BOOKSHELF

By FRANK TURNER

THE ANXIOUS self-questioning of the Christian Churches about their social function and relevance has produced such a proliferation of literature that this article can only offer a plan, rather than an ordnance survey, of the territory, omitting many important features so that a few key landmarks may stand out the more clearly. I hope no bad work is commended here, but I know how much good work is unacknowledged.

The attempt to relate the spiritual life to social issues and the demands of social justice is a modern specification of the perennial tension in Christian life between the contemplative and the active life. The very metaphors which articulate that tension point up the nature of the problem. If we speak about 'Church' and 'World' we find ourselves implying what reflective people are unlikely to believe, that the 'Church' is the realm of pure aspiration and the 'World' (whatever mysterious entity that is) is the realm of shabby pragmatism closed to the Spirit. If we speak, in geometrical imagery, of the 'vertical' and the 'horizontal', we imply that the lines of engagement along each axis can never converge. In either case, we must fastidiously retract the unwilled consequences of our terminology.

The tension is not merely linguistic. It is manifest in the mutual suspicion of parties both inside and outside the Churches. Much of the literature devoted to the relationship of spirituality and social life does the recurringly necessary job of dissolving false oppositions. So a first move towards orienting oneself is to sketch, however schematically, the split in consciousness which presents the problem.

On our left we have the extrovert activists who scarcely believe in the interior life. If they are secularists they may regard the practice of prayer and contemplation as mystification, as a self-indulgence which has the latent function of blinding oneself to social evils and one's involvement in them. The classic aphoristic statement of this position is to be found in the eighth and eleventh of Marx's Theses on Feuerbach:

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> All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice . . . The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

Marx does not of course, depreciate reflectiveness as such, but insists that it must be firmly directed towards a predetermined *practical* goal. The corresponding Christian attitude is sternly ethical, perhaps rooting its formidable case in such biblical texts as the judgment parable of Matthew 25, the notion of the 'true fast' in Isaiah 58, and the 'temple sermon' of Jeremiah 7. It is a fine insight which will always have its necessary function as a challenge to our religious integrity. But its apologists may degenerate into 'muscular Christians' who, by an overconfident application of 'By their fruits you shall know them' (Mt 7, 16), make themselves prosecutors of the world's sinners. When unable to gloss over their own doubts or weakness they may either overcompensate by hyperactivity or be plunged into despair.

On our right, we have those to whom eagerness for action betrays immaturity or superficiality, who regard the authentic human task as self-development. The authority to whom this position appeals is perhaps Jung, who writes in *Modern man in search of a soul,*

> That I feed the hungry, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ—all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all the beggars . . . are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness—that I myself am the enemy who must be loved—what then? As a rule, the Christian's attitude is then reversed; there is no question of love or long-suffering; we say to the brother within us 'Raca' and condemn and rage against ourselves (pp 271–72).

To accept oneself in one's wretchedness, says Jung, is 'the hardest of tasks'. Naturally, he does not claim it is the only task. But on this view, action without self-knowledge is merely destructive. For Jung, furthermore, the modern person is the one who has lost 'participation mystique', 'submersion in a common consciousness'; who 'abhors dogmatic postulates taken on faith and the religions

based on them', and through his scepticism 'is thrown back on himself'. Having left behind all 'medieval certainties', one can attain maturity only by exploring one's own psyche (*Ibid.*, pp 227ff). Modernity is therefore defined as a kind of mature alienation. We are offered no hope of journeying *through* individual self-awareness to a new sense of the corporate, because solidarity implies 'submersion'. Jung's heady mix of deep insight and philosophical question-begging remains just as influential as Marx's single-minded materialism. The 'orthodox' religious variant of this position retains all but Jung's anti-dogmatism, holding that the world can be bettered only as the consequence of cumulative individual conversions.

The literature we shall consider has, then, to meet criticism from two sides: it must demonstrate that a commitment to social justice is not a self-righteous instance of what Pascal calls a *divertissement,* a distraction from the task of becoming spiritually mature, but is an integral dimension of that task; and it must refute the charge that spirituality is *constituted* by its refusal to confront concrete social evils.

So one approach seeks to expand the horizons of spirituality where these are thought to be too restricted. It will occupy us in the bulk of this survey. A second approach begins from the other end, from 'social analysis', with a systematic reflection on social trends, on global, national or local patterns of power and impotence, privilege and oppression. Such an attempt obviously requires some ability to grapple with political and economic thought: but the challenge is to develop a mode of analysis which does not by its very methodology assume the non-existence or irrelevance of spiritual factors. (Commonly, of course, these two approaches will be represented in the same book, since the very attempt to transcend a false polarity suggests the need to adopt a plural perspective.)

These two approaches cross categories of genre. Many people (not least those who write on spirituality!) need books and essays which are not found on the 'spirituality' shelves of bookshops. They may be works of scripture scholarship or of theology, or of advocacy on behalf of groups perceived to be oppressed or marginalized but which cast light more widely too—some of the most creative writing on spirituality and social issues has perhaps emerged from the women's movement, and from those arguing for some form of the 'option for the poor'. Finally, since the action

of the Spirit is not confined to the Church, we need to be alert for illumination from sources that are not explicitly religious. We would impoverish ourselves, for example, by choosing to be oblivious to Saul Bellow's humanity and depth of insight, or to the incisive and analytic ironies (both personal and political) of Milan Kundera.

Expanding the scope of spirituality

Teilhard de Chardin lays the foundation for this expansion when he notes the danger that the Christian will resolve inadequately the tension articulated above: might 'repress his taste for the tangible and force himself to confine his concern to purely religious objects', or abandon religious aspirations altogether, or simply give up any attempt to make sense of the situation. One familiar counsel, that the value of human action resides in the intention put into it, is only partially true: the intention 'pours a priceless *soul* into all our actions' but '*does not confer the hope of resurrection upon their bodies*'. Our works *matter* because they can contribute to the building of the fulness of the 'universal Christ' and to 'Christ's blessed hold on the universe' (*Le milieu divin*, pp 52–55, 62–63).

Thomas Merton insists that prayer and meditation can only be genuine if 'firmly rooted in life', and that inertia and repugnance in prayer might be cured by 'a simple respect for the concrete realities of every-day life, for nature, for the body, for one's work, one's friends, one's surroundings, etc' (*Contemplative prayer*, p 39). Contemplatives identify themselves 'with the sinful and suffering world in order to call down God's blessing upon it' (*Ibid.*, p 28). Even in the midst of the world, such a life inhabits 'the desert'. But this desert is not the symbol of abdication from history: to think that would be to swallow the 'pompous rationalizations of politicians who think they are somehow the directors and manipulators of history'. The desert is the place where *comfort* is lacking. Only there can the Church be freed from being 'the servant of cynical and worldly powers, and can be launched into 'the full current of historical reality' (*Ibid.*, pp 113, 116). No more than Teilhard does Merton specify appropriate forms of historical engagement: and his language seems, unhelpfully, to contrast contemplative compassion with tainted political action. Compassion is simply to be directed in general towards 'the sinful and suffering world'. His own compassion, to be sure, bore fruit in a powerful

critique of militarism (and critique is itself a form of action): but we also need pure-spirited politics!

Now, in one clear sense, ethics and spirituality are inseparable. For as Kenneth Leech notes, the fundamental obstacle to a life of prayer is *sin:*

> Today when we tend to have moralistic notions of sin, we need to recover the theological understanding of the Scriptures, and to remember that 'sin for Jews was seen as a quenching of the Spirit' (*Soul friend*, p 169).

To encompass the social realm, therefore, spirituality requires a conception of sin (and conversely of 'conversion' and 'holiness') that does not itself exclude social reality. In a pithy article, 'Sin and conversion', Peter McVerry uses a pair of vivid examples to invoke the notion, fundamental in this context, of 'structural sin': 'much of the pain and suffering that others have to endure is caused by the way the world has been ordered by those who benefit from that particular ordering'. One's personal sharing in structural sin might take the form of collusion with the social, economic and political arrangements that impose such suffering: collusion, that is, by a refusal to examine one's assumptions and values, combined with a willed or half-willed isolation from those who suffer. McVerry discusses what conversion from such sin would mean: a conversion of mind, of heart—and of feet!

An excellent complement to McVerry's discussion is a brief exegetical article by Luise Schottroff about the Pauline account of 'liberation from the power of sin', which appears in an important issue of *Concilium.* Sin is a power that rules in the world, 'a collective and compulsive system to which every individual is subject', which brings about *death.* Its force is such that it can transform even such an articulation of the will of God as the Torah into an oppressive force. The grip of this tyranny is broken by the resurrection of Christ, whose lordship is the counter-force to sin: but we can only place ourselves under the banner of this Lord by the practice of *diakonia.* It follows that the contemplative insight which empowers a critique of injustice cannot amount to 'conversion' till it commits one also to service. Between them, McVerry and Schottroff help to show *what kind of* historical practice is required by the fundamental perceptions of Teilhard and Merton.

The search for social justice does not, of course, exhaust the content of conversion. A judicious corrective to rigid thinking in

this area is given in an essay by Donald Evans, who considers a range of 'conversion-perspectives': those of political or liberation theology, of 'psychological or therapeutic theology', of 'spiritual or charismatic theology', of 'ecological theology or nature-theology', of 'critical reason', and finally of 'existential conversion' (the acceptance of one's inalienable freedom and responsibility as a human person). Each perspective is necessary, pointing to a dimension, present in all human life, in which we can live fruitfully or destructively. Each perspective can function positively as a critical complement to the others, or negatively by claiming to be itself absolute or determinative, so becoming fundamentalist. (Fundamentalism is imperialism with regard to truth, the assumption that the source of truth and authority is single, absolute and identifiable, whether that source be deemed the scriptures or parts of them, a hierarchy, or even some dimension of one's own experience such as 'reason' or 'feeling'.)

Evans explores how far a lived unity among these perspectives is possible (for the individual and, equally important, for the Church corporately): all the perspectives are relevant at all times, but their respective demands weigh variously on us according to personal circumstances and gifts. Vocations are plural. They cannot be discerned without an underlying surrender of oneself to God and to the Spirit's presence in one's own and others' lives that Evans calls 'mystical'.

Evans's essay will help us to advert to our half-conscious assumptions. Charles Davis argues strongly that one such prevalent assumption is, in fact, a misconception; namely, the tendency to identify the religious life with *interiority* (so that to work for the liberation of the oppressed, for example, is not itself 'properly religious activity' but is only the application of an *antecedent* religious consciousness). Davis posits three worlds, to all of which human beings are related: 'the external or objective world of human knowledge, the social world of practice with its norms, and the subjective world of self-awareness'. Religion is neither a distinct 'sacred' world over against these three 'secular' worlds, nor belongs to any one of them. One cannot experience the Transcendent except through the mediation of these spheres of human experience, and one's reaching for the Transcendent must permeate all of them. Political action is 'religiously Christian', for example 'when (1) it remains in critical relationship to the existing order; (2) it is utopian in its openness to new possibilities; and (3) it refuses to

respond to hate with hate, but, instead, embraces the risk of offering gratuitous love' (*New Blackfriars,* March 1986, p 123).

If God is Lord of the whole of our lives, God's salvation is mediated through the loving action of all dimensions of our lives. One can see how Davis's argument follows on from that of Teilhard. Similarly, the 'new theology of salvation' and the 'new kind of spirituality' lucidly discussed in *Concilium* vol 96, and especially in the contributions to that volume by Claude Geffré and Segundo Galilea, are not created *ex nihilo.* What is new, according to Gustavo Gutierrez, is, first, that the poor themselves (at least the poor of Latin America) are newly aware that the causes of their poverty can be challenged, even changed. The second new emphasis, or shift, follows from the first. Because change is possible, it is imperative: so Teilhard's nebulous 'human task' cannot bypass the liberation of the oppressed. Thus there is no dislocation of categories of experience which need to be held together (*We drink from our own wells,* pp 17–18).

One biblical symbol which articulates the unity of external and internal transformation is that of the Kingdom (cf. Teilhard's phrase, 'Christ's blessed hold on the universe'). Jon Sobrino, in *The true church and the poor,* shows how the 'Reign of God' can be envisaged as an all-inclusive category, embracing the Christ who proclaims it and makes it present, its utopian content, its privileged addressees, and the human practice by which one conforms to it. We conform on various levels—by consciously opening ourselves to relationship with God, but also by loving action in the world. To say, for example, that personal faith-contact with Christ is primary and the practice of love is derivative would be to misrepresent the Kingdom. Faith and love correspond to two essential aspects of human life; that of meaning and that of action. Nor, he shows, does 'love' pertain primarily to intimate personal relationships, so that it applies only by analogy to that form of corporate love which is 'justice'. Segundo's exposition of the Kingdom allows him to criticize those restrictive interpretations which betray the symbol itself.

J. B. Metz applies a similar strategy to the image of discipleship, the 'following of Christ'. He shows how all forms of the discipleship of Christ have both a 'mystical' and a political (or 'a practical situational') dimension. So, for example,

> Poverty as an evangelical virtue is a protest against the tyranny of having, of possessing and of pure self-assertion. It impels those

> practising it into practical solidarity with those poor whose poverty is not a matter of virtue but is their condition of life and the situation exacted of them by society (*Followers of Christ*, p 49).

The same unifying strategy may be pursued in the exploration of particular spiritual traditions. So Gerard W. Hughes shows how the spirituality of the Ignatian *Exercises* encourages one to 'befriend one's inner life': but also how this very befriending allows one to give up that shivering search for personal security which repudiates awareness of one's implication in the evils of our time. In a valuable appendix to *Christology at the crossroads*, Jon Sobrino considers 'the Christ of the Ignatian Exercises' and the scope of that discipleship which the exercitant is seeking. J. B. Libanio focusses his discussion more precisely, reflecting systematically on the social and political dimensions of one central Ignatian idea, that of 'discernment' (how, for example, prominent among those 'inordinate affections' which block discernment might well be our social 'position', the vested interests of our social group—perhaps even of our Church).

David Brandon, a Buddhist and a social worker, challenges the split between action and contemplation in a different way. We need an adequate spirituality to challenge and purify the very activity of 'helping others', which can degenerate into the imposition on others of one's own goals and prejudices, under the illusion that it is others, not oneself, who need to change.

> Self-discovery within helpers becomes viewed as an indulgence taking valuable time away from the manipulation of change in others. The currently popular term 'catalyst' is ironically and unintentionally appropriate as it means strictly 'an agent in an effect produced by a substance that *without undergoing change itself* aids a chemical change in other bodies' (*Zen in the art of helping*, p 81).

Finally, as an example of what scripture scholarship can offer, one might take the work of Walter Brueggemann. He describes the prophets' function of evoking an alternative consciousness to that of the dominant powers. The prophets grieve, to call the bluff of the empires that 'all is well'; they cease to look to those in power for their fulfilment; they challenge the pretensions of the monarchs to control access to God, thereby *depriving God of freedom*,

since 'it is almost inconceivable that the God domiciled in Jerusalem would ever say anthing substantive or abrasive' (*The prophetic imagination*, p 34); but they also bring energy to the oppressed by offering symbols capable of articulating repressed hopes and yearnings. Through the prophets the people are enabled to see their own history in the light of the divine freedom and justice.

Expanding the scope of social analysis

Karl Rahner suggests *why* analysis is suddenly necessary. While social structures changed almost imperceptibly, they could hardly be envisaged as the field of human responsibility: 'but now we live in a society that has made social and sociopolitical transformation the proper object of its very reflections and activity' (*The love of Jesus and the love of neighbour*, p 90). Once we are fully aware that social arrangements reflect human choices we must accept our own freedom (relative, but real) with respect to them. This requires good will, but also intelligence. So Davis ends his article by saying,

> I want to do more than defend the legitimacy of the political mode of religious faith. I would argue that social and political activity is today the privileged locus of religious experience (*op. cit.*, p 125).

This final step of his argument is based not on the structure of spirituality itself (indeed, logically it cannot be), but on a judgment of the 'social analysis' type, though he has space only to state his judgment, not justify it by analysis: what demands the shift in 'religious performance' he has described is such 'signs of the times' as contemporary society's 'cynical disregard of its victims' and its 'suicidal reliance on nuclear arms' to provide an unattainable, ultimate security.

Holland and Henriot's work remains the best introduction to social analysis. Their own judgments are persuasive, but they also sketch the larger and deeper process of which analysis is one (recurring) stage, and give practical guidance on procedure for those who wish to begin the process. John Kavanaugh offers less an analysis than a cultural and spiritual profile of the affluent West, encouraging readers to confront facts which they might prefer to blind themselves to, to see society as graced but also as 'disgraced'! Charles Elliott begins his book with a simple but stark 'look at the world', before discussing how one might deal appropriately (courageously and unevasively) with the sense of

guilt and powerlessness that will inevitably be evoked. These three books will suggest their own ways of follow-through.

Finally, one must not shirk the task of analyzing the Church itself. If sin is the main blockage to contemplative life, and if the Church is always called to that, the Church must become aware of its own sin. The articles in *Concilium* 130 provide a good starting point: one might, for example, follow up Donna Singles's 'The case of women in the Church' by facing the challenge posed by R. R. Ruether's *Sexism and God-talk*.

Conclusion

It is not easy to select a couple of recommendations. As I have suggested throughout, the central problematic (of 'contemplation and action', or 'faith and justice') can be examined from several perspectives. The basic principle of integration is simple, but not easy: to pray, to allow oneself to be open to those who suffer—and then *to pay attention to one's experience*, of prayer, personal relationships and social commitments. As McVerry insists, reading cannot substitute for the willingness to be open to new and disconcerting experience. Only from the felt needs that such experience throws up can one best make use of the literature.

Nevertheless, and at the risk of transforming this survey into publicity blurb, I would send readers of *The Way* to their back-numbers. The issue of July 1984 (from which I have discussed only Peter McVerry's piece) is both an overview and a stimulus. Donal Dorr's book also covers many aspects of the field in a lively but searching way, and I could have introduced it at almost any point in this essay. Holland and Henriot remain indispensable: and, for a rigorous but eloquently readable theological treatment, Sobrino's *The true church and the poor* seems to me outstanding.

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