SOME MODERN ILLUSIONS

By PAUL EDWARDS

SOME MONTHS ago I was idly looking at some certificates issued by a college of catering. I was intrigued to see that each certificate was headed by a representation of the two-faced god, Janus. 'What is he doing there?', I wondered. The college could hardly be suggesting that a caterer must always be two-faced, with one permanently smiling face to welcome the customer, the other, private face to register elsewhere his personal emotions. A classics teacher gave me the explanation. Janus is the patron of caterers because he is the god of hospitality: he is the god of hospitality because he is the god of the home, and he is two-faced because his work of protecting the house requires him to look in two directions at once.

I find that very instructive. If you want to protect something, look in more than one direction. Ideally, one should have something like a revolving radar-scanner, impartially scrutinizing all points of the compass. Unfortunately, few of us have minds with that sort of alertness, flexibility and all round sensitivity. Most of us concentrate our mistrustful vigilance in one direction. I once knew a virulent young fascist for whom the leading capitalists, the masters of the Kremlin and british liberals were all part of a world-wide zionist conspiracy. I recall a canadian headmaster, who should have known very much better, attributing the Sharpeville massacre to the communists. One friend of mine, who occupies a high academic niche, attributes all our modern ills to the permissiveness of the modern schoolteacher! While most of us would eagerly dissociate ourselves from such monomania, we easily fall into the mistake of attributing all ills to a single cause, or, at least, looking for them only in one direction. The shrewd Aristotle knew better. He analysed virtuous action as lying between two opposed but equally vicious extremes.

All the above is a piece of self-justification. In the last decade I have intermittently, although always on request, sent for my bow of burning gold and loosed off a few arrows in the cause of righteousness. They have mostly been aimed at sadducean triumphalism,

pharisaic legalism and inspissated clericalism. As my vocabulary shows, I have taken my fighting stance in the ranks of the 'progressives'. Yet I have not been unaware all this time of the Janus principle, which I would enunciate thus: 'If you want to protect something, don't concentrate your vigilance in one direction'. The obstacles to effective christian practice are not all of one kind, nor do they stem from a single source. Some of us have worked cheerfully to dismantle the massive mistakes of the past. I think that I have seen pieces of sound construction thrown down with them. We have tried to clear the ground to rebuild the city of God, and already some very shoddy erections encumber the site, their foundations, if any, shallow and ill-aligned, the materials flimsy and the work of construction unskilled and slapdash. In this article I invite you to a somewhat depressing inspection of the site. It is dismaying that before the slums of the past have been anything like disposed of, we should already be confronted with a new shanty town. There is a little dry comfort in the thought that it is too badly built to stand up for long.

One former erection which certainly needed considerable reduction and extensive remodelling was the authoritarian arch, whose disproportionate mass overshadowed the whole site, and to fit in with which practically every other had to be distorted. (A few years ago a british archbishop described his authority in terms of the keystone of an arch, the weight of which, bearing down on the blocks beneath, keeps them in a state of perpetual tension.) The new gerry-built development, which some would throw up instead of the Church, has no place at all for authority. There is an oversize lean-to propped up on nothing and misnamed 'Conscience'.

Conscience rightly understood, my conscience, is myself judging on a moral matter: me with my twopennorth of knowledge, my limited perspective, shallow understanding and faulty powers of deduction. Indeed, 'a poor thing, but mine own', and because it is mine I have to use it; I have to rely on it. Even when I decide to let myself be guided by someone else's judgment, I have to judge of the reasons for accepting his view rather than my own. The final judgment, the ultimate responsibility, will always remain my own. But if I do have any sense, then I realize that there are people better informed than I, with superior insight and wider experience, and I let myself be guided. But many of us nowadays seem to think that our individual private judgment, feeble though it has often shown itself, is, in the moral sphere, charismatically infallible, so that we

can do no wrong so long as we 'follow our consciences'. This 'conscience' seems to mean the immediate emotional reaction to a situation. If I can do a thing without feeling guilty, then that action is totally and incontrovertibly licit. John Henry Newman, that great protagonist of the responsibility of the individual conscience, was asked what he would do if a papal direction should conflict with the dictates of his own conscience. He said that he would consult the bishops, that he would refer to the theologians, that he would discuss the matter with his friends. Such laborious enquiries are not for us! We know! Our consciences tell us. They do so largely effortlessly and almost instantaneously, registering good and evil like a piece of litmus paper testifying to the presence of alkali or acid. And what is even more obliging, they so often concur with our inclinations.

It is not only in matters of moral conduct that we have been granted a degree of perspicacity that our catholic predecessors never enjoyed. They believed in the teaching authority of the Church. With them the scriptures, the teaching of tradition, the views of the fathers, the reflection of the theologians and the official declarations of the Church, carried weight. Admittedly, too much weight at times. Docility can be overdone. Too many people treated the penny catechism as though it had been dictated by the trinity in person(s?). But now 'we think for ourselves', though the process by which we arrive at our doctrinal decision is not at all one of sustained ratiocination. We 'know'. We have a discriminating 'feel' which enables us to walk among the Church's doctrines like a shopper in a supermarket, picking up what suits our needs and our tastes. The Church used to have an infallible pope, although it was very rarely that he made a statement for which he claimed infallibility. Now we have popes and popesses in abundance, tranquilly assured of the unfailing accuracy of their moral discernment and doctrinal selectivity. I should be aghast at the religious harm such attitudes will do. I find that I am more shocked at the intellectual destitution and sheer mental slovenliness from which those attitudes spring.

Our predecessors and most of my own generation were nourished on catholic doctrine in a way that amounted to forced feeding. The scriptures came nowhere in comparison to doctrinal formulations. The liturgy was a hobby for those with a taste for gothic vestments and a liking for knowing what happened when a greater double occurred during a privileged octave. The christian way of life began with rising diligently, dressing myself modestly and achieved its climax as one went to bed 'observing due modesty' and occupied

oneself with thoughts of death. (Catechism nos. 355 and 370).

We have now corrected this overemphasis on doctrine by leaving it out. Our children have done projects on race prejudice and can compose bidding prayers standing on their heads. Quakers, sikhs and social workers have been brought to address them. But many of them, who have completed a sixth form (high school senior) course, could not give you any sort of explanation of the creed which they recite on Sundays. But then the creed is only a vocal exercise for the congregation, to warm them up for the bidding prayers. Christianity is something that has to be lived; and in the past we made the mistake of giving first place in catholic education to a verbal, academic knowledge of doctrinal technicalities. But the Church has not been misguided in her efforts, which date from the apostles' preaching, to find firm explicit statements which express her belief in Christ and the significance she sees in his life and work. How else should a body of rational human beings proceed? The search for sensitivity in human relationships, the quest for community, will never do justice to human stature if we ignore the need for truth. It is part of our christian duty to penetrate the formularies of christian belief, to be able to explain them to others, perhaps even to help in the recasting demanded by changes of thought and language. I have a dismal impression that many catholic schools have lost their nerve in this sphere. Quite rightly abandoning the near monopoly which 'doctrine' used to enjoy, we have become so anxious to be thought 'relevant', and so afraid of being accused of 'indoctrination', that we are prepared to leave young people, who have been taught in their secular subjects an exactingly cerebral approach, without any corresponding intellectual grasp of catholicism. The result is often a dilute and mindless religiosity, where there is anything of religion left at all.

One reason why so many of the new erections, if I may go back to my building-site metaphor, are so flimsily constructed is that we have become almost ideologically nervous of anything that appears solid, definite, which might have any pretence to permanence. One of the dirtiest words in our modern vocabulary is 'institution'. The institution is a monster out of 'Dr Who', unfeeling, unreflecting, blindly obeying its appetite to dominate and absorb, which, if not checked, will eliminate the human element on our planet. This nightmare has a foundation in experience. People launch an institution to accomplish some purpose, and all too often the institution becomes more important than its members, more important than

the purpose for which it was instituted; its own institutional life takes over as its *raison d'être*, to support which it absorbs all the human energies available. Then individual human beings are at the worst crushed by it, more often impoverished, because their individuality has been mutilated; and their energies, offered for the original purpose of the institution, have been absorbed by the institution itself. The lesson to be learned from this harsh experience is that members of any institution must always be very much on the alert, intent on the purpose of their institution, vigilant that their energies and resources are not channelled solely into the maintenance and growth of the institution for its own sake, that the institution remain flexible and adaptable in the steady pursuit of its original aims.

Instead, too many of us have become frightened of institutions, afraid to commit ourselves for fear of losing our freedom and individuality. So the clergy is diminished, religious orders shrink, and one is told, 'I find teaching too restricting', and, 'The social services weren't my scene'. The desired scene would seem to be one where talents develop almost effortlessly, where one's charisms can be deployed without the demands of routine, where results are immediate, tangible and abundant. Everything should be spontaneous, exhilarating and above all 'rewarding',

Perhaps it was like that in the garden of Eden. Since we lost that desirable tenancy, things have changed, and when we want something, we usually have to work for it, and work particularly hard when it is a question of developing talent. The distinguished sportsman works his body harder than a navvy; the writer puts in more hours at his desk than the clerk; the musician practises continually, and the actor submits to a more rigorous discipline than the soldier. While I write this, the TV is showing a very exciting rugby international. The play looks spontaneous, exhilarating and magnificently rewarding. But how much coaching lies behind it, how much laborious training! I remember coming across a very good amateur footballer just after he had returned from his regular self-imposed training session. He was quite exhausted. If he had not been, he would have been dissatisfied; it would have meant that he had not performed vigorously enough, and so his standard of fitness and control would be a little less than they might have been.

A moving performance by a musician or sportsman may well look like a spontaneous release of talent, and it will be exhilarating and rewarding for both performer and spectator. But behind the apparent spontaneity lie years of planned practice and sustained self-

discipline. And also organization: do I have to prove that you cannot normally stage a gripping dramatic production, an orchestral performance or even a really good game without organization, without a largish group of people, a proportion of them behind the scenes, working with disciplined cohesion?

There is little individual achievement without elaborate self-discipline. The more complex human achievements are impossible without organization. Finally, the sustained pursuit of an important objective requires a continuing, sustained organization: that is, an institution. Perhaps I am labouring the obvious; but a lot of people manage to close their eyes to the obvious. Society, without which civilization is impractical, is an institution. So is the health service, the fire brigade and every university and the shop at the corner. Imagine a health service manned by doctors who were available only when they were in the mood, or a fire brigade of which no member wanted to be tied down to definite hours lest he lose his independence! But some of us now take this attitude to the work of the Church. I suspect that what we are really protecting is not our spontaneity and independence, but our shallowness and our utter amateurishness. To harp on freedom and independence can sound very noble and sturdy. I suspect that it is really as sturdy and noble as going for a good paddle when other people are committing themselves to sailing the seven seas.

When we had a more common-sense understanding of the importance of institutions there was a virtue called loyalty. To me loyalty has always seemed a primal decency, and I find that this estranges me from many a radical whose theological principles I largely share. Of course loyalty can be excessive. (The Janus principle is always relevant.) When it is so, it leads to dishonesty, perhaps towards others, perhaps even to oneself. It can breed narrow-mindedness and sectarianism. But disloyalty furthers neither ecumenism, pluralism nor even honesty. You do not learn to appreciate the commitment of other christians to their own churches by being indifferent to your own; nor do you learn to value the vocation of others by undervaluing your own. There seems to me something less than honest in the attempt to stand both within and without an institution, to belong to it and yet to recognize no filial obligation, to receive from it and yet to feel no tender, protective reticence in its regard. Criticism can itself be an act of loyalty, that criticism which painfully emerges from one's loving concern. Quite otherwise is that callous disparagement delivered with palpable satisfaction to

the critic. I think that the strength of my feelings in this matter comes partly from bafflement. Not only do I find it distasteful to hear catholics complacently criticizing the Church, the clergy criticizing absent clergy for the titillation of the laity, and religious exposing the problems of their congregation for the benefit of the mildly curious outsider: I really am puzzled at their lack of scruple in this regard.

The word 'loyalty' suggests tradition and the sense of the past. The conservative thinks that he has a feeling for the past, for 'the good old ways'. If he really had, he would understand that 'the good old ways' were once new, were even contemporary; he would realize that the world is constantly changing, and that in new circumstances 'the old ways' are not exactly the old ways, and perhaps are not so good either. If we have a genuine appreciation of the past, we shall be sensitive to the present and thoughtful about the future; we shall be genuine progressives. But a number of today's progressives think history unimportant. There is so much to learn: group dynamics, third world theology and the simpler chords of the guitar, which leave no time to enter into the complexities and contradictions of the past. A handful of facile clichés are all that is necessary, so that we can use 'medieval', 'counter-reformation', and the more sophisticated of us 'ultramontane', to dress our views with a pseudo-historical perspective. If modern radicals had a little more knowledge of history they would find the present conduct of ecclesiastical authority, though often dismaying, much less profoundly demoralizing. They might learn from a whole great tradition (for example, Athanasius, Catherine of Siena, Thomas More and Newman), how to be steadfastly loyal while being open-eyed and without illusions, how to develop individual charisms powerfully for good without having 'to do their own thing' in near disaffiliation.

One alleged justification for diminished loyalty is our loyalty to a larger world, to christianity instead of to the Church, to humanity instead of credal groups. Paradoxically – a word that can be legitimately inserted in front of so many statements about human beings – since catholics have learned in the last two decades a much broader and deeper view of the world and the Church's part in it, we have also become very cliquish among ourselves. There is now a very strong tendency for us to split into little groups of the like-minded clustering round our own particular chosen point on the spectrum between the heresy-hunting reactionary and the extreme progressive. This is more excusable in the conservatives in their narrow

zeal to preserve the true orthodoxy; it is very much less excusable in those who would claim the large perspective. The latter cut themselves off, not only from the ultra-conservatives, but from the broad mass of the Church and, so it seems to me, do so without making any noticeable impact on the rest of the world. It is as though, since Pope John opened the windows to let in some fresh air, we have formed little huddles where the room temperature best suits us, and most of us, whether reactionary or radical, with our backs to the window most of the time.

There is a kindred consideration. One facet of the modern hostility to the impersonal institution, and one praiseworthy response to the growing isolation of the individual in our present society, is a new and, in principle, very healthy stress on community. Unfortunately the genuine concept is frequently lost sight of in the enthusiasm generated by the notion. Some years ago a group of young nuns were telling me how horribly impersonal a large community was, and how life in small groups of four or five would be better. By 'better' I think they meant 'nicer'. They were dreaming of pleasant little groups of the like-minded, of the three or four people they liked best, where the effort to 'fit in' would be minimal. Surely community spirit means the very opposite of this: it means accepting the fact that people are different and should be different, together with the truth that most worthwhile human projects (I want to say 'institutions', but dare not) reach their achievement in both maintaining and blending differences. An orchestra, a football team, a church, needs different sounds, different skills, varying charisms; and the differences must be both held and harmonized. This is never easy. Untamed individualism will prevent blending; sheer conformity will mean that there is nothing to blend. The individual has to be resolute in making his own distinct contribution; he must also have the self-discipline to be aware of the rest of the orchestra, side or church, and harmonize with them. Because our individual sense of the whole can be very defective, we have to be guided by those whose responsibility it is to look to the total effort, the conductor, the captain, even (though I never expected myself to be writing this!) ecclesiastical superiors.

I must not be too censorious; to start something, you need to begin with people who can work together fairly easily. Otherwise the project will never get off the ground. But the initial agreement is a mere beginning. To build on it, to bring together a greater diversity of characters and viewpoints, is the real challenge. Meeting it

requires prolonged effort and discipline, both personal and corporate, both of which are to be ruled out if we must have total spontaneity with immediate and unbroken satisfaction.

Corporate bodies, like individuals, are tempted to use the easier route, even if it does not really lead to their original destination. Because the difficulty of harmonizing differences is considerable, it has sometimes been avoided by the imposition of uniformity, while corporate discipline has been secured by some very questionable devices. One of these was to make the individual more amenable by reducing his self-confidence, so that he leaned the more upon the institution and its leadership. Make a man feel small and you correspondingly enhance the scale of the institution and the stature of its officers. The technique has been used by many an institution, religious as well as secular, and is, I am told, flagrantly exercized by 'chapters' of hell's angels, whose neophytes undergo a period of outrageous servitude. Most of us now see through this particular tactic and rightly repudiate it. The reaction, like any other reaction, can be excessive, and cocksureness, more's the pity, becomes the fashion. Humility, as distinct from that benumbing diffidence which results from humiliation, is an objective virtue. It is a part of wisdom to see one's own limitations, to be willing to take part in a production of 'Hamlet' without demanding the role of the Prince. When we insist, as many of us do, on having our 'own scene', it is a poor little drama that we present. One unpleasant technique for 'cutting people down to size' and encouraging their respectful submission is to encourage their sense of guilt, to harp on their sins and their failure to live up to their ideals, to engender a feeling of moral feebleness. Against this technique also people have revolted, as the diminished number of confessions shows. And once again there has been some over-reaction. Many of us no longer scrutinize our conduct rigorously. That would be 'unhealthy'. We are no longer willing to state an exact account of moral failures; that would be 'obsessive'. And a crust of complacency develops, hindering our moral growth. Solid achievement is rare except when one is passionately aware of how much is to be done, and how little has been done.

May I go back to my building site? I should like to look nostalgically, and with some uncertainty, at the gaunt, extensive, now largely abandoned premises on the street of self-denial. My nostalgia does not come from any pleasure in penance; but I still have hankerings after a lost simplicity of outlook. Once upon a time it seemed obvious that being a good christian would normally be a painful

business, and therefore it was wise to keep in training by the practice of mortification. Nor do I now think these propositions untrue. But I do see that if Christ came healing and liberating, then it is very inappropriate to wear one's christanity like a perpetual, ankle-length hair-shirt. Nor am I to be persuaded that christian joy is a 'spiritual' joy, without any sort of relationship to 'enjoyment' as we commonly use the word. I incline to think that the way out of my difficulty lies through the notion of 'liberation', through the power of christian confidence and fortitude to free one from that network of dependence on so many things, so many gratifications, all necessary for our continued serenity. Perhaps the really good christian can enjoy a good meal, and can also suffer a considerable curtailment of the quality and quantity of his rations with splendid unconcern. The convinced christian has, even in the midst of real privation, more powerful reasons to rejoice than the pampered materialist could imagine. But that level of christian virtue and practice is a decidedly elevated one, and not that easy of achievement. Is any worthwhile achievement easy? Nobody becomes a craftsman overnight, nor a scholar in a day, and for the greatest craft of all, that of loving, does even a lifetime suffice?

Of two illusions I am particularly afraid. First, I worry that our rejection of the harsh 'penance for its own sake', 'if it's nasty, its certain to be good for you' school of thought, will render us flabby and unable to face discomfort with nonchalance and leave us quite unable to cope with discouragement. The latter form of feebleness is now abounding.

Secondly, I shudder when I hear the word 'fulfilment'. Within the sound of that word flourish, I reckon, all the worst illusions. When 'mortification' was mortification, 'and very good for you too', self-fulfilment as a christian ambition was obviously ruled out. It was patently the opposite of self-denial. Now I see that a person's talents, interests and disposition are not something just to be negatived as a way to salvation. (To be honest, I never believed anything as outrageous as that, nor did I ever hear it maintained.) A person's talents and disposition are there to be employed in the salvation of the world, and are presumably a good guide as to what is expected of him by Providence. But he is a passing wise man who can judge his own capacities objectively and decide dispassionately the best field for their deployment. I should be a lot less sceptical about 'fulfilment' if sheer fashion played less part in determining how people want to fulfil themselves, if a lot more people felt called

to fulfilment in jobs which have little prestige attached to them, if 'fulfilment' were only more compatible with routine, with short vacations, working under the direction of others and residing in the shabbier provincial cities.

If you want to talk about 'fulfilling yourself', I shall want to know in what sense Christ 'fulfilled' himself as a carpenter at Nazareth, as a teacher whose teaching was largely rejected, as a convicted felon. I am not saying that he did not fulfil himself, even if St Paul preferred to say that 'he emptied himself'. But show me that the fulfilment you demand is the sort of fulfilment that Christ practised and you will find me genuinely open to conviction. At the moment I find talk of fulfilment a mixture of shallow humanism, superficial christianity and no small quantity of self-deceit.

How unkind! Rereading this article I am taken aback to find how little kindness it contains. Do Janus's four eyes look out without compassion? I have tried to excuse myself on the plea that kindness is exercized towards people and that my contempt has been directed at notions, at wrong and harmful notions. Should you be kind to illusions? Certainly one should be kind to those who have illusions and compassionate about the circumstances which produce them.

Now for my last piece of didacticism. We should be kind to the sources of our present illusions. We should be kind because they stem from adolescence. We are at the moment, even if we be middle-aged, even if we be older still, all adolescents. We have emerged from the childhood in which we were so long held, from our long period of being told exactly what to do, of learning only what it was good for us to know, our development stifled by the 'absolute paternal care'. But you do not pass straight from infancy to adult maturity. There are all the pains of adolescence, with its idealism, untutored energy, impatience, and hasty judgments based on inexperience. The energy, the idealism of adolescence are valuable. If they can be preserved into a period of sounder judgment, if experience enriches rather than crushes them, they become invaluable. If we can produce ideals without illusions, then the new Jerusalem will arise, solid and enduring.