

possession of the holy land which is God's gift (a type of the kingdom promised by our Lord).

In the meantime, in this life, Amos gives us God's purest and simplest message: 'Seek ye me, and you shall live' (v, 4)—just two words in Hebrew, but two words which meant everything to Amos. The quest for God was the secret of his life, as it is of ours who, in the fulness of time would seek to have life yet more abundantly.



## RELIGIOUS POVERTY AND HUMAN SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

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**D**OES the religious life have anything to say about how men should live in society? People tend to think that anyone entering chooses a life that is, in human terms, a-social. Even religious orders which exist to be of direct use to society only perform their function from outside society, without getting intimately involved with the lives of the people they serve. And today, more than ever, religious are being reproached with this, even by Catholics. Religious life is too 'other', and religious poverty, in particular, bears slight resemblance to the real poverty in which so many people spend their lives. In fact the religious orders have abandoned the poor and grown indifferent to human misery; it has even been suggested that they aggravate it by their insistent appeals for the means to maintain themselves in their vast establishments. As it stands religious life is not only a-social but quite possibly anti-social as well. Let it adapt itself to new conditions, and identify itself with the aims and outlook of modern society.

But this kind of criticism is only possible, surely, because human and natural values are being used to judge a situation to which they quite simply do not apply. In its essence the religious life is an attempt to realize on earth the ideals of the perfect society shown to us by the life of Christ with his apostles; and

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it is by the standards of this society that our world is to be both judged and healed. If we demand that the poverty of the gospel model itself on the poverty of the world, we shall fail to understand the inner meaning of revealed poverty and the way in which human society is to be redeemed by it. For the world's redemption by Christ does not merely involve the sanctification of individuals one by one, but reaches out to save and sanctify human society as a whole, as a society. It is now possible for men to be made holy by living together as brothers, reconciled and united in a community whose pattern of life has been revealed by Christ. In this community the love of one man for another becomes the means by which God is glorified. Christ proclaimed that he had come 'to gather together in one the children of God that were dispersed'. We are a family, both by creation and by grace, and our first title to Christ's love is that we have been reborn into the shared life of the Holy Trinity. It is this rebirth that, most of all, binds us closely to one another, making us one. Outside this unity we have no authentic existence.

How has all this been reflected in the way in which Christians have lived together in society? The Acts of the Apostles describe how, after Pentecost, those who believed formed themselves into a community in which love was the whole law, having 'but one heart and one soul'. Such unity in love was something the world had never known until this, and it resulted in an entirely new way of looking at property: 'no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common . . . as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds . . . and distribution was made to every one according to his need.' In these circumstances it really was possible to claim that 'there were no poor among them'.

Otherwise we know very little about this community in detail. At least some of the faithful ate together (this we know from the institution of deacons to wait at table), just as they prayed together and held their property in common. But clearly there was no question here of any absolute obligation, and the renunciation of the claims of private ownership remained a matter for individual generosity, as Peter told Ananias. In fact, however, the practice of holding everything in common was so general that St Luke was able to talk of a rule voluntarily adopted by everyone. And, of course, this detachment must be understood

in the context of the early Church's keen expectation of the return of Christ, a profound hope which transformed the whole of life.

This is well enough known. Perhaps less well known is that the pattern of common living worked out by the Jerusalem community was the one which, with certain modifications, remained the norm for the first two centuries of the Church's life. The *Didache*, for instance, lays it down that 'thou shalt have all in common with thy brother and shalt not say that anything belongs to thee as owner. For if you share the same spiritual goods, how much more should you share the same perishable ones.' Similar parallels to the description in Acts can be found in Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Hermas; and in his *Apologetica* (A.D. 197) Tertullian claims that 'all is in common between us, except marriage'. That this can be said without any hesitation or qualification witnesses clearly to the persistence of the Jerusalem tradition, which itself grew out of the first Christians' response to the gospel ideal of the common life. At its most characteristic this tradition maintained that a Christian cannot regard himself as a proprietor because between brothers everything is shared. This sharing is the basis of what the Church has always called the apostolic life, a way of living begun by Jesus with the apostles and afterwards taught by them to the Christians at Jerusalem. St Paul described it to the Corinthians when discussing the alms for the Jerusalem church, telling them that it was not a question of their going short so as to relieve others: 'what is needed is equality, as it was written "he who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack".' And in Romans, almost in the words of that *Didache* text, he says: 'If the gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of a service to them in material blessings'. The right to property is not disputed; the ideal was a sharing in charity, a division between brothers. Continual terror and persecution only served to heighten a sense of the unimportance of worldly affairs confronted with the imminent prospect of the Lord's return. Against such a background the urge to amass wealth is considerably weakened.

But persecution got more intermittent during the third century, and in the periods of calm—sometimes lasting up to thirty years at a stretch—the Christians were able to grow in

numbers and settle down. Many of them settled down with their own private property. Sharing in common had never been obligatory but only a 'counsel', and now the Jerusalem ideal was observed less and less; the whole pattern of the Church's life began to alter. Even as early as the middle of the second century Hermas was criticizing Christians who held on to their possessions: in the construction of the tower which represents the Church, the edifice of salvation, round (i.e. unchiselled) stones can have no place. Christians settling down to private ownership are round stones, and God will chisel them by taking away a part of their goods. Otherwise they will certainly give way at times of persecution. Let them be content with what is sufficient and get rid of the rest, thus preparing themselves for the possession of eternal goods. Other texts make the same appeal; nevertheless the practice of holding property in common became increasingly rare. In these circumstances it was only natural that the most fervent should feel drawn to separate themselves from the main stream. So, in the second half of the third century people started to make for the desert.

It is easy enough to misinterpret this exodus, to see it as a flight from life with one's fellows, an evasion of responsibility, and the beginning of a concentration on individual sanctification as opposed to sanctification in and through society. On this view the whole relationship of the religious life and the apostolate is called in question. If the religious is primarily concerned with his own salvation, surely a Christian wishing to consecrate his life to the service of souls would do so most authentically not through the commonly accepted forms of the religious life, but through a complete identification with the conditions of life and work in the world, living on what he earns for himself, not tied by obedience; and in this way completely dedicated to his neighbour, whose poverty he shares by making it his own. But, as Fr Bouyer has conclusively shown, the flight to the desert was not in the first place the result of a sudden thirst for contemplation and solitude, even less of a desire to get away from people. St Anthony, Athanasius tells us, was attempting to revive the *vita apostolica*, which had become impossible in the Christian community as then constituted. Once he had sold all he had and given to the poor, how could he continue to exist in a community which was not geared to the apostolic practice of sharing? There was only

the desert, where Christ had done battle with the tempter, and where the resources, if meagre, were at least at the disposal of everybody. Anthony was not the first to go, and he was followed by a vast number of men and women who renounced their personal possessions and restored the ideal brotherhood of the Jerusalem community. The hermits, in fact, were attempting to re-create the social pattern of the early Church. They had to begin by breaking away; but already their life was, in many respects, a community life. The solitaries maintained contact with one another—because, Anthony held, no one could be sanctified without the advice of a spiritual father; so the hermit had to be approachable. Anthony himself left his solitude to visit the monasteries. In the *Vita S. Antonii* there is this description of the community life of the desert: 'On the mountains were dwellings filled with choirs of holy men, singing psalms, studying, fasting, praying, exulting in the hope of what would be given to them, and working now so as to be able to give alms. They lived in mutual love and concord. Here was a place apart, filled with piety and justice. No one knew of or suffered injustice. There were no complaints about the tax-collectors. A whole multitude of ascetics was engaged on the same effort to attain to virtue. People who saw the monasteries exclaimed: "They stretch like valleys along the banks of a river! How lovely are thy tabernacles O Jacob, thy dwellings O Israel!"' Here was another realization of the Church's continuing mission to create, on earth, a society organized in such a way that it would solve for itself all the problems which arise from the unequal distribution of wealth.

But from this time forward there were always two Christian communities instead of one; and it was the desert community, the 'religious' community in our sense of the word, which attempted to realize the complete ideal of a Christian society. Of its nature this community could never be more than the 'little flock' of the Gospel. As time passed the characteristics of both groups became even more sharply differentiated. Those who stayed in the world no longer, for instance, shared their goods with other people so as to put everyone on the same level as themselves; instead they gave alms to those who were in immediate need. On the other hand, the sharing of property by those who chose to continue the traditions of the apostolic life soon evolved into the complete renunciation of all personal ownership

—poverty on a scale which in the first community was practised by only a few people. The gospel ideal of a society in which everything was shared as between brothers had, not surprisingly, proved impossible on a large scale: even in Jerusalem several people had taken advantage of the situation to stop working altogether. But the ideal was maintained, even though it had to become the prerogative of the 'state of perfection'. The aim was still to bring about peace on earth, through a society whose harmony would be the means of giving glory to God and preparing men for eternal life. Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men of goodwill.

Christian theology has always held that God intended mankind to live as a single community. But sin made such concord impossible. Because of sin private ownership became necessary—even natural—as a defence against man's rapacity. Human society is held together by a system of mutual rights, rights which are not only inevitable and necessary but are regulated by respect for justice. Yet they are ultimately the outcome of man's selfishness, and because of man's errors and failures they result in the grouping of mankind into opposing individuals and classes and nations. The tragic situation of the children of a loving God endlessly involved in an unrelenting struggle against one another emphasizes the poignancy of Christ's insistence, just before his death, on mutual love; and in the present state of humanity his counsel to 'fear not, little flock; sell what you have and you will have treasure in heaven' seems daring to the point of folly.

Perhaps all this sheds some light on the vital function of religious poverty as witnessing to the evangelical pattern of life, whose spirit, at least, should always inform human society. This poverty expresses love as between brothers, who are concerned not simply to relieve hardship but to put an end to it: 'there were no poor among them'. The aim of such poverty is to manifest the unity of the members of Christ, many individuals forming a single body, the Church. Its detachment from possessions results from its fundamental orientation towards the life to come. Yet the life of evangelical poverty is also concerned for society to be ordered here and now so that it prefigures and prepares for the kingdom that is to come. 'That they may be one, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.' The relevance of religious poverty to the world's problems is that it

shows the power of love to conquer the selfishness of man's deep and instinctive urge to possess. This will always demand renunciation, even privation. But not destitution; for religious poverty witnesses not primarily to the sacrificial character of the redemption but to the coming of the kingdom, the reign of Christ. So it is creative, advancing the work of God in the world by the way in which it uses the various gifts God puts at man's disposal. Religious poverty calls for a detached use of property in the service of God. In this way it hopes to have a part in realizing on earth the society animated by charity which it is the Church's commission to create.

Given all this, it should be clear how far wide of the mark are recent suggestions that religious life should be modelled on the living conditions of the very poorest. This is to ask that we should identify ourselves with the jealous struggle between rich and poor, and so forgo our divine mission to show men how their society may be made whole. Perhaps the world no longer understands our testimony under the forms which it takes today. But apostolic poverty is a mystery, and it can only be understood by entering into its spirit, as we have to enter into the spirit of the cross. It cannot identify itself with the poverty which is the result of the failure of human society, for it is trying to do something quite different: it has to announce to the world the kingdom of heaven, the reign of love.



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**M**AX THURIAN is a member of a Protestant religious community, and his book *Marriage and Celibacy* is his second contribution to the series which the S.C.M. Press is publishing under the general title of *Studies in Ministry and Worship*. His first book in the series was entitled, *Confession*.