing, under cover of this stern prescription, is to try to find a buttoned-up sense of security in a fixed position reflecting God's *special* concern for me. I shrink from the fluid and unpredictable, from the use of imagination and initiative the undetermined future demands, and I end up like a neurotic schoolboy who panics unless he is 'noticed'. The truth is that my gifts and circumstances may suggest many varied ways of serving God, and it may be a matter of indifference which I choose.

What it comes to at the end of the day is that I have to abandon the luxury of seeing myself as God's blue-eyed boy, a privileged soul. It is not that 'God's will for me' is a meaningless phrase, but that the substance behind it cannot be portrayed or described, and attempts to do so will only provoke a mirage. A man shattered by his wife's death or by the loss of job will deceive himself if he pictures God as having manipulated this precise circumstance to humble him, or to extract strong proof of his love. It is comforting to imagine the voice of God: 'It is your love I want and thus I am afflicting you', but the odds are that this is sheer delusion. We all hang on crosses, whether we choose to or not, and most of us are denied the satisfaction of hearing the words addressed to the penitent thief. Our disasters will often be of our own making, as in the case of Dismas, but the consoling thought that God is using this pain to bring me back to him may only amount to morbid impertinence. To see my success in Friday's test as the direct answer to Thursday's prayer may be only a minor fantasy, but dangerous heights of unreality are reached when the sinner can say he was well in with God last evening, fell out of grace last night, and returned to it this morning by way of a quick confession. The radical orientations of sinning and repenting are not to be described in terms of a carousel, and, if the character of our working relationship with Christ eludes definition, so also does the nature of faith itself. The lesson of Christ's

own dereliction is that faith of its essence must be a night ride. The kind of certainty we want would negative freedom and love. God's 'glory bare would blind or less would win man's mind'. The communication gap between time and eternity cannot be closed by human concepts, images or language, and the pilgrim will have to find other ways of crossing the abyss.

Yet faith *is* certainty, and its insights are reached with the help of historical fact. At the foot of the cross, says Augustine, one man saw a jew dying, another saw God redeeming. 'Faith gives new eyes to read a deeper meaning and a new truth into evidence, which is objectively there and waiting on an interpreter'.<sup>1</sup> Between God and man there *is* a particular as well as a community relationship. There *is* meaning in the prayers we clumsily mouth in the only language we have, and in the liturgy of confession. God *is* the ground of all being, and he *is* working his purpose out 'till the world shall be filled with the glory of God as the water covers the sea'. The criticism of the traditional bromides of piety is that they seek to invest the essentially noiseless, unconceptualized love of God and man for each other with misleading details, as though the graph of that relationship could be plotted instead of being lived, as it must be, within the mists of unknowing. We are not on our own, but must take the fact on trust. The pilgrim must stay with his choices as he crosses the valley of the shadow of death, without repeated assurances that the path he treads is not a dead end. Aridity and desolation are not a penitential privilege but the bread and butter pattern of the ascent to God.

For all the christian's failures, his is an historical religion whose doctrines have affected human culture in all sorts of ways. The precise mode in which civilizations have followed each other according to the pattern of providence seems to defy exploration. But the modern theology of hope comes to the rescue by inviting us to look at the christian message, not simply as something 'given' and waiting to be 'unfolded', but as news of 'God as future', of a kingdom in which our role is that of collaborator, not just interpreter. All that has been and is, is an historical movement towards that omega point where the kingdom of God, now only glimpsed, will be present to us. Towards that guaranteed destiny the human race is drawn, partly by an inexorable evolution, yet one which leaves the individual free, for it is also a destiny which he must help to construct. The purposes

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<sup>1</sup> D'Arcy, M. C.: *The Sense of History, Secular and Sacred* (London, 1959), p 154.

of God will be achieved, yet we have to fill up what is wanting to Christ's sufferings. There is mystery here which cannot be mastered by thinking about it, only by living it; and this demands political action.

The theology of hope is the basis of the christian-marxist dialogue.<sup>1</sup> It sees the metaphysician as a man imprisoned in a closed system that answers itself, and offers the hell of a completely understood humanity which can only manipulate itself. In this system, the future is behind us, only to be unfolded, and we live merely in passive expectation, in a present described as 'eternity in the moment' instead of in a passion for 'the future of God'. In this condition, history makes the same meal of us again and again, and, in the face of the primacy of the future favoured by modern sensibility, christianity seems to have nothing to say. The remedy is to return to the 'open' biblical message, the preaching of the resurrection as a message of promise, the announcement of the covenant of hope. This is the perspective of the apocalypse and the city of God who said of himself that 'I will become who I will become'.<sup>2</sup> This is the God of hope whose kingdom is not yet present to us, save in terms of a glimpsed epiphany, but which both draws us on and comes towards us. The promise impels us to look, not 'above' for escape, but 'ahead' towards a task in which we share, a future never quite mastered. Creation is no longer rooted to an event in the primordial past, but is orientated to an eschatological future. The futurity of God – who remains eternal since he has always been the future of every present – is not an impotent *diastasis* but one that draws the present to itself through Jesus the mediator.

The theologians of hope, then, invite us to a meal, but also to share in the cooking, with always a passion for the possible. Man is to turn from the tyranny of a history of origins and turn to one concerned with ends and commitment, to quarry the future out of the world, to read theological history as anthropology, to turn from the *doxa* of contemplation to the *praxis* of a receptive but also active knowledge. But the bible makes of this a community issue, the salvation of the people, for the test of passing over from death to life is that 'we love the brethren'.<sup>3</sup> Thus the need for a political theology

<sup>1</sup> Cf the essays by Ernst Bloch ('Man as Possibility'), Wolfhart Pannenburg ('The God of Hope') and J. B. Metz ('God before us'), in *Cross Currents*, vol xviii, no 3 (Summer, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Exod 3, 14; cf also Rom 15, 13; Heb 10, 23; Ephes 2, 22; 1 Thes 4, 13.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Pet 3, 15; 1 Jn 3, 14.

to describe the community effort for universal peace and justice in a world whose future is the kingdom of God, not just an aggregate of our own potentialities, or Bloch's 'melancholy of fulfilment'.

So much for the opters-out of the western world. But to what course of action should they address themselves? Their impulse to act is deadened by life in a society which, though inhuman, is not altogether unkind; yet it offends the root of their being to be part of a situation where the machine, instead of releasing man for living, dominates and quantifies him. It is a world which puts prices on people and turns human labour into a commodity, a world in which there is no joy in doing things badly – and there ought to be joy in doing just that, if it is the best one can do. Comparatively affluent suburbanites live passive and alienated from their own humanity in those dreadful little boxes where all look just the same. Seven per cent of the british population owns 84 per cent of the country's private wealth. The cost-of-living rises steeply, not in consumer durables, but in the things that hit the poor: food, rent, light and fuel; and two-thirds of the country's households have no refrigerator and no car. The dustman who goes on strike because his basic wage is below the levels of social security benefits is condemned for blackmailing the community, while property developers make their two or three hundred per cent profit, and nobody terms it unpatriotic. Vast new buildings are kept deliberately empty to allow for prices to appreciate, while thousands still live in slum or near-slum conditions; and, even in 1969, there are mothers, british and american, who have to chase the rats from their babies' cots.

Meanwhile, the country's economic health remains bound up with the need for the rich to stay rich. There is a myth that, if wages rise, then prices must rise also by the ineluctable logic of economic cause and effect. Yet there is no reason at all why wages should not rise while prices remain stationary and profits diminish – provided it is accepted that the shareholder is not a sacred cow, and that it may be up to him on occasion to make a deliberate sacrifice for the sake of the less-privileged worker and consumer. Three years ago, after the british government had to impose some deflationary measures, a plump merchant banker, a catholic, was interviewed on television. He denounced the increase on surtax (for higher incomes) as a gimmick, doubted the wisdom of a price freeze, and regretted that the wage freeze was not more severe. As one commentator put it: 'Why not simply say that when the pound is threatened it is the poor and not the rich who must make financial

sacrifices'. He added that a future, kinder generation might well be appalled at the readiness with which rich men and women inveighed, in our era, against 'the selfishness and envy exhibited by the poor'.<sup>1</sup> Finally, it is not only the marxist who denounces a system wherein goods must be sold at a higher price than the cost of the human labour that made them. The christian, too, must ask: what has this to do with the gospel?

These problems are too complex to admit of indiscriminate recourse to revolution, which society's nervous system is too sensitive and vulnerable to withstand on a wholesale scale. The knots need, not to be cut, but to be untied – and the problems are not too complex to admit of solutions by way of painstaking reform. After all, if the catholic middle classes in south america were simply to pay just wages, then the case, in certain desperate instances, for a just revolution would be largely reduced. These are countries stiff with untapped wealth, and there ought to be plenty for all. The root evil is that the Church's preaching and teaching has not succeeded in creating a social conscience, but rather has tended to foster a privileged class. Nor should it be beyond the wit of north american christians to inhibit the rape of the south american economies by U.S. neo-imperialism. Washington puts pressure on Brazil to adopt deflationary policies at a time when the country is screaming for expansion. The brazilian workers are denied the jobs they need, and the production of indigenous goods for export is restrained. Why? Because the U.S. wants to sell its wares in Brazil's domestic market, and fears her potential competition abroad. Not all the american aid in the world can compensate for the sin of stifling trade. Not all the largesse of the archdiocese of Chicago can absolve the american hierarchy from tacit complicity in Washington's sin – a sin greater by far than anything done in Vietnam.

Britain's latest crop of protesters, the skinheads, direct their 'agro' or aggressiveness against a form of soul murder. Unlike the classless hippies, the skinheads amount to a reassertion of working-class identity. These steel-toed tearaways are conscious of being rejects. They have mostly failed to qualify for an upper grade secondary education, and, in an age obsessed with 'qualifications', see no future for themselves. The world of the slick young executive, even the white-coated craftsman, seems light years away from them. Yet they may none the less be alert, intelligent, even creative. What they need

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<sup>1</sup> *The Incompatibles*: ed. Blackburn, Robin, and Cockburn, Alexander (London, 1967).

is an educational system that can cater specifically for the non-academic imagination, link the study of civics and liberal arts with a craft course geared to the need for labour mobility, and give formal recognition and qualification to the youngster who will not take a degree but may be tomorrow's designer, supervisor, trade union official or welfare worker. There is no need for a revolution to bring this about, only an intelligent response from government level. The best way to secure this, in the british way of life, is to establish pilot schemes and pioneer experiments on a voluntary basis, and then invite the government to absorb and expand them. Is this, or is this not, a major opportunity for the churches to start transforming the world, shaping it towards the kingdom of God? Yet where, in the church schools, would one find this done? It happens in 'fascist' Spain, but not in liberal Britain.

There is room in history for dramatic prophecy: the martyrs are there to prove it. But most of us have to prophesy in duller ways, by cooking the potatoes with Martha, and, if Martha opts out, there will be no dinner. The work of regeneration from within is a long and tedious business, but this is the real challenge facing the young idealist today who seeks to live in terms of christian hope. It is all very well dismantling structures, but get rid of private ownership and a man has no protection left against the state. End up as a state pensioner in a state institution, and you have nothing left to opt out of. The task is not to blow the system up – any fool can throw a stick of gelignite – but to change it so that property, far from being abolished, is redistributed so that everybody has some. Active political commitment thus becomes an urgent obligation on the christian helping to build the kingdom, with all this implies in reading, study and building up pressures on the men who take the decisions. Meanwhile, there is no point in anyone opting out because he cannot carry the whole of society with him at once. He has to start small. It is his simple, lonely and inadequate initiatives, his practical identification with even one of the under-privileged, which will give some status to his gospel-talk, which in turn may set fire to at least a little piece of the world.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is the essence of the layman's vocation, which aims to consecrate the secular order without detracting from its secularity. It is worth noting that the role of the secular Institute is to provide the exemplar and criterion for this lay vocation, in which primacy is given to the demands of the professional, artistic or working world in Christ, and not to the calls of the religious community and its specialized mode of worship and service. (Cf Beyer, J.: 'Religious Life or Secular Institute', in *Supplement to The Way*, 7 (June, 1969), pp 113 ff.)



The christian-temporal historic ideal is not something to be realized in a point of time, something regarded as 'done'. The task is to establish a movement, something always in the making and ever requiring re-birth. It will cross the dividing line of historic existence, Maritain tells us, when it begins to be recognized by the common conscience and to play a motive part in the work of social life. New political formations, secular yet in part the product of religious resurrection in men's hearts, are needed today to give structure and purpose to the rich ideas of community now struggling for recognition in the third world: struggling, that is, for an indigenous quality that has nothing to do with russian, chinese or western stereotypes. Hence President Senghor's search for an african socialism, built on cooperative lines and teilhardian evolutionary concepts; President Nyerere's Arusha Declaration; or the rural reform programmes in Chile, Peru and Venezuela. In all this, the christian idea of the *cooperative* has the major role of saving the community from the *collective*, just as in the prosperous West it has the duty to stimulate property-owning democracy, workers' control of industry, the interaction of personal ownership with the exercise of that ownership in social terms. There is no greater barrier to the progress of these ideas than the apathy of the working class itself, an eternal excuse for the smug british tories who mouth the property-owning principle and then take refuge behind the people's indifference. Most of the working class are content to be passive, to be wage earners with minimum guarantees of social security. They do not aspire to responsibility and ownership, nor will they do so until they are differently educated.

Heroic endeavours to recreate man's image of himself have succeeded each other throughout the centuries. Each one wearies and dies, but only to make way for the next, which expands a little more and describes a wider circle than its predecessor did. Man's situation is not of necessity tragic. He stands at the threshold of dazzling technological triumphs. Whether these will serve or master him depends on how he regards his future and what it demands of him now; but the science of cybernetics should help to create a mentality which is always on the look-out for connections and continuity, and can heal the false separation of nature and the supernatural. The humanist, brooding over the human predicament, can take heart from the optimistic thrust of the scientist who sees how to do things and change things, and who can provide the tools to perform the human task.