

could, as is so often the case with heresies be a sign of the failings of the orthodox. If we are to be the leaven of our society in this matter of death, we have to think seriously about the place of death in our culture. More important, it seems that we have a duty to make our distinctive faith more obvious, not to be afraid of the spirit of the age as it is represented by the undertaking industry, the hospitals and the doctors, by the high-minded Gnosticism of the fashionable sects, by all those who have power over our lives and over the style in which we shall be allowed to die. If Christians were as distinctive in their attitudes to death—repudiating, for example, the practice of embalming the dead—as are Orthodox Jews, western society would become healthier and saner.

Christ and China

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It has been conventional to describe theology as 'faith seeking understanding'. We might, however, care to shift from the private sphere of understanding to the public sphere of language and call theology 'watching one's language in the presence of God'. Either way Christian theology must show itself to be truly Christian. It should seek understanding in the light of Jesus Christ. It should watch its language in the presence of the God-man.

Using either version of theology, what might we say about the New China and the recent Chinese experience? What insights and reflections does faith in Christ suggest about the era and the nation on which Mao Tse-tung has put his stamp? Where can belief in the Crucified and risen Jesus take its stand vis-a-vis contemporary China?

When asked to confront Christ and Mao's China I have no short or easy answer to give. Let me single out two themes (suffering and the emulation of heroes), and then conclude by listing some major points of comparison and contrast when we bring together the two figures themselves, Jesus and Mao.

First of all, suffering. Over twenty years ago Father Robert W. Greene's *Calvary in China* appeared.¹ In 1937 he had begun his missionary career in China. He was imprisoned after the Communist victory in 1949, put on trial in 1952, and then expelled from the country.

The book describes the destruction of his mission and his own sufferings—especially the drawn-out trial which reaches a climax in Holy Week. At many points the story matches the passion of Jesus himself. Former Christians and friends act with Judas-like treachery. Greene recalls an old non-Christian as replaying the role of Simon of Cyrene (p.97). At the trial itself the judge parallels Pilate's contempt for truth. His Communist lies confront the simple Christian truth which Greene represents.

In fact, the whole book sends us back to the high and carefully prepared drama of Christ's passion. The gospel story respects our sense of timing. Both sides set themselves on collision course and keep to it. In Mark the Pharisees and Herodians may initiate joint plans to kill Jesus as early as chapter three, verse six. In John's version Jesus himself wastes little time before visiting Jerusalem, cleansing the temple and issuing his provocative statement about 'destroying' the sacred place (2:13ff.). Nevertheless, both Jesus himself and those who line up against him do not rush at once to the climax. Tension must first mount. The story pushes forward steadily to the high point of the trial and public execution.

Greene frames the account of his sufferings in China with a similar dramatic sense. The Red soldiers and Communist peasants do not surge forward in violent rage to beat the missionary and fling him out of their country. The story wears an air of measured deliberateness: a long imprisonment, a series of examinations late into the night, a public trial at Easter before a crowd of at least six thousand people and—finally—expulsion from China.

During the night hearings false titles are heaped on Greene—'spy', 'reactionary', 'imperialist devil', 'guerrilla accomplice' etc. Like Jesus he stands alone—without any advocate or friends present. His hands are tied behind him. A soldier slaps him across the face for giving a forceful answer to the officer conducting the trial. The missionary is charged with spying for the imperialist American government. False witnesses testify that he sent the guerrilla forces a revolver with which members of the People's Government Army had been killed. Greene reports his feeling as he heard the charge: 'If only this ordeal were being undergone for some doctrine of my

¹ London, 1954.

Faith! But the political business gave me no consolation and left me with the thought only of its uselessness' (p. 135). The reader's mind flicks easily to the Lucan version of the proceedings before Pilate.

Then the whole company of them [sc. elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes] arose, and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king' (23: 1-2).

Greene's sufferings raise questions about the feelings of Jesus before Pilate. Did our Saviour feel distress at being tried not for some teaching drawn from the Sermon on the Mount, but for false and useless accusations drawn from the political world?

Greene recognizes and pursues the parallel between his story and the Lord's passion through detail after detail. He is kept short of water, but offers this unsatisfied thirst 'to Our Lord for my persecuted Christians' (p. 131). By the end almost everyone seems to have turned on the missionary or left him. At the public trial his former cook acts as the star witness for the prosecution. Greene draws comfort from some Christian women whom he notices weeping over his torment. Finally, the crowd calls for the death penalty, 'Kill him, kill him' (p. 148).

All in all, Greene's book skilfully and movingly describes his own way of the cross and the tragic destruction of a Christian community. It would be grossly unfair to belittle either the deep commitment or the very real pain of such veteran missionaries. I have dwelt on *Calvary in China* because of its implications for any theology of the cross in a Chinese context.

This book and similar works narrow down the possibilities for seeing links between (1) suffering in China and (2) the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. Greene invites us to grieve most of all over the sufferings of the Christian laypeople, sisters and priests. He also recounts the horrifying scenes he frequently witnessed: the dozens of public trials and executions which contributed to the ruthless political re-education of the people. Very occasionally he allows us to glimpse the wider sufferings that China endured for a century and more. Thus he speaks of his Communist persecutors:

I was not in their eyes a simple Catholic priest who was trying quietly to preach the doctrine of Christ among them. I was a symbol of something they hated long before Communism raised its ugly head in their land. It was the West they saw in me. The West that had for years humiliated and degraded

China—and in my heart I knew these crimes of the Christian West cried for change (p. 129).

As a total work, however, *Calvary in China* entails its special risks. With other such books from the forties and fifties it seduced readers into concentrating on the sufferings of individual Christians—often notable and brave leaders—and into disregarding the way of the cross walked by anonymous millions in Asia, Europe and elsewhere.

Take China itself. During the Sino-Japanese war (1937-45) well over twenty million Chinese died. Wars, bandits, famines and floods destroyed at least forty million Chinese in the first half of this century. In a thousand ways human beings and nature proved themselves prone to seek out and destroy Chinese men and women. The perspective of killing organised the history of China for decades before Mao came to power. Of course, these victims have remained for the most part an anonymous mass for the 'Christian' West: soldiers rushing to death on some distant Chinese battlefield, civilians left dead after a Japanese bombing raid, all the casualties of a cruel civil war, the landlords and capitalists purged after the People's Republic came into being. The word 'Calvary' can take on new overtones when we recall those large crowds of Chinese whose butchery we can only mourn *en masse*.

God forbid that missionaries like Greene bear the blame for the extraordinary way Western Christians have let themselves ignore and blank out the enormous suffering endured by the Chinese and other non-Christians. Significantly, 'Hiroshima' is one of the few names from Asia which continues to symbolize man's relentless inhumanity to man. Would this have been so, if by 1945 the Japanese had not already proved themselves fit candidates for the Western club of capitalists?

Let us also not pass over the fact that the martyrdom of Jesus has stamped the imagination of the West. Men stalked and killed the individual Jesus. His death left behind its very particular scar on human memory. After him the names of such martyrs as Joan of Arc, Thomas More and Dietrich Bonhoeffer glitter like gold. They refused to step out in the darkness of cowardly capitulation. Their courage transmuted death into a precious event, the end which gave point and purpose to their whole existence. The execution of Jesus himself and of the martyrs who imitated his heroism has impressed itself sharply on the Western mind. Could it be that Christians have become so oriented towards the model of the individual martyr that they are a little more ready to shrug off the atrocious slaughter of millions of their brothers and sisters?

Here I cannot help wondering whether books like *Calvary in China*—against the intentions of their authors—contributed to the wide-spread and ruthless indifference towards the dead of Biafra,

Chile, Irak, Vietnam and all those other scenes of mass death. Where a book or a film clearly frames the sufferings of some noble individual, we open ourselves to feel anger or pain. But anonymous, large-scale deaths can leave us unmoved. A Calvary in China is only for individual Christian heroes and heroines.

In one major way books like *Calvary in China* 'improved on' the passion story and—notoriously—helped to anaesthetize Western consciences towards countries that either turned Communist or needed to be rescued from Communism at all costs. Opposition to 'diabolic Communism' could be pressed into service to excuse countless acts of savagery.

Greene begins with a familiar comparison between Communism and Catholicism. Communism resembles the Catholic Church by its insistence on unity, universality and apostolicity, as well as by such practices as the confession of faults. After that comparison it then becomes easier to slip into talking about a mortal combat between the Cross and the Hammer and Sickle. Greene can press on to recall the satanic sense communicated by the officials before whom he appeared. He was accused of calling Communist officials 'devils'. A 'smug and sinister' smile lit up the face of the judge when he heard that word, 'devils' (p. 142).

This sense of confrontation with personified evil fails, however, to show up in the case of Jesus' trial and death. In Mark's gospel Jesus shows himself from the outset of the ministry clearly 'the stronger man' (3:27)—driving out demons and effortlessly overcoming the invisible powers of evil. But once the passion and crucifixion begin to loom up, the exorcisms drop away.

Apart from the isolated case of one possessed boy (9:14-29), we never hear of any evil spirits again. In Luke's passion story Satan enters into Judas (22:3), Peter is warned that Satan wishes to 'sift him like wheat' (22:31), and Jesus surrenders to those who arrest him: 'This is your hour, and the power of darkness' But any sense that Jesus goes to battle against demonic powers peters out at that point. John's gospel names Satan as 'a murderer from the beginning', who 'has nothing to do with truth' (8:44) and who enters into Judas at the last supper (13:27). Yet this 'entrance' is also Satan's exit from the story.

In fact, the trial and crucifixion narratives do not yield any sense of confrontation with Satan's representatives. Take Mark's story, for instance. At the night trial the high priest meets Jesus for the first and only time. We are not told that Caiaphas' face comes to life with a diabolic smile when he finally sees the prisoner. Mark neither adds any such sinister details nor— for that matter—even gives the high priest's name. He simply drops him into the narrative for a brief burst of questioning. Caiaphas quick-

ly reaches his key demand, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' Once he hears the affirmative answer, he turns from the prisoner to ask other members of the council: 'Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?' (14: 60-64). He neither shows demonic rage at the claim nor makes any attempt to get Jesus to disown the claim.

Neither Caiaphas nor Pilate have wickedly schemed to pervert the world. They simply act to protect their power, property and privileges. A certain moral indifference allows them to defend their 'interests', even though that means killing an innocent and vulnerable man. From the little we see of Pilate and the priests in the gospel story— or can learn of them from elsewhere—they do not look like totally monstrous persons who have entered into some league with the devil and the invisible powers of evil. Pilate and Caiaphas have value-systems that seem coherent, intelligible and even uncomfortably like our own. Call them ruthless and morally indifferent, but *not* frontmen for Satan himself.

Of course, the situation in modern China, unlike that of the ancient Roman Empire, makes it easier for Greene to suggest forces and figures that loom larger than the ordinary life of man. As supreme hero and universal saviour of China, Mao made himself constantly present. Communism offers a consistent and compulsory explanation of life in all its aspects. Neither Pilate nor Caiaphas nor even Tiberius Caesar matches Mao. None of them have his stature, demonic or otherwise. Despite official emperor worship, the Roman rule allowed for a generous diversity of religious (and agnostic) beliefs and practices. Imperial Rome did not expect or impose a single, all-encompassing world-view, as happened in Mao's China. It is more plausible for Greene than it was for the evangelists to hint at invisible agents of evil. More readily than the passion narratives, *Calvary in China* can encourage its readers to look beyond a particular set of human beings to the unseen powers of darkness.

Undoubtedly, Greene has some New Testament warrant for making such a move when telling the story of his suffering. The letter to the Ephesians describes Christian life in the following terms:

Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand (6: 11-13).

Nevertheless, it is worth reminding ourselves here of two points. Firstly, the gospels portray Jesus as sweeping before him the unseen powers of evil. Unhesitatingly he sees through the diabolic temptations that confront him in the desert. There is never any suggestion that he might fail in standing up to the invisible forces of Satan. No New Testament writer speaks of Jesus needing to 'put on the whole armour of God, that he might be able to stand against the wiles of the devil'. Second, in 11 Corinthians, St. Paul repeatedly recalls the sufferings he went through as a result of preaching the good news. His meditation on Christ's passion merges with a meditation on his own suffering mission.

Five times have I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night. In hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure (11 : 24-27).

Paul feels drawn into the event of the crucifixion. But he does not represent his participation in the Lord's passion as conflict with demonic powers. Thoroughly visible agents (Jews, Gentiles, robbers etc.) and forces of nature (the sea, flooded rivers, cold etc.) strike at and threaten to kill Paul.

A few words of summary should be in order. I shrink from my remarks about Fr. Greene's book being taken as another dreary example of heartless disregard for heroic missionaries. Criticism looks cheap coming from well-fed academics sitting in their offices twenty years later. Nevertheless, I find at least two deeply disturbing implications in *Calvary in China*.

Firstly, it pushes the understanding of Christian suffering beyond the plane of harsh secular realities to a mythical level. These Chinese and other Communists begin to look like puppets and mouthpieces of Satan. A paper by Thomas Berry ('Mao Tse-tung: The Long March. A Study in Revolutionary Antagonism and Christian Love') tugs at our elbow, and says that it is nonsense to view Mao as some satanic anti-Christ. It seems much more reasonable to argue that Mao has been locked in a struggle with another invisible figure—Confucius.

The key to understanding Mao is in recognizing in him a counter-Confucius, whose greatest historical mission, in spite of himself, is to evoke a renewal of the Confucian tradition. Confucius will one day be recognized as the colossus of

Chinese tradition who challenged Mao as consistently as Mao challenged him. Confucius can even now be seen as the hidden anxiety of Mao, as the judge of his deeds, the one against whom Mao was struggling throughout the entire course of the Cultural Revolution, and the one whom Mao had in mind everytime he mentioned the word 'struggle'. Until this day Confucius remains both the inspiration and the indestructible nemesis of Mao.²

In short, Mao is a counter-Confucius, not a counter-Christ.

Second, books like *Calvary in China* have encouraged their readers to relate Christ's passion *only to Christian suffering*. Any proper theology of the cross, however, dare not evade the enormous mass of suffering undergone by the Chinese people at large. Even before theologians begin to reflect on the *gesta Dei per Sinenses* (the acts of God through the Chinese), they need to recognize the full extent of the *passio Christi apud Sinenses* (the passion of Christ among the Chinese).

In his 'Love and Animosity in the Ethics of Mao', Raymond Whitehead spots Reinhold Niebuhr's tendency to relate Calvary only to that loving suffering of individuals which Christianity has honoured. Niebuhr wrote in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

Meanwhile it must be admitted that no society will ever be so just, that some method of escape from its cruelties will not be sought by the pure heart. The devotion of Christianity to the cross is an unconscious glorification of *the individual moral ideal*. The cross is the symbol of love triumphant in its own integrity, but not triumphant in the world and society.³

Whitehead refuses to separate in this fashion 'the individual moral ideal from *social struggle*. We live not simply as individuals but in social contexts, in classes. The cross must be related to *class struggle*.⁴ Nevertheless, even Whitehead pushes aside the full implications of Calvary. Any adequate theology of the cross must remember not only the classes actively locked in social struggle, but also all those classes and individuals who are or have been the passive victims of conflict.

²*Theological Implications of the New China*, Papers presented at the Ecumenical seminar held in Bastad, Sweden from January 29 to February 2, 1974 (Luthern World Federation); hereafter *Bastad*.

³(New York), pp. 81f.; italics mine.

⁴Bastad, p. 82; italics mine.

The *passio Christi apud Sinenses* must be taken in its full range. Calvary in China covers not only the heroic dead of the Communist Liberation Army, but also the victims of Nanking, Kuomintang casualties, prisoners in labour camps, and all those professionals and academics who have seen their disciplines suppressed after the Communist revolution. Let us reflect for a moment on this last group. Rejected as bourgeois, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists can live only by finding a substitute job. They saw their chosen work ending in bitter failure. There is at least some faint analogy here to the failure Jesus himself experienced. After accepting his vocation to renew the spiritual life of Israel, he soon found almost everyone standing against him. He could only weep over Jerusalem, the city he wished to convert (Luke 19: 41).

In brief, faith seeking an understanding of China, must take the full scope of Chinese suffering into account. Pascal remarked that 'Jesus will be in agony to the end of the world.' That agony includes the whole way of the cross along which the Chinese people have passed and continue to pass.

Several papers at the Bastad seminar invite the comment, 'Your Calvary is not big enough.' Jean Charbonnier and Leon Triviere (on 'The New China and the History of Salvation') seem to do better. 'Sufferings' they write 'endured by millions of Chinese in the work of shaping their nation into a new people give them a share in the redemptive passion of the Saviour.'⁵ Heaven forbid that I should allow niggling criticism or scoring off other writers to look like the first objective of my essay. But I suspect that Charbonnier and Triviere suggest all too readily only the conscious acceptance of suffering by Chinese who hope to shape 'their nation into a new people'. But Christ's cross casts its shadow over all the victims of man's vicious inhumanity to man: children butchered by mad tyrants, Jews herded to their deaths in shower-rooms, and the lives cut short by Chinese warlords as well as the lives given to bring about the New China.

the second part of this article appears next month

⁵ Bastad, P.108.