

I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD

By P. G. WALSH

THE OTHER Sunday here in Glasgow I listened to an incontestably orthodox sermon on 'Christians in the world' which made me want to shuffle my feet throughout. The preacher exhorted the congregation to be true to Christ's exhortation to be 'in the world but not of it' (Jn 17, 16-18); for as a christian community we have our own clear and exacting standards by which we are to live, but we are surrounded and assailed through the TV, newspapers, theatres, cinemas (and on the broader front through oppressive regimes, multi-national corporations, etc.) with a divergent and indeed antagonistic philosophy of living, against which we must be perpetually on our guard. The occasion of this sermon, clearly tenable in part if not in whole, was the publication of a pastoral letter from the bishops of the archdiocese which drew attention to the galloping degeneration in standards of public morality as reflected in the current statistics of divorce and abortion. The sentiments expressed in the sermon and in the pastoral letter I am far from seeking to impugn; in fact as I approach the chilly plateau of late middle age, I recognize in myself an increasing tendency to huddle with the moralists and to generate some heat in the face of mankind's decay. And this is precisely the danger – not in identifying 'the world' with the immoral stances of the society in which we live, but in totally externalizing 'the world' and envisaging it as something outside and apart from ourselves. This is a temptation particularly insidious in communities of irish descent and tradition; it is tempting to ascribe it to that monastic and penitential discipline from which irish Christianity derives its metallic strength. At any rate, those of us who live in irish tribal cocoons have constantly to resist the temptation to identify 'the world' with the poor devils beyond the pale. Hence my metaphorical foot-shuffling which I now attempt to rationalize.

I read in Raymond Brown's book on the Gospel of St John that *kosmos*, the greek word for the world, appears in the New Testament nearly two hundred times, and that John is responsible for a high

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proportion of these usages. If we exclude the appearances where no value-judgment is reflected in the use of the word, we find it employed with two profoundly different, almost warring implications. On the one hand, *kosmos* can denote a world intrinsically good, a world capable of positive response, a world which can be purified and attain wholeness. This view is the legacy of the Old Testament. When God created the world, as the refrain in Genesis has it, he saw that it was good. Then Wisdom's poetic apostrophe reminds us that God preserves this good world because he continues to cherish it. 'Thou lovest all the things that are, and hatest none of the things which thou hast made: for thou didst not appoint or make anything hating it. And how could anything endure if thou wouldst not, or be preserved if not called by thee?' (Wis 12, 25-6) So in John's gospel, though 'the world' is a sinning world, Jesus is the lamb who removes its sins and saves it (Jn 1, 29; 4, 42). Such scriptural passages as these formed the basis of the secular christianity so rife in the early nineteen-sixties, the time when Harvey Cox wrote *The Secular City* to bring St Augustine up to date, a book which now seems to epitomize the paradisaical innocence before the fall.

But the big guns of John thunder out the diametrically opposed view. So far from embracing the *kosmos* because the Father loves it, we are bidden to renounce it because it hates the Son. Christ and his followers cannot belong to it, and Christ's Spirit finds it incompatible. The world hates Christ because he attests that its works are evil. He has come to deliver his followers from the world. The world is his adversary with which he grapples and which he claims to have toppled. 'Have confidence. I have overcome the world' (Jn 7, 7; 15, 19; 17, 9; 16, 33). It is John's more pessimistic formulation rather than Wisdom's glorifying of the world which speaks more authoritatively for this era of the late 'seventies, in which Amnesty International documents the progressive erosion in the standards of justice and the maintenance of human dignity in so many christian countries of the globe.

It is altogether too facile to suggest, with so many of our scriptural commentaries, that there is no fundamental theological difficulty in the confrontation of these two warring concepts of the world, that scripture hymns the sinless creation and condemns the flawed world. The world which the Father loves and sustains in Wisdom is the flawed world; John does not hymn that world except in the most perfunctory way. His gospel, as has been frequently observed,

is the sustained drama of conflict between light and darkness. Christ and his followers, the light of the world, are under siege from the forces of darkness. Those satanic forces, after appearing to prevail, are finally routed by the glory of the risen Son.

We are rightly urged by the advocates of liberation-theology to devote more attention in our interpretation of the scriptures to the social and political circumstances under which they were composed. This plea is clearly important when we seek to formulate a christian view of the world in the face of these two contrasting scriptural visions. The picture painted by John of the mode of christian presence in the world must have been powerfully affected by the early experiences of the christian communities as he knew them in the later decades of the first century. John speaks as one of the jewish Christians of Palestine who are hemmed in by the constraining antagonism of jewish orthodoxy. (There is a sixteenth-century latin play, the *Baptistes*, based on the death of John the Baptist, by the scottish humanist George Buchanan, which brilliantly evokes such hostility a little earlier.) John's voice may also be the voice of the greek Christians of the eastern Mediterranean. There must have been many communities, if the evidence of the younger Pliny in the early years of the second century is reliable, where religious practice was in some degree constrained by the representatives of the roman imperial power.

John's imagery of the inner circle of christian light, surrounded and menaced by the forces of darkness, tends to overshadow the contrasting welcome to the world, so evident in the Old Testament texts, whenever and wherever a minority community lives precariously under the domination of a hostile and encircling ideology. Its seductive danger has been that it has been frequently applied in the history of the Church as the whole of christian truth rather than one of two facets of it. John's gospel has a *quod semper, quod ubique* relevance, but it must first be reconciled with the equally scriptural truth that God cherishes and sustains his creation by charging us with its stewardship. Christ overcomes the world through the constructive presence and work of his followers in it. The yearning for physical withdrawal behind barricades of our own erection for the proper contemplation of the world's debased standards must not be indulged.

One of the liberating functions of the study of ecclesiastical history is to observe how often the Church has tried to accommodate its practice to the demands of such scriptural texts. It is useful to

focus the long telescope and to observe at distant quarters the damage which can be done by too simplistic an application of the johannine imagery. The last century of the western empire provides almost the perfect paradigm. Gibbon characterized the fall of that western empire of Rome as 'the triumph of Christianity and barbarism'. With this judgment he expresses too scathingly and polemically a perfectly tenable historical position. When leading christian figures counselled their friends to withdraw from the secular world to ensure their personal salvation, they were not content merely to commend the positive merits of the monastic life. They depicted the secular world as that arena of the forces of darkness so powerfully described in John's gospel. Writers like Paulinus of Nola regard themselves as holding the front line in the company of Augustine and Jerome and others; they are waging war on the secular world. The friends to whom Paulinus writes are urged to change loyalties, to abandon (in another metaphor) the shipwreck of the world.

This was, to coin a phrase, the unacceptable face of monasticism. These christian leaders felt themselves suffocated by the cultural pressure of classical humanism, and blinded themselves to the merits of God's world. So they failed to make the necessary distinction. They failed to point out to their friends that withdrawal from 'the world' need not have demanded withdrawal from the world. In other words, withdrawal from the corrupting influences of John's *kosmos* need not have demanded the physical withdrawal into monastic life urged by a Paulinus. For him, the world was to be abandoned because it was past redemption, and only those withdrawing into the circle of light would be saved. Because such leading christian figures failed to appreciate the importance of the role of christian statesman and christian administrator, the benefits of imperial peace and order were allowed to founder in the fifth-century roman West.

Inevitably this is a grossly over-simplified picture, but it contains sufficient truth to allow us to pose some uncomfortable contemporary questions. The catholic community in Britain is not notable as a constructive force in the national world of politics, though some of the Church's national commissions are achieving an increased impact. All too often, however, the more committed the christian group the more apolitical is its stance. If I may bite the hand that feeds me, I have to say that I know a Jesuit or two as well as a few laymen whose attitudes are curiously unconstructive. This is not a

matter of a failure to participate in political activities; the same people can't do everything. But all too often such individuals project an unhealthy cynicism. They don't appear to believe that God could envisage employing the talents of 'Moses' Callaghan or Mrs Thatcher or David Steel in his economy of the world. To revert to the fifth century for a moment, the only time when Paulinus seems to show any enthusiasm for the merits of the imperial administration is when the barbarians start to pour over the Italian northern frontier. Perhaps it needs an enemy bomb or two to concentrate the minds of the cynics.

To be fair, there aren't many who simplistically equate 'the world' in this way with the leaders of state or local government. More appropriately we identify it (and comfortably externalize it) with the corrupt activities within the world. We recognize it, with Solzhenitzyn, in the unremitting pressures of the Russian political machine on any form of religious or social dissent. Or in the repression and deceit involved in Steve Biko's death and the subsequent white-washing in South Africa. Or in the methods of interrogation practised in Chile as revealed by Sheila Cassidy's testament. Or in the hounding of the Jews of Amsterdam which the trial of Pieter Menten in the Netherlands has resurrected. Or (since honesty as well as charity finally begins at home) in the interminable nightmare of violence practised by both sides in Ulster, or in the jack-boots of the National Front or the miners' boots in the picket lines at Grunwick, or in the umpteenth year of the London run of *O. Calcutta!*, or in the statistics of divorce and abortion cited in the pastoral letter of the Glasgow bishops.

But the important thing is to recognize these sins as sins of community. No-one who has followed the Pieter Menten trial was left in doubt that a large proportion of Amsterdam's population, many of them Catholics, closed their eyes to the forced removal of Jews by the Germans from that city. The inquest into the death of Steve Biko has been followed by a general election, in which the political machine which first humiliated and then killed him has received massive support. We cannot pretend that if pitched into similar circumstances we should have performed any better. Wherever we live we share the communal responsibility for the corrupt manifestations of the world. We share the guilt of the murders in Ulster, the infant-mortality of Brazil, the starvation of Calcutta. There is a haunting passage from the Roman historian Tacitus, in which he ascribes the atrocities committed by Domitian to the collective

responsibility of his whole generation. 'It was our hands', he writes, 'which dragged Helvidius off to prison, our faces registered shame at the sight of Mauricus and Rusticus, it was we whom Helvidius bespattered with his innocent blood'. As so often, the pagan's insights are a standing reproach to the Christian.

This is the sense in which the teaching of John is urgently valid. The corruption of the forces of darkness lies not only around us but within us: the infection of the whole community of which we have failed to be the ferment. By our failure to maintain the world which the Father loves, we too carry the guilt for the temporary triumph of the world. The sooner we stop regarding ourselves as God's cowboys warding off the Indians from the wagon-ring of unflawed righteousness, the better. The message of John abides, but the metaphor can mislead.

To some extent this is a scottish *cri de coeur*; as I have earlier suggested, the tendency to externalize 'the world' after the johannine model may be part of the irish legacy. Living within the cocoon of righteousness is warm and comforting, as I, a non-Scot, gladly attest. But it can also be stifling. When from time to time I meet members of religious orders from the West of Scotland, performing outstanding service for the Church elsewhere in Britain or abroad, it is striking how many of them do not pine to return home to work in an atmosphere where they know christian commitment to be wider and deeper. Of course the preference for service elsewhere always contains an element of *peregrinatio pro Christo*. But such voluntary exile may also incorporate a sense of greater freedom because of a less rigorous demarcation between the kingdom of light (the realm within the Catholic structures) and the exterior darkness. It is only fair to emphasize that this sense of restriction is not something imposed by episcopal direction, but a psychological condition sustained by a long tradition of immense strength which envelops bishops as well as priests and laity.

It would be unfair to leave this lament hanging in such intolerably vague and abstract terms, and a concrete example may be helpful. I have been a member of the Catholic Education Commission since it was set up five years ago. From the start its overriding aim has been to defend the catholic stake in scottish education, and in achieving that aim it has won the respect of the Scottish Office and of local educational representatives. It has played a notable part in temporarily defusing the time-bomb of integrated education, which was a real threat five years ago and which would leave the Church

inestimably weaker if it came. This achievement is not to be underrated. But it has been achieved with a wholly johannine outlook on the world. I have left meeting after meeting downcast at some opportunity missed through the lack of an ecumenical dimension, and through the failure to look beyond the immediate interests and concerns of the catholic community. And because our separate system inevitably encourages catholic teachers to seek their career wholly within it, the barrier between Church and world is reinforced by the financial considerations and the opportunities for advancement.

It seems to me to be perfectly possible to be a supporter of the ideals of catholic education and still to seek links with the outside world of education, the community at large. Can our schools be used after hours as community-centres? Is a controlled experiment possible to investigate the feasibility of combining with other denominations in establishing a christian school, for example in an area where our numbers may prove insufficient to maintain a catholic school? Are we encouraging our schools to engage in joint christian projects with the non-denominational institutions? Are we playing our proper part in assisting the education of the immigrant communities, or are we blithely leaving all the sweat and tears to our neighbours, the inhabitants of the realm of darkness? It is a pity that we cannot harness the energies so impressively expended when our interests are directly threatened, and achieve something in the service of others.

This seems to me to qualify as one of the two polar heresies arising from our inadequate theology of the world, the simplistic defence of the johannine frontier. But the other may be equally pernicious, especially for those who have advanced boldly into the world in the wake of Vatican II: and that is the tendency to ignore John's admonitions and to embrace the world's corrupting aspects. When Paulinus of Nola, millionaire consul and poet turned monk, sought to signal the danger points of the secular world, he inveighed especially against clinging to property and wealth, attachment to position and power, and espousal of the cultural ideals of classical humanism. With the deepening insights of fifteen hundred years of missionary reconciliation with diverse cultures, we now stigmatize the third of these as too negative and simplistic; even in Paulinus's day many Christians with surer apologetic instinct recommended the positive aspects of pagan thought. But the dangers of the first two, the corruptions of wealth and of power, remain the basic

threats to the christian life.

The Paulinus who sold all his property and encouraged his friends to do the same proceeded to build a large monastic foundation at Nola, but he peopled part of it with the poor and homeless. The monastic orders have sometimes become large-scale property-owners without always following suit. Fr Adrian Hastings has a diverting anecdote of a journey by aeroplane over Africa in the company of a Provincial whose reading matter, symbolically enough, was Galsworthy's *Man of Property*. One gets a similar feeling at Fiesole in observing that so many of the best holiday villas are owned by the apostolic groups devoted to holy poverty. And buildings are only one facet of possible corruption. Worldliness may reside in the trim fleet of cars outside a parish house or in convent-grounds; and then there is the type of the layman who after inveighing for ten minutes against the treasures of the Vatican climbs with no sense of irony into his E-type Jaguar. . . Should we not also be exercised about expensive tastes in dress and eating-habits? We do not all take vows of poverty, but perhaps we should be reminded more frequently in homilies of counsels as well as commandments, and, in the confessional, that a contribution to Oxfam may be more efficacious as satisfaction than the Divine Praises.

Power and position can corrupt us all, clerics and laity, but here a balanced attitude is vital. If we are to maintain the world that the Father loves, we cannot refuse a preferment which enables us to follow his will more effectively. Yet those in positions of authority, however petty, become uncomfortably aware of the corrupting dangers linked with the opportunities; Thomas More is the classic example. Each of us, in religious orders or out of them, should accept such positions in the world if we can competently perform them, and if we are certain that our motive is *diakonia* rather than mere job-satisfaction or the advancement of our own group.

Being in the world but not of it demands enthusiastic participation in its affairs and the attempt to master its corrupting elements. We must recognize that our flawed nature makes us heirs to and continuing creators of that corruption; this imperfection, this sharing in the world's sinning, is our burden till we die. This is why it may be healthy to add a mental gloss when we recite the Johannine phrases that we know so well. 'Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, of our unredeemed selves . . . Have confidence. I have overcome the world, my own unredeemed community'.