CHRISTIANS AS POLITICAL DISSENTERS

By PAUL OESTREICHER

FOR NEARLY TWO THOUSAND years, both personally and institutionally, Christians have lived on a see-saw, at one end the teaching of Romans 13, at the other of Revelation 13. Before the conversion of Constantine, St John the Divine's vision prevailed. Secular power was likened to a beast that 'opened its mouth to utter blasphemy against God . . . and was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them'. The writer of the Apocalypse was a prisoner on the island of Patmos. As a Christian who refused to bow down to the emperor he was, *ipso facto*, a dissident. (An early 'liberation theologian'?)

Not until after the emperor's conversion did the prevailing theology revert to Romans 13. To be a dissident was no longer the norm. St Paul, proud of his Roman citizenship, had felt it necessary to remind the Christian community in Rome itself that they had no right to opt out of their civic duties. Their citizenship in Christ's kingdom did not make them any less citizens of Rome. Therefore, Paul argued, 'he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed . . . for rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad'. Had Paul been writing somewhat later in his ministry, he could not possibly have indulged in such unqualified wishful thinking. His loyalty to the state would have been much more critical, as it must in reality have become if, as tradition strongly suggests, he ended his life in Rome as a martyr.

No simplistic appeal either to scripture or to tradition will suffice, in any age or in any place, to justify either conformity to the state or dissent. True as that may be, it has not deterred Christians from doing just that again and again. On this issue, as on many others of belief and practice, of doctrine and ethics, the temptation to such easy self-justification has seldom been resisted. It is possible to 'prove' almost anything by selective use of scripture and tradition.

Whole libraries have been written on the right relation between Church and state, Christian citizen and secular ruler. Augustine,

Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Rahner—no 'great' theologian has felt able to ignore the subject. Yet in almost every age and place, Christians have been deeply divided in their response to wordly power. They have usually also been sadly intolerant of each other. Both patriots and dissidents have, more often than not, shared at least one thing, their self-righteousness, their conviction that this coin has only one side.

In accepting the invitation to write this article on conformity and dissent, I am all too aware of the pitfalls and may well fail to avoid them. Let the reader, therefore, beware of facile praise or blame. My own experience of life, born as a part-Jewish child in Nazi Germany, eventually to become chairman of the British section of Amnesty International, would appear to place me firmly in the Revelation 13 tradition. That is both where my heart is—and my public image. Why then have I never been in serious trouble? Why has the British establishment, having tapped my phone, been satisfied to treat me with exemplary courtesy, even when I have made a gesture (that landed me in court) to refuse paying taxes to finance nuclear weapons?

The answer, inevitably, is complex. But let me ask a question, provoked by a poster of the long-since banned Christian Institute of Southern Africa, which will not easily let me go: 'If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to find you guilty?' This much is clear. The British establishment is not easily provoked into punishing its respectable citizens or even (though that is open to dispute) those of lesser repute. Our society tries, with limited success, to maintain the principle that all are equal before the law. A cathedral canon is a lot more equal than an unemployed Pakistani immigrant. But suffice to say: were I to behave as I behave in Chile or Ethiopia, Turkey or Romania (to name only a few) I would be spending a good part of my life behind bars. Even in Switzerland conscientious objectors to military service still go to prison. And I was one, at the age of eighteen, in New Zealand. I proceeded, four years later, to write the history of the treatment of those who refused military service in that country during World War II. Their lot was much harsher than it would have been in Britain. On the other hand, in Hitler's 'Greater Germany', from which my parents had fled to New Zealand, they would have been guillotined. I shall return later to Frans Jägerstetter, who was.

Like many great confessors and witnesses to the Kingdom (it is good to remember that the Greek word for witness is *martyria*) Martin Niemöller, who lead the Confessing Church's struggle against Hitler, was no academic theologian but a former U-boat captain. Asked what the basis for his resistance was, his reply was naively simple, 'whatever the situation, I have always asked myself the one question: what would Jesus now do?' Niemöller believed that the Holy Spirit would always give him the right answer if he listened sensitively. He survived the Beast's terror and felt sufficiently vindicated to continue a prophetic ministry into his nineties. Yet even he had to acknowledge with hindsight that he had not always got it right. Only nearly always. There was a famous exchange between him and Karl Barth. Barth: 'Martin, it amazes me how little theology you know, and yet you nearly always make the right decisions'. Niemöller: 'Karl, it amazes me how much theology you know, and yet you nearly always make the right decisions'.

There is profundity in that exchange. In the last analysis Christian discipleship, obedience to the divine will, a free response to God's own love depends neither on scholarly wisdom nor on any kind of doctrinal orthodoxy. Heretics (and even academics) are as capable of witnessing to the judgment and mercy of God as other Christians. Is that not the point of the parable of the Good Samaritan? I would go further. The Holy Spirit is not bound by our parameters. There are, among the martyrs, not a few who were not Christians at all or who were even pitted against the Church when, as so often in history, it had gone over to the legions of Satan. What leads me to that conviction is summed up in the title of one of Leo Tolstoy's *Twenty three tales*: 'Where love is, God is'. It is as simple and as complex as that.

As simple and as complex as Martin Niemöller's question to himself: 'What would Jesus do?' Immersion in the spirit of the whole New Testament, necessarily read in the light of the Old, makes it possible to approach that question without resort to any kind of fundamentalism. The ministry of Jesus gives more than a few clues. It does not give definite directives. When decisions are made it all depends—in the end—on what kind of person the actor (we are all actors in the drama of life) has become. More often than not decisions are, of course, avoided. To remind me of that danger I have for years had prominently displayed in my home the words of Harvey Cox that '*not to decide, is to decide*'.

Only once—in the extant record—was Jesus directly challenged on his attitude to Caesar. 'Is it lawful to pay tribute?' The questioner did not really want an answer. He wanted to trap Jesus, to make him condemn himself. For a Jew to have said yes would have been to validate the Roman occupation. To have said no would have been an incitement to treason. Jesus had more than enough wit to handle such a situation. The questioner wanted no answer and got no answer. 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's' (having pointed to Caesar's image on the coin) neatly side-steps the essential issue: what *is* Caesar's and what *is* God's? It is depressing to recollect how many sermons have misused that incident to justify craven obedience to the powers-that-be. But to his disciples, that *was* a coded answer. All things in heaven and on earth are God's. In any conflict between God's will and Caesar's, God's must prevail. In other words, if Caesar's demands are unjust they must be challenged, disobeyed and perhaps actively resisted. How, will differ widely from situation to situation. Resistance that is incompatible with love for Caesar, who is also a child of God for whom Christ died, would seem to be ruled out. Until one remembers that, in the most extreme of cases, Dietrich Bonhoeffer joined the plot to kill Hitler (despite his pacifist convictions). He was willing to incur the guilt of taking one life in the hope—vain hope, as it proved to be—of saving many thousands of lives. Was his subsequent execution martyrdom? He doubted it, I do not.

One thing is clear, Jesus was a Jewish dissident in his own eyes and in the eyes of the temple authorities; dissident in its modern meaning. He believed the rulers of Israel to be both hypocritical and corrupt and in a whole variety of threatening ways insisted on reforming their teaching. At the very least he was a revisionist, leading a schismatic movement. His universalism was a dire threat to the particularism of temple Jewry, even though it had respectable Jewish prophetic antecedents. 'You have heard it said . . ., but I say to you . . .' was almost a Jesus refrain. Jesus's physical and moral onslaught on the financial corruption surrounding temple worship was a classic act of Gandhi-like civil disobedience. With a crowd behind him, he angrily overturned the tables of the money-changers. Yet this was in no sense guerilla warfare, nor was it directed at the occupying power. Jesus alone was vulnerable, setting the scene for his own arrest (at the behest of the temple rulers) and his subsequent execution at the insistence of possibly

the same crowd that had followed him to the temple, hoping that he would eventually seize power and share the spoils with them.

Again, it is depressing how often Jesus's cleansing of the temple has been misused to justify Christian participation in violent revolution and war. No one, except—in the long run—Jesus and his disciples, was harmed, let alone killed. There is no reason to suppose that Jesus did not have the true interests of the money leaders and even the temple rulers at heart. He was, demonstratively, teaching them a lesson and not after the manner of the Grand Inquisitor.

First-century Israel was a theocracy. More than traces remain in twentieth-century Israel. No distinction was made, in the days of Jesus, between religious and secular power. In the Roman Empire it was no different. There being no 'one God' in whose name Caesar could act, Caesar himself had to be given divine attributes. Inevitably, Christians would not worship the Roman State in the person of Caesar. Many paid for that with their lives.

Despite the Enlightenment and the modern secular state, *de facto* Caesar-worship continues to be expected. Patriotic loyalty is based on the principle of unconditional obedience to the laws of the modern state, be it autocratic or democratic; be it Russia, America or—shall we say—Singapore (which can stand in for many others). What is unconditional loyalty, if not a secular expression for worship? That being so, every Christian, in all states, at all times, is called to be a potential and at some times an actual dissident, a register of conscience and in consequence, in some states at least, a prisoner of conscience. To deny this is a form of the idolatry rejected in the first three centuries of Christian history, yet widely embraced—albeit unconsciously—ever since. National and regimental flags in church sanctuaries are evidence enough.

None of what I have written spells out when Christians should resist and how. That can only be decided with any degree of authority and integrity *in situ*. The bible and tradition, used with humility, will help; but in the end it comes down to 'what the Spirit says to the saints' in the midst of the human predicament. And, whether we like it or not, the saints often seem to be given contradictory advice. In the actual situation Christian loyalist will often be confronted by Christian dissident. And they will be tempted to excommunicate each other. At great spiritual risk.

We are saved by grace, not by our right decisions. We can, indeed must, follow our conscience *and* respect the conscience of

others. To inform our conscience as best we can and to allow it to be radically challenged by our opponents should always be part of that process. But while not all are capable of intellectual debate, all *are* called to follow the inner light. Those who cannot make up their own mind (that surely embraces us all at some time or other) are bound to follow those whom they have learnt to trust. There is regretably no in-built guarantee that ecclesiastical authority will provide the most reliable yardstick for judgment. Popes and synods can err greviously, though not inevitably. Would that we were better at discerning the prophets, who occasionally even come disguised as Church leaders.

With hindsight, or from outside a situation, it is often easier to separate the sheep from the goats. Looking back, it is astonishing (or is it?) that hardly any Christians in Hitler's Germany had the insight to resist the Fuhrer's war of aggression, his unprovoked attack on nation after nation and finally his barbaric, no-holds-barred assault on Russia. Even those Catholics and Protestants who resisted aspects of Nazi ideology (though very few challenged its anti-semitism) were at pains to stress their loyalty to the Fatherland, if not to Hitler, when it came to fighting the war. Many, not least among the bishops, enthusiastically backed what was deemed to be a crusade against communism. Many others since (though not so many in Germany) have learnt no lessons from that tragic story.

In that situation a simple Austrian peasant of great spiritual discernment stood out against the whole state machine and his bishop, who accused him of spiritual arrogance. A devout Catholic, Franz Jägerstetter knew in his heart that this war was unjust and refused to wear the uniform of the aggressor, even as a medical orderly, an honourable option, pressed upon him. 'Surely you cannot refuse to save lives.' His reply: 'I must refuse, if I have first to swear loyalty to the Führer'. So his bishop tried some more arguments: 'How can you do this to your family? The family is sacred. You will be executed. They will lose a husband and father.' His reply to that: 'Why not tell that to the soldiers who go to kill and be killed?' Finally: 'Who are you to decide what is just and unjust? If the Führer is wrong, God will judge him, not peasants like you who are called to defend their Fatherland.' The bishop was hopelessly wrong, but few would have conceded it at the time. Even German manuals of military law (not to speak of divine law) stated that no soldier is obliged to obey a criminal command. How

much truer, if the whole war is a crime. Jägerstetter went, unshaken, to his execution and into eternal life. All the human contradictions notwithstanding, I suspect that many who lacked his insight or courage and died at the front are now with him in paradise. 'There's a wideness to God's mercy . . .'

Liberation theology has much that is wise and right to say about the need for resistance against oppression in Latin America and Southern Africa and indeed about the need for resistance to economic systems that keep a Fourth World poor in the midst of First World affluence. The Christians who side with the rich oppressors or who are the rich oppressors condemn themselves. They cannot, with open minds and hearts, read the story of Dives and Lazarus or face the implications of the parable of the Last Judgment (which is not—in the first instance—addressed to individuals but quite explicitly to the *nations*) and remain unmoved. There can be little doubt about Christ's identification with the poor.

At this point the necessary debate in the Church is no longer about the need for resistance (though many will continue to deny that need); it is about the means. The advocates of the just revolution have yet to convince me that liberation must come out of the barrel of a gun. With Gandhi I agree that it is better—and utterly human—to fight with guns, than not to fight at all. The most inhuman course is not to care, to do nothing. The disciple of Jesus will look for ways of defeating the Beast—the evil system of power—by means compatible with loving those who represent and direct that system. That, knowingly, invites the risk of being misunderstood, as apparently in league with the enemy.

Much more exploration needs to be done in the search for alternative weapons and some of it perhaps far behind the political trenches, in places where battles of the Spirit can be fought. The name of Thomas Merton should be enough to remind us that such battles are sometimes fought in silent cloisters, though rather too seldom—I suspect—for the good of those whose only weapons are those of the Spirit. They can get very blunt.

Martin Luther King often affirmed that the Church's task was neither to dominate the state nor to be subservient to it but to be its conscience. Christian institutions have only occasionally risen to that challenge. They have often sought to dominate (with disastrous results) and have even more often been subservient. They have been afraid of the prophetic role which has been left to the few who have been prepared to be rejected. Yet in recent years

many nations have produced religious leaders prepared to speak the truth in love to those in power: a whole succesion in South Africa, leading to the spiritual triumvirate of Naudé, Tutu and Boesak; Camara and Romero in Latin America; Werner Krusche and Heino Falcke in East Germany; the American Catholic bishops, together, on nuclear weapons and the economy; an Archbishop of Canterbury to a triumphant, jingoistic nation on the need for penitence and compassion in victory after war; the Church leaders of Liverpool to a hard hearted government on the desperation of the poor in Britain's cities. And many, many more. Yet still nothing like the corporate leadership of world Christendom, nothing remotely like it crys out effectively (I use the current ecumenical shorthand) for 'peace, justice and the integrity of creation'.

It remains for the more or less lonely prophets (most unknown to a wide audience) to sustain the integrity of the people of God. They constitute the social hope of the Christian Church, like Wilberforce, challenging an obdurate House of Bishops, in his nineteen-century struggle to abolish slavery. What of conformity and dissent in the Second World War, or in the communist ruled nations? That is a highly complex and significant story. It is an intriguing story of discretion and valour, compromise and resistance. The triumphant survival of the Russian Orthodox Church through bitter years of persecution, to the celebration of its millennium in 1988, is no subject for half a paragraph in this article. That history cannot quite be written, yet.

But, illustratively, I shall, all too briefly, speak of Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Since the Soviet invasion of 1968 Czechoslovakia has been a deeply demoralized nation with relatively small and weak Churches, quite the opposite to Poland, with the strongest Catholic Church in all of what was Christendom. The Czech Catholic clergy did not react in unison to their nation's plight. They divided into three factions. Some resisted, more or less openly. Most of these lost their licences to work as priests. They took their priesthood with them into prison or to whatever secular work-place they could find. The second group kept their heads down, kept out of public life, neither praised nor criticized the state, and got on with the humble but important task of nurturing the faithful. The third group accepted the state's invitation to cooperate publicly, offering them social and material incentives. They took on themselves the odium of being looked

down on as collaborators. At least some of them were sorely troubled at the deep-seated anti-communism of their colleagues and convinced that only by demonstratively embracing the self-declared enemies of the Church, and being penitent about the Church's past, could they break the vicious circle of hate and rejection.

All these positions are morally credible and defensible. In all three 'camps' there will be some with suspect or at least mixed motives. For there is glamour in martyrdom. There is comfort in the public obscurity of the pastor who is loved by his flock. And there are all too obvious perks in playing along with those in power. I have said enough to illustrate the rashness of making judgments. That is for God alone. And not only in Czechoslovakia. The tragedy of that situation is not the diversity of reactions, but that the three groups are hardly on talking terms with each other.

The Lutheran Church in East Germany is sociologically very comparable with the Church of England. It is about as strong and about as weak. Its history since 1945 is a most remarkable one of reasoned cooperation with and reasoned resistance to political power. Its leaders, all of them survivors of the Confessing Church's struggle against Hitler, were as immune to primitive anti-communism (having suffered alongside communists in the anti-facist struggle) as they were to the temptation to give their blessing to Stalinist abuses of power. Forty years of experience have more than vindicated their theology and their practice of *critical solidarity* with their own society. From being harassed and marginalized in the fifties the Protestant Church has, in the eighties, become a self-confident, free and independent factor in society. Its pilgrimage has been and remains a long, complex struggle for integrity, a struggle on behalf of the whole of society. It has largely been about speaking the truth and setting others free to do the same. *Glasnost,* when it has been significantly absent in the state, has characterized many of the East German Church leadership for forty years. That has given them a remarkable potential for ecumenical leadership, well beyond the borders of this little known 'other' Germany. That story, too, has still to be told to those outside.

The East German lesson has taught me that critical solidarity should always be the norm for all Christians, in all societies. Criticism, yes, but never without caring love for those being criticized. Even oppressors are not devoid of the divine presence. Solidarity with the whole of society, not least with those bearing

the burdens of power, for whom the Church should pray without ceasing; but never unconditional surrender to their demands. The balance between solidarity and critique will differ from country to country and from year to year and from Christian to Christian. Discerning what the Spirit is saying to the Church is very largely about getting that balance right. It is never easy. If there is no tension, then there is almost certainly something wrong. Very occasionally almost total resistance will be God's order of the day. Even more rarely, almost total collaboration.

I have, in these fragmentary thoughts, made no fundamental distinction between personal resistance, the exemplary resistance of Church leaders and corporate Christian resistance. There are certain fairly obvious practical differences, but none of principle. Prophetic insight and pastoral sensitivity, both necessary parts of any Christian response can come from saints known only to their neighbours, from leaders of world renown and even from whole Churches acting corporately. The motive for any valid resistance will always be the welfare of some part of God's world, the partial implementation of God's just and gentle rule. The welfare of the Body of Christ can safely be left in the hands of a caring Father and the indwelling Spirit of the living God. That is a lesson most Christians have yet to learn. Self-preservation is not part of the Church's vocation.

Neither confirmity nor dissent can ever be important in themselves unless they are part of a sharing in Christ's ministry of reconciliation, bringing the whole creation into harmony with itself and with its Creator. When Christians are called to wield the sword of the Spirit, then they are to heal, not to hurt, though there be pain in the healing. A liberated few, free to be fools for Christ's sake, like my friend Daniel Berrigan, know a lot more about that than I do. So let these reflections conclude with something like a confession of faith by Daniel, part of his letter to his fellow Jesuits written while on the run and shortly before a natural spell in Danbury jail. I summarize the text, dated 10 April 1970. If many readers are already familiar with it, so much the better:

> This week marks the anniversary of the deaths of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1945) and Teilhard de Chardin (1955). It is the week that we, the felons of Catonsville, are summoned by the state to begin our prison sentence. No one of us needs to be told that the times are such as to bring despair to all but the strongest. My

hope at this point remains firm. I hope that at least a minority of the Society of Jesus may remain together in the years ahead to form a confessing brotherhood, a community in which men speak the truth to men, in which our lives may be purified of the inhuman drives of egoism, cultural conformity, professional pride and dread of life. A brotherhood which will be skilled in a simple, all but lost art—the reading of the gospel and life according to its faith.

Many of our Church leaders are effectively innoculated against Christ and his Spirit. Nothing is to be expected from such men, except the increasing suffocation of the Word. But the real question is not the conversion of cardinals or presidents, but the conversion of each of us.

Most of us are obsessed with the inevitability of change. We talk persuasively of it, we grasp at new forms and styles. And yet the suspicion remains; very few of us have the courage to measure our passion for moral change against the sacrifice of what lies closest to our hearts: our good name, our comfort, our security, our professional status.

And yet until such things are placed at risk, nothing changes. The gospel says it. So do the times. Unless the cries of the war victims, the disenfranchised, the prisoners, the hopeless poor, the resisters of conscience—unless the cry of the world reaches our ears and we measure our lives and deaths against those of others, nothing changes. Least of all ourselves; we stand like sticks and stones, impervious to the meaning of history or the cry of its Lord and victim.

I ask your prayers, that my brother and I, and all who are at the edge, may be found faithful and obedient; in good humour and always at your side. Daniel Berrigan S.J.

Should such a general reflection, written in Britain as 1987 nears its end, not contain some practical coda, some objective not utterly beyond human capacity? For me it would be this, that Christians should challenge the state to grant amnesty, to set free half the population of our shamefully overcrowded prisons. Those same Christians should commit themselves to take into their suburban homes those many who have no home. If even ten percent of the two million or so English churchgoers took up that cause . . . It could happen.