

THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

By KENNETH LEECH

JUST OVER SIXTY years ago, G. A. Studdert Kennedy ('Woodbine Willie'), probably at the time the best-known clergyman in Britain, told a Church congress:¹

A very large number of the people who attend our services and partake of the sacraments are disassociated personalities. They are one person on Sunday and another on Monday. They have one mind for the sanctuary and another for the street. They have one conscience for the church and another for the cotton factory. Their worship conflicts with their work, but they will not acknowledge the conflict. I want to press home what seems to me to be obvious that while this unfaced conflict exists the soul is not on the road to salvation.

His words have a depressingly contemporary ring. In a recent study Langdon Gilkey has noted that there remains 'the same deep split in our day as there was half a century ago between an individual and a social interpretation of the christian religion'. Gilkey goes on to argue that 'the deepest substantive question of current theology is . . . the mediation of this false opposition, an opposition untrue both to scripture and to an adequate theological interpretation of history and of human destiny'.² Midway between these two writers stands the major watershed of World War Two. Since the end of that war, and the collapse of earlier christian social movements, there has been a return of individualistic understandings, followed since the 1960s and 1970s by a renewal of concern, in various christian traditions, for a reintegration of soul and society, prayer and politics, mystical and prophetic dimensions of christian life.

For Christians in the western catholic tradition, the essentially social character of catholic theology and spirituality received a strong statement in Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism*, published in French in 1938.³ The theological work of Karl Rahner helped to

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develop a new understanding of the relation of grace to human progress. In Rahner there is a recovery of the unity between natural and supernatural which was to receive fuller statement in the texts of the Second Vatican Council.⁴ It was, of course, that Council which provided the theological framework for the recent renewal of a socially-based spirituality in the catholic world. The really important theological revolution initiated by the Council was its abandonment of a 'two planes' theology and its assertion of a unified doctrine of grace. Earlier sharp divisions between nature and supernature, and trends in theology which despised human potential and human struggles, receded as the Council texts emphasized the action of grace in all people, and linked together human participation in the divine life and the promotion of a more human life on earth.⁵ The 'inner life' and the quest for social justice were seen as aspects of one whole reality, the working out of God's will in history.

This unified spiritual/social viewpoint was continued in the thought of Pope Paul VI. In particular his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975) sought to hold together understandings of salvation and human liberation. The earlier document *Justice in the world*, issued by the third Synod of Bishops in 1971, has rightly been seen as a major turning point in catholic social theology. Since the Council and the developments arising from it, theologies of liberation have grown up in Latin America and elsewhere, and a number of writers have stressed the need for a spirituality of liberation and for the unifying of contemplation and political action.

There have been many important voices and influences outside the Roman Communion pointing in a similar direction. The social character of spiritual theology has always been a central aspect of eastern orthodox thought, though its practical expression has been uneven. Thinkers such as Khomiakoff, Solovyov and Bulgakov were important in an earlier period. Soon after the war Nicholas Berdyaev was writing of a necessary shift in christian consciousness, a shift from personal to social and cosmic transfiguration.⁶ Some recent orthodox writing has rejected individualist understandings of spirituality,⁷ while theologians of the syrian orthodox tradition have strongly emphasized the political consequences of orthodox theology.⁸

In recent years too there has been a remarkable and growing stress on social aspects of the gospel and of christian lifestyle among Christians of evangelical outlook. The influence of John Howard Yoder's *The politics of Jesus*⁹ is important here. Yoder, a theologian

from the mennonite tradition, rejected individualistic interpretations both of the ministry and teaching of Jesus, and of the theology of the early Church. A year after Yoder's book came the 'Declaration of evangelical social concern' (the 'Chicago Declaration') in which the signatories acknowledged, with penitence, the neglect of some key elements in the gospel. The following year, 1974, saw the origins of the Radical Discipleship movement at the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization. Since then, hardly a year passes without some new major statement of evangelical social commitment. In 1980, the All India Conference on Evangelical Social Action, meeting in Madras, issued the Madras Declaration which emphasized the biblical basis of social action. Since then there have been more reports and studies which have stressed the equal importance of evangelism and work for social justice, and have attacked 'one-dimensional spirituality' or 'soul-centred spirituality'.¹⁰

In this current renewal of the evangelical social tradition, the influence of Jim Wallis and the Sojourners Community has been considerable. Since its origins as *Post-American*, the monthly magazine *Sojourners* has become a major point of convergence for Christians seeking a biblically based social theology, with close links with the radical wing of the charismatic renewal, the anti-nuclear movement and Catholic Worker activists. While earlier issues of the magazine appealed mainly to those on the evangelical circuit, during the last few years the influence of the late Thomas Merton, of Henri Nouwen and of spiritual writers of other traditions has been very marked in its pages. In Britain, the influence of *Sojourners* is very evident on its sister magazine *Grass Roots*, published from the charismatic community at Post Green in Dorset, and manifesting the same fusion of charismatic spirituality and biblical social radicalism. Jim Wallis's books *Agenda for biblical people* and *The call to conversion*¹¹ bring out what is certainly the most distinctive feature of the movement, its rootedness in biblical truth. Wallis is highly critical of conventional evangelical preaching in which the gospel is moulded to fit a narcissistic culture. In this reduced and distorted form of Christianity, he claims, there has been a loss of the social meaning of conversion, so that conversion is seen as 'bringing Jesus into my life' rather than bringing us into his. The perspective represented by Wallis, as well as by writers such as Robert Webber and Ronald Sider in the USA, is evident in Britain in such groups as the Frontier Youth Trust, the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, and in an increasing number of younger evangelical

anglican clergy, many of them trained at St John's College, Nottingham.

Throughout the renewal of socially-based spirituality and of spirituality-rooted social commitment, there are some recurring features. There is a concern for more and better theology, and for the recovery of the unity of theology and social criticism. It is utterly mistaken to see this renewal as the abandonment of theology for social action. There is a recognition of the need for spiritual discipline and inner resources for those involved in social and political struggles. And in some recent writing there is a concern to relate personal pastoral care with public struggles.¹² We are witnessing a movement of which it can be said: 'The social movement among spiritual people is not merely a fad, but a maturing consciousness of what it means to be a spiritual person'.¹³

Not surprisingly, there has been a reaction against this renewal, and a movement, evident particularly in sections of the New Right, to stress the 'spiritual' role of the Church and the clergy, and to dismiss signs of social and political seriousness as evidence of 'marxist' influence or of infidelity to traditional doctrines. Not that 'other-worldliness' and 'false spirituality' have only recently returned to western Christianity: they were seen by Amos Wilder in 1955 as its central characteristics.¹⁴ Today, in both the United States and Britain, the truth of Moltmann's statement that the Church is 'sure to be most misused politically at the very moment when it wants to be non-political'¹⁵ is increasingly clear. Certainly the renewal of serious social commitment, with its roots firmly in biblical faith and in the life of prayer, has been seen as deeply threatening by secular power structures. Some of the strongest assertions of the 'spiritual' and individualist versions of Christianity in Britain in recent years have come from Conservative party politicians.¹⁶ In this they have received some quasi-theological underpinning from academics such as E. R. Norman who sees true religion as concerned with the 'ethereal qualities of immortality' and with 'the condition of the inward soul of man' rather than with social transformation.¹⁷ In a recent attack on Monsignor Bruce Kent, secretary of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the journalist Conor Cruise O'Brien claimed that the key theological question between them was whether 'the gospel is there not just to set men free from sin, but from what sin has done to our society'.¹⁸ Many of these recent writers believe that, in asserting the individualist version of Christianity, they are reasserting traditional Christianity against

modern liberal aberrations. In fact, as William Temple pointed out in 1942, the individualistic account is 'entirely modern and extremely questionable'.¹⁹ Those who are stressing the social dimensions of theology and spirituality are recovering vital and neglected aspects of christian orthodoxy.

In this process of recovery, we can identify a number of central theological and spiritual emphases. I want to draw attention to six which are of particular importance. The first is the doctrine of creation. As long ago as Irenaeus, belief in the essential goodness of the created order was seen as being of fundamental importance in orthodox spirituality. For, as Irenaeus insisted, if the created world is merely decay, ignorance and passion, then it is a sin to offer to God its fruits. While Gnostics in all ages have proposed a radical split between spirit and matter, between this world and the next, orthodox Christianity has insisted on the goodness and spirit-bearing power of matter. A vital aspect of the current renewal has been the recovery of a genuinely christian materialism, a materialism which not only values the created world, but also asserts the material basis of spirituality, its rootedness in the earth. So we have seen the growth of 'creation-centred spirituality' which rejoices in the goodness of the world.²⁰ We have seen an increased concern for ecological balance, and for a theology and spirituality which take environmental responsibility seriously. The influence of Teilhard de Chardin in helping to shape a 'spiritual materialism' and to unite mysticism and action to transfigure the creation ought not to be forgotten.

Secondly, the doctrine of incarnation. The syrian orthodox theologian Paul Verghese (now Metropolitan Paulos Gregorios), writing over a decade ago, saw an inadequate theology of incarnation as basic to the social inadequacy of much contemporary Christianity.²¹ From an evangelical standpoint, Robert Webber has criticized evangelicals' 'failure to comprehend the full implications of the Incarnation. The two sidedness of an incarnational perspective on spirituality recognizes both the mystical and practical, or what we may aptly term the human and divine sides of spirituality'.²² I have argued elsewhere that an incarnational theology is the basis both of christian spirituality and of christian social action, and is the unifying factor between them.²³ An incarnational spirituality will stress the 'taking of manhood into God', the deification of human nature, and the solidarity of all flesh with that of the incarnate Christ. It will stress both the glory of the human, and the reality of Christ's presence in the poorest and most despised of men and women.

It is very significant that at times of great oppression and repression, the dynamic in christology is rediscovered: thus Bonhoeffer's work in the nazi period, and Sobrino's in El Salvador today.

Thirdly, the understanding of sin and salvation. Much western religion has been dominated by an obsessive concern with human fallenness. Sin has been seen as social and even cosmic, while salvation has been restricted to the personal realm. So a stress on original sin in isolation has led to a kind of cosmic pessimism, a despondency about the world and about human potential. The renewed social spirituality stresses both the social dimensions of sin and the socially transforming power of grace. It recognizes that the themes of salvation, righteousness, redemption and peace have deeply social roots in the jewish tradition. It sees justification as a social process, the unity of persons in Christ, the establishment of a new creation.

A fourth aspect of the new spirituality is its emphasis on sacramental life, and especially on the eucharist. The recovery of the centrality of eucharistic worship has been associated in the past with the recovery of social vision. Thus in 1910 the anglo-catholic priest James Adderley observed that the Oxford Movement had brought about both the renewal of eucharistic life and the christian socialist revival.²⁴ Many of the heirs of the Oxford Movement were concerned with the social implications of the liturgy. 'The Mass', wrote W. G. Peck in 1927, 'is the beginning of the christian revolution, is filled with dynamic ethical meaning, fraught with vast spiritual power'.²⁵ In the 1960s John A. T. Robinson, in an important essay on 'Matter, power and liturgy', stressed the social and materialistic roots of the christian liturgy. The offering of bread and wine, he wrote, presupposed the process of production. Yet so often Christians are tempted to try to find a way to God through matter which by-passes its need for redemption. He saw the eucharistic offering as basic to christian social action in the world.²⁶

Fifthly, there has been a recovery of the central place of contemplative prayer and its relationship to social struggle. Segundo Galilea, writing from Chile, has emphasized the importance of a spirituality of liberation, a spirituality which synthesizes the political and the mystical, and which 'abolishes the false antithesis between the religious-contemplative and the militantly committed'. It is possible, he claims, that liberation theology may provide an ecumenical point of convergence in this area. The work of Thomas Merton is of abiding significance in the integration of contemplation

and action. One writer has suggested that Merton's *Asian journal* is comparable to Bonhoeffer's *Letters and papers from prison* in its potential influence on a generation.²⁸

Finally, there has been a recovery of the theme of the Kingdom of God as the heart of the gospel. The loss of the Kingdom as central was basic to the decay of social theology. As Kammer has written:²⁹ 'The disappearance of the centrality of the concept of the Kingdom of God represented the loss of the social dimension of the christian faith and the loss of any coherent doctrine of society'. As the loss of a Kingdom theology meant decay, so the recovery of the centrality of the Kingdom was seen by various writers as vital to the renewal of social theology. In 1922, in an influential essay, Percy Widdrington claimed that the recovery of the Kingdom as the 'regulative principle of theology' would bring about a reformation compared with which the reformation of the sixteenth century would appear a very small thing.³⁰ Today Jim Wallis has argued that the neglect of the Kingdom is the greatest weakness in contemporary evangelical preaching,³¹ while Gilkey emphasizes that the Kingdom is both the reign of God in the heart and a redeemed social order:

But as inner and outer, individual and social, cannot be separated at any point in christian understanding, so individual and social salvation cannot be separated. The Kingdom as a symbol of redeemed community underlines the final social as well as the clearly personal and individual character of God's purposes in historical time.³²

In the christian world today, the major division is increasingly one that cuts across the denominational divisions: it is the division between those who believe that the good news of the Kingdom of God involves a hope for the transformation of this world, and those who do not.

Christian spirituality is a Kingdom spirituality, a spirituality for a pilgrim people, a people on the move. It is a spirituality rooted in the material world. It is a spirituality which takes its life from the Word made flesh. It is a spirituality based upon the new creation, the reconciliation of all things in Christ. It is a eucharistic spirituality, a spirituality of common life, of eating and drinking, which recognizes, in the words of Stewart Headlam, that holy communion directs all who partake to be holy communists.³³ It is a contemplative spirituality, in which listening and discernment are the wellsprings of action. It is a spirituality which is in essence social, for, in St

Augustine's words, 'how could the City of God . . . begin at the start, or progress in its course, or reach its appointed goal if the life of the saints were not social?'³⁴

NOTES

- ¹ Report of the Anglo-Catholic Congress 1923.
- ² Gilkey, L.: *Society and the sacred: towards a theology of culture in decline* (New York, 1981), p 42.
- ³ London, 1962 edn.
- ⁴ *Theological investigations* 1 (Baltimore, 1961), pp 297-346.
- ⁵ See *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, *passim*.
- ⁶ Berdyaev, N.: *Ecumenical Review* 1, 1 (1948) pp 11-24.
- ⁷ Cf. Staniloae, D.: *Theology and the Church* (New York, 1980), pp 210-11.
- ⁸ See Verghese, P.: *The freedom of man* (Philadelphia, 1972); and Ostathios, G.: *Theology of a classless society* (London, 1979).
- ⁹ Yoder, John Howard: *The politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1972).
- ¹⁰ Conn, H. M.: *Evangelism: doing justice and preaching grace* (Grand Rapids, 1982), pp 57-58.
- ¹¹ Wallis, Jim: *Agenda for biblical people* (New York, 1976), and *The call to conversion* (New York, 1981).
- ¹² Cf. Selby, P.: *Liberating God: private care and public struggle* (London, 1983).
- ¹³ Meehan, F. X.: *A contemporary social spirituality* (New York, 1982), p 2.
- ¹⁴ Wilder, A. N.: *Otherworldliness and the New Testament* (London, 1955).
- ¹⁵ Moltmann, J.: *Christian* 6, 5 (1982), p 8.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Powell, E.: *No easy answers* (London, 1973); Jenkin, P.: *Credo* (London Week-end TV), 11 May 1980; Thatcher, M.: *Address at St Lawrence Jewry*, 4 March 1981.
- ¹⁷ Norman, E. R.: *Christianity and the world order* (Oxford, 1979), pp 2, 76.
- ¹⁸ *Observer*, 20 November 1983. O'Brien seems not to have realized that the words in question came from the 1971 Synod of Bishops. See Bruce Kent's response in *ibid.*, 4 December 1983.
- ¹⁹ Temple, W.: *Christianity and social order* (1942), p 7.
- ²⁰ Fox, M. (ed.): *Western spirituality: historical roots, ecumenical routes* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1979).
- ²¹ Verghese, *op. cit.*
- ²² Webber, R. E.: 'A critique of popular evangelical Christianity', in *New Oxford Review* (October 1979), pp 6-10.
- ²³ Leech, K.: *The social God* (London, 1981).
- ²⁴ Adderley, J.: *The parson in socialism* (Leeds, 1910).
- ²⁵ Peck, W. G.: *The social teaching of the sacraments* (London, 1927), p 128.
- ²⁶ Robinson, J. A. T.: *On being the Church in the world* (London, 1964 edn), pp 31-71.
- ²⁷ Galilea, S.: 'Liberation as an encounter with politics and contemplation', in *The mystical and political dimensions of christian faith*, ed. C. Geffré and G. Gutierrez (New York, 1974); and 'Spiritual awakening and movements of liberation in Latin America', in *Concilium* 9, 9 (1973), pp 129-38.
- ²⁸ Capps, W. H.: *Hope against hope: Moltmann to Merton in one theological decade* (Philadelphia, 1976).
- ²⁹ Kammer, C. L.: *The Kingdom revisited: an essay on christian social ethics* (University Press of America, 1981), p 48.
- ³⁰ *The return of Christendom* (London, 1922), p 102;
- ³¹ Wallis, Jim: *The call to conversion*, p 34.
- ³² Gilkey, L.: *op. cit.*, p 56.
- ³³ Headlam, S. D.: *The laws of eternal life* (London, 1888), p 52.
- ³⁴ *City of God*, 19, 5.