

except in faith. Indeed his ministry is of reality far beyond his wits. He is set between his Lord and the people, ministering to the one Redeemer, to the one teacher, to the one doctor of souls, to the one lover of the family of man. Being a conscious instrument of the many works of Christ, in his faith, the priest approaches the mind and heart of his Lord. What is more than this, is that the Lord himself is adapting his minister more and more to his purposes.

I have never found a priest willing to discuss this last point. Perhaps like me they do not know what it means. That it is so, there can be no doubt, but the nature of it remains concealed for the present. Some time of his own choosing the Lord will justify his choice.

A priest was talking to me the day before his golden jubilee, when he was going to concelebrate with the Pope. He had no good thing to say of himself. He had been for fifty years an unprofitable servant. He had only been faithful. He had only done what he ought to have done. He had not made a name for himself; he was anonymous, like so many other priests. There remains the judgement of our Lord: 'He who speaks of himself seeks his own glory: he who seeks the glory of him who sent him, he is true and there is no injustice in him' (Jn. 7.18).

By Rather Dim Lights

Michael Tatham

I don't see how the rather obnoxious Tory voters can be excommunicated. They are acting according to their rather dim lights (something that most 'progressive' Catholics applaud when it is a matter of *Humanae Vitae*).

Peter Hebblethwaite
New Blackfriars December 1984 p. 499

Perhaps one of the most rewarding things to remember when one is playing with ideas is that nothing remains as it is for very long, and, what is rather more awkward, just as ideas are soon outmoded and superseded, so too the nature of the problems with which we are engaged changes before our very eyes. It is as if the entire process is taking place on a cinema screen where the credits continuously merge into new lines.

Even the apparently successful outcome of some process of study or legislation can be seen in the long run to have produced not so much a final answer as a formidable tariff of new problems. Medical science's ability to reduce infant mortality and prolong the average expectation of life has created a situation in which—were it to be taken seriously—the Church's traditional pastoral and moral teaching, with its primitive emphasis on fertility, would be a serious threat to the future. Recent matrimonial legislation to improve the position of women has been so successful that further legislation is now urgently required to protect not only husbands, but the unfortunate wives of second alliances. In the early years of this century it would have been impossible for pioneers in the Labour Movement to foresee that within a man's lifetime the power of the unions mobilised for sectional self-interest under the laissez-faire banner of 'free collective bargaining' would play a decisive role in destroying a *Labour* government. And no doubt the pioneers would have been more astonished still to find that in a Polish marxist state a union should have become, together with a traditionally right-wing church, the acknowledged focus of the nation's liberal and patriotic aspirations.

In the face of such happily idiosyncratic developments, it seems only prudent to view almost all schemes for improvement with a good deal of scepticism. It is perhaps a fault of our Western philosophical and religious heritage that there is nothing comparable to the endlessly changing hexagrams of the I Ching or the Chapters attributed to Chuang Tzu, to encourage a more sceptical attitude to the idea of progress.

Naturally, had I been sufficiently prescient to have informed myself a little earlier, I should not have made the amusing discovery that my opinions of half a lifetime were more or less nonsense. As it is, it was not until some way through the shaming Wilson era that I realised I could not remain in the Labour party (and even then my first thought was a shift to the left) and finally resolved that I must drop all pretence that I was any kind of free-wheeling lapsed Christian. And here I am in 1985, and, despite years and years of amusement and enlightenment from *New Blackfriars*, a confirmed pagan and well to the political right of all those 'caring' SDP bishops. (As for the political stance of *New Blackfriars*, this is so far out of sight that it presents no barrier to pure relaxed enjoyment.)

In a recent article Juli Loesch was quoted as mocking the stereotypes that most people adopt when they choose a political position.¹ Very rightly she saw them as children putting on a political dressing-up kit.

Hands up all those on the left in this audience: ban the bomb, pro-feminist, pro-choice (drugs and promiscuity).

And on my right: those for strong defence, NATO, respectability, capital punishment (the Empire and Mrs Whitehouse).

And the joke is that really I should be quite happy to settle for that caricature and happier still if I could include a swingeing attack on pretty well everything that takes place under the general heading of child-rearing and education. But we live in a world where even the best of dressing-up kits falls a little short of perfection, and still further back, in what is called the real world, things are a good deal less than half ideal. Here, for example, the agricultural vote means that the farm lobby is a great deal too powerful, and I am reasonably confident that the consequences of the EEC are likely to be more troublesome than anyone has yet realised. Nor am I quite convinced that it was absolutely essential to sink the *Belgrano* just because the ship was equipped with a working rudder, or, for that matter, that the exciting teledrama of the now long-forgotten Iranian Embassy siege was quite the splendid thing it was said to be at the time. (By this I mean that most of the casualties appear to have been inflicted rather late in the action and only one terrorist was found to be sufficiently alive to stand trial). On the credit side, the 'Why I vote Thatcher' side, we have had a timely victory over the private armies of the over-privileged mining communities—and thus to some extent salvaged the credibility of Parliamentary democracy—and the administration has resisted the clamour for reflation (that dishonest concealed tax on the weakest sections of the community) despite knowing only too well that its political opponents inside and outside the Tory Party will use the insoluble issue of unemployment as means of distracting attention from their own palpable inadequacies.

In its way this unresolvable debate about inflation and unemployment is a useful illustration of how trying to change something for the better may all too easily have consequences that are disagreeable, or unforeseen, or both. No doubt the Levellers and Pymites, Fifth Monarchy men and assorted puritans, were right to feel that the Book of Common Prayer and Ship Money and Soap Monopolies were inconvenient matters which required radical adjustment—perhaps even a Divine mercy—and that if they removed the "men of blood" a new age would dawn and the reign of God and his saints commence its millennium². Inspired by their consciences and with the best of intentions they separated Charles I from his head and crown. Alas, when they next looked about them they found that in lieu of God and the saints there was first a military man who did not care a jot for their wishes and then an unprincipled Papist womaniser who contrasted so unfavourably with his father that Charles I was shortly canonised a saint at Tunbridge Wells. It would be unwise, however, to think that we shall always be so fortunate; kings are more

easily reconstructed than either Humpty Dumpty or those other national institutions which have already survived long enough for us to take them for granted.

There is a sense in the land that we are living on social and economic capital that history and geology accumulated for us in the past, and that because there has been no recent revolutionary hiatus, no dislocating invasion of our territory, no loss greater than the gradual dismembering of Empire, and no civil disturbance more troublesome than the miners' strike of 1984, this accumulated capital remains permanently disposable. Few errors could be more damaging. Well-meaning and naive people (or self-interested and less naive people) have professed to believe that certain defects in our present forms of government, system of social welfare, education and worship, will be vastly improved if we set about the task of replacing whatever remains of the old imperfect past with something that requires the minimum of discipline and responsibility and is, above all, tuned to populist requirements of instant gratification and immediate comprehension.

The practical consequences of this decadent loss of nerve have, naturally, been uniformly unsatisfactory. For the first time in our history frivolous private spending, high unemployment and inflation have actually co-existed³. Our education system—in so far as it is doing anything—is producing a second and third generation of illiterate, bored wasters whose uncouth appearance is all too frequently an exact reflection of their personalities. Both the Anglican and Catholic Churches have manufactured an assortment of new translations of the bible together with various liturgies, and the whole meaningful and exciting development steeped in the sort of folksy good-fellowship once associated with the unctions of nonconformity. Needless to say, such enterprise has merely impoverished an already declining and debilitated faith by stripping it of all that was time-hallowed and numinous. The Churches continue their numerical decline (even apparently in the countryside) and the protestant chapels which led the way in making participation and social conscience prescribed Christian texts have largely shut their doors for good. Simone Weil, in her essay on *Forms of the Implicit Love of God*, written half a century ago, recognised the danger.

The trap of traps, the almost inevitable trap, is the social one. Everywhere, always, in everything, the social feeling produces a perfect imitation of faith, that is to say perfectly deceptive. The imitation has the great advantage of satisfying every part of the soul. That which longs for goodness believes it is fed. That which is mediocre is not hurt by the light; it is quite at its ease⁴

The extent to which the new orthodoxy of social concern has more

than fulfilled Simone Weil's prediction is to be seen not only in the attitude of *New Blackfriars*, but in the pronouncements of Anglican bishops and the widespread approval of such ravishingly stupid pieces of jargon as the phrase 'Christ's preferential option for the poor'. Rowan Williams in a recent article, 'Violence and the Gospel in South Africa', attempts to make the words mean something:

It *does* mean that in a setting where some people (even unconsciously) assume the right to determine the fate of others, to decide what their possibilities shall be, God, by promising His Kingdom in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, judges and condemns that system, and the change that He wills for it is bound to be a change in favour of those deprived of power or liberty⁵.

And, of course, none of this is remotely true, as Dr Williams himself illustrates a little later on when he explains that what is really going to emerge from a revolution is unlikely to have much connection with God's will.

Unless you have a Franz Fanon-like view of violence as purifying, cathartic, a view which seems self-indulgent to a Christian, you're bound to see the randomness of terrorist activity as something not only refusing to draw just and necessary limits but destroying hopes of long-term rapprochement, because it utterly destroys trust.

And that is obviously correct. The struggle for power and its success or failure has never had anything in common with 'just and necessary limits'. Simone Weil has drawn our attention to that remarkable reply—remarkable for its honest perception—which the Athenians once made to the Melians:

For of the Gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a law of their nature wherever they can rule they will. This law was not made by us and we are not the first who have acted upon it; we did but inherit it, and shall bequeath it to all time, and we know that you and all mankind, if you were as strong as we are, would do as we do⁶.

All the same, the damage is usually done before reality has the opportunity to correct fashionable errors of the 'Christ's preferential option' type, and in recent times we have seen all too many instances in which—aided and encouraged by the generalised moral indignation of the vociferous—highly imperfect regimes have been replaced by various forms of socialist improvement. Burke was well aware of the consequences of such forward-looking activity some two hundred years ago when he commented on the effects of revolutionary idealism:

... their morality has no idea in it of restraint, or indeed of a distinct settled principle of any kind ... they are no longer

to be depended upon for good or evil. The men who today snatch the worst criminals from justice, will murder the most innocent persons tomorrows.⁷

He was also aware that the pursuit of abstract ideals does not lead to moral progress, or the eradication of evil, but all too often to the precise opposite. In aiming at a perfection above human capacity, we fall below it. Equally appropriately, Burke warns that the morality of indiscriminate good will is a spurious product of sensibility, and subversive of genuine morality. Perhaps the most recent example of the sorry union of socialism, optimism, and popular religion is to be found in Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran—a change of circumstance originally much applauded in Western liberal circles and perfectly typical in that it conformed to the usual pattern of moving from a highly imperfect right-wing regime to something theoretically better. Nowhere, I think, is the difficulty of the situation better summed up than in the words of Eugenia Ginzburg lying on her plank bed in the Krasin Street prison in Moscow:

How tenuous was the line between high principles and bigoted intolerance, and also how relative are all human ideologies, and how absolute the tortures to which men submit their fellow men.⁸

Perhaps behind all the apparent failure and disappointment of seeking to make a better world there is one difficulty which tends to escape our attention. And this is that in the last resort we may find that the ingredients which make our existence most worth living are the very difficulties and problems that we spend our time attempting to overcome: poverty, failure, humiliation and, of course, death. Probably few of us would really want to find ourselves in any New Jerusalem, no matter whether it was a kingdom of this world or some other. It was Schopenhauer who remarked that 'man loves above everything else an existence which is full of want, misery, trouble, pain, anxiety',⁹ but I suggest that he was putting it rather better when he said—I cannot remember where—that it would be highly unsatisfactory if turkeys flew around cooked and ready for the table. In any New Jerusalem we should die of boredom.

- 1 Susan Dowell in 'Prolifers for Survival', *New Blackfriars* February 1985, p. 67.
- 2 See also Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and some Contemporaries*. Faber & Faber, 1984.
- 3 A.J.P. Taylor's autobiography, *A Personal History*, has a curious passage on page 332 of the paperback edition:

Civilization can survive wars and slumps. Inflation destroys the foundations of Society. We have now had inflation for nearly a decade and are no nearer seeing the end of it than we were at the beginning. Indeed it is quite clear to me though not to most others that no one has the slightest idea of a remedy. I suppose we shall

lurch from one crisis to another and that my standard of living will go steadily down as my earning power decreases. Altogether the economic effects of our peculiar inflation are strange. Usually inflation and full employment go together. Now we have inflation and mass unemployment at one and the same time. Another curiosity, the organised trade unionists have not only outstripped the well-to-do middle classes, they have become the principle exploiters of the poor and humble. Like all aristocrats they cling to their privileges at the expense of everyone else. I no longer feel the enthusiasm I once did for the lads. Not that that makes me any more admiring of the socially educated classes.

4 *Waiting on God*. R.K.P. 1951.

5 *New Blackfriars* December 1984, p. 507.

6 Thucydides, Jowett's translation.

7 *Burke Correspondence* 111, 125. See also Charles Parkin *The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought*, Cambridge, pp 90–96.

8 *Into the Whirlwind*, Collins and Harvill, 1967. p. 90.

9 Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* O.U.P. 1983, p. 155.

Cupitt's Context

Melvyn Matthews

One of the characteristics of western middle class men and women in the latter half of the twentieth century is a form of quiet cynicism. We do not wish to give credence to anyone else any longer. We have shut the door to those who would give us dreams of a better world, and are usually quite happy, even at times quite determined, to dig our own back gardens. We have, in fact, seen the rise and fall of too many heavenly cities for us to wish to build any more. Fanaticism of any kind is definitely a non-starter. One might have thought that this insularity was a particularly English disease brought about by loss of empire and the apparent failure of post-war social optimism, but it is also a disease of each western nation. It is often codified into political form by the new right or into religious form by the moral majority, but it derives, essentially, from a form of quiet, despairing self-protectionism, resignation; a belief, if it can be adorned with that word, that nothing very much more can be done. All that can be done now, it is felt, is that people should cultivate their own situation. Religion is therefore understood as that which reinforces the sense of the individual's importance in the face of social and cosmic collapse. The church is the last refuge for those suffering from anomie, and faith gives the individual hope in the face of darkness. Church study