

THE ARITHMETIC OF JERICO

By JOHN HARRIOTT

IT IS NOT just the best tunes that christians lose to the devil. Ever since the enlightenment, it seems to me, they have been losing their clothes, their purses and their jewellery to their opponents. Odder still, instead of indignantly demanding them back, they have often failed to recognize their own former possessions, preferring to launch strenuous, ramshackle campaigns against their wearing and possession. Liberalism, humanism, the democratic process, the struggle for social justice, all have in their time been opposed by the custodians of the gospel in which these causes are rooted. And even during the past hundred years, when the left hand of Rome has been writing them into its social teaching, the right hand, with its fondness for the hierarchical, the authoritarian and the feudal, has continued to promote a theology and a conduct of church affairs which seriously impede a whole-hearted effort to reconstruct human society on the part of the christian people. An over-simplification? Perhaps. But not wildly inaccurate as a general description of general tendencies which account for specific contentions and confusions within the Church today. Thus, for example, the quite remarkable contradiction between ever more insistent episcopal support for human rights and distributive justice in social matters, and the Church's own primitive practice of justice within its own domain. It is like watching a lecturer on a public platform passionately inveighing against the death penalty, while intermittently shooting his audience, one by one.

This phenomenon is, I believe, the key to understanding various upsurges of radical christians, especially radical clergy, within the catholic Church during the past twenty years, and especially in the decade following the Second Vatican Council. To lump together the movements typified by Camilo Torres, the Berrigans, Helder Camara, *Echange et Dialogue*, the Priests of Golconda in Colombia, Christians for Socialism in Chile, Priests for the Third World in Argentina, or 'Cosdegua' in Guatemala, radical ginger groups like Slant in Great Britain, and the individual priests and laypeople who

read more at www.theway.org.uk

have crossed swords with church authorities on issues ranging from racial discrimination to birth control, would be a complete falsification. They do not constitute a party within the Church. Their aims, methods, language, and particular social situations all differ in many particular respects. Some concentrate on reforming or revolutionizing the Church's internal administration and structures, others on restatement and development of doctrine, others on transforming human society in the light of the gospel as they understand it. Yet it is not an entirely false instinct which leads both their friends and their enemies to recognize a certain family resemblance between them: a resemblance based on something much deeper than the superficial fact that most of them live uncomfortably, and sometimes perilously, within the institutional Church as we know it, and that most are periodically involved in clashes with the Church's officialdom.

Perhaps the most striking common factor is that all of them take with unusual seriousness the petition contained in the Our Father: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'. They are running to paradise in time, not because they have abandoned belief in everlasting life but because they believe that obedience to Christ's teaching must and will construct an earthly society with the lineaments of heaven's. Certainly the individual's heart must be converted, but the social environment can help or hinder that process; and contrariwise the converted heart will act upon society because love, the giving of life, of peace, of joy, the hunger for justice, all imply social relationships. No one can be loving, life-giving, just, in isolation from other men or in some totally abstract sense.

For all these groups and individuals, therefore, man is indeed the measure of all things. Not because Marx said so, but because God made him so. Their intention is not to imprison man's origin, destiny and field of activity within time and space as the materialist does, but to express the same loving reverence for man, in their response to God, as God himself exhibited in his dealings with our world. It was God who glorified man by taking his nature and becoming brother to all men. It was through human words, gestures, relationships, that God revealed in the only way truly intelligible to us his own nature and purposes, and answered the basic religious question: What is God like? It was in a human life perfectly lived that God held a mirror up to all living men in which they could see their own nature, how they might live at their highest pitch, what heights

they might scale in time and in eternity. Man became the junction of all traffic between God and creation. At God's bidding he became earth's lord and master, earth's steward, earth's pilot, earth's voice. In turn, each individual man was to express his response to God through his dealings with his fellow-men. As St John tells us, no man can claim to love God if he does not first love his brother. It is not by calling on God, by the rhetoric of praise, that man is to demonstrate his own love, reverence and wonder of the Almighty, but by his care, compassion and loving service of Christ's and his own brethren. The critical test of the true christian, the pass-mark for entering into eternal life, is the simple act of giving a cup of water to a thirsty man. Words are cheap, actions cost dear. The ultimate command of God made man, 'Love one another as I have loved you', is a call to strenuous action in the field of human affairs, since it was by acting among and upon men, not by loving words alone, that Christ the master redeemed the world.

It is in the gospel, therefore, that one must look for the inspiration of radical movements within the Church, not in current ideologies and political manifestoes. It is in the gospel that they find the flame that sets alight that passionate concern for man which links them with the humanist and political activist: with those who, in some sense, have stolen the christian's clothes. They do not see man as a substitute for God, or as a rival to God. Rather he is the chief arena of human transactions with God; and Christ is, in the words of Pope Paul speaking of Christ and the workers, 'the prophet of all their just causes'.

To this extent they part company with those who understand christian perfection as lying in total detachment from visible human concerns, and in the cultivation of purely interior and 'spiritual' qualities, like the desert hermits who fled the city and the marketplace to escape all human company and what they believed to be its inevitably corrupting effects. They are firmly established in the tradition that sees the christian as called to transform the city, not to fly it. But they differ also from all those, whether within the Church or outside it, who wish to impose a blue-print for human perfection on all men, regardless of their individual or background circumstances. Accused of being ideological revolutionaries, they are on the whole – I speak from casual observation rather than as an academic philosophical critic – non-ideological liberals who are first and foremost concerned with particularities. Far from starting with a theory and then trying to apply it to men, they begin with the

individual human beings they know; and it is from their immediate perception of human needs that any theories they may embrace devolve. For some, it is true, especially in latin America, this has led to their embracing a neo-marxist political programme of social revolution; for others, as in North America, an active political role within the democratic system; but for others again, like Daniel Berrigan, it has led to outright rejection of the role of political priest and to donning the mantle of the prophet who cries woe upon all political systems as they at present exist. The common denominator is the afflicted individual, the christian duty to lift him to his feet, and a belief that, for this to be done effectively and lastingly, far-reaching changes are necessary in the structures of society.

Structures of society: it sounds a high-faluting expression, but in practice what it means is all the ways in which human beings so organize their lives that human casualties are the inevitable result. The christian radicals wish to delve into the origins and causes of human misery and remedy them at source, wherever this is possible. Christian philanthropy in the past has been like a first-aid station set up at a factory gate through which issue a continuous stream of shocked, wounded and bleeding victims: the nuns, the priests, the laypeople have handed out cups of tea, bandaged the wounded, mended their torn clothes, put a shilling or two in their pockets. But they have not gone inside to see what is causing the trouble. That's not good enough, say the radicals. We have to investigate the operations inside the factory to discover why so many people are being injured, and attempt to put matters right.

Perhaps an old man whom I saw the other night can stand for all such victims. He stumbled on to the underground train and sat down opposite me. He was drunk, and bundled up in torn, dirty clothes. He sat hunched and fidgeting, his eyes savagely sweeping the scatter of passengers in the compartment, and growled and snarled incoherently. All one could catch were monotonous obscenities, and over and over 'I hate . . . I hate . . . I hate', spoken with such venom that the words clearly frightened everyone within ears-hot. He was Caliban to the life, a spirit of malevolence. And what, one wondered, had made him so? Was it possible to believe that he, personally, was entirely to blame for his condition? Or was it not more probable that a thousand disappointments, rejections, injustices, had brewed the poison which welled up from his depths?

This is not, I think, a merely sentimental view. Of course our own interior state, our choices, our acquired habits, above all the gravi-

tational pull of personal selfishness can corrupt and disfigure our personality. But education, housing conditions, income, access to medical and social services, the political system within which we live, and supremely the experience or the absence of trust, love, attention, can extend or diminish the range of choice or weaken the capacity to choose. Social conditions inhibit or add to the individual's onward movement towards complete, adult, humanity. And it needs no remarkable genius to recognize that within each nation a small number of privileged people 'enjoy every advantage', while the vast majority struggle against odds; and that taking human society as a whole, a small number of nations take for granted opportunities and satisfactions the majority can only aspire to in some distant future; and that these gross inequalities result from defects in human organization which are open to remedy. The radical christian is not necessarily turning his back on the notion of original sin, or adopting a utopian view of human nature, if he devotes himself to changing the conditions of life so that every individual enjoys the maximum freedom to develop and give expression to whatever human resources, whatever gifts and talents, lie dormant within him.

The word 'human' keeps recurring, because it is the total human being, not the individual under a particular aspect or title – citizen, consumer, elector, employee, householder or whatever – which is the object of this christian concern. And the words 'political' and 'social' steal into the argument because political and social aims and arrangements are the medium through which the basic necessities for a full human life are supplied or denied: necessities such as food and water, shelter, employment, clothing, medicines, access to information, cultural and recreational facilities, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of movement. Just as the modern christian radical, by working to root out the causes of suffering, is advancing the humanitarian thrust of traditional christianity, so, in working for the removal of whatever interior and external constraints hamper human development, he is extending the work of the Church as an agency of human freedom. For, no matter what objections occur to the secular humanist, the catholic conservative, and even the catholic radical himself, since he so often runs foul of the institutional Church as represented in its officials, a strong case can be made out to support the claim that the Church has inspired much activity for enlarging human freedom, whether it be social, political or psychological. It is easy to laugh at the pious missionary handing

out Mother Hubbards to the natives to cover their nakedness; easy to forget that he often liberated them from taboos that plagued their whole existence. As a village headman told a catholic bishop in Borneo: 'Before the priest brought us the teaching of Christ we lived in fear. If a particular bird flew in a certain direction while we were bringing in the rice, the whole crop had to be thrown in the river and destroyed. If we heard the cry of a certain animal, we must all stay in our houses for several days. When we built a longhouse, a newborn baby had to be placed in the hole for the main upright and crushed to death to protect the house against evil spirits. When we became christians, we were freed from these taboos'. In his own way, the christian radical is working to free men from a whole legion of taboos and evil spirits which blindfold his eyes, chain his feet and bind his hands, whether they are interior fears, anxieties and confusions, or exterior devils like poverty, hunger and political oppression. His determination is to live the truth that will make men free, and to communicate the life that Christ has promised.

After such a sympathetic interpretation, there seems nothing left to do but place a halo on the radical's head, set him on a pedestal, and man the barricades. But of course it is not so easy. Christian radicals are not like immunized doctors moving among the plague-stricken. They too are subject to temptation, not least the temptation to pursue good ends by evil means: attacking the violent oppressor with violence, or countering arrogance, complacency, harshness and selfishness in those who enslave, by whipping up hatred, rancour, anger, and scorn among those who are enslaved. A man's enemies are those of his own household, especially the household of his breast. To make war on injustice without becoming mirror-images of those who are unjust is the hardest task of all; and a dozen revolutions, in which one gang of moral ruffians has been replaced by another, litter the path of history to prove it. And although most christian radicals seem to me well aware of the danger and careful to avoid it, inevitably there are some who are goaded by the cruelty and injustice they experience into countering fire with fire. (It is hard to agree with them in principle, and yet sometimes it seems an impertinence for one who lives in clover to criticize those who are wriggling on thorns for showing impatience.)

Opposition from outside takes many forms. There are those who are unwilling to surrender the power, riches and social prestige they already enjoy, and value christianity only in so far as it seems to make no painful demands on them, and to act as an additional

protection against those with designs on their property. Others genuinely believe that the gospel says nothing about the actual conduct of human affairs and is concerned only with the interior state of each separate individual. Others believe that the gospel demands whole-hearted repudiation of the material world. Others sympathize with the ideals of the radicals, but believe the world is as it is, and that no amount of striving will fashion a freer and more just society. Others again think that the radicals are right to labour for improvement but mistaken in believing, if they so do, that a paradise on earth is possible.

Leaving aside for the moment this final question which divides radicals themselves, we can, I think, see contemporary catholic radicals as protagonists of a visionary catholicism, one co-existent with a more ideological understanding to which in various forms their opponents are parties. There are in fact two faces of catholicism. In its visionary form, the focus is on man and man's world interpreted in the light of the essentials of christian faith communicated through divine revelation; the propositions which encapsulate that faith are seen as true but inadequate, and to that extent provisional, formulations. Full value is given to the statement that Christ is truly man, there is a continuous interest in the implications of that statement, and consequently a close attention to the nature and activities of man as the surest guide to our understanding of God. Or rather man, exalted by the living presence of Jesus Christ, and in him finding self-understanding, continues to learn God in the lineaments of man, as well as expressing love and reverence of God first and foremost by serving man, made in God's image and likeness. Secondly, the visionary sees that there is a real sense in which 'his own sweet will is heaven's will', that God has placed human destiny in man's own hands, to fashion responsibly and in freedom. He therefore rejects any flirtation with fatalistic interpretations of divine will and dominance such as characterize every other world religion. Thirdly, he thinks of man as an open-ended mystery whose evolution as a species cannot with certainty be predicted. Fourthly, he recognizes that God's life is communicated to every man, expects evidence of that grace at work in all men, and is therefore always seeking signs of divine action and common ground among those who are not enrolled within the christian churches. Fifthly, though he believes God has provided guide-lines for moral behaviour, he does not expect clear-cut answers to every moral dilemma; but he accepts responsibility for interpreting these general principles in

particular situations, and the concomitant necessity for risk, failure and recovery. Sixthly, he believes that the community founded by Christ is, like the sabbath, made for man, not man for the community, and that it is ultimately destined to be a home for all men; therefore that its bias is towards accepting, caring, welcoming and being an instrument of reconciliation.

This crude sketch, covering ground which could only be properly treated in several articles, is still sufficient to mark out potential areas of conflict. The sense of this world as the christian's immediate concern, trust in the democratic process within the christian community, the emphasis on human responsibility, the sense of the provisional, as well as other features of the visionary outlook, disturb those who think of revelation more as a stone handed to us by God and simply to be accepted rather than as something to be teased out and explored till the end of time; of the christian community as a privileged body which should glory in its exclusivity; in terms of hierarchy, obedience and order rather than of human responsibility and justice; and of a divine plan to be faithfully respected in every detail, rather than of man as, by divine invitation, co-creator and shaper of the natural world and human society.

All this, though it may seem to be a diversion, has a bearing on attitudes towards the perfectibility of human society. Those who think of perfection and salvation purely in terms of interior attitudes and individual salvation will certainly reject the notion of an earthly Utopia out of hand. So, too, those with a static view of human nature, and those who believe man to be so profoundly corrupt that any substantial betterment of human society is not on the cards. Even for the majority of christian radicals, the possibility of an earthly kingdom which perfectly reflects the heavenly, in which love, harmony, freedom, peace and joy have triumphed over the discord, hatred, envy and constraints which are endemic in the world as we know it, is not a burning question. For most of them social justice is not a lost world, a sunny upland, distant but perceptible, towards which the caravan of man laboriously struggles, but a dynamic, a process, by which gradual improvements here and there are effected.

Yet the question cannot be dismissed, and the answer is by no means certain. It is a question which, as Professor John Passmore's brilliant study, *The Perfectibility of Man*, has demonstrated, has teased men for centuries in all parts of the world, and certainly divided christians in every age. That, at first sight, may seem odd. Surely we are all going to die, and a heaven where we will know God

face to face, where there will be no more tears or mourning, where God has prepared what eye hath not seen nor ear heard, can only be thought of in terms of life after death? Certainly that is the expectation of most christians. On the other hand, would Christ have taught us to pray for the coming of the kingdom 'on earth as it is in heaven' if the possibility of such an event must be totally discounted? And is there not more than a passing hint in St Paul that he at least visualized an earthly state of universal harmony, a kingdom fit for God to rule over, a final period of history in which Christ would come again among men who would be spared the experience of death? And Paul was not the man to underestimate human sinfulness and corruption. Yet he states in a famous passage that 'the creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God'; in First Corinthians he seems to distinguish between the dead and those who will be changed and made imperishable but who are not going to die; and in First Thessalonians, mysteriously, of those still alive being taken up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

The stonger tradition, undoubtedly, is that Jerusalem lies 'above', that heaven lies outside the world of the physical senses, that perfect justice cannot be achieved within the boundaries of space and time. It does not, however, seem to me to be the case that one can dismiss with a wave of the hand all those who have suggested various routes to an earthly paradise, all the sects and parties who have striven for perfection on this side of the grave, and all those who have dreamed of a universal brotherhood of man, as being prey to illusions. The evidence of history and of our own experience is against them. But man himself, the christian faith, the christian community, are all, as far as we can tell, still in their infancy, and we cannot be sure when and how he will achieve full stature. In any case, it is dreams and visions which breathe life into torpid man, and whoever has no promised land in his mind's eye is unlikely to journey far. For the rest, there is plenty for the christian radical, while he tries to live in the light of the gospel and calls on the power of God, to which he can turn his hand: poverty, hunger, ignorance, cruelty and the unjust systems which give rise to them in a world where there is enough for every man's need, but too little for the greed of a few. As he labours for that justice which is the only sure foundation of peace and order in human society, he can echo Newman's words: 'I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me'.