

Keep Left for the Church—II

BRIAN WICKER

I said at the end of my first article that what was needed at the present time, in order to restore a proper sense of tension between the Church and the World, was a deeper theological understanding especially in the moral field. But theology is a practical as well as a speculative activity: and moral theology must always bear upon practical life if it is to have any value. This is why the most important developments in moral theology have come from people with immediate and practical interests in the central moral issues of the day. Above all this nowadays means an interest in the problem of modern warfare and its prevention. I think one must single out, in this context, Père Regamey's *Non-Violence et Conscience Chrétienne* as one of the most important pieces of contemporary moral theology, though it bears little resemblance to the usual books on morality. I think the challenge of Père Regamey's book is its stress that, as a response to the colossal issues confronting us, a minimal 'code' morality (Is it licit to do this? Am I forbidden to do that?) is no longer adequate. This is not to say that a code morality is no longer necessary: but it is no longer enough to suppose that the avoidance of sin is all that we can expect from the average Christian. The average Christian, not only the exceptional one, must become morally heroic if the world's problems are to be solved. By going to Gandhi for his inspiration, Regamey is able to sketch the requirements and the possibilities of such a Christian heroism.

Non-violence (*satyagraha*) is not just a technique for winning battles without bloodshed: it is a way of proclaiming, and more fundamentally a way of possessing, the truth. Or rather it is a surrender to the truth, a way of being possessed by it. It is heroic in its activity in the practical world because it demands a heroic self-surrender to truth in the first place. We must be prepared to do violence to ourselves, and to suffer in ourselves, in order to avoid doing violence to others by any swerving from the path of truth. 'Whoever forces himself to attain to the truth, in its concrete actuality, as it actually is, knows what a perilous bridgehead he is trying to hold on to, pushed out into the unknown. What a tearing away of what is incompatible with it, what a refusal of inadequate ideas, and habitual preconceptions and easy answers it en-

tails! There surely is a radical principle of heroism!' (cf. p. 183). Now, it might be concluded, from such a train of thought as this, that the only struggle was the *moral* struggle to grasp the truth despite one's own moral weaknesses, i.e., that the truth was itself clear, and the only difficulty was wholeheartedly to accept it. And it might be tempting for the kind of Catholic who thinks *he* possesses the truth, simply in virtue of being a Catholic, to acquiesce in this conclusion in a false spirit. For *satyagraha* depends upon a realisation of the intellectual difficulty of arriving at truth, even before the moral struggle to accept it arises at all. It boils down in the end to something like Newman's easily misunderstood, but profound remark that 'the safeguard of Faith is a right state of heart'. In any matter of a profound and complicated kind it is always hard, and often impossible, to arrive at a final state of clarity about what is true and what is false, even in a region such as that of the Catholic faith. What exactly is the relation of Scripture to Tradition? What precisely is historical in the concept of Salvation history? Here, in questions of crucial importance for Catholics, it seems that it is going to take all the humility to truth and all the scholarship of the entire Church to arrive even at satisfactory statements, let alone a complete analysis. Faced by such problems as this one is enabled more easily to see that, however incomplete it is as an answer to difficult intellectual and moral problems, the notion that we are not the possessors of the truth, but are to become possessed by it through a self-surrender, is at least part of what is required if any progress is to be made at all.

The most impressive result of Père Regamey's approach is the bond it establishes between the heroism demanded of us intellectually and the heroism of moral struggle and practical action. It reasserts what has been largely lost in moral theology, namely the basic requirement of intellectual integrity and the capacity to use our intellectual imagination if we are to grasp the complexity of moral situations and reject as inappropriate the old cut-and-dried answers. In other words it restores to moral thinking the notion that it is the whole person, and not merely the moral will, considered as if it were a distinct faculty, which is the subject of moral concern, and which will be corrupted by a shallow understanding of moral problems. It puts back into its place what Jacques Lerclercq calls a 'wisdom' morality, as distinct from a code morality. Wisdom morality is concerned with the general tenor of a person's whole life, and the shaping of his habitual responses, rather than with the legitimacy or otherwise of separate acts. The sermon on

the mount is wisdom morality: the ten commandments are a code morality. But where I think Père Regamey succeeds, and Lerclercq fails, is in realising that, however necessary both notions of morality are, there can come times in the life of the individual, and of a society as well, in which reliance on keeping to the code, however successfully it is kept, is not enough as a response to the situation confronting it. Wisdom morality is concerned with a response to a complete situation, considered as a whole, and not with it considered as a series of separate moral problems each to be solved by a particular course of action. Hence a wisdom morality depends upon a certain largeness of intellectual grasp: the capacity to see the situation in its complex unity. It is Père Regamey's purpose to show that the present state of human civilisation presents a challenge of this kind, and it is the specific problem of the H-bomb which has made this apparent. Now the reason I think why Canon Lerclercq fails to deal adequately with the possibility that, in certain circumstances, code morality has to be transcended by the Church as a whole in favour of a wisdom morality, is precisely that he is not concerned with any specific practical moral challenges in his book. Hence he does not deal adequately with the relation of counsels to precepts: for this problem is only the problem of wisdom morality and code morality seen from another angle.

It has commonly been felt that, for most people, the counsels are demands which we need not ourselves go into very deeply, for *prima facie* they are not our business. They are for the spiritual *élite*. But Père Regamey discards this distinction as false. It is not that the counsels oblige only a minority: for they are not obligatory at all. A counsel is given because the giver judges that the person concerned has it within him to respond to it *intelligently and voluntarily*, for he can see for himself the possibilities in the situation. So it is our intellectual and imaginative grasp of the total situation which governs the way we respond to it, not only the depth of supernatural charity we bring to it. It is for the receiver of a counsel to consider whether the demand imposes itself upon him as the answer to the situation. But we are all recipients of the counsels, all equally bound to consider this question. The life of the counsels is for every Christian: but its mode of expression is not the same for all of us. It is not a question of a higher and a lower vocation: it is a question of positive and negative. Now the precepts, being largely negative, tend to emphasize our separateness from our neighbours. Christians who keep only the minimal law of the Church manifest their religion to the world in the form of a feeling that they alone

are in step, and everyone else is out of step. The anomalies and minority habits of Catholics appear to be the distinctively Catholic things because they have the effect of making Catholics seem apart from others, not in the sense of offering a challenge to others, but in the sense of keeping themselves to themselves. But you cannot interpret the counsels in a negative way. A proper conception of the way the counsels make demands on all of us (and this is a matter of Catholic education) would automatically give meaning to these anomalous habits, for they would be integrated into individual lives. Instead of seeing ourselves as different from others because we possess the truth and they don't, we would see ourselves as people singled out by the truth, and united to all others who were striving for it. To achieve this reorientation of ideas is not just, or even primarily, a matter of working for a greater generosity on the part of individuals: it is first of all a matter of reforming the relevant institutions—the educational system at all levels, and the cultural organisation—forms. And the direction which this reform needs to take is towards a greater emphasis on the study of the world of the Bible and what it represents for us.

If we are to understand what is demanded of us in relation to the world it is essential that we know what 'the world' means for the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The tension we need to find between the Church and the world is not to be understood in the Greek sense—the world being the gross physical universe set over against the spirit and intellect of man—but in the Biblical sense, of the whole created order, man included, but falsely thought of as self-sufficient apart from God. The Biblical conception of the world is necessarily ambiguous, good because it is God's, evil because it has turned away from him: and it is this ambiguity that renders our tension with it so necessary and yet so hard to define. For man is part of the world: and his task is to restore it, not to accept it at its own valuation of itself, nor yet to try to escape from it into a premature kind of spiritual paradise of disembodied souls.

This restoration of the world can only be achieved by a simultaneous attack, at the institutional and at the individual level, on our current conceptions of what morality is. For the Bible, morality is first of all the achievement of one's complete selfhood by the recognition of God's holiness taking possession of us. Keeping the moral law is simply the necessary condition for this to happen to us: the means by which we become fully human through sharing God's very life. A morally *blameless* life only pays off in this general sense that it makes us more

completely ourselves. A blameless life is not an end in itself. Now it is this emphasis which is lacking in our moral education. We may be more enlightened than previous ages as to what kinds of thing are blameworthy, and to what extent we are responsible for our acts: but the emphasis still remains on the achievement of blamelessness, rather than on achieving life.

Consider the matter of sex. If we insist, in the Greek manner, on man as composed of body and soul we are likely, as history shows, to think of the soul as much the most important part of us. Now the soul cannot easily be thought of sexually: and heaven cannot easily be thought of as constituting (among other things) the complete realisation of our sexuality as such. *This* (we take it) is what it means to say that there is no marrying in heaven. So we get the denigration of sex to a secondary level typical of the 'grey Puritanism' of modern Christianity (the phrase is Lawrence's). It is this which makes plausible Graham Hough's footnote to his book on Lawrence: 'I take it for granted that Christianity does depreciate sexuality, or at most make reluctant concessions to it; and that Lawrence was right in believing this, wherever else he was wrong; and that the Chestertonian (and post-Chestertonian) trick of representing Christianity as a robustly Rabelaisian sort of faith is a vulgar propagandist perversion'. Now I think that what makes this kind of remark possible is not, nowadays, what we say about sex: for in the more enlightened quarters at any rate *what* is said is tolerably sound. What is faulty is the *proportion* of time given to the consideration of sins against chastity compared with the time given to the assertion of sex as a central activity in human life. In most books on the subject, the goodness of sex is stated in the opening few sentences or pages, merely as a preface to the real business of discussing the dangers of its abuse and the various countermeasures which are possible. What is needed is a treatment which reverses these proportions: for the amount of space given to a topic is a pretty good indication of the value an author attaches to it—whatever protests he may make to the contrary. The fact is, of course, that in theological and moral terms our ideas are so enfeebled that, having asserted the goodness of sex, we have nothing more to say about it. This is why our efforts to counter the activities of the mass-pornographers and racketeers are so ineffective, and why our only practical resort is to negative prohibitions and campaigns against irresponsible publishers and booksellers. Perhaps it also explains the fact that naturalistic arguments against contraception carry absolutely no conviction to anyone not already prepared to accept them.

There is a deeper aspect of the sex problem, however. Sex is a mystery in the natural order; but God has made of it a mystery in the supernatural order. At both these levels expression can only be given to the mystery in the language of symbol, myth and parable.

This is true of all the other mysteries with which Christianity is concerned, and it follows from the fact that we need to base our Christian education on the appreciation of symbolism and myth as a fundamental human mode of expression. Now the realm of mythology and symbolism is nothing other than the realm of art. Art is both individual—in the case of the work produced by a single person bodying forth his own experience and his own vision—and collective, in the case of those social creations—the dance, the folk song, the heroic saga, ritual magic—which embody the experience of a whole community. The purpose of art, in either case, is (I believe) the same, namely to make sense of our experience of the world, which has been dislocated by original sin, and so come to terms with it. Art is the attempt to restore, in a new order, the old harmony with the environment which was the lot of unfallen man. It is part of the way forward to paradise; it is part of the order of salvation history. By creating, out of the world and our experience of it, symbols and stories which exist in a different, imaginary world, we are able to see our own world from the outside so to speak, and hence to adapt ourselves to its inexorable demands in harmony and peace. In this sense, all religion is created out of human art; and, on the purely human level, the Bible is no exception.

It is a complete culture; a collection of monuments in the artistic order, some individual, some collective, all of which need to be understood in the terms of the environment which produced them. But our understanding of the Bible must not be just antiquarian; it has to be both properly historical—seeing the Biblical world as it was, objectively—and at the same time progressive, and relevant to our own predicaments. In other words we have to be able to relate it to the cultural world of the twentieth century, and to discover the way the seeds of the one have germinated and flowered in the other.

For example, we have to learn to see our own collective arts—those of the television and the radio, of newspapers and magazines and paperback books as our own attempts to make sense of our twentieth century experience. They are more than mere entertainment, methods of killing time. They are formulating our social consciousness. Hence we need to form a habit of cultural awareness and discrimination within these various manifestations of our collective self-consciousness, and to do

this not just as a protective device (a means of defending ourselves from corruption or exploitation) but as the means by which we can begin to change ourselves, and our social life. Society doesn't just get the level of art it deserves; it is also true that the level of art helps to determine the kind of society we shall get.

If in the realm of collective art the danger is that we shall accept a level which is trivial and degrading, in the realm of individual art the danger is that, as Christians, we shall fail to see that the 'great instrument for the moral good is the imagination' (as Shelley said) and that this is fundamentally (as Lawrence saw) why the novel matters. Morality is not just a matter of judge and act: it is also a matter of seeing—of appreciating the subtlety and complexity of life, and often of admitting that in such circumstances, judging, in any final sense, is beyond us. It is one great object of art in the individual sense that, by sharing the experience of others through the medium of a fictitious world (a novel, a drama, a poem, a painting), we can deepen and extend our experience and the subtlety of our response to it. In this sense, education in the arts is necessary for the proper moral development of a person. Humanly speaking, to be uncultured, not in a highbrow sense, but an ordinary decent, responsible sense, is to be morally limited. But if one thinks of morality as the struggle for selfhood; and if one thinks of the attainment of one's own true self in terms of realising to the full the divine power within us which makes us in God's image and likeness, then the achievement of true culture—which is directed precisely to the ordering of our experience towards a new harmony with the world, and so towards God who is the very foundation and corner-stone of it all—is of overwhelming importance. It must be the central feature of any Christian education, since it is the focal point of our historical destiny as the mediators, in history, of God's purpose for the world of here and now.

But the role of art, however creative in its ultimate effect on society, is mainly indirect. It directs and stimulates our sensibilities; but it does not, by itself, involve action in the world. Indeed an art which is itself directed towards changing the world is always liable to become mere propaganda for a cause, the tool of a particular political clique. But this does not mean that there is no link between the activity of art and the activity of those involved in political and social action. The Christian liturgy is just such a link. By raising art to the level of a collective act by a whole, gathered community the artistic act of appreciation and response can overflow into the act of participation. It was the realisa-

tion of this fact which inspired the revival of the poetic drama of the thirties, especially of the plays associated with the left wing Unity Theatre such as *Waiting for Lefty*. In that play the purpose was not so much dramatic performance as social stimulation; the audience and the players were so identified with each other that when Lefty himself arrived to rouse his Trade Unionist colleagues to protest and strike action, the audience too felt the need to go out into the world to make their protest. H. G. Wells found himself getting up and crying 'Strike, Strike, Strike.' (cf. Julian Symons, *The Thirties*, p. 88). Now it must be admitted that, as works of art, plays such as this were only partly successful; but it is questionable whether this was because of the technique of group participation: it was rather because of the artificiality, the attempt to synthesize a new art-form in the laboratory when, in fact, art is so closely bound up with life that it cannot be produced in such a way. But to the Christian there is, already, a species of dramatic participation which is not synthetic, but to be found in the world; namely the Liturgy. We need to link education in the formal sense much more closely with our liturgical activity, which is, in a more direct way, the source from which our new life in the world must come. The liturgy is nothing other than the Biblical world made permanently present in each historical epoch. By living within this liturgical life—which is the holiness of God made accessible to us—we are able to mediate the Biblical world and its concepts to the contemporary situation. The liturgy must be, then, the key to all our educational rethinking; for it must be both the source and the ultimate object of our sacramental life in the world. The target towards which we must strive in our social life and its organisation must be to make our society a fitting counterpart to the liturgical society; that is the assembled church within each particular culture.

But if the liturgy, with all its cultural riches, is to be available to every member of the Church, let alone those separated from it, it is perfectly obvious that our educational programme must be geared to the full comprehension of its meaning and depth. This is not merely a matter of rethinking the content of syllabuses and methods: it also involves a profound reorientation of our concepts of a Christian society. The liturgy is a 'common culture' in the sense in which writers like Raymond Williams use the phrase. It is a whole way of life, as well as a body of intellectual and cultural work; and this is a way of life held in common by the community. Whatever differences there may be of temperament and talent, it is important, for a liturgically orientated

society, that the central core of this culture (the Biblical world, one might say) should be available to all. This means inevitably that the institutions by which our culture is taught and spread must be openly accessible on equal terms. You cannot have a common cultural life without a high degree of educational and economic equality and a sense of communal integration. Without this the liturgical assembly can never become a true community; and if it is not this it is not fully the priestly community which *is* Christ in the world.

It is in the light of these considerations, I think, that we can see why there is a certain natural and proper fellow-feeling between the progressive conscientious Catholic and the radical humanist reformer; and why there is a natural opposition between a Catholicism which seeks to transform the world according to this true spirit of liturgical life and a Catholicism which is conservative in the sense that it in practice emphasizes and maintains in being an authoritarian and legalistic spirit. It is in the most deeply egalitarian and democratic soil that the true nature of the authority of the church can best be manifested for what it is: an authority which is not of this world, but comes from God who utterly transcends the world.

But it is also possible, on the view I have tried to outline, to show how the role of the church as an active contributor to the culture of its period and as a positive co-operator with what is good in a secular society can be reconciled with its other role, namely that of preserving a spirit of subversiveness towards any established order of things, challenging and opposing as well as accepting the world. For it is precisely because she is a supernatural society created by God and, through her identification with Christ, is in a sense eternal that the Church can never stand still in history. She must forever be transforming the world and never allow herself to become identifiable with any particular manifestation of this process. It is because she is, in a sense, unchanging that she can and must involve herself with the progressive elements in all social change. Secular movements are born, develop and ossify: and it is the Church's task to challenge and oppose every form of such ossification without contracting out of the movement of history which was manifested in it. That is the problem of a Church which is in the world but not of it: whose task within history is to look towards the end of history and the end of the world.