

- 48 *In Parm.* VII p. 46.
- 49 *In Parm.* 1082, 10.
- 50 E.g. *On Detachment*.
- 51 J. M. Rist, *Plotinus* (Cambridge, 1967), chapter 16.
- 52 Dodds, *Elements of Theology*, p. 311.
- 53 Parmenides, fragment 1.
- 54 Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Farewell Speech to Origen*, 111; Basil, *In Hexaem.* I 10f; V 8.
- 55 *War in Heaven* (Faber paperback edition), p. 137.
- 56 *Orthodoxy* (Fontana edition), p. 19.
- 57 e. e. cummings, *since feeling is first* (quoted in the previous article).
- 58 Emily Dickinson, *Poems*, 838; 613.

(To be continued)

A Tale From Old Argentina

Michael E. Williams

Recently attention was focussed on the Church in Latin America by the Puebla conference of bishops, but we must not forget that last year, 1978, was not only the year of the World Cup but also that of Jim Jones and the mass suicides. Those events in Guyana were as photogenic as any papal visit or assembly of bishops and perhaps even more difficult for a secular world to comprehend. Such mass religious hysteria is unusual in any continent but the fundamentalist religious beliefs that seem to have accompanied it have been increasing recently and the activities of apocalyptic groups like the Mormons have become a feature of life in the shanty towns. For some, these happenings are an anglo-saxon excrescence on the fair face of South America. True enough, flight from the world usually takes a different form in Latin countries. The situation does not lead men to indulge in fantasies about a new Jerusalem or Jonesville here on earth. The most they can hope for is to take time off and spend it in the company of fellow sufferers who may teach them how to transmute their present cares and troubles into something of mystical value. There is a down-to-earth realism in the suffering Christ and the Mater Dolorosa in a world where incarceration, flaying, and swords of sorrow are no idle metaphors. But we must not forget that these religious forms have their secular counterpart. In the dark days of the late nineteen twenties after the fall of Hipolito Yrigoyen the unevangelised masses of Buenos Aires found a liturgical release from their cares in the tango. 'Un pensamiento triste que se puede bailar', as E. S. Discepolo described it.¹ But when a change for the better came with the revolution and the advent of Peron, Discepolo ceas-

ed to write tangos. Is there some sort of relation between this and the changing fashions in religious devotions?

Yet, just as the Iberian peninsula has not been entirely devoid of evangelical dissidents, so too South America had produced the occasional apocalyptic visionary. There was for example, Manuel Lacunza, a Chilean Jesuit who, on being expelled with other members of the Society, took refuge in the Papal States at Imola in 1768 and after years of study produced *La venida del Messías en gloria y Majestad* under the pseudonym of Josaphat ben Ezra. The work was millenarist, looking forward to the future reign of the Messiah here on earth. It was translated into Latin and several modern languages, including English. Lacunza died in an accident in 1801 and his posthumous fame was especially due to the English edition of his work. William Miller, the founder of the Adventists in 1833, read it, as did Edward Irving the founder of the Catholic Apostolic Church (Irvingites). The work had been put on the Index in 1824 but was eagerly read by religious seekers on both sides of the Atlantic who were perplexed by the political instability of the early nineteenth century.

It is the tale of one particular disciple, Francisco Ramos Mejia, that I wish to relate here. The story has an interest in itself and might also help to throw light on some features of society and religion in Argentina.

II

The abdication of Ferdinand VII of Spain enforced by Napoleon in 1808 added further to the confusion in the American colonies. Conflicting loyalties to the crown in the person of the deposed Bourbon or the newly appointed Joseph Bonaparte; resentment at the way other European powers like England were trying to exploit the troubles of Spain and so increase their own influence in the River Plate area; all these made the issue of national independence a far from clear issue. Even when the Junta was set up to govern the Viceroyalty of the River Plate it took a considerable time to clarify what the relationship to the mother country would be. Even as an independent country there was still to be resolved whether this would mean a federation that gave a certain amount of autonomy to the provinces, or a strong centralised government. It was not even clear at the beginning whether there would be a republic or some form of monarchy. So it is that the history of these years is one of intense internal conflict and debate. Moreover, the path of independence involved conflict with other parts of the subcontinent who had already declared for the King. The Church had its own problems too. Many clerics and members of the religious orders played a distinguished part in the movement for liberation. But those bishops who were of Spanish birth could hardly be expected to be as enthusiastic about independence as

their subjects and so there was real danger of ecclesiastical anarchy. Another test came with the debate about the new constitution when the country had to live the traumas about the power of the state over marriage and education that had already exercised Catholic peoples in Europe. The presence of the Phrygian cap in the arms of the new republic doubtless sent a chill through some Catholic hearts. Many of the great political and military figures in the struggle for independence were nominally Catholic. But the quality of River Plate Catholicism was poor. There was much ignorance, many of the settlers had come there to make a fortune and were little moved by religious motives. Even the Inquisition was remote since, despite plans for the setting up of the Holy Office in Buenos Aires, cases were always tried in Lima or in Spain; in either case a journey of several weeks.² There was little direct supervision in Buenos Aires. Then there was the territorial question. During the last days of Spanish rule the frontier was fixed at the River Salado in the South. The Indians had come to terms with the situation and had accepted these limits to the colonisers' influence. But in 1810 the change over from a monopolistic economic regime to an open and free market with English and other traders, meant a need to increase stocks and the cattle boom indicated that the frontier had to be crossed.

III

Among the first of these early pioneers was a certain Francisco Hermogenes Ramos Mejia.³ His father had been a business man, a member of the *cabildo* (town council) in Buenos Aires and the owner of extensive property. His family were much involved in affairs of the city. But Francisco, although he helped to administer his father's property, was not much interested in politics or town life and in 1811 together with his wife and son established a property of his own, "Miraflores", across the River Salado beyond the frontier and into Indian territory. His skill as an administrator meant that it was a well organised cattle ranch with good economic prospects. But he was not the usual type of rancher. For one thing he believed that the Indians had as much right to own property as the whites and so he paid the local *caciques* or chiefs for the territory he had acquired in order to indicate that he was their lawful neighbour and on equal terms with them. Moreover he opened his doors to anyone who was seeking peace, shelter and brotherhood. No questions were asked and homeless Indians and *gauchos* would find food, housing and work at Miraflores. But if they accepted his invitation and stayed then they had to obey the rules of the community. It was more like a monastery than an *estancia*. There was to be no drinking, no gambling, no polygamy or promiscuity. He himself was prepared to regularise associations in a religious ceremony of marriage. For Francisco was a deeply

religious man in his own idiosyncratic way. Since boyhood he had formed a personal theology about God, religion, and man's duties towards his creator. His ideas were far removed from the accepted Catholic belief or popular practice of devotion to saints and images. He was of a puritanical frame of mind. He had his own personal interpretations of the Bible, influenced by his reading of Lacunza, that all seemed to come back to the conviction that the second coming of the Messiah was imminent. Such ideas become more understandable if one considers the turmoil in the country and the lack of any obvious human solution to the problems of the day. Every Saturday he held a religious service at which all members of the Miraflores community had to be present. There he preached his own version of religion in a service of his own devising. Admitting no ecclesiastical hierarchy or religious superior he was not only supreme owner and administrator of the *estancia* but also its spiritual lord imposing on his subjects a discipline of work, community life and religious belief. Somehow he managed to reconcile capitalism with an other-worldly mysticism. Unlike that other social experiment, the seventeenth century Jesuit reductions in Paraguay, there was here no question of the Indians taking an active share in the administration or of being educated in anything more than Ramos Mejia's own reading of the Bible.

The crossing of the Salado by white adventurers meant not only attacks against the native population but rivalries and conflicts between the settlers themselves; Miraflores escaped these troubles and was a haven of peace in an increasingly strife-torn countryside. But Ramos Mejia did not escape criticism. His administrative ability was admired but his strange beliefs and independent way of thinking created an atmosphere of fear and suspicion, and the fact that he was able to prosper and even extend his property led some to think that he must have made a special deal with the Indians and was not a man to be trusted. However, by 1820 the situation on the southern frontier was becoming so unsettled that the Governor of Buenos Aires considered that it was time to come to some new agreement with the Indians to stop the continual raids they were making on the settlers. Ramos Mejia was asked to act on their behalf and the negotiations took place at Miraflores. This led to a treaty between the Province of Buenos Aires and the *caciques* of the southern frontier. There were expressions of friendship, peace, and harmony on all sides. This was the high point of Ramos Mejia's career. He had gained the confidence of the authorities in the capital, and the Indians were even more enthusiastic about his model society and the *Ley de Ramos* which governed their lives.

It was now that a change took place. Emboldened by his newly recognised status in the diplomatic field, Ramos Mejia dec-

ided to write to the Governor, Juan Ramon Belcarce and explain his own religious views. He gave an account of the problems of the countryside as they appeared to him, he treated of the relationship with the Indians, the way officials should behave, and he had some words of harsh criticism for both state functionaries and the local clergy. While there was much in this that was reasonable and commendable, it was rendered almost unintelligible by the religious interpretation and jargon with which it is presented. He sent Belcarce his *Abecedario de la religión* and began to write pamphlets. The most substantial was *Evangelio de que responde ante la Nación el ciudadano Francisco Ramos Mejía*. This bore the dateline 'Year of the Universal Flood 4777, the 28 day of the month of America.' Not only his religion, but his calendar, his grammar, spelling and syntax were highly individualistic and privatised. As a preacher he was able to exercise a fascination over his congregation, but when he tried to commit his beliefs to writing the thinness and illogicality of his assertions became apparent.

IV

In the heady days that followed 1810 many of the clergy and religious of Buenos Aires were not distinguished for their austerity or temperance. The last Spanish bishop, Don Benito Lué y Riega found it difficult to maintain his authority. Some of the clergy were so troublesome that they had to be banished from the city. One such was the Franciscan friar, Francisco de Paula Castañeda. An eloquent preacher with his own ideas as to what direction the new republic should take, he found the pulpit too small and so took up writing for the press and when they refused to print what he wrote he founded his own periodical. There in hard-hitting, intemperate articles he defended the rights of the Church as he understood them. He made enemies on all sides and was despatched to the remote southern frontier. One can imagine the depression that came upon such a one, deprived of his public and sent to the wide open spaces of sky and pampa. But imagine his joy when he discovered that he had as a near neighbour none other than Ramos Mejía. Here was something to turn his energies to, the hunting of a real live heretic. He read up, studied, sought information about life at Miraflores and in a very short time had his brief prepared. Then in a series of brilliant orations he demolished Mejía pouring scorn and ridicule on his writings, hinting darkly about his dealings with the Indians. As a skilled and unscrupulous polemicist he was a match for the evangelical who could only assert or deny and offer no proof or reasoned refutation of Castaneda's arguments. Castaneda for all his florid rhetoric did speak a language the people could understand, he made use of a Catholic vocabulary and he re-converted many who had become followers of Ramos Mejía. The news reached Buenos Aires and with the collapse of the

treaty with the Indians Mejía's credibility was damaged. An enquiry was set up. Bernadino Rivadavia, the future President but then a government minister, ordered him to abstain from practices contrary to the religion of the country, which were causing scandal and were damaging to the common good. He was forbidden to preach or to return to Miraflores. Four years later, in 1825 he died at the age of 52. If Castañeda was the one who showed up Mejía's teachings as incomprehensible and illogical it was Rivadavia who finally stopped him in his tracks. There is a familiar ring about this. Rivadavia was hardly a fervent Catholic. In fact recent research⁴ has led us to believe that behind his protestations of friendship to the Church, he was at heart a free-thinker. Ramos Mejía was condemned for reasons of state. Only recently Rivadavia had allowed the British residents in Buenos Aires a freedom of worship, but it was one thing to be liberal to foreigners, quite another matter to allow a native Argentinian to profess a religion that was liable to disturb and confuse people. Mejía was condemned because he spoke a strange tongue.

V

What then is the significance of the story of Francisco Hermógenes Ramos Mejía? Whether he sincerely believed what he taught is a matter between him and his creator. It has no special interest for us. Neither need we concern ourselves with the question of his sanity. Such a discussion would lead down endless paths of speculation on the psychology of religion and religious mania. But to try and discover why he was considered dangerous might help us to see some of the forces that were working in the society of his day.

Neither jealousy of his success in running Miraflores, nor even suspicion concerning his relationship with the Indians are sufficient of themselves to explain his fall. He failed because he came up against two aspects of Catholic life. Firstly, there was his doctrinal muddleheadedness where his own speculations and interpretations of the Bible led him to a position so out of touch with the common belief of Christian tradition as to be unintelligible. He was speaking in a strange tongue, he was an innovator who failed to make himself understood and so put himself out of communion with the ordinary Christian believer. Secondly, these views of his were seen to be not merely an aberration but a positive danger to society and so Rivadavia silenced him for pastoral reasons. We must remember that the form of government was no longer the Spanish monarchy, many of the governors and presidents were indifferent to religion, Catholicism was to cease to be the established religion, and yet the old principles of regalism inherited from the Hapsburgs and Bourbons were still operating. The ruler was responsible for the common good in all its aspects. One can-

not always disentangle the temporal and spiritual, reasons of state and reasons of religion are sometimes scarcely distinguishable. What begins as a sound Catholic instinct to relate Christianity to this world's affairs ends up in a form of totalitarianism.

In the centre of Buenos Aires, the Plaza de Mayo, stands the Cathedral. On its front there is written 'Domine, salvum fac populum tuum, et benedic hereditati tuae'. There too, is an ever-burning lamp in honour of General San Martín, the Liberator, which prevents us from falling into the illusion that the quotation can refer to anything other than the Argentine People and Its Inheritance.

But the close link between Church and State is further complicated by the attitude towards Rome. At the time of independence Rome acted cautiously. She did not want to antagonise Spain, nor to allow the new nation to be lost to the Church. The Republic has always been grateful for this. Official understanding of the Church has always been ultramontane. In protecting the Church, the State is protecting Rome. The Apostolic Nuncio is regarded as belonging to the national episcopal conference, if there is to be Church mediation in international disputes, this has to be papal mediation. Perhaps this alliance was most clearly seen at the Eucharistic Congress in 1934 when the Papal Legate, Cardinal Pacelli, was driven through the streets of Buenos Aires in the same car as President Justo, so that both would share equally in the acclamations of the crowd.

One of the reasons why there is no easy solution to the rather unsatisfactory state of the Church in South America is because those who challenge existing religious practice and values often find that they are using a language about God, man and society which sounds in the ears of their hearers as wild and strange as anything Ramos Mejía ever uttered.

- 1 'A mood of sadness that can be danced'. E. S. Discepolo (1901–1951) wrote the lyrics to many tangos in the days when the words were more important than the accompanying dance.
- 2 See J. T. Medina *El Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en las Provincias del Plata*. Santiago de Chile 1899.
- 3 For Ramos Mejía see Miguel Ángel Scenna. *El Primer Hereje Argentino*, in *Todo es Historia* vol VII pp. 79–92.
- 4 Guillermo Gallardo *Sobre la heterodoxia en el Río de la Plata después de mayo de 1810*. In *Archivum* IV pp. 106–156 Buenos Aires 1960,