

THE NEXT STEP

By PETER HEBBLETHWAITE

The author was wondering how to begin, when suddenly, it all came to him in a vision in the form of a dialogue with himself.

P: I can't make head nor tail of the editor's request: 'In what ways does the eschatological perspective of christian life give meaning to the present, to the immediate future, and to working for intramundane goals as desirable in themselves?' Does that ring any bells for you?

H: Of course it does. It is an invitation to justify political commitment on christian grounds. It is a call to remember the social nature of christian salvation – we are saved in the body – and therefore cannot be saved apart from service of our brothers. It hints that Jesus is the great Liberator, the one who sets us free, breaks the shackles . . . You know the rest.

P: But we've done this innumerable times. Surely we don't want just another attack on separated spirituality. *Gaudium et Spes* dealt with that one: 'They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities . . . The christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties towards his neighbour and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation'.¹ That is clear enough. It is enough to dispose of the marxist charge of alienation.

H. How naïve can you be! You don't dispose of alienation by saying that you reject it. You still find plenty of people saying that the Church 'shouldn't interfere in politics' when what they really mean is that by its silence it should give tacit consent to the corrupt *status quo*. There is nothing wrong with the principles enunciated in such pompous language by the Council, except that they don't bite. And when someone like Camilo Torres takes them seriously, then he gets sat upon. You know that as well as I do. As long as you confine yourself to the soft soap of words, then all is well. March, protest, do something, and a friendly letter – at least the first one will be friend-

¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

ly – will warn you not to go too far or too fast. We mustn't run before we can walk, etc.

P: But you are not saying that the Council changed nothing at all.

H: Well, if feeling generous, I'll agree with Herbert McCabe and call it 'the great breakthrough into the nineteenth century' – that is after all what the liberal-type recognition of religious liberty really meant; and if feeling mean, call it 'the great breakthrough into the thirteenth century' – because then the king shared his authority with the barons, most of whom were robbers.

P: You are not leaving much room for the holy Spirit to blow . . .

H: He blows where he lists – or do I mean listeth? – but in any case the real history of the Council began after it ended, and its ripples began to spread out through the world. So many people have tried to emasculate the Council, to rob it of its revolutionary power, to domesticate it, to turn it into a matter of cosy reformism, with no loose ends. And it's everything as before, with a slightly changed style. Take this recent roman document on minor orders. The offices of lector and acolyte, it tells us, will be kept – but admission to them musn't be called 'ordination'. It must be called 'installation' and, this document adds, 'Thus there will better appear the distinction between clergy and laity'.² They will be installed. What a marvellous word! *Installés*. Mind you there is a reminder that 'the conferring of ministries does not imply the right to sustenance or salary from the Church'.³ There they are, moving deckchairs about the Titanic, while the ship prepares to founder.

P: This is all very diverting, but it's completely off the point. The Council released all kinds of movements in the Church in which social and political commitment is an essential part; and if bureaucrats go on being bureaucrats, then you shouldn't be surprised at that – it's all part of what Weber calls 'the routinization of charisma'. Life passes by elsewhere. You shouldn't get obsessed with this kind of thing.

² The *Motu Proprio*, 'Ministeria quaedam' (Vatican Press, dated 15 August, 1972), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, XII. Both interlocutors seem to be unaware that the latin word, translated in the quasi-official english translation as 'installation', is *institutio*, and means the delineation and transmission of a ministry which encompasses the adequate power to exercise it and the responsibility for exercising it. Cf Beyer, J.: 'The Ministry of Women in the Church', in *Supplement to the Way*, 17 (Winter, 1972), p 97, note 4.

H: I'm not in the least obsessed, but I can't help being struck by the contrast. Hunger in the Third World, torture in Brazil, apartheid in South Africa, the war in Vietnam, and yet someone can calmly sit down and pen such a document. It is almost as though the bureaucratic Church had a sort of death-wish. If you do irrelevant things, then you should not be surprised if you are considered irrelevant.

P: What was the last relevant thing you did?

H: Er . . . I wrote an article about the Church and revolution.

P: Words, words. Have you *done* anything? I know that when you talk about revolution you don't mean – at least not at the moment – bombs and machine guns and suchlike. What have you done?

H: I took an african out to dinner.

P: Who paid?

H: I did, unfortunately.

P: There you are, paternalism at its worst. He was probably very offended. But that's your jargon, not mine. That's the worrying thing about commitment to revolution. One needs to start somewhere, yet where to start? If you simply maintain, so to speak, a generally revolutionary attitude in your personal relationships, then you have forgotten the 'great structural transformation of society' and are dealing with people on a one-to-one basis. And that is only one step from saying with the old encyclicals that if you want to change the world, you have to begin with yourself. So you took an african out to dinner. Not a bad start unless you then patronized him, as I suppose you did.

H: He is my brother, and that's a christian insight. Of course it can't mean just vague benevolence towards all and sundry, still less Lady Bountiful soup-doling charity. Someone said: 'When the house is flooded, you can either mop it up, or find the tap and turn it off'. I want to find the tap and turn it off. Evil is built into the structures of neo-capitalist society . . .

P: Do you refuse to mop up then?

H: I don't refuse, but I'm disinclined to. It doesn't really help.

P: That's the trouble with your position. Until the day of the great revolutionary blow-up, *der Tag*, it is difficult to know what to do. Yet

life goes on under these capitalist structures (from which you profit) and there are needs, immediate needs, which have to be met, and met now. I know you have all sorts of disparaging names for this – ‘tinkering with the works’, ‘effete liberalism’, and so on – but I am a gradualist. Your vast revolutionary pipe-dreams seem to be a substitute for action now. One day – but not yet – it is all going to be so different. Well, let me tell you something else: it’s all going to be much the same, and perhaps worse, after your revolution.

H: I knew you were reactionary: now I know you are a fascist beast. That is the justification for the *status quo* that everyone brings up. Only someone as comfortable as you could do it. The underprivileged don’t think like that, and if it is a dream that they have, it’s a dream of a Kingdom where there will be more justice, more brotherhood, where men and women will smile spontaneously at each other, where there will be more of the authentic gospel. It’s all in the Apocalypse: God will wipe away every tear. But now that man has come of age, as Bonhoeffer said, he has to muscle in himself and hasten on the Kingdom on earth. Pie in the sky won’t console him any more. He’s seen through that one.

P: You make revolution sound like the opium of the people. The eschatological vision is needed to get us moving now, to stir us out of our complacency, to make us continually critical of all human societies, but it cannot be brought *within* history. The need for criticism would remain after the revolution: it might well be even more urgent.

H: I’ll accept that argument, provided it is not turned into an excuse for doing nothing at all. But I think you are still hung up on the picture of ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’. The Church has turned Jesus into an inoffensive statue, a vague point of reference. And the toughness – the money-changers were after all cast out of the temple – gets forgotten or rationalized away. For generations the ‘meditation on the Hidden Life’ has been used to make young religious content with their lot. But we can’t take that any more. We have rediscovered the Jesus who is the heir to the Old Testament prophets, deeply concerned about the poor, the *anawim*, and with harsh words for the rich. ‘He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly’ (Luke 1, 52). When you hear that in the Monteverdi Vespers, it’s comfortable and undisturbing, but when read out just before a peace march, you begin to sense its power. And it is

no good just prattling on about 'human dignity' and 'all men are brothers' unless you translate this into political action. Charity today has to be political, or it is vacuous.

P: I don't like your redrawn picture of Jesus. It seems to me just as much a projection as 'gentle Jesus meek and mild'. You just use him, exploit him, as a symbol of liberation. Yet one thing which emerges very clearly from the New Testament, despite Bultmann and all that, is that Jesus did not take up the revolutionary option open to him: he did not join the zealots. And if you read your Kittel on *adelphos*, brother, you will find that in Matthew 25, 40 ('As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me') it is at least arguable that 'brother' means a fellow christian, not all men indiscriminately. You ought to find that disturbing.

H: I think it is merely a quibble. Your other point is more serious. Jesus did not join the zealots. True. But in his radical independence from all human institutions – 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath'⁴ – he is inviting his followers to say no and no and no. The impact and implications of his message are revolutionary, even if his life was not. In him one grasps radically new possibilities for man, the door opens on the not-yet-realized. No wonder people try to muffle the subversive side of Jesus.

P: Now you are playing with words again. Jesus is the 'New Man', the second Adam, the man in whom the human race starts again, after humanity's previous fumbings. And that is subversive: but it is first of all personally subversive, that is, it is I myself who have to respond, it is I who am personally challenged and, if you insist, subverted. To be a disciple is to be continually ready to respond, to change, to be challenged. I'm not sure you can apply that directly to society. For one thing the subversion of society involves self-righteousness and presumption – you claim to know what is good for people, and that leads to all sorts of tyrannies. And it is anti-gospel: 'The Kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you . . .' (Luke 22, 25). Stalin and Hitler were called benefactors. Not only that, but once you start talking seriously about the subversion of society, then you cannot escape the question of violence. It is impossible to make out a case for violence from the New Testament: 'Those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword'.

⁴ Mk 2, 27.

H: You sound like a fundamentalist. The Church has never had any difficulty in finding arguments in favour of the 'just war'. I agree that violence *in itself* is always objectionable: but there is never violence *in itself*. There are situations of organized, institutional violence, in which injustice is done to persons, in which their human rights are contemptuously trampled upon; and in such situations, violence is the only answer to the oppressor.

P: That is precisely the marxist justification for violence.

H: So it is, and why not? At least the marxists provide an analysis of capitalist society which brings out its inherent violence, its class basis, and so they provide a tool for changing it. One can appreciate and use their analysis without swallowing the rest. The Church has no comparable analysis to offer. We are only just beginning to have a political theology after 2000 years. Metz . . .

P: But can you really make that distinction between the analysis and what you choose to call 'the rest'? By 'the rest' you must mean dialectical materialism and the 'leading role of the party' and all that. Many have thought they could pick and choose in the heaving sea of marxism, only to find that they have been exploited by the party which knows all about trojan horse and 'popular front' tactics. You become their dupes. They think you are naïve, even as they exploit you. They despise you really.

H: You are still obsessed with this communist bogey. I don't feel myself obliged to defend stalinism and all its consequences. That has nothing to do with marxism. We are concerned with a return to the young Marx. What happens in eastern Europe has nothing to do with my position, or with Marx.

P: So you are a thorough-going revisionist. You wouldn't survive for long in Poland or Czechoslovakia, and if you lived in Russia . . .

H: You'll be asking me next why I don't go and live in Russia. This discussion is getting irritatingly trivial.

P: Let's try to raise the tone. I find a system which, day in day out, appeals to Marx for its justification. I'm quite prepared to concede that Marx has been twisted and deformed. But I do not concede that you can so cavalierly say that what has happened has absolutely nothing to do with Marx. Then we really would be in the land of double-think. I'll make another concession too: there is in Marx much that should make christians think and examine their consciences.

For one thing, he helps them to smash the idol of the God who would be merely the prop of the social order. For another he unmasks us: our reasons for acting are not always what we think. There is a permanent contribution of Marx, which has become diffused in our culture. But I fail to see how marxism as system – in any of its multiple forms – is compatible with christianity, since it begins as an anti-theistic humanism. ‘Communism begins where atheism begins’, said Marx. And he also said ‘Man is the supreme being for man’. That is the source of all the ills of marxism. I don’t say that in a moralistic sense, as though it expressed overweening pride, *hubris* and so on. I say it because it opens the way to the manipulation of man. Philosophically: if there is nothing *given* in the meaning of man, if the meaning of man has to be *invented* totally anew, then tyranny follows. Because you or someone else will impose on me his version of what man is. And that is intolerable.

H: Oh Popper, that thou shouldst be living at this hour!

P: This is supposed to be a serious discussion. It’s for *The Way*. I have an awful suspicion that what attracts you in marxism is its secularized interpretation of christianity. It has a secularized view of the fall of man, and calls it ‘alienation’, the original sin of property; it has a secularized view of salvation history, which it calls the march of history, though history doesn’t march; it has a secularized view of redemption which is to be achieved through the great day of revolution. In short, it is precisely what I would expect christians whose faith is dimming to embrace with eagerness. They want the consolations of a system, without the inconvenience of dogma; and they want a spur to action which they don’t find in faith. But instead of admitting this to themselves – and it would be an awful admission – they juxtapose. They call it a synthesis between christianity and marxism, when in fact it’s the substitution of marxism for christianity.

H: All very eloquent, but it supposes that you can search out the depths of my heart. You can’t. Maybe there are people who have done what you deplore. What interests me is the contribution which christianity can bring to marxism. There are values which marxism needs to learn. For example mercy. I don’t mean any mealy-mouthed sentimental treatment of the oppressor: but so many revolutions have devoured their children, and at some point in the process there has to be a halt. That halt is called mercy. And then there

is real participation, something which the Church recognizes in theory even if it is slow to practise it. The yugoslavs have got onto this and made 'self-government' in the factory and the school the essence of their marxism. Perhaps this is what Vatican II was trying to say when it talked about the 'local churches'. So if marxism is to have a human face, it needs this christian contribution. But meanwhile the injustice and the in-built violence is there, and not just in Latin America, and we have to fight with all those who are prepared to overthrow it.

P: I could have said much of that myself. But there is still a problem. Your whole position seems to reduce the gospel to a manual for social and political action. Jesus becomes simply 'the man for others', whereas we know that his openness to the Father in the conversation of prayer – all those nights on a mountainside alone – was a condition of his being 'the man for others'. There is a traditional way of putting this which I know will annoy you. Before the horizontal dimension – the service of the brethren – is possible, there must be the vertical dimension of prayer, filial relationship to the Father. True, it then overflows into the love of the brethren, with all that that implies today of justice and the ordering of society. But you cannot have the horizontal alone. That way lies superficiality.

H: But God is not absent from the horizontal, as you choose to call it. This is his world. He is its Lord. We find him in it, not in the impossible attempt to leap out of it. Perhaps the difference between us lies simply in our different starting-points. We can begin either with the world or with God. You want to begin with God: then the world becomes the backcloth against which the divine drama, centred on Jesus, is played out. He brings, from on high, salvation, and the community which arises in his wake is called the Church. Having done that, you then have to 'fit in', as a sort of afterthought, the world. The Church has access to the means of grace; the world needs grace to be saved. You are stuck with this model. It is the explanation of everything you say. Your order of priority is God-Church-world. Mine is the reverse of that. I start in the world, because that is where I am and because it is the only place where the world can be saved. I see grace at work everywhere, and not just in the Church. The holy Spirit is prompting people to change society, not to be content with the *status quo*, to recognize that new communities, little groups, are rising up which are radical and committed and with a new life-style, simpler, more brotherly, evangelical.

P: So really you are very moderate after all. You are very close to – forgive me – *Gaudium et Spes*: ‘The ferment of the Gospel has aroused and continues to arouse in man’s heart the irresistible demand for dignity . . . The Spirit of the Lord, who with a marvellous Providence directs the unfolding of time and renews the face of the earth, is present to this development’.⁵ I’ve improved the translation for you. The Abbott version says that the holy Spirit is ‘not absent’, which is rather cold-waterish. The Latin just says: *Huic evolutioni adest*.

H: That’s useful. I wish I knew what you knew. And I wish you had something of my radicalism. We could make a good combination. But I don’t like being called a ‘moderate’. Most people, whatever their real convictions, like to imagine that they are ‘moderate’, or placed somewhere, as Suenens says, ‘in the extreme-centre’. It’s mostly self-deception, a desire to have things all ways at once. I am extreme because we are in an extreme situation. When there’s a war on, there’s no time for amiable neutrality. ‘He who is not with me is against me’.

P: That was Lenin’s favourite quotation from the scriptures. But there is more room in the centre than you imagine. I don’t mean the ‘centre’ as a pale compromise between extremes. I mean a sort of *positive centre* which has measured the extremes, has learned from them where it can, and yet remains critical and above all self-critical. There is a new dialectic emerging, not between ‘left’ and ‘right’ in the Church – that debate remains too narrowly ecclesiastical anyway – but between people like yourself and the prayer people. I read this theother day in *The Tablet*: ‘The “mystics” – I use shorthand for prayer-people, Jesus kids, pentecostalists – could lose touch with a world in need of change and compassion; the “revolutionaries” tend to forget the “Kingdom within” as they push their counters about the board. The spirituals risk depth without effectiveness; the politicals risk activity without depth’.⁶

H: I hope that is not just another paper synthesis.

P: It is not meant to be a synthesis: it is a call to dialectic, a task, not an achievement. This is what I want to do all along the line: maintain the tensions that are creative. Vertical and horizontal:

⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

⁶ ‘Go East, Young Man’, in *The Tablet* (London), 16 September, 1972.

prayer and action: contemplation and commitment. You ought to be able to appreciate the dialectic with your marxist background. And yet when it comes to the crunch you simplify and choose.

H: You have to. The needs of action impel you. You can't get anyone on the barricades with your dialectic of vertical and horizontal. Just try it some time. Slogans have to be simple, massive, blockbusting, if they are to move people.

P: That's the adman's jargon. I'm astonished that you advocate it. You have no sense of complexity at all. You just think in these big naive categories of 'capitalism' and 'socialism', where one is wholly black and the other wholly white. You are like a reverse caricature, a mirror image, of the anti-communist: you are basically manichaeism. Huxley in *The Devils of Loudun* warned us that the loss of the sense of the devil would lead people to regard their political opponents as devils, as the embodiment of evil. Your personification of evil is 'capitalism'. But there is no pure capitalism left – it is everywhere modified by governments for social reasons. And there is no pure socialism either: room is made for the play of market forces. In Poland I met a man who had written a thesis on *Response to Market Demand in Certain Sectors of Capitalist Society, with Special Reference to Marks and Spencers*.

H: Was it accepted?

P: It was. Can we leave this? I want to raise another point. You are a priest. Among other things the priest is a sign of the unity of his community, just as the bishop is in the diocese. No, don't groan. This would seem to prevent him, as leader of the community, from taking up precise political options on questions which are being disputed among his congregation. Just before the Trades Union Congress there was a sermon in which the following opinion was uttered on the Industrial Relations Act: 'Never has such a sustained, disastrous and misguided assault, under the pretence of seeking the public good, been made on the basic elements of the british industrial relations system'. That is a precise political opinion. But it is only an opinion. You cannot excommunicate someone for not holding it. Not so long ago, and perhaps still, such a use of the pulpit would have been denounced as clericalism. Well, now there is a new clericalism of the left. *Slant*, when it existed, declared that its case was: 'To be a christian now is to be politically on the left'. You can say that you would expect to find christians on the left, something of that sort, but you cannot *define* a christian in this way.

H: You are forgetting something. You say that the priest is the sign of unity and I agree; but if you mean that he shouldn't disturb anyone's slumbering conscience, then you are mistaken. The simple absence of manifest conflict is not unity. You can maintain the façade of apparent unity by being completely non-controversial. But what is this unity worth? It is a paltry thing compared with the dynamic unity of the human community for which we are striving – with all our brothers, and not just with those who happen to be dozing on the next bench. *That* is the unity of which the priest should be the sign. Another thing too: he is a sign of unity, but he is also a sign of contradiction who must challenge *bourgeois* values, especially when they come dressed as christian values. The priest is the prophetic witness to the coming unity of man. You will remember what Terry Eagleton said: 'The priest is best understood as a revolutionary leader on the leninist model'.⁷

P: I can think of no more dangerous model. In Lenin's theory, the workers did not have a revolutionary consciousness. Indeed he went further: 'We have said that *there could not have been* social democratic consciousness among the workers'. Where, then, does it come from? According to Lenin: 'It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all classes shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trades union consciousness'.⁸ If that is to be the role of the priest in the Church, *mutatis mutandis*, you are back once again to clerical paternalism, and your arrogant claim to know and impose what you know makes true *service* of the people of God impossible. There can be no service without respect. And that includes respect for differences of opinion on political questions.

H: That is something we can agree on. Even if I borrow techniques of analysis from marxism, they are no more than that. And I believe that the christian motivation is different. Do you think we have helped anyone?

P: Others will have to be the judge of that. Meanwhile, I have been rethinking the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man was lying beside the road. A communist drove by: he couldn't stop because he was on his way to a party meeting. A christian couldn't stop because he was hurrying to a prayer meeting. A priest drew up, hesitated, but went on, because otherwise he would never have finished his article.

⁷ *The Body as Language* (London, 1970), p 76. ⁸ *What is to be done?* (London, 1902).