

Theology and Equality¹

52

by Roger Ruston, O.P.

I

Until very recently christian theology has never been much concerned with social equality. It would be true to say that, on the contrary, a well-developed theology of inequality has been characteristic of christianity for most of its history. Before I develop this theme it could be well to define what kind of equality I am talking about. I am concerned with social equality of the kind that is demanded by many contemporary civil-rights movements. It may be called 'equality of consideration'² by which I mean the presumption against treating human beings differently in any respect until grounds for the distinction have been shown which are relevant to the distinction we propose to make. According to such a principle we consider that to judge an individual not on his merits relevant to the case but on the supposed merits of some class to which he belongs is a fundamental injustice. The onus of proof that membership of some class of human beings disqualifies an individual from equality of consideration in some respect always lies with one who wishes to make or to perpetuate the disqualification.

A principle of equality of this kind is not a natural christian growth. It can be developed without any reference to christianity but it is likely to be more vigorous if it comes about by the cross-fertilisation of christian inspiration and humanist ideas. If christianity has contributed anything to the development of the equality principle in society it is not so much by way of formal christian ideas as by way of a certain humanitarian impulse at work in a suitable ideological environment. By this I mean that some christians, having had their eyes opened by the gospel more than usually to the evils of the world, have been ready to take up what ideas lay to hand in order to bring them to an end. But it does depend on the ideas being to hand. It is not possible to claim that equality of consideration is an inevitable product of christian principles. Such a claim would have been universally repudiated during the greater part of christian history. And it is not possible, now that ideas of social equality have at last been espoused by some christians, to pretend that it is all there in the Bible if only one cares to look in the right places. We can justify any social arrangement we please, within reason, from the right texts of the Bible.

The set of ideas that has dominated the christian order of things

¹A paper read at the Conference on Women in the Church, held at Blackfriars, Oxford in September 1973.

²See *Social Principles and the Democratic State*, S. L. Benn and R. S. Peters, London 1959.

from the earliest times have been overwhelmingly in favour of assumptions of *inequality*, both between christians and outsiders and between different kinds of christian within the church. I cannot help feeling that there has always been something strongly anti-egalitarian in Catholic christianity. Equality before the law for example is not—to say the least—fundamental to Canon Law. It is a democratic ideal alien to the idea of privilege that is enshrined in the Code of Canon Law. In Medieval canon law, no inferior could bring an accusation against a superior. The principle known in this country as ‘benefit of clergy’ was a constant and only partially successful claim by the church that the clergy should not be tried by the layman’s court for any crimes at all. In general the higher a man was in the hierarchy of the church the more difficult it was to bring him to justice. As recently as 1949 we have this statement from a German canonist: ‘The Church has never acknowledged equality of all men or of all christians before its forum; if it had done so, it would have denied its own being’.³

It is the principle of *hierarchy* that has characterised the church, not equality. The word itself was coined by a christian platonist, Pseudo-Denys, to express the order of beings in the cosmos descending from the fountain-head of God. In the ecclesiastical hierarchy, as in the celestial hierarchy, the higher ranks illuminate, purify and perfect the lower ranks with such divine knowledge as the receivers have the capacity for. Everyone occupies the place in the system that his capacity allows and there is no knowledge, no divine illumination, but what is passed down. Moreover the higher one is in the system, the nearer one approaches to priesthood. It is a completely ‘sacerdotalised’ world, but one which incorporates a view of the priesthood that owes more to the philosopher-king of Plato than to the ‘merciful and faithful high priest, like his brethren in every respect’ that we find in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It has had an enormous influence on the self-understanding of the Catholic Church, bringing together under one great unifying concept many diverse elements such as the sacramental system, the teaching authority and the governmental organisation inherited from Imperial Rome.

In the 12th edition of a major text book of canon law published in 1970 and ‘redone and wholly brought up to date in conformity with the dispositions of Vatican II’ we can find the doctrine in almost its pure form; ‘The Church, as has been noted several times, is hierarchically ordered; that is, she is an unequal and non-homogenous society. There are in her hierarchical leaders and subjects, there is an active and a passive element, individuals who govern (*ecclesia dominans*) and individuals who obey (*ecclesia obediens*), individuals who teach (*ecclesia docens*) and others who learn (*ecclesia discens*). There is, to sum up, a “chosen” (*clerus*) class which has the task of

³August Hagen, quoted by Walter Ullmann in *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages*, London 1967, p. 14.

training and spiritually governing the faithful and of administering the sacraments. . . . One can fittingly recall here the gospel saying: "*In domo Patris mei mansiones multae*"' (sic).⁴

From the earliest times it has not been difficult to support this view of things from the Bible. Many texts from St Paul seemed especially designed to authenticate the view that the ordinary christian was meant to be the subject (*subditus*) of all higher authority, deriving as it does from God. This notion of the subject has had a long history in both ecclesiastical and civil government. We should note in passing that the very same term is used by St Paul when speaking of the relationship between husband and wife that is to obtain among christians: '*Mulieres viris suis subditae sint, sicut Domino . . .*' (Eph. 5.22). This text could only help to align the marriage relationship with the general system of hierarchical subjection which became dominant in Roman christian society.

According to Walter Ullmann⁵, inequalities within the church have always been maintained by faith itself. In my naivety I had thought somewhat along these lines: among christians there has always been an acceptance of equality before God. The basis of human worth in God's eyes is not birth, nor wealth, nor intelligence, nor race, but faith in Christ. Since this is a gift of God received by all the baptised no man can claim to have merited it in any way so all are of equal worth in an ultimate sense. We are equals before God by the very fact of baptism. Therefore one would have expected faith to have been a levelling force within christian society. The truth is rather the reverse. What the possession of faith did to the baptised was to introduce him to the proper order of things in which he had to take his place. This order of things was not the natural order but the redeemed order, revealed at the coming of christianity: 'Although nature—says St Gregory the Great—had made all men equal, there nevertheless intervened a hidden dispensation according to which some were set over others because of the diversity of merits of the individuals'.⁶ Until the theology of St Thomas, when a church Father spoke of nature he meant fallen nature. It was frequently stated that all men were equal by nature but this meant equally sunk in sin and ignorance, each man following his own self-will. It was not a positive concept. On receiving baptism, however, a man became *fidelis christianus*, the faithful christian saved from the corrupt state of nature and brought under the true authority. The faithful man was identical with the

⁴Vincenzo del Giudice and Gaetano Catalano, *Nozioni di Diritto Canonico*, Milan, 1970, p. 89.

⁵Op. cit. p. 8ff. The first part of this paper relies heavily on the writings of Ullmann.

⁶In Ullmann op. cit. p. 14. Gregory may well have believed that the coming of christianity revealed a true order of merit among men regardless of race or birth—though hardly regardless of sex. The difficulty is to know what he meant by 'merit' and what he thought it counted for. In any case it must have been something attributed to the man of faith and not to the natural man. It must also be said that when 'merit' is made the basis of a system of authority instead of just a simple rule against unjust discrimination it is about as slippery a concept as 'nature', and just as objectionable.

obedient, the natural man with the disobedient. The one lived by the will of God mediated by the proper authority, the other lived by his own wayward will. You were faithful in so far as you knew your place in the scheme of things. Faith was receptivity, obedience. Through faith you became a *subject* of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities both of which originated in divine authority. The idea of the *citizen* and the idea of moral autonomy that goes with it, based as it is on a positive concept of human nature which came in with 13th Century Aristotelianism, was quite absent.

So the idea of faith has been intimately bound up with that of subordination in the Catholic tradition. It is not at all irrelevant to be talking here about the Catholic Church of 1,000 years ago, for it was then that the ideas were formed that have prevailed in Catholic institutions ever since.⁷ The goal of this ideology was undoubtedly a christian one—that of unity, one mind and one heart in all things. The enemy was thought to be diversity and individual autonomy. Throughout more than a thousand years of Catholic Europe it worked for the stability of society at all levels and provided a model of order for both civil and ecclesiastical institutions for a long time to come.⁸

The link between faith and keeping one's place appears again in the Lutheran Church. Luther himself developed an idea of vocation which meant that the existing divisions and grades in society are identical with the vocations to which individuals are called and that their remaining in this situation is always God's will for them.⁹ Here is a revealing remark from a modern Protestant theologian: 'We are not free and equal as men, but because each man is free in his own position. . . . For this reason the idea of freedom cannot be translated into a political, social programme. The direct derivation of right from making righteous is impossible. Freedom does not have to be created, it is given'.¹⁰ A Swiss pastor's remark is a beautiful example of this way of thinking, leading as it does to the usual social consequences: 'It is all a matter of grace. Therefore no one has a right to ordination, therefore women have no right to ordination'. The faithful, because they are faithful, have no rights. The idea of rights goes with the idea of the natural man and does not seem to be in itself a christian idea.

⁷As ideologies become senile and more frequently contested so they tend to become more rigidly applied. With regard to the subjection of women in the church for example, there were far more exceptions to be found in the Middle Ages than in modern times.

⁸The organic, hierarchical ideology of the church which we inherit from that time was easily underpinned by the texts from St Paul concerning the diversity of functions within the One Body of Christ. But the idea that everyone in the church should find his proper place according to his gifts has always been compatible with actual domination by one class of christians over another, just as the idea of *service* has. We must beware of producing these ideas as if they were some new discovery of the post-conciliar church that will dissolve away all the damaging inequalities. They have been part of the system for centuries.

⁹See R. Ruston, *Remaining in the Calling in which you were called*. In *New Blackfriars*, Oct. 1972.

¹⁰Hanz Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*, London 1969, p. 276.

This is not to say, however, that some christians have not been the main ones to promote it as part of the theology of nature or as a fitting vehicle for the gospel in the world. The Protestant readiness to oppose the man of grace to the man of nature is perhaps a return to the earlier, pre-Thomistic outlook of which I have already spoken.

Now the main objection which we would put forward against inequalities of consideration in any society is that they do injustice and injury to the individual who deserves to be considered on his or her own merits, not according to a stereotype. But in a society such as the early medieval one, which thinks wholly in terms of types and grades and symbolic values and never in terms of individuality or natural rights and in which equality before the law means nothing, it is just not possible to use the stifling of individuality as an argument against anything at all. There was for well over a 1,000 years—and for much longer in the institutions of the Roman Church—nothing in the available stock of ideas that could have lead to the emancipation of the underprivileged classes in society such as slaves and women. Treat them in a considerate manner, yes—that is clearly enough commanded by the Scriptures. But work for their freedom? That would have been inconceivable.

I am not saying that the organical, hierarchical conception of the Church actually creates the kind of discrimination to which we have learned to object. But such a conception will naturally fall prey to any firmly established inequalities in society. And it is inevitable that the most obvious *de facto* inequality—that between men and women—will fit into the pattern without any trouble. If power is going to be distributed according to descending, authoritarian principles, then a pattern of dominance that already exists will find a natural home. At other times and places other social inequalities have been identified with the christian order, just as the male/female one still is: the disqualification of the Jewish born from ecclesiastical office and from membership of religious orders; the constant discouragement of black men from entering the ranks of the clergy in certain mission territories. The patterns of dominance in Western society have consistently valued male above female, white above black, gentile above Jew. It is not surprising that these patterns of dominance should find a home in the hierarchical mentality which has predominated in the Church.

Interest in the individual and his rights does not make its entrance until the intellectual and social upheavals of the 13th Century. A variety of developments, artistic, philosophical and social contributed to put nature and especially human nature at the centre of attention. Man the human being rather than the faithful christian became for the first time since Greek humanism a proper object of enquiry. In the theology of Aquinas the natural order as a whole was able to take its proper place. Man was, after all, created in the image of God and to study man in his nature is in a way to study God also. The

nature of man was characterised by the possession of reason, not merely by the absence of grace, and it was by virtue of his reason that he was the image of God. So right reason could itself be a natural light showing man how to do good and avoid evil. Those in possession of reason—all true humanity—could therefore claim some kind of moral autonomy which is real even if it has to be guided by the teachings of the church. The possession of a certain autonomy means that men are not totally subject in all things to a law given them from above. It was ideas of this kind, combined with the contract relationship characteristic of feudalism that led to the emergence of the *citizen* with his constitutional rights. The citizen could be defined as one partaking in government, an idea impossible when men are mere subjects without any kind of moral autonomy.

Thinking along these lines could have led to a reevaluation of woman's role in society but unfortunately the old myths were too strong even for St Thomas: discussing the kind of subjection by which woman is naturally subject to man even before the fall, he says, '... the good order among the human multitude would fail if certain of them were not governed by others more wise than they. And so by this kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason is naturally more abundant. Human inequalities are not excluded in the state of innocence...' (*Summa Theol.* I. 92 art. 1 ad 2). The position of women in the scheme of creation was always a subject of embarrassment for St Thomas: possessing reason and therefore human, yet still '*aliquid deficiens et occasionatum*' (I. 92. 1 ad 1), she was less of a helper to a man than another man would be, except when children were required.

However, the group of ideas associated with the citizen and his natural rights gradually began to replace hierarchical assumptions with democratic ones, at least in the civil sphere. But from the decree *Unam Sanctam* of Boniface VIII in 1302 reasserting the subjection of all men to the one spiritual authority, to the anti-democratic pronouncements of the 19th Century popes, egalitarian ideas have been bitterly fought at every stage by the Catholic Church in the name of the old hierarchical order of things. Even if the Church has now given in on the secular side, these ideas are still not compatible with the way the Church sees *itself*. The ideology of the autonomous citizen plays no part in that forerunner of the city of God, the Roman Catholic Church. The tendency of modern theology has been to try to divide the field between secular and sacred functions—to allocate nature and the material world to the care of the laity, and to reserve matters of spiritual concern exclusively to the 'hierarchy'. This means that the clergy still find it almost impossible to admit that the 'lower' levels of the Church could have anything significant to say in matters of faith. One only has to recall the extreme reluctance with which a few women were finally admitted to the later sessions of Vatican II as observers to realise that there is still an unbroken habit of keeping

knowledge in the hands of the dominant class of christians. In the masculine-sacerdotal church women are still firmly identified with those whose role it is to listen and obey.

Traditional christianity therefore has not been a congenial environment for the growth of ideas of equality, despite the naive assumptions of some modern christians. Even if these ideas were re-introduced to European thought by the medium of medieval theology, they have only reached their full development outside the church and in open opposition to it. What has prompted many modern christians to fight in the front line against discrimination in matters of race, sex and religion has been not christian traditions of social order but the intuition that this is where the fight against evil is now to be located. A christian familiar with the gospel might have a nagging worry about 'who is my neighbour?' that makes a social arrangement that everyone else accepts as natural to be an intolerable offence to him. Such is the kind of awakening that we have seen among black men when they realise that they will no longer put up with a system that murders their brothers and sisters. Such people will use the ideological weapons that are available whether or not they are christian in origin. This I take to be the action of the Spirit.

These reflections on the traditions of the church leave us with two outstanding theological questions that cannot be answered without a good deal of further study: 1. Does the biblical image of the church as the Body of Christ inevitable commit it to the ideology of hierarchy as we have known it? 2. Does the gift of faith always make a christian a *subject* in the city of God, even though he has obtained the status of an autonomous citizen outside it? If the answer to these questions is no, there is a lot of thinking to be done by Catholics.

II

Part I of this paper was meant to be an introduction to a positive theology of equality developed from certain New Testament ways of thought. But so many problems were raised about the validity of such an enterprise that the preceding inflated introduction is the result. It seems doubtful whether theology can be of much use in the fight against unjust inequalities in society or the church. But I believe it can be, so long as we do not expect too much of it; so long as we realise that the purpose of it is to justify a position that we have already arrived at, let us hope by the impulse of the Spirit. We do not go with an empty conscience to theology for instruction. We make theology according to the needs we see around us, needs to which we believe we ought to respond according to the words of the gospel. Theology is always identified with a particular self-understanding of

a community.¹¹ If we want a different community we must make a different theology.

If there is to be a theology of equality, it ought to be part of the theology of *liberation*. Other schemes are possible, such as the theology of man in the image of God. The theology of liberation, however, is the one which has most unspoiled resources at its disposal at the present time. There can be no doubt about the legitimacy of such a theology. If the Bible is 'about' anything, it is about God's liberation of mankind from slavery. If the origin of this metaphor was actual slavery in Egypt, by the time we get to the New Testament it has come to mean slavery to sin. In so far as any kind of inequality between human beings is the expression of this slavery to sin, then it must be part of Christ's work to get rid of it. Perhaps it would be better to call it now the Spirit's work. If the Spirit's work, then our work, since in the relationship of grace which exists between Christ and his church there is no distinction between an act of ours done in the Spirit and an act of the Spirit himself.

Now it is clear that sin is not merely a matter of personal disobedience but a complex structure of relationships which has so much of a life of its own in the word that the unaided individual effort to escape from it is always defeated in the end. Sin is, as it were, ready and waiting for the individual as he grows up. Some of the chief marks of sin in the world are the damaging divisions of inequality among classes of human beings which nail the individual to a stereotype of behaviour—of subservience or dominance—before he realises he has been nailed. He usually thinks it is 'natural' to act out the role allotted to him. There seems to be a natural order of things. But with the collapse of the old hierarchical conceptions of order in the secular world the relationships become exposed for what they really are: injurious to the dominant and dominated alike. It is more and more apparent to those who take the trouble to trace back current attitudes to their origin that the major divisions in society are *never innocent*. They all involve dominance and subservience, and this situation is always justified by myths of inequality.¹² These myths are generated in order to justify and perpetuate a situation that we might call *original injustice*. It is clear, for example, that the racism of the British is a *product* of slavery and of the brutal treatment of black people. It is not the *cause* of it. It is necessary to prove to yourself that someone you have treated unjustly deserves it because he *is* inferior. White people in the 19th Century needed to see the natives they exploited as savages, cannibals, whose only hope lay in coming under the domination of the 'superior' type of human being. 'What we call prejudices are merely the rationalisations which we acquire in order to prove to ourselves that the human beings we harm

¹¹James Cone in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, N.Y. 1970, quoted by Edmund Hill in an article on Black Theology in *New Blackfriars*, June 1973.

¹²On myths of inequality in general see P. Mason, *Patterns of Dominance*, London 1970.

are not worthy of better treatment'.¹³ So nowadays the myth goes something like this: black people are lazy, untrustworthy, with no great power of thought, they like living in crowded conditions and are a drain on our national resources. Once again the myth is generated in order to justify the actual injustices done daily to a particular class of people in our midst. Such is the need for the myth that no amount of irrefutable proofs to the contrary such as have been pouring out these past 10 years will convince those who do not wish to be convinced. It is not difficult to unearth corresponding myths about men and women. Women show lack of logic, emotional instability, a more sensual nature and so on. . . . We have not come very far since the days of Aquinas. As for the original injustice, I am inclined to agree with John Stuart Mill that the inequality of rights between man and women and the myths which are made to justify it is a relic of the primitive slavery, when 'every woman was found in a state of bondage to some man'. It has no other source than the law of the strongest which, we would like to think, has been put far behind us in most other spheres of life. All the volumes of words written to justify the present state of affairs—the confused theologies of sex and such like—all of them are *afterthoughts*.

But the worst aspect of these myths is that, when successful, they are believed in by the dominated as well as by the dominant. People tend to live up to their stereotype. In doing this they are living according to someone else's definitions of them. They are living a lie: which no doubt pleases the Father of Lies. But the defining class succeeds not only in defining the class it dominates but also in falsely defining itself. It too is equally in slavery to lies. Every lie told about black people is a lie told about white people. Every lie told about women is a lie told about men. The member of the dominating class is just as seriously—perhaps more seriously—damaged by the myths of inequality. He is in a far more hopeless position in the end, for he is unable to save himself from it. It is going to depend on the self-determination of the oppressed to save him too. He cannot save the situation because he has nothing to give. It is a constant illusion of the liberal that he has something to give the oppressed. All he has to give is further false definitions. Let the oppressed say themselves what they are. It is the only means by which the dominating class can be freed. Equality is in everyone's interest.

This structure of sin in the world embodied in the myths of inequality and in the other systems of lies is what St Paul refers to as the Flesh in opposition to the Spirit. I would say with James Cone, the black theologian, that where a class of people is liberating itself from false definition by another class, *there* is the sin of the world being overcome, *there* is the Spirit in action.

¹³M. Harris, quoted by Michael Banton in *Race Relations*, London 1967, p. 113.

¹⁴*On the Subjection of Women*, Everyman's Library, p. 223.