

Cecil Hargreaves

THE GOSPELS IN A WORLD CONTEXT



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by Cecil Hargreaves



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General Introduction

'My son, there is something else to watch out for. There is no end to the writing of books, and too much study will wear you out' (Ecclesiastes 12:12). No doubt, the preacher was speculating upon the barrenness of a great deal of his thinking and, as he indicates in the next verse, felt that, if only God was given his rightful place in life, all would fall into place. On the face of it, however, he seems to be suggesting a moratorium on publication! When one considers that volumes upon volumes have been written on the Bible, the question may well arise why the Bible Reading Fellowship should contemplate starting a Book Club, in which the books would actually deal with the Bible. The only justification can be the deep-seated conviction that there is still more to be found in the pages of Scripture – that it is no mere collection of sagas or historical documents, no mere survival from the religious aspirations of near-eastern peoples of a past age. If it were, the Bible would belong to a limited number of scholars interested in ancient literature or antiquities. As it is, this Book Club has been launched in the conviction that the Bible is no dead book, that its message is alive and communicates with contemporary man and contemporary society.

What is more, we can discover the Bible speaking a word of God to us, witnessing to that element of mystery in life, which enables us to break out of the prison of our own thinking and frantic attempts to save ourselves and our world. It speaks of life with a vision, life in response to a calling.

In his epilogue to the third and final volume of the Cambridge History of the Bible the late Professor Greenslade closed his remarks with reference to 'the Gospel which the Bible perpetually proclaims'. He sees here the reason why, at the coronation of the British monarch, the Bible, when presented to the newly-crowned ruler, can be described as 'the

most valuable thing that this world affords'. It was for this reason that Samuel Taylor Coleridge was able to exclaim, 'I do not find the Bible, the Bible finds me'.

Accordingly, the series of books in this new Book Club will indicate that the Bible is much more than a mine from which we may dig up an occasional ingot. The 'gospel' or 'good news' it proclaims impinges on every department of thought and action. The Bible can be misused as well as used. It can become a fetish and be detached from the actualities of human life. If, however, we consider the ways in which the Bible has been, is and can be used, we cannot fail to catch something of its continuing appeal and continuing relevance for today's world.

In *The Gospels in a World Context* Cecil Hargreaves demonstrates this relevance in a novel way. 'In our new six-continent world and our new six-continent world Church', he writes, 'it is clear that we have opportunities of getting light on the gospels from all sorts of new directions . . . We are getting writings that I would see as good "parallel-readings" to be set alongside the gospels and alongside the more conventional type of gospel commentary.' On the basis of this conviction he introduces four contemporary Christian thinkers and relates their different standpoints to one of the four gospels. Dr Kosuke Koyama, a Japanese theologian, seems to him to have a special affinity with Mark; Bishop Kenneth Cragg, notable among Christian interpreters of Islam, with Matthew. Dr M. M. Thomas of South India, his third choice, reflects the concern for history and the deep compassion of Luke; and Fr Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk who combined contemplative detachment with commitment to revolutionary struggle is taken as a guide to the gospel of John. Cecil Hargreaves uses his wide acquaintance with contemporary 'non-European' Christian writings to convince us that there is more light to break from the gospels than can be found within the European tradition; and that the early Christians were not as different from ourselves as we are sometimes led to think.

R. J. HAMMER

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Study Projects A few questions and suggestions for study are given at the end of each chapter, after the footnote-references.

Cecil Hargreaves

He was born in Cheshire in 1919, son of a Liverpool businessman. His mother came from an Irish family, and his father was half-Irish. 'Most of my schooldays', he says, 'seemed to be spent in playing the piano, or making music with others'. He left Cambridge with a first-class degree in theology and a second in classics. He found himself in India and Burma during the second world war. He returned to India in 1952, as an ordained missionary of the Church Missionary Society. He spent nine years in Calcutta (1952-61), first as lecturer and then as vice-principal of Bishop's College; and was later for some years lecturer in New Testament Studies in the United Theological College, Bangalore. He shared in the preparatory work for the formation of the United Church of North India and took part in a service of unification of ministry during its inauguration in 1970. For eight years in the 1960s he was Asia Secretary of the Church Missionary Society; and in 1975 was appointed for three years General Secretary of the body now known as the Conference for World Mission in the British Council of Churches. Currently he is engaged in biblical and editorial work in a publishing firm, combining that with parish work.

His books include a textbook for students on the translation of St Mark's Gospel in Greek and on Greek New Testament syntax (1962); *Asian Christian Thinking* (1972), now going into a second edition and being translated into German; and as co-editor with Dr Christopher Duraisingh, *India's Search for Reality and the Relevance of the Gospel of John* (1975).

He is married with three sons. Before their marriage his wife, as a Church of Scotland missionary, was doing Christian bookselling work in western India.

Introduction

A year or two ago, I was trying to do some studies in Mark's Gospel and also happened at the same time to be reading the book called *Waterbuffalo Theology* by the Japanese Christian Kosuke Koyama. I was struck by the resemblance at many points between the writings of Dr Koyama and Mark's presentation of the story of Jesus. Subsequently I had the same sort of experience in relation to the Gospel of John and the writings of Thomas Merton. And so on.

I have in this book suggested some parallels between the gospels and certain modern Christian writers in different parts of the world. It seems to me that some of these modern writers can help us considerably as we try to get the feel of what the gospels were saying all those centuries ago, and can bring out for us something of the modern significance of the gospels. In our new six-continent world and our new six-continent world-Church it is clear that we have opportunities of getting light on the gospels from all sorts of new directions. Interpretation of the Scriptures by people based largely inside European culture has been successful in certain remarkable ways. But the newly articulate voice of other cultures today is a reminder of new possibilities of interpretation that lie before us. We are getting writings that I would see as good 'parallel-readings' to be set alongside the gospels and alongside the more conventional type of gospel commentary. Such parallel-readings obviously do not displace the gospel commentaries or minimise their importance: rather they supplement them.

In the four chapters of this book I have attempted studies of four modern Christian writers and of the relevance of each of them, as I see it, to a particular gospel.

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As I have said, I believe it to be useful to read someone like Dr Koyama alongside the Gospel of Mark. Dr Koyama, as is

widely known, is a Japanese theologian, evangelist, pastor and teacher who has spent his working life mostly outside Japan and in different parts of south-east Asia. His great emphasis is on the 'crucified Lordship' of Christ and on God's patient involvement in the untidy, agonising, tragic details of human history. His thinking, he says, has been greatly influenced by such devastating events as Hiroshima and Vietnam, and by the ambiguities of western technology. Another obvious background to his thought is the world of Buddhism, and the distinctive Buddhist attitudes to history and to human suffering. Koyama's emphases have close affinities with Mark's central theme of the suffering Messiah and of the demonic hindrances that stand in the way of the coming of the Kingdom. What is more, Koyama's thought is worked out in very Marcan terms of God as a God of covenant, and of the Church as the covenant community, the servant-community. His theology is a theology of crisis, and of the 'undomesticated' Christ who disturbs and challenges man's ordinary ways of human thinking. Here again, we get many reminders of Mark's apocalyptic picture of Jesus as the mysterious Son of Man striding forward through the pages of the gospel towards his death and resurrection.

In a similar way, I think, to read the writings of someone such as Kenneth Cragg is to be taken right into many of the central themes of the Gospel of Matthew. Bishop Cragg has spent much of his life in the heartlands of the chief Semitic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. His thinking is done against a background of current Middle East situations, including the oil-power situations of the Arab world, Israel's political existence, and the phenomenon of new Islamic republics. His writings reflect the cultural, religious and political movements and tensions of that part of the world. He is an interpreter of the way in which the different Semitic religions have developed differently some of the great Semitic religious themes, such as power (including political power and success), nationhood and the chosenness of God's people, covenant, the moral order, law and obedience. To me there seems to be a substantial overlap here with Matthew's Gospel. That gospel is deeply concerned with Christian truth in

relation to the dominant Semitic insights and revelations. In its presenting of the story of Jesus, kingship, law and grace, obedience and faith, power and love, chosenness and universality are some of the central themes.

Alongside the Gospel of Luke it is illuminating to read the writings of a thinker such as M. M. Thomas in India. One of Dr M. M. Thomas' main emphases has been on God's movement of salvation within ordinary human history and secular society. His theology of humanness, as one might call it, has a marked stress on liberation and development and shows a deep concern for those oppressed human beings whose experience of life has been depersonalised and dehumanised. His writings come out of an Asian awareness of the stark facts of world poverty and underdevelopment. In ways that seem, once again, to overlap with all this, Luke's Gospel may be said to have a distinctive emphasis on the importance of history and, in its presentation of the story of Jesus, to express itself in terms of a theology of humanness. One recent commentator has in fact described it as a secular gospel.

Lastly, I turn to the Gospel of John. My favourite parallel-reading to this gospel is the writings of Thomas Merton, the American Catholic monk who died in 1968. His writings show a remarkable combination of contemplative detachment, on the one hand, and commitment to radical and revolutionary struggle on the other. The double emphasis on spirituality and struggle was worked out both in his profound attempts to explore the relationship between Christian mysticism and Buddhist mysticism, and also in his involvement with American Catholic leftists in the nineteen-sixties. All this seems to take us right into the middle of two central themes that are held together in John's Gospel. On the one hand, there is the theme of non-escapist spirituality and the love of God. On the other hand, the prophetic emphasis on the judgement of this world, on struggle, and on the importance of action rather than words ('doing the will of the Father').

It will now perhaps be seen that the title of the present book is intended to refer particularly to the relationship of the

gospels to the modern world's cultural contexts, its national contexts, its inter-religious contexts, and its international contexts.



At this stage, the reader may be saying to himself: 'This method of approach is simply a reading into the gospels of ideas that are vaguely related. Surely our job is not to try and modernise the gospels in an unscientific and subjective manner, but to study the actual text, and, as far as we can, the first-century historical context of the writing of the gospels?' I accept the importance of this sort of warning. I accept the fact that basic to any understanding of the gospels is the need to stick closely to the actual text and original context.

What is the probable original context of, for example, the Gospel of Mark? One recent book on the gospel gives this answer:

Mark was produced by an apocalyptic community, probably in the years just prior to the fall of Jerusalem. Writing in Greek for a community whose Bible was the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), the author has shaped the Jesus tradition in such a way as to demonstrate that Jesus' activity, interpretation of the Scriptures, rejection and death were all part of the plan of God foretold in Scripture. He was the agent of God to summon the community of the new covenant, which was to comprise all who discerned in his words and work the inbreaking of God's Kingdom and who therefore sought to live in obedience to his will, to nurture and support one another within the community, and to urge all who would hear to join the expectant group awaiting God's vindication of Jesus as triumphant Son of Man. The work was probably written in southern Syria, and served as a challenge and guidebook for the community whose members travelled as itinerant charismatics, carrying forward the tasks of preaching and healing inaugurated by Jesus, ready to follow him to death if God willed.¹

That is just one scholar's suggestion about the situation of writing. But it gives some idea of modern viewpoints. The

gospel seems to have been written or finally edited away from an area of Jewish influence, since Jewish customs have to be carefully explained (Mark 7:3). A good many scholars still give support to the traditional idea that the gospel was written or finally edited in Rome; the mention of Rufus in Mark 15:21, tying up with Romans 16:13, suggests this. But there is also something to be said for Antioch, or southern Syria, or even a Palestinian area outside Jerusalem as the basic place of origin. Overall there is a general emphasis among modern scholars on the Jewishness of the figure of Jesus as portrayed.

Can we really compare Mark and Koyama, except in the most general terms about their common Christian commitment and faith? Can we draw any comparisons between the first century and the twentieth century except to say that 'Mark' asked the right questions in his day about the significance of Jesus and encourages us to ask the right questions in our own quite different day?

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My own view is that however vast is the historical and geographical distance between first-century Syria and twentieth-century south-east Asia, the overlap in Christian emphases and Christian message between 'Mark' and Koyama is clear and instructive.

We are here of course entering the whole field of hermeneutics: that is, the principles of biblical interpretation. We cannot avoid some further brief discussion on that matter.

It has been widely emphasised by modern scholars that for interpreting the meaning of a biblical passage, one has primarily to apply one's mind rigorously to the first-century text and context. One must above all take things out of the text (by 'exegesis') and not read one's own things into it. However, most modern scholarship has also accepted the importance of a process which it has come to call, in its own technical language, 'pre-understanding'. Pre-understanding refers to how one approaches the text from one's own background. The level of one's pre-understanding determines how well-equipped one is to get the atmosphere of a piece of biblical writing. Pre-understanding includes taking a prior

look, before one gets down to the text, at the mental framework of reference or horizon of understanding that one brings oneself to one's biblical studies: in other words, the presuppositions and questionings that belong to one as a child of one's own age, culture, experience and situation.

It is recognised that if the text is to come alive for someone, there must be some overlapping of convictions, presuppositions or experiences as a background to the central objective business of examining the original text and context. The example is sometimes used of Karl Barth as an interpreter of the Epistle to the Romans.² He approached the text with strong questions and emotional searchings of his own about what has been called 'the Godhood of God'. He found that Paul's words came alive for him and struck home in the most vivid way possible. He listened to the Pauline text with what modern scholars would call 'pre-understandings' or presuppositions that overlapped with, and could find a significant meeting-point with, the text. Barth's work on Romans has been described as less of an objective examination of Paul's words than a re-proclamation of Paul's gospel in the modern age. His commentary has been described as being, in one sense – the very strictest sense – a bad commentary, but as being obviously a classic of theology. Whichever way one looks at it, Barth was surely a great interpreter, and 'pre-understanding' played a big part in his equipment.

In a somewhat similar sense to the above, I believe that a writer such as Koyama brings certain 'pre-understandings' that overlap with, and can illuminate, Mark's 'pre-understandings', and that one can take him (and others like him) as an extremely useful interpreter in relation to the gospels. It is not, I think, necessary for a writer actually to have written a commentary on a particular piece of Scripture for him to be relevant to the interpretation of that Scripture.

The subject of pre-understanding in hermeneutics is of course a much more complex line of study than might be suggested by the single illustration given above about Karl Barth. A person's pre-understandings (e.g., those of many modern Christians educated in a scientific age) may well not predispose him to understand the background, the

thought-world and the intentions of a first-century writer coming from a non-scientific age. Rather they make it more difficult for most modern readers to enter into the atmosphere of first-century biblical writing. Our pre-understandings can hinder as well as help our interpretation.

How then do we decide whether we are being honestly biblical in making comparisons between modern writers and the gospel-writers? There seems to be no easy way of deciding. Hermeneutics tends not to deal in clear black and white lines, but in weighing up the probabilities as between a number of important principles. These principles relate both to the negative aspects of pre-understanding and to the positive aspects.

Let me attempt a brief list of three hermeneutical principles, starting with a negative or warning one. *Some modern situations and interpreters' experiences are of little use for any honest linking up with first-century biblical situations and experiences, because of the huge cultural gap between the twentieth century and the first century.* It is arguable that, for example, a psychological study of the Book of Job published in 1975 ran into the dangers here being referred to³. Job was seen as suffering from various types of mental disturbance. His three friends were seen as constituting a therapeutic group, and with their help Job works through his disturbance, acknowledging that his previous perfect and upright image must have concealed imperfections. One reviewer of the book said that such an interpretation of the book of Job goes wrong through failing to take seriously the great gap between a scientific twentieth-century and a non-scientific fifth-century BC situation, and through trying glibly to bridge this gap and read a lot into the text. After all, it was said, the text of the book of Job asserts that Job was totally innocent, and the background and aims of the author of the book of Job were so different from those of the modern interpreter as to make real comparison impossible. If the reviewer was right, that would be an example of what we mean by this principle.

A second hermeneutical principle is the very different one that *some modern situations or interpreters' experiences can be picked out as providing a really close link-up with a biblical situa-*

tion or experience. For example, a preacher preached a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, giving it a modern application in terms of an Irish Protestant who in an emergency stopped to help a Roman Catholic in need, while a member of the IRA and a Catholic nun had passed by without noticing. (No doubt other preachers have given applications in terms of a Protestant in need and a Catholic helper.) It is arguable that this sort of thing is an entirely valid and useful piece of interpretation, because it picks on a modern equivalent of what is precisely the central point of the parable, namely the surprising behaviour of someone belonging to a religious group considered as inexorably opposed.⁴

A third hermeneutical principle cannot be so simply expressed. It is that *some modern situations or experiences which link up with first-century situations in the Bible make it possible for one group of modern Christians to interpret Scripture meaningfully to other Christians in another part of the world.* Some modern Latin American Christians feel that their experience of life, including life in a police-state, gives them a better pre-understanding of many biblical situations and passages than can be got from what they feel are the more academic and domesticated circles of European biblical study. They feel that their experience can be of use in helping other parts of the world Church to interpret Scripture. Sophisticated modern Christians in one part of the world can be helped by people in another part of the world to enter more fully into the spirit of a first-century biblical experience.

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The reader will be able to judge for himself whether I have followed the above principles in what I have written in the rest of the book. I may have fallen into the trap of not keeping a due sense of distance between the twentieth century and the first century. It will be obvious, however, that I regard the opposite danger as equally to be feared. I mean the danger that besets the person who concerns himself simply with the first-century text and context and who insists on seeing the gap between that context and any modern corresponding context as virtually unbridgeable. His danger is that of an over-literal interpretation. It is as possible to be over-literalist

about the first-century historical context as it is to be over-literalist in connection with verbal inspiration.⁵

In the following chapters I have gone on the assumption and conviction that the early Christians were not so different from ourselves as to make it impossible to draw comparisons between Christian writers then and now. I believe that it is possible to have some real measure of understanding of the beliefs and emotions of first-century Christians, and to attempt a re-interpretation of those beliefs in terms that have relevance for us today.

To take the first chapter, once more, as an example, I have assumed that in the picture of Jesus drawn by the first-century Mark and by the twentieth-century Koyama there are certain marked similarities. Compared with the rather liberal humanist western picture of Jesus which is perhaps most naturally congenial to me as a westerner and which was the one which I imbibed in my schooldays, I find that Mark-Koyama present Jesus in more stark and undomesticated terms. In addition to the cultural gap mentioned above between the first century and twentieth century, there seems to be an equally important gap between undomesticated first-century theological views and domesticated twentieth-century theological views. Twentieth-century theological views in the western and northern parts of the world tend to be accommodated to current western presuppositions, such as a philosophy of success or the principle of uncommitted scientific impartiality. A challenging gap exists between that sort of western view and the theological viewpoint of Mark's Gospel. My suggestion is that Koyama, having his origins in a cultural setting east of the Bosphorus, like Mark, and yet also being a highly intelligent twentieth-century man, can help us to get the feel of what Mark is saying to us. He can help us through a salutary culture-shock (or is it Christ-shock?). This type of help is a good example of the benefits of our modern six-continent world and six-continent Christian Church.⁶

Notes

1. Howard Kee, *The Community of the New Age*, SCM Press, 1977.
2. Tony Thistleton, *Obedying Christ in a Changing World*, Collins, 1977, p. 103.
3. K H. Kahn, *Job's Illness: Loss, Grief and Integration*, Pergamon Press, 1975.
4. Tony Thistleton, *op. cit*, p. 107
5. See Gerald Downing's article in *The Modern Churchman* (Winter, 1977) on 'Our Access to Other Cultures Past and Present: the Myth of the Culture Gap'. For an opposite viewpoint and a writer who stresses the importance of the culture gap, see D. E. Nineham's *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, Macmillan, 1976.
6. See the Lausanne Committee's *Gospel and Culture* (1978); and the work of the United Bible Societies on 'transculturation' in biblical interpretation.

1: Kosuke Koyama and the Gospel of Mark

Dr Kosuke Koyama is a Japanese Christian in his late forties who has spent much of his working life as an evangelist, theologian, pastor and teacher in different parts of south-east Asia. He comes from the united Church of Christ in Japan and from the Reformed tradition. He has taught and worked in Thailand. He has served as the Singapore-based director of theological seminaries in south-east Asia. Currently he is senior lecturer in the Department of Phenomenology of Religion at New Zealand's Otago University. His best-known book in English, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, was published in 1974.¹ As its title suggests, it is a description of how his theological thinking was moulded and earthed by his Thailand experience of trying to interpret the Gospel to Thai peasants. His style of writing and preaching is vivid and impressive. He sees the Gospel and the figure of Christ as challenging what he calls 'the tranquillity-piety' of much Asian culture and thought (especially Buddhist thought) and also as challenging what he describes as the 'demonic' aspects of much western technology.

Three keywords of Koyama's thinking, as I see it, are slowness, growth and surprise. These telegraphic, shorthand terms are an attempt to summarise Koyama's emphasis on the patient redemptive purposes of God in history, on new modern possibilities of the spread of the Gospel in relation to different cultures and faiths, and on a Christian theology of crises and unexpectedness.

It seems to me that one can reasonably summarise three of the main emphases in Mark's presentation of the story of Jesus by using these three same keywords. From Mark chapter 4 onwards, with its distinctive Marcan presentation of the parable of the sower (parable of the soils), we get a stress on the Messiah's hiddenness, on the *slow* frustrations of the coming of the Kingdom, and on Jesus' way of the Cross. From

chapters 7 and 8 onwards, there is the central Marcan stress on the *growth* of faith in Jesus on the part of new categories of people who are Gentiles and not Jews. In Mark chapter 13 we find great importance given to Jesus' teaching for a time of crisis, with the underlying theme that however black things may appear to be, Jesus' followers must hold on to faith in the promises of God and in the *surprises* of God, and to hope of resurrection.

Slowness

Koyama writes in highly paradoxical and provocative terms about the slowness of God, and even 'the inefficiency of God', to drive home his main theme of the slow, patient love of God. The phrases are used in the same sort of way that Paul spoke about 'the foolishness of God'. God's 'inefficiency' in letting his Son die on a cross is also the divine efficiency of love. Slowness is as it were inherent, according to Koyama, in a covenant-God who is willing to work through personal relationships with people, through incarnation, and through a cross. Koyama says to fellow-theologians in Asia: 'In our Asian hearts and kidneys . . . we must appreciate the death of the Son. Is there any other centre for our theological existence than this word of the Cross?'²

Koyama says that 'spiritual speed is the speed of love' and cannot be fast or short-circuiting or productive always of quick results. He reminds us that Asia's religious leaders and Asia's 'slow-culture' peoples have always been suspicious of religion that puts great emphasis on efficiency, speed, head-counting, and a semi-commercial marketing-approach. He says that part of the difficulty that westerners have in focusing on the movement of grace lies in the high value that they place on the rather depersonalised virtues of efficiency and speed.³

At this point I would like to quote a typical passage from Koyama's writings, to help the reader to get the feel of his style:

Since God is love, he is always prepared to operate in history 'inefficiently'. God's love which is genuine proves its genuineness by working its way in history

without any 'magic formula', 'easy quick ways' or 'technologically efficient ways'. Here is one classic example: 'And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger, and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. Your clothing did not wear out upon you, and your feet did not swell, these forty years' (Deut 8:2-4). God wandered 'these forty years' with his people to know what was in their hearts and to teach them that 'man does not live by bread alone . . .' What an inefficient investment in order to teach this much of the truth of God! No matter how important the truth is, wasn't there a more efficient way? God is the Lord of history and he is almighty, the king of kings. Why didn't he and couldn't he act far more majestically and with amazing efficiency . . . if possible with computer efficiency? If he did, would it not enhance his own glory before the eyes of men? Why didn't he short-circuit history and liberate himself from all the troubles, inconveniences and inefficiencies of 'walking history' with his people? ('The people stood and stared while their rulers continued to scoff, saying, He saved other people: let's see him save himself, if he really is God's Christ, his chosen!' Luke 23:35. He did not come down from the cross. He refused to free himself from the cross, and by doing so he refused to disengage himself from the sinful history of man. In this way, he forcefully demonstrated that he was God's chosen!) God does not liberate himself from the history of man. Because he is Love he became a nomad for 'these forty years'. He demonstrates his faithfulness by protecting even 'your cloth' and 'your foot'. (What a nuisance! What a chore!) His care extends to all his people who are journeying in the desert. He spends

his love profusely for man, and he refuses to give up, no matter how profoundly his project is frustrated, no matter how 'inefficient' his work becomes.⁴

With his Asian emphasis on slowness, it should not be thought, however, that Koyama is over-romantic or uncritical about Asian spirituality in many of its manifestations. He says that the Gospel is a stumbling-block for all cultures, and judges all cultures, not least the tranquillity-piety of Buddhism. He merely suggests that 'slow-culture' people, or people who have 'a bullock-cart-culture', may have fewer things to trip over in certain vital areas of human experience and spiritual experience.

As we have seen, Koyama asserts that it is only the inefficient, weak, suffering God, the servant-Christ, the crucified Lord, that is a gospel for men and women. Koyama's thinking, in short, is centred on a theology of the Cross. He is critical of any theologies which could go under the name of a theology of glory: within this latter term he would, I think, include any types of Christian thinking that proclaim the possibility of resurrection without crucifixion, that seem to centre on cheap grace, or that seem to try and evade the hard realities of history. His understanding of a theology of suffering is both very biblical and very Japanese. Along with other Japanese writers, he likes the phrase 'a theology of the pain of God' or 'a theology of love rooted in the pain of God'.⁵ He says that the realities of life, including the Hiroshima events and the Vietnam agony, have been so grim as to make irrelevant and ineffective anything less than a full theology and message of God's involvement.

Koyama is frankly critical of what he sees to be the somewhat aggressive, competitive and crusading mind at work in many Churches and Christian communities. He says that a crucified Lord needs 'a crucified mind' in his followers, to serve him. He believes that a crusading mind tends to try and short-circuit the complexities of culture and personality. He pleads that the Churches should try to find more the shape of servant-communities if the Gospel is to spread through them. He is fond of quoting Mark 8:34 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and

follow me'. He says that what is being spoken of here is 'the mind which is ready to crucify the self for the sake of building up a community'.⁶

Perhaps good pastors always put an emphasis on patience, slowness and realism. Koyama is clearly a good pastor. (The author of the Gospel looks like having been a good pastor too.)⁷ Koyama's pastoral realism comes out well in his description of his experience of ministering and preaching to a local congregation of almost illiterate peasant farmers near the theological seminary where he once taught in Thailand. He describes the setting and day-to-day concerns of his congregation: sticky rice, bananas, pepper, dogs, cats, bicycles, the rainy season, leaking houses, fishing, cock-fighting, the lottery, stomach-ache, funerals, and the care of water-buffaloes. All that, he says, usefully grounded his high-altitude flights of theology in the realities of human life. Whether he is dealing with the realities of peasant-life or the realities of sin, Koyama is a realist. This is the practical implication for him of believing in a covenant-God, a God of community and personal relationships.

Pastoral realism is not only found in Asia. But, as I see it, the emphasis on the patient slowness of God found in Koyama, the emphasis on the servant-Christ and the servant-community, can present something of a salutary cultural shock to those of us brought up in the west who too quickly associate all slowness with laziness or fatalism.

To turn now to Mark, we may note that Mark's central Jewish-Christian theme of the Kingdom of God is expanded by him in conjunction with what can only be called this same theme of God's slow patience from chapter 4 onwards. In Mark chapter 3 we get the story of the opposition to Jesus in the synagogue (Mark 3:1-6). Following this Mark records at great length in chapter 4 the parable of the sower or the parable of the soils. This gives us Jesus' completely realistic teaching about the obstacles to the coming of the Kingdom and the negative character of much human response to his own witness. The warning of chapter 3 is re-inforced: that Jesus was to win victory always only through the dark tunnel of rejection and his own suffering. The Marcan presentation

hammers home the point further by the strong wording of Jesus' explanation of the purpose of the parable in Mark 4:10–12 – 'for those outside everything is in parables . . . that they may indeed hear but not understand . . .'.

This emphasis of Mark continues right up to the Crucifixion and the Passion. We find brought out in stark terms the halting into inaction of God's Messiah, and his desolation on the Cross. It has often been suggested that so strong in Mark is the theme of Christ's suffering and the suffering predicted for his followers that this gospel must be considered a gospel written for a persecuted church or a suffering church or a minority church. Certainly the Passion story and the lead-up to it occupy a large proportion of space in this gospel. The suffering emphasis gathers special weight from Mark 8:31 onwards. There is the thrice-repeated 'The Son of Man must suffer' in 8:31; 9:31 and in effect 10:45. There is the poignant key-verse in Mark 10:32 which describes how Jesus and his disciples 'were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid'.

Nor is that all. For Mark, each major part of the story of Jesus seems to be tied up with the crucifixion, and the slowness of the Messiah's apparent progress. One aspect of the many stories of Jesus' expulsion of demonic powers that are to be found in Mark's gospel is their emphasis on the fact that there was to be no cheap victory for the Messiah. It is a case of fighting all the way. There is no triumphalism at any stage. Jesus is not pictured as just a wonderworker. Up till the Resurrection there is always a slowness, a servantness and a hiddenness about Jesus' glory. It is only when the death and resurrection are reached that the decisive conquest takes place.

The same is true of Mark's theological picture of Jesus (his 'Christology'). It is full of realism. The titles 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man' are frequently used. But Mark's use of these titles is probably only to be fully understood in the light of the significance of Mark's all-embracing Passion theme. In Mark, as we have just said, Jesus is no natural wonderworker type of 'Son of God', as the term would normally have

signified for Gentiles. The term is probably used in a much more realistic, Hebrew sense of the obedient, faithful servant of God: in other words, implying the suffering-servant-Son. (See Mark 10:45 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve . . .' as emphasising the servanthood.) Even the Resurrection, surely a major part of Mark's story in spite of the abrupt ending, is not seen in any triumphalist light. It brings a supreme message of the divine power, but it remains for Mark the resurrection of the powerless, rejected and crucified Christ. Mark is content that the paradox of 'crucified-risen' should not be glossed over. In a very Pauline manner, for him the secret lies in the paradox. It is in God's weakness that the strength is made known and made available. Mark, like Paul, seems always to think of Christ in this way. With Mark, the 'crucifiedness' is one that is built into every part of his gospel story, and is not something temporary which the Resurrection quickly does away with. The Calvary love of Jesus is risen and spread throughout the world, but it remains the Calvary love.

There is in Mark a strong emphasis on the hiddenness of Christ, or, as it is more technically called, the theme of 'the Messianic Secret'. It is generally recognised that this theme is a highly distinctive feature of the gospel. Mark seems keen to make clear that in Jewish settings (not so much in Gentile settings; see 5:19) Jesus often told people not to say who he was. He told people to keep silent about his healings (1:44). We find his disciples not understanding who he really was (8:17ff.). And, as we have seen, the impression is given that Jesus' parables were deliberately told to hide the truth from most people (4:12). Perhaps part of the answer is that Mark was writing in a situation where non-Christian Jews often said to Christians, 'If Jesus was the Messiah, why did he not speak out and claim the title openly and early on?' Mark says in effect: 'He often kept quiet about his Messiahship, not only because he might otherwise have been thought to be claiming to be a Messiah of the popularly-expected military sort, but also because he always visualised that God's work could only be done by an agent who remained until the End someone hidden, humiliated and apparently unsuccessful; and he pre-

sented some things as riddles in order to keep at arm's length merely superficial listeners.'

In the end this emphasis on silence in Mark's presentation must be seen as yet more evidence of Mark's focusing on the crucified Jesus who calls his followers also to suffer, and on the Jesus whose majesty must always remain somewhat hidden until the End. The Messianic Secret passages are undoubtedly a main pillar in Mark's attempt to show that the story of Jesus was never 'a success story' and that Christianity can never be anything but a costly way to follow. It was a main part, it seems, of a Marcan outlook which was determined to resist any idea that Christianity was no more than 'natural religion'. Some commentators have given no central importance to Mark's Messianic Secret theme. They have seen the passages about silence as signifying no more than Jesus' reluctance to be called 'Messiah' when there were so many false ideas of Messiahship circulating at that time. (And some commentators have of course used the 'silence' passages to try and suggest that Jesus never claimed to be Messiah.) But leaving aside these views at either end of the range of interpretation, as it were, the general theme of the Messianic Secret is taken to be of central importance in understanding Mark's Gospel. Mark's Gospel is well seen to be, as a commentator many years ago described it, 'the book of secret epiphanies'.⁸

No part of Mark's Gospel is more concerned with 'slowness' than the parable of the Sower (or the Soils), already mentioned. Mark's use and presentation of that parable may be said to be one of the most distinctively Marcan touches in his gospel. His realism ensured that he gave a very prominent place to the parable and to Jesus' teaching connected with it. Some fuller treatment of that passage seems called for at this juncture.

This parable, along with a message of sure promise about harvest, contains some very realistic sentences about the small amount of seed or soil that was fruitful. Mark presented Jesus as one who never pretended that many people were going to respond to his message, and presented his parables in many cases not so much as attempts to make it easy for

people to understand his message, as attempts to shock uncommitted people into some awareness of realities. We may note Sherman Johnson's comment: 'Mark actually seems more pessimistic than Paul about men's possibilities to respond to the Good News'.⁹ I take Mark 4:11 ('To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables') to be about the slowness of men to respond to the Good News. As C. E. B. Cranfield says in his commentary, 'God has chosen to reveal himself in a veiled way and indirectly. The incarnate Word is not obvious. Only faith could recognize the Son of God in the lowly figure of Jesus of Nazareth.'¹⁰ I take Mark 4:12 and its strong words, in a harsh and ironical sense. The meaning, paraphrased, seems to be ' . . . so that they may remain blind, if they insist on it . . . '. This would be in line with the quoting of the passage from Isaiah 6:9-10 which seems to be using the same sort of Old Testament prophetic irony.

Did Mark have an emphasis on the Church as the servant-community, as he did on the servant-Christ? The answer seems clearly to be Yes. Mark 9:33-37 is a key passage: 'if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all', says Jesus. This was said when Jesus placed a child in the middle of the circle of disciples when they had been arguing about status and precedence among themselves. The passage comes just after a central point in the gospel at 8:29 with Peter's acknowledgement 'You are the Christ' at Caesarea Philippi. It is part of the central area of Mark's Gospel where we get the threefold prediction that 'the Son of Man must suffer' (8:31; 9:31 and 10:45).

We do not know precisely the full sense in which the Marcan community was called to be a servant-community. Did Mark want to emphasise that it was the community's vocation to suffer and be persecuted? Certainly this gospel draws attention to several sayings of Jesus about his followers being persecuted (Mark 8:34-38; 10:38-39 and 13:9-13). If the gospel emerged from Rome and from the persecution of Christians under a Roman emperor, this would fit in well. Or was the situation of the Marcan community an Antioch or southern Syria situation? If so, the community would probably

have been not so much fearing death or imprisonment but humiliation at the hands of either orthodox Jews or pagan Gentiles. It is hard to say what the background was. We only know that the gospel seems to have been written away from Jerusalem, probably in a non-Palestinian situation. However, the writer is very evidently presenting the gospel story with an eye to reminding his church and community that they have been called to be specialists in forgiving, in being humiliated, and in learning how to live in a world of violence and victimisation. It is not difficult to hear a distinct echo of Mark in what Koyama says about the need for the modern Church to learn a spirit of non-aggressiveness, and non-competitiveness.

Growth

We now come to what I have described as the second keyword in Koyama's thinking, and compare it with Marcan key-thoughts. Is there a suggestion that Koyama's stress on slowness and the slow patience of God results in a hesitancy on his part about the urgency of trying to spread the Gospel? Not at all. Koyama is an evangelist from start to finish. (Some have said that the strong way in which he expresses his simple personal conviction about the person of Jesus Christ puts him into the category of 'an old-fashioned evangelist' at times!) He is profoundly concerned with the growth of faith and the making of new Christians.

The point is, however, that he is an evangelist who is very conscious that the Gospel has so far very often only been proclaimed in terms of one culture, the 'Western' culture. He longs for it to be proclaimed increasingly also in terms of other cultures. He sees the Gospel as challenging and penetrating all our cultures in the different continents. This gives him perhaps quite a bit of overlap with Mark, whose gospel seems to have been finally put together in a setting where Jewish Christianity was emerging into circles of Hellenistic culture.

Koyama is, as we have implied, quite honest and open in his criticism of Buddhist thinking of the 'tranquillity-piety' sort. He is not interested in any theology or philosophy that

neglects history. He does not think that Christianity can make any accommodation to pantheism. He declares himself uninterested in what he calls a 'sugaring' of the Christian Gospel with Buddhist concepts in the attempt to communicate it to Buddhists: to speak of 'salvation through the dhamma to Nirvana' seems unsatisfactory to him, and in danger of distorting the Christian truths just as much as, Koyama believes, Aristotelian concepts were in danger of distorting Christian truths in the early centuries of the Christian era.

But Koyama does also believe firmly in the attitude which respects the traditions of people of other faiths and people of non-Western culture. He is fond of pleading with Christians to put away their fear of other faiths, and not to feel threatened by them. He urges them not to feel despairing or fearful because of being perhaps a minority among the greater number of people of other faiths, but to be ready to hear speaking through other religious traditions the voice of the Christ who stands outside our understanding of him. Christ, he says, names his own name. Koyama, in short, is not interested in mere denunciation of Buddhism. He says he wants 'to appreciate the complexity of man in living history'. He wants to see Asian history and culture as being within God's concern as much as any history and culture. He admits that Buddhism has in a real sense taken suffering very seriously indeed and has wrestled earnestly with the problem of suffering in relation to the cosmos as a whole.¹¹ He obviously longs for Christians and Buddhists to carry further together an exploration of the true significance of suffering.

Koyama, therefore, is basically sympathetic to the idea of dialogue between people of different religious faiths. He is critical of a certain type of Christian outlook which he calls 'the crusading mind', which wants to bulldoze men and history with a simplistic approach and without any appreciation of cultural diversities and historical backgrounds. He admits to feeling, as an Asian, an emotional pull towards adapting the Gospel to Buddhist patterns of thought, in spite of the pulls on the other side to which we have just referred. He does not want to continue that part of the western Reforma-

tion inheritance which consisted in what he calls 'a theology of assault'. He declares himself interested in the idea of some harmonising of the Judeo-Christian 'linear' view of history and nature with the Hindu-Buddhist 'circular' view of history and nature. He says that he wants to see evolved a 'spiral' view, in which the principle of circular sameness is maintained (just as wires in a spiral keep coming back to the same point though at a different level) and in which also the principle of linear progress or newness of level is maintained.

It is significant that in the course of a discussion about the relationship between the different cultures and different religions, Koyama draws special attention to the importance of the gospel story of the Gentile woman who is described in the NEB translation of Mark 7:26 as 'a Phoenician of Syria by nationality', and whose daughter was healed by Jesus. Koyama says that although he had read much, not very helpfully, in the commentators, on the meaning of the woman's faith, he came to see (when he was living in Thailand and trying to interpret the story to Thai women) that her faith and her approach to Jesus were of course rooted in the universal human sentiment of motherly love for her daughter, a sentiment not peculiar to any race or culture or tradition. Faith in Jesus is not limited to one culture, and is not limited to the Jews. Koyama writes:

The beginning of faith must contain some universally valid and relevant factor which can erase religious, cultural and political demarcations. Otherwise, how can a Gentile woman sincerely come to Jesus Christ, an Israelite? Otherwise, how can the peoples of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Bangkok and Djakarta come to Jesus Christ, a Palestinian Jew?

There is in Mark's Gospel a notable emphasis on the spread of the Gospel, in the shape of stories about certain people or groups of people coming to faith in Jesus. Combined with this is a distinct awareness of the significance of the fact that some of these people are Gentiles and not Jews;¹² the implications of this fact for the penetration of the good news into new cultures and new settings are usually seen as intended by Mark to be a main feature of the story of Jesus. Mark's stress

on the slow way in which the Kingdom often grows among men in the face of human opposition and demonic struggle does not mean that he is fainthearted in his recording of the spread of the Gospel: on the contrary, his story of the growth of faith in Jesus, among Jews and then also among non-Jews, is told in strong terms and with enthusiasm. Mark seems to be an evangelist-cum-theologian who delights in the details of the spread of faith, is very conscious of the complications that enter into the story as the faith begins to emerge in people of cultures and backgrounds other than the Jewish, but who wants to get across to his reader the drama of it all in the wide sweep of human history. 'Jesus said to them, Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' (11:17). Again, 'Jesus said, The Gospel must first be preached to all nations' (13:10).

The story of the Syrophenician woman (7:24–30, and 7:24–8:26 as a whole) is the beginning of the most important section of the gospel where Mark shows people of non-Jewish background coming to Jesus. The words of the Roman centurion in Mark 15:39 ('Truly this man was the Son of God') are surely rightly seen as specially significant for Mark, and are as it were a moment of climax in this gospel. It is also surely full of meaning that for Mark the big moment of Gentile faith in Jesus is faith in a dying and apparently defeated Jesus. There is no suggestion that Gentiles are being drawn to faith by some sort of Greek 'wonderworker' appeal.

How can we put it then? Mark seems to proclaim on the one hand that the good news in Jesus is for all men and women, and that an exciting exploration lies ahead as faith in Jesus expresses itself in different cultural settings. On the other hand, Mark seems to imply that basic Christian faith can never just be adjusted to each culture (e.g. not adjusted just to a Hellenistic 'wonderworker' philosophy) but must be a commitment to the servant-Jesus of Palestine. Is it fanciful to see this paradox in Mark's presentation? I think not. If there is anything in this, we find it clearly echoed in Koyama's thinking, with its openness yet also its committedly Christian approach. (Mark's stress on the followers of

Jesus as the servant-community may also perhaps be seen echoed in Koyama's stress on the importance of Christians not having an arrogant attitude towards those of other faiths.)

Surprise

Koyama's theology, thirdly, is as we have said a theology of crisis and of unexpectedness. He is fond of speaking of God as the apocalyptic God of surprises. Man tries to make God like man, says Koyama, but God has to upset and perturb this easy-going reasoning. Koyama preaches the judgement and the mercy of God. His emphasis on 'crisis' has perhaps been accentuated by him in reaction against what he calls the 'tranquillity-piety' and the placid philosophy of many of the human communities in which he has lived and worked, especially in Thailand. He paints a vivid picture of how men and women in Thailand can have a life relatively free from a sense of despair and crisis, or from the need for decisive action. The regularity of the monsoon rain, with its blessings, symbolically leads to a sense of assurance that everything is always going to be all right. Koyama says that the Thais' outlook is influenced both by the kindly Nature that they live under (without typhoons and the other natural disasters of many other parts of Asia) and by the Buddhist faith which has encouraged them to take a very placid attitude to life. He says that they have thus been shielded from some of the hard realities of life in the ordinary world and from thinking about some of life's tragic aspects. As a relevant message for them, as for himself, he sees nothing less than a theology of the Cross, with its 'crisis-message' of judgement and mercy, to be adequate.

Koyama reacts no less definitely to the less placid philosophy of western countries! He acknowledges the great blessings, for example immense medical blessings, that have come to the modern world from western activism and western science. But he is also very conscious of that aspect of modern western technology which is not benign but which takes the 'demonic' form of armaments and nuclear weapons. He sees science as clearly in danger of being dominated des-

tractively by its technology. He sees man's situation as one which is surrounded by dangers of a cataclysmic violence. He sees some of the roots of this violence in the deeply ingrained western habit of violence. As we remarked earlier, Koyama's theology is not a little influenced by the events of Hiroshima and Vietnam. For western people caught up in all these ambiguities and demonic involvements. Koyama reckons that nothing less than a theology of the Cross, with its 'crisis-message' of judgement and mercy, can be adequate.

Clearly, for Koyama Jesus is no emotionless figure. He is the apocalyptic eschatological Christ, the ruler over all principalities and powers, who stands at the centre of history, in his judgement, his redeeming power, and his risen Lordship. He is the One who comes to men and women in all the surprises of his judgement and grace to challenge them to a decision. Any description of Christ that tries to dispense with these paradoxes must be inadequate, says Koyama. The figure of Christ moves at the centre of the world's history not imperturbably nor untroubled, but as One enveloped both in crucifixion and resurrection, both defeat and victory.

Similarly, for Koyama the God whom Jesus reveals is the God of apocalyptic surprises. God cannot be spoken of in terms of imperturbability but only in terms of 'wrath' and of emotive love. Koyama pleads for the concept of the wrath of God to be a central part of the Christian presentation. He admits that the whole concept seems scandalous to Thai people and to many other sorts of people. But he sees the wrath of God as part of God's involvement in history and therefore a necessary part of the Christian understanding of God as a loving God. He says that just as the early Christians upheld the idea of wrath and judgement in God as against the Stoics who refuted such ideas in the name of divine imperturbability, so Christians today have to uphold the same concepts.

But of course it is a case both of man's over-placidity and also of his demonic violence coming under the judgement of God. The world's life is vitiated by both the indifference and the violence of man. It is only in Christ who on the Cross lovingly takes on himself all the judgement stemming from these evils that we find renewal. Here Koyama finds ultimacy

and peace. And his language is throughout eschatological. 'In this eschatological hour we are called to share the pathos of God, God's pathos towards all scattered things which are held together in the glory of the crucified Lord'.¹³

In Mark, similarly, Jesus is the Jesus of apocalyptic surprises. There is always the looking ahead to the 'Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory' (Mark 13:26). There is about Jesus in Mark always a mysterious, other-worldly, apocalyptic aura. This is not to say that there is no human Jesus in the picture that Mark draws, or that Jesus in Mark is emotionless or colourless. Far from it. (See Mark 1:43 in NEB, and 10:18.) Nor is it to say that Jesus is depicted as moving effortlessly and imperturbably above the things of this world. However, it is made clear in Mark's presentation that Jesus, for all the reality of his humanity, is reflecting an ultimate and transcendent reality that goes far beyond definition in ordinary human terms. There is an ultimate mystery about the Son of Man. Perhaps the most typical of all Marcan verses, as we have said already, is Mark 10:32 where we see Jesus striding towards his death, and talking to his followers mainly about death and sacrifice. This is why it is usually said that Mark's Gospel mirrors the faith of an early Christian community that was full of expectation rather than backward reminiscence. They look in faith at the Christ that is yet to be, not only to the Christ already known.

Again, this is not to say that there are no references in Mark to Jesus as teacher: such references are frequent. But it is true that in Mark there is not nearly so much space given to Jesus' teaching about everyday life as we find in the other Synoptic Gospels. The impression given in Mark is that Jesus was concentrating people's thinking on ultimate things and not primarily on behaviour in the ongoing life of this world. In this sense, Mark's is an eschatological gospel.

One modern commentator, John Drury, sums up this understanding of Mark's Gospel in a striking phrase. He writes of 'Mark's terrifying Christ, behaving like a tiger', comparing it with Luke's more humanised picture.¹⁴ Drury also speaks of Mark's Gospel as one of 'mind-blowing mystery and tremendous revelation which impresses and dis-

orientates its readers'. As has already been suggested, the great stress in Mark's Gospel on miracles, healings and the casting out of demons has led many commentators to see as the central theme of Mark's Gospel Jesus as the mysterious Divine Son. And the great 'Son of Man' phrase used in Mark of Jesus and by Jesus (carrying mainly its Daniel 7:13 meaning) is thought by many to have been emphasised by Mark in order to stress the picture of Jesus as the divine apocalyptic figure. There is something to be said for the view that this early and powerful picture of Jesus was very soon given no prominence in the early Church because the people who came to be in ecclesiastical charge preferred other descriptions of Jesus that gave a more domesticated picture.¹⁵ This understanding of Mark's Gospel certainly fits in well with the points touched on earlier about the gospel probably having come into being at a time when the Church was up against stark facts of opposition or persecution. Koyama's emphasis on the 'undomesticated' Jesus has a big overlap with Mark's similar picture.

We commented earlier on Mark's emphasis on the crucified Jesus. We have to go on to fill out that phrase by mentioning his emphasis on 'the crucified Lordship' of Jesus. In Mark Jesus is the Lord who conquers demons and disease. Mark and the Marcan community cannot be content with a picture of Jesus that does not reflect their contemporary faith in him as living, risen Lord, who promises present new life, present forgiveness, present healing. He is present, 'round the corner', now and in an imminent new Coming. He is the Lord of surprises.

Hence the predominance of miracle stories throughout the gospel. This starts right from the first chapter. The baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:11 is followed immediately by attack from Satanic powers (1:13 and 1:24). God declares that Jesus is the One who shall undo the work of Satan in the world (1:11) and this is, as it were, a danger signal for the powers of evil. From that moment they are alerted against him. Jesus carries the fight into the enemy's camp with the healing of the man with the unclean spirit (Mark 1:21-27). Each ensuing miracle-story is a part of Christ's battle against the power of

evil: this battle continues right up to and includes the Cross and Resurrection, and it is a main theme running throughout the gospel.

The figure of the apocalyptic Jesus and his teaching obviously comes into prominence in Mark chapter 13, the great 'warning discourse'. In this chapter both some earthly destruction (13:1; 13:30) and an unknown future End (13:10; 13:32) are spoken of. The central point of Mark chapter 13 seems to be to endorse without any shadow of doubt what the rest of the gospel is already saying: that here is the Messiah who stands both in history and beyond history, and that, however black and catastrophic things may look, people should know that God is fully in control and will show himself to be so. What is needed is faith and endurance: 'he who endures to the end will be saved' (13:13) is perhaps the key-verse. That verse of course directly echoes Daniel 12:12-13. Mark, and the Marcan community, were clearly deeply immersed in the spirit of the Daniel prophecy: quotations or echoes of the book of Daniel come more frequently in Mark than those from any other Old Testament book. Mark and his community lived in the Christian expectation that the purposes of God would indeed be fulfilled and were integrally linked to what had happened in Jesus and would happen in Jesus.

Koyama, speaking at a great Christian gathering in the troubled world of south-east Asia in 1968, spoke of the realities of the Vietnam fighting going on at that time. He spoke of the desperate problems of poverty in many countries of Asia and in many places in other continents. He said that these were places in which Christians, like their Master, must become involved, must agonise, and must act. He also spoke of the eternal reality of Christ. He said that these two realities (worldly and eternal) had to be held together. He acknowledged the tension, for Christians, between on the one hand 'triumphing trust' in Jesus Christ, and on the other the 'discomfort' and 'stumbling presence' of involvement in the real life of the world. But he proclaimed the sufficiency of Jesus Christ at the intersection of these two realities. He emphasised the assurance contained in the scriptural verse

about how 'all things hold together in Christ' (Col.1:17).¹⁶ All this, for me, ties up closely with Mark's emphasis, in chapter 13 and throughout, on Jesus as the Messiah who stands both in history and beyond history.

★ ★ ★

We seem to find 'Mark-shaped issues' and Marcan challenges both in east and west, north and south, today. We have seen how Koyama said that a Christianity accommodated too much to Thai culture, with its 'tranquillity-piety', would be in danger of domesticating Christ. And a British bishop recently pointed out that a Christianity accommodated too much to British culture is in similar danger:

How long and how far can the Church of England or any other Church have a pact with the ruling philosophy of the English people . . . humanitarian, materialistic, having many Christian roots, and yet departing substantially from the Christian Gospel and what it has to say about human nature and human destiny?¹⁷

Notes

1. K. Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, SCM Press, 1974.
2. *op. cit.*, p. 173.
3. I owe this comment, and one or two other sentences in this section, about Koyama, to a striking article on him by John Bluck in the magazine *One World* (WCC) for July-Aug., 1977.
4. Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, pp. 66-67.
5. Note the title of another book by a Japanese Christian: Dr Kazoh Kitamori's *The Theology of the Pain of God*, SCM Press, 1946.
6. Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, p. 24.
7. The point has often been made in commentaries that Mark seems to have been written with a pastoral concern for the needs of local communities who might use it.
8. Gunther Bornkamm in his recent *The New Testament: a Guide to its Writings*, Hodder, 1973, p. 57, has quoted with approval this phrase of Martin Dibelius.
9. Sherman Johnson, commentary on *Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentary Series, 1961, p. 90.

10. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, Cambridge Greek New Testament Commentary Series, 1959, pp. 153, 157–158.
11. Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, p. 26.
12. I am aware that scholars differ as to the extent of the emphasis in Mark on Jesus' mission to the Gentiles. But see Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, Macmillan, 1952, pp. 197–198, for an illuminating discussion. He says that 'Mark truly divined the universalism implicit in the teaching of Jesus'.
13. Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, p. 26.
14. John Drury, *Luke*, Collins Fontana, 1973, pp. 12–13.
15. For an example, see Ernst Käsemann, *Jesus Means Freedom*, SCM Press 1969, p. 128.
16. Koyama in an address printed in the *South-East Asia Journal of Theology*, vol. 10, no. 1 (July 1968).
17. Bishop Patrick Rodger, in an address to Manchester Diocesan Synod, June 1978.

Questions and Suggestions for Study

- A. Read through the whole of Mark's Gospel at one go. See if you think it presents a picture of an undomesticated Jesus. If you think so, try and list points of relevance in this for Christianity in your own country.
- B. We have noted that in Mark the servant-Christ was accepted in faith notably by a non-Palestinian (15:39). Do you think that our modern cultures (most of them non-Palestinian) are a help or a hindrance to faith in Jesus?
- C. Read through Mark 4:1–20 with the help of something such as Robert Crotty's notes in *Good News in Mark* (Collins Fontana paperback 1975). See if your main impression is one about God's 'slowness' and patience, or something else.
- D. Read Mark chapter 13. See if you get the feeling that we today have lost something of Mark's note of expectation for the future.

2: Kenneth Cragg and the Gospel of Matthew

My favourite parallel-reading to the Gospel of Matthew is the writings of Kenneth Cragg (Bishop A. K. Cragg, the well-known scholar and writer, one-time Assistant Bishop of the Anglican Jerusalem Archbishopric, and now Assistant Bishop of Wakefield in England, and vicar of Helme). He seems to be a very 'Matthaean' writer. His exploring of the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which are in origin Semitic religions, takes one into several major concerns and themes of the Gospel of Matthew: for example, the themes of power and kingship, of judgement and authority, of law and discipline, of sonship and faith, and of grace and powerlessness. Kenneth Cragg had early involvement in the life of the Arab world and of the Middle East during his years of chaplaincy-work in Beirut. Those who like coincidences may note that Beirut in Lebanon is not very far from the site of Antioch, which is the general region where many scholars think that the Gospel of Matthew originated. Since his Beirut days, Kenneth Cragg has achieved distinction and leadership in many academic and religious fields, and has done much writing.¹

He has been an interpreter of Islam to Christianity, in particular, and of Christianity to Islam. His presentation of the significance of Jesus Christ in the modern world seems to shed a lot of light on Matthew's presentation of Jesus Christ. Matthew's Gospel seems to have been written by someone who was deeply committed to presenting Jesus Christ in relation to the time-honoured tenets of Semitic religion. Kenneth Cragg has been sensitive to the views of Jews and Muslims about Christianity, especially their view that Christianity with its emphasis on grace is unrealistic, romantic and far too optimistic about the unredeemed state of the world. In this setting he has striven hard to present the Christian faith both in fully realistic terms and also fully redemptive terms.

He has been sensitive also to common Christian difficulties in relation to Judaism and Islam, but has tried hard to get Christians to enter deeply into the spirit of devout Islamic faith by pointing them towards living Muslim worship rather than merely to Islamic theological formulations which can constitute a more rigid and less living element in the faith. He has tried to see the vocation of theists in all these three faiths in relation to modern secularism and secularisation. His own position in all this remained one of a radical Christian personalism and a Christocentric emphasis on the Cross and the Resurrection.

The Matthew presentation of the story of Jesus seems peculiarly relevant to the sort of things that modern Muslims, Jews and Christians are talking about when they get together for serious dialogue: for example, transcendence and incarnation, transcendence and indwelling, election and universality, sin and redemption, law and grace. To put it another way, Matthew has a special challenge not only for Muslims and Jews, but also for Christians, as all of us try and talk more together. From Matthew, Christians have the chance to see that the omnipotence and power of God is not just an old-fashioned emphasis stressed excessively by Jews and Muslims, but is built into the revelation of God brought by Jesus. From Matthew, Muslims have the chance to see that the idea of a supreme messenger of God who suffers voluntarily is not just a sentimental fancy of Christians, but is ultimately inherent in any adequate concept of God's omnipotence and power. From Matthew, Jews have the chance to see that Jesus did not cast away the old heritage of Judaism in bringing the newness of his message. For Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Matthew can surely be a key-document, helping people of all three faiths to recognise more deeply some of the authentic dimensions of the being of God, and some of the authentic dimensions of the Cross.

Inclusiveness

One way of putting all this is to say that there is an 'inclusiveness' about both Matthew's Gospel and about Kenneth Cragg's presentation of Christianity. Matthew is an inclusive

Christian interpreter in the sense that he holds together both the understandings of God found in Christians of Semitic outlook and in Christians of Gentile outlook. Cragg is an inclusive Christian interpreter in the wider sense that he holds together the understandings of God found in all members of the Semitic family of faiths whether Christian or non-Christian.

Matthew's inclusiveness includes the following aspects. On the one hand he presents Jesus as the Messianic fulfilment of Jewish prophecy. In this gospel's presentation many of Jesus' sayings seem to echo the ideals of Rabbinic Judaism: for example, 'till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (5:18-19); 'these twelve Jesus sent out charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"' (10:5-6); 'the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practise and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do . . .' (23:2). On the other hand, Matthew's Gospel also contains many sayings with a universal emphasis: for example, 'many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (8:11); 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it' (21:43); 'go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .' (28:19-20).

To express this inclusiveness in another way, we may note how there lie juxtaposed in Matthew's Gospel both the passage (Matt. 5:17-20) about the continuing importance of the Jewish law and the passage (Matt. 5:21-48) about grace and forgiveness. (The contrast is there whether we regard them as two emphases within the Jewish inherited teaching or as the statement of a tension between Christian and pre-Christian.) Or again, the section on judgement and warning (in chapters 19-25) may be compared with the nearby emphasis on the priority of forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-35). Since many modern scholars see in 'Matthew' a creative author and not just someone who laid different bits of received material rather meaninglessly alongside one another,² it is at least possible that the author of the gospel is to be seen as someone who

was deliberately inclusive in his outlook.

At least one distinguished New Testament scholar has put forward the suggestion that a main mark of the author of Matthew was his inclusiveness. Dr W. R. Farmer, of Dallas, Texas, USA, has put forward a very clear suggested profile of the author of Matthew.³ He describes him as 'an ecumenical genius' or 'ecumenical statesman', whose main characteristic was 'inclusiveness' and a passion for unity among different groups of religious people in his own particular first-century situation. Farmer sees the author and compiler of Matthew as a man who deliberately wrote a document which set side by side diverse blocks of material from conflicting traditions in the interests of mutual understanding, comprehensiveness and unity. Farmer says that what was done may have been something like the way in which the editor of a modern ecumenical hymnbook or book of prayers includes material from very different churches, denominations and groups, and sets them alongside one another. In a situation of many differing opinions and convictions, brought to a climax by the crisis of the Jewish-Roman war of AD 66-70 (and the resulting crisis between Christians of more Jewish background or emphasis on the one hand and Christians of more Gentile background and emphasis on the other), Farmer sees the gospel-author as attempting to provide a focus of unity round the memory of Jesus and faith in him. The author is seen as doing this in spite of the differing received traditions about Jesus found in the different churches of his area. Among these diverse received traditions, says Farmer, some churches cherished legendary stories of Jesus' birth, others cherished stories of what marvellous things happened at the time of Jesus' death and following his death, and others cherished entirely different points. The author of Matthew, it is said, deliberately placed these diverse pieces of material alongside one another to show the common ground that the diverse groups had. The more-Jewish and the less-Jewish tradition is placed side by side, 'with no effort made to compromise the integrity of either, except as their being placed side by side tends to mitigate against extreme interpretations of any one point of view'. Farmer adds:

The most distinctive achievement of the author of Matthew is his overall inclusiveness. This he has achieved through the art of juxtaposing all conflicting tradition within a framework of larger literary units which so harmonise with one another that all discordant elements are overwhelmed by the grandeur of the total vision to which the completed work has always pointed those who accord it the attention it deserves but never demands.

On probable details of the background situation of this gospel, Farmer describes the worsening of relationships between orthodox Judaism and the new Christian Church as a result of the Jewish-Roman war crisis. He shows how in Antioch, where he believes the gospel to have been written, people generally seem to have condemned the Jewish fanaticism in and around Jerusalem at the time of the war. He says the overall effect of the war upon Christians in Antioch would seem to have been to shift the balance of power within the total Christian community into the hands of those who saw the future of the Church in terms of a single mission . . . and that to the Gentiles.

Farmer, however, thinks that some Jewish Christian churches in Antioch may have still stood by Jerusalem attitudes, and may have become more firmly Jewish in the crisis. Just as the Church's links with and dependence upon synagogues would now have to end, so also there was going to have to be a general realignment of Christian theology and Christian thinking. It was in this situation that the author of Matthew wanted to keep united two groups of Antioch Christians that were in danger of becoming separated: on the one hand, as we have said, those Christians who were fervently Jewish and still identified themselves fully with fellow-Jews in Palestine in their fanatical defence of the Jewish temple; and, on the other hand, other Christians who without totally rejecting Judaism were turning towards the Gentile world and seeing the future in the direction of an emphasis on universality. Some of the opposing emphases which, it is suggested, the author deliberately set side by side, have already been briefly alluded to above: for example, the

opposing emphases on Jew and Gentile, on law and grace, and on judgement and forgiveness. Professor Farmer's picture of what the background to Matthew's Gospel may have been seems highly suggestive and significant.

Some New Testament scholars may of course want to minimise Jesus' 'opposing emphases' in Matthew as being merely a contrast between the true spirit of Jewish law, on the one hand, and certain distorted and rigorist Jewish interpretations of the law in his day, on the other. Such scholars might say that that is the contrast being made, not a contrast between Jewish law on the one hand, and something superseding Jewish law, on the other. This puts the matter in the strict original setting of Jesus' teaching, and the point is taken. But it still seems true to say, as we have said, that Jesus was touching on a distinction that has wider implications than merely ones within Judaism. He was touching on, for example, the whole distinction between law and grace in any religion and as between religions. The force of his word 'But . . .' (Matt. 5:22, 28 and so on 'But I say to you . . .') has to be seen in its total implication.

In general it is fairly widely accepted that a big part of the background of the writing of Matthew was the puzzlement of first-century Christians about both the common ground and also the distinct differences between Judaism and Christianity. Matthew seems to have compiled his gospel not least in order to help people to face this puzzlement, and to show them how to look in more than a one-sided way at their religious faith.

Matthew holds together in a remarkable way the Jewish-Christian emphasis on the divine transcendence (the unapproachable light) and the general Christian emphasis on God's glory seen in the 'weakness' of Jesus. In Matthew the motif of royalty (e.g. the gifts of the wise men in 2:11, and the ride into Jerusalem in chapter 21) is always followed by the motif of suffering. In chapter 2 the context of the gifts is Herod's cruelty, and one of the gifts is myrrh. In chapter 21 Jesus rides as a servant-king on a donkey.

As we shall see, Cragg, in a not dissimilar way, holds together the Jewish and Muslim emphasis on the sovereignty

of God and the general Christian emphasis on the redemptive suffering of Jesus. In Cragg the motif of God's omnipotence is always followed by the motif of God's 'vulnerability'. He urges Muslims and Jews to take seriously the Christian emphasis on God's vulnerability.

Cragg in turn urges modern Christians to take seriously the Jewish and Muslim emphasis on God's glory and sovereignty, and the great principle that God is to be all in all. He pleads for 'an Islamically-oriented Christianity', and says that this is no more than a realisation by Christianity of part of its roots. He agrees that the New Testament is apparently very un-islamic in the commitments and decisions which are found in it, especially at what he describes as the *New Testament's* 'definitive event' of Gethsemane. But he says that the New Testament's basic concerns, and the issues that it faces are already islamic. A quotation may help us here:

The New Testament is deeply islamic in the concerns to which its decisions belong: the sovereignty of God, the universality of mercy, the correction of evil, the release of thanksgiving and the claims of eternity. These can perhaps be focused into the dethronement of idolatry. There is no more splendid, and effective, liberation of idolaters from their futility and fear than New Testament religion. 'You turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God', wrote Paul to the Thessalonians. Surely here, for all the divergences of diagnosis and remedy, is a cause for Muslim openness of heart? For Islam is committed to antipathy for all 'shirk', to 'jihad' against all false worship, and to the reversal of all 'non-islam'. The essence of 'non-islam' is the idol power, the false absolute, the disowning of God. Is it not clear that all Christianity, and the Christian's prayers herewith, have to do, decisively and devotedly, with this supremely islamic concern that 'God may be all in all'? If we cannot be well together on the ground of Islam, can we not be found together at least in common struggle against 'non-islam', against all that is insubordinate to the will, the mercy and the rule of God?⁴

In other words, Cragg makes clear that just as the goal of

Christianity is that God may be all in all, so this too is the supreme concern of Islam. In pressing home this point he never lets go, however, of the distinctive Christian emphases on grace, redemption and universality.

I suggest that in both Matthew and Cragg, Jesus Christ is so presented that law and grace, transcendence and incarnation are taken seriously. In both writers it is made clear that the general Semitic emphasis and the specifically Christian emphasis belong together in the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus. In both writers the relationship between law and grace, transcendence and incarnation, is ultimately expounded in terms of the Cross and the Resurrection, and in terms of the implications of these events for the community of the followers of Jesus. It may be helpful to look in more detail at the issues of transcendence (or what I have called the divine 'authority' in what follows) and of law.

Authority and Sonship

The question of God's authority and sovereignty is very much to the fore in Cragg's writings. He is well aware that most Christians are critical of Islam for believing in God, as they see it, as someone of autocratic and authoritarian power rather than loving power. At the same time he realises that most Muslims are critical of Christianity for introducing the concept of Jesus' incarnate sonship (and man's sonship of God through Jesus), thus blurring, as Muslims see it, the majesty of the One God.

As we have seen, Cragg pleads with Muslims that the Muslim emphasis on God's greatness and authority be interpreted as including love as the deepest point of authority: and he pleads with Christians that the Christian emphasis on the free sonship of grace be interpreted in a way that does not at all diminish the glory of the One God. In particular, Cragg believes that Muslims can learn a lot from Christians about the sort of radical personalism in worship that the term 'sonship' implies. Sonship, he says, 'in nature and through grace' is 'the ultimate religious experience'.⁵ At the same time he believes that Christians can learn much from Muslims about reverence in worship.

So Cragg's discussions on the theme of power and authority fall roughly under three heads:

(i) *Worship*. Clearly a great emphasis in Islam is on God's transcendent glory and power, and on the importance of worship. Many of us Christians have been humbled by seeing, and living alongside, the disciplined prayer-observance of devout Muslims. Kenneth Cragg has tried to get Christians to take more seriously the common ground that they have with Muslims in the field of prayer and reverence: he speaks of 'a community of reverence and gratitude' between Muslims and Christians, 'a common consecration and joint seeking of the face of God', a common 'centrality of gratitude', and a common 'dethronement of idolatry' which Muslims and Christians can share together. He speaks of 'a common frailty' that Christians and Muslims share among the dilemmas and crises of the modern world, whether in relation to modern western society or modern Asian and African society. The dilemmas into which modern science and technology, with their banes and blessings, have thrown us all, lead us, he says, into the common crisis of 'our confusion, our brokenness, our anger' and 'our self-sufficiency'. This must surely send us down on our knees together, he adds, in 'a rendezvous of spirituality'⁶ and consecration to service. It must also surely call us to think together, he says, on the significance of our common heritage of belief in a supreme God: again he speaks of 'a partial rendezvous of praise and petition' and penitence, as something which Muslims and Christians will surely want to make together in this age of ours which is wrestling to understand the relationship of the sacred and the secular.

Kenneth Cragg sees a similar common ground between Judaism and Christianity in this matter. He says that we can all meet more easily in worship than around creeds: religions creed-wise are 'ends in themselves'; religions worship-wise are 'for ends beyond them'. Each faith can in the right sense lose itself in some way when engaged in worship. Kenneth Cragg admits that these 'areas of rendezvous' can only be partial and cannot constitute for adherents of any of the faiths their total prayer, but he appeals for an exploring of common

prayer between the people of the different faiths.

(ii) *Sovereignty*. Kenneth Cragg examines sensitively the whole general concept of God's sovereignty in each of the faiths. Basically he sees this concept (the belief that God is 'all in all' and is to be 'all in all') as the big underlying belief which all the three faiths have in common. He says that 'the whole end of Christianity is that God may be all in all, and this is too the supreme concern of Islam'. He goes so far as to say that a Christian cannot fully be a Christian without being 'islamically oriented' in this respect. He speaks of the Islamic emphasis on God's glory as an emphasis badly needed in many other religious traditions these days. Sympathetically, he says that even the Muslim 're-writing of the Crucifixion' (by the view that God's great servant would never be allowed by God to fall into such weakness) is only done in the interests of God's glory. But in the end, says Cragg also, a Muslim surely cannot fully be a Muslim without being involved in what Christianity says about God's majesty being supremely disclosed in incarnation.

It is, of course, in this area of discussion that the differences between the faiths emerge most obviously: Cragg faces them squarely. It is recognised that Muslims usually reject the significance of Jesus of Nazareth as incarnate Son of God, and that Christians usually assess the Islamic concept of God as one of autocratic Power rather than loving Power. Cragg is concerned, however, that Muslims and Christians should not accept their present doctrinal divisions and differences as necessarily the last word about agreement between them. He starts from some of the great Muslim articles of belief in God as Creator, Lawgiver and Revealer, and from the strong Muslim sense that the world has been created for a mutuality of relationship between God and humanity. He asks whether Muslims could consider the possibility that the idea of incarnation (sympathy, weakness, vulnerability) in God is inherent in the Creator-concept, since a God who showed himself willing at the very beginning to create free beings thereby must surely have laid himself open to the possibility of becoming vulnerable himself.

Cragg also starts from the basic Muslim belief in man's

responsibility before God and accountability to God's will: he says that if God has created man as a free and responding or accountable person and not only simply as a surrendering person, then perhaps it may be conceded that God has in some sense, voluntarily, qualified his own sovereignty. Cragg suggests that Muslims be asked to see vulnerability not as a qualification of the sovereignty and greatness of God, but as 'greatness in a different way'.⁷ By Christians, he says, when talking to Muslims, 'the submission of God on the Cross must be presented as part of the sovereignty'.⁸ Cragg agrees that it may be difficult to ask Muslims to accept this paradox of sovereignty and vulnerability in God, but his 'inclusive' view about relationships between the faiths stimulates him to put forward the idea. He is virtually saying to Christians, to Muslims and to Jews: 'Consider the possibility that there are already implicit in your received faith certain aspects of truth that are now being brought home to you by people of another faith in this new age of ours'.

Cragg also takes up the strong Muslim emphasis on obedience, and on God's activity in history. He says that 'the divine engagement with men and history' demands some concentration of obedience of Jesus' sort, and that Jesus' sonship (so difficult an idea for Muslims, who take the term to be non-monotheistic) simply means obedience of a complete sort. He adds that the conviction about Jesus' sonship that grew among monotheists (and their resultant worship of Jesus Christ within the recognising of God in worship) simply came from the conviction that Jesus was integrally within the divine activity and that God's disclosure was focused in him.

(iii) *Success.* Also on the theme of power, in a broader sense, Kenneth Cragg gives a very sympathetic sketch of the Jewish and Islamic concepts of 'dominion', that is, political success or racial success, showing how these are based on God's giving to man dominion over nature as recorded in the Book of Genesis. He examines the strong conviction that the Jews have of their chosenness as a nation, under the chapter title 'The Chosen and the Nations' in his book *The Privilege of Man*. He also examines the Islamic theocratic concepts of the

Caliphate ('Obey God and obey the apostle': *Quran*, Surah 5.93) and of Din and Daulah, 'religion-cum-empire', under the chapter title 'Apostolic Rule: the Dilemma of Islamic Rule' in the same book. The whole authoritarianism and 'political success' emphasis of Jewry and Islam are underlined, though the protests of the Jewish prophets against selfish power and the likelihood that at the beginning of Islam Muhammad put huge emphasis on the importance of patience and of a trust in God's Word alone are fairly stated.⁹ There is admitted to be a paradox in Islam at this point, though in the end the centrality of the idea of political power is left unchallenged.

The logic of life is power and the theme of religion is submission. The marriage of these is power-submission, and this is Islam. One does not truly submit unless one prevails. For victory is with God.

Traditionally Islam is seen to have found a non-politically-backed religion to be too pessimistic about changing humanity. On the whole, it is stressed, in both Jewry and Islam, God is identified with what prospers, and this philosophy of power determines their view of the world. Kenneth Cragg points out that both Adam as 'caliph' (*Quran*, Surah 2.30: 'I am appointing a viceroy on the earth') and Abraham seen as standing for Race and Power are key symbols of much of this philosophy of power: in Judaism, Abraham is 'founder of the people' and founder of the family: in Islam, Abraham is the great prophet fighting against idolatry and is the city builder. The Jewish and Islamic emphasis on power is seen to emerge in modern times in the significance that the Jews have attached to Israeli success and in the significance that the Arab nations have attached to the new power of their oil resources as a counterblast to the former colonial power of 'Christendom'.¹⁰ Cragg also gives a realistic assessment of elements of imperialism, nationalism and a political-power emphasis in historical Christianity, dealing both with power-politics at the time of the Crusades and with more modern western imperialisms and the position of the Churches on church-and-state issues. He shows how at a very early stage in its history Christianity experienced within

itself under Constantine a vigorous policy of church and state combining to smash heretical opposition.

However, as a reconciler, Cragg tries to get all the three faiths to take a new look at their common Abrahamic tradition. He points out that Abraham was not only a symbol of Race and Power but also, in Genesis chapter 22, of Sacrifice (suffering, faithfulness, trust).¹¹ He suggests that all three faiths should find a common ground and an interpenetration of each other's faiths at this point. In a chapter on 'Grace and Sonship: The Crisis of Christian Humanity' he expounds the Christian emphasis on power as being centred round two points: first, the personal dimension of the power of love found in any person who has entered into God's gift of free sonship, and secondly the power of suffering voluntarily borne. He says that Christianity accepts the experience of suffering as central in humanity, as distinct from Islam's conviction that real humanity must be successful. He admits that Shī'ah forms of Islam have taken suffering as 'marking the designs of God' and not just impeding the designs of God, but he says that these views are 'not central or definitive' in Islam. He notes that Jewry also accepts suffering as a central human experience, but that often only in the sense of suffering 'against rather than for or with humanity'. Kenneth Cragg has a dictum that 'It takes a whole world to understand a whole Christ'. He seems to suggest in all his writings that the contribution of all the faiths is needed if there is to be the deepest understanding of religious issues. This point may be relevant to the understanding of the relation between Christ and power.

In a way that seems to echo Matthaean twin-concepts of authority and sonship, Cragg urges that Jews, Christians and Muslims bring their insights in a living way into the life of the modern world: both the great Semitic insights about the divine authority that lie behind Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the specific Christian insights about the new power of love possible in any person who has entered into God's gift of free sonship, and also about the power of suffering voluntarily borne.¹² As a reconciler, Cragg hopes to see all three faiths take a new look at their common Abrahamic

tradition, come closer together, be willing to undergo change, and together to serve the modern world in living ways.

In all this, can we in fact see a link-up with Matthew's Gospel and its underlying themes? I believe so. On the one hand, Matthew takes seriously those parts of the Christian tradition known to him which see Jesus as a majestic figure of authority, the Man of Power. The 'kingship' theme is obviously to the fore in Matthew. The sense of the Royal majesty of Jesus comes out clearly throughout the gospel. Significantly in the very first verse of the first chapter of the gospel Jesus is described as 'the son of Abraham'. (See the references to Abraham in what we have written above.) Later in the first chapter Jesus is described as the son of 'David the king' (Matt. 1:6). In the story of the wise men in chapter 2 the same point is implicit. The note of authority and discipline is never far away in this gospel. Jesus gives to Peter, the apostles and the church a clear delegated authority (Matt. 16:19; 18:18) and the gospel ends with words of authority on Jesus' lips (Matt. 28:18). Matthew takes seriously the convictions of many people that various forms of institutional power, whether ecclesiastical, social or political, are important, in spite of the obvious dangers connected with them.

On the other hand, at the climax of his gospel (the Passion and Resurrection story), Jesus' authoritative power is shown to rest in the end, paradoxically, in his suffering love. He exercised his kingly power chiefly from the Cross (Matt. 21:5). It is the sacrificial aspect of his Abrahamic descent that emerges as the main factor in that descent. Jesus' Davidic descent finds its greatest significance in his being, like David, 'the servant-king' (Matt. 21:9), 'the shepherd-king' and a lover of people. In the story of the wise men, Jesus' kingship is always connected with passion motifs and persecution motifs (Matt. 2:1-12). Although Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is indeed the Messiah of deeds and the Messiah of power, it is spiritual power – prophetic power – that is central. The great Matthaean emphasis on Jesus' miracles makes exactly this point. The miracles have the authority of charismatic love rather than the authority of overwhelming mystery.¹³ And it

is to the same sort of vocation of sonship and servanthood rather than of authoritarian rule that Jesus ultimately calls his followers. He says 'Love your enemies . . . so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven' (5:44-45).

We go to Matthew's Gospel for the same sort of inclusive meditation on the meaning of power that Kenneth Cragg has given us in one modern setting. Around the figure of Jesus Matthew gathers together the widest possible revealed insights into the meaning of true power, including the insights of realism. Matthew's Gospel, read sensitively, leads us straight into a consideration of what is the mind of Christ and the will of God in relation to personal power-struggles in our human relationships, political and military power struggles in national and international affairs, and economic power-struggles in the use of the world's natural resources. It also leads us into the same sort of insight about our inner human lives that Paul was talking about when he said, 'When I am weak, then I am strong'.

Law and Grace

A further 'Matthaean' issue is that of law and grace. Can humanity be redeemed? If so, how? By the spread of God's law or in some other way?

Cragg is fond of urging Christians to take seriously the great 'law and justice' emphasis in Judaism and Islam. He writes sympathetically of the Jewish 'vocation to Torah achievement' and defines the Jewish Torah-vocation not as being essentially legalistic or self-justifying but as 'a walking with God' and as 'the shaping of the people of God in a co-relation with him that is beyond self-justification'. He says that Judaism's Torah-vocation 'is at the heart of New Testament religion' and should not be misrepresented by Christians. In relation to Islam, while endorsing Professor H. A. R. Gibbs' dictum that 'the genius of Islam is finally law and not theology', Cragg contends that the Islamic apprehension of the truth of God as Creator, Ruler and Maker of the moral fabric of the universe must be seen as a positive thing, having in it the implication also of the truth of what he calls 'God's costly hallowing of man' (in other words what Christ-

ians usually call a redemptive work in history). The idea of hallowing goes back to the Muslim conviction that the Law from Sinai has set Islam under a strong sense that the earth has been given by God to man in trust.

Cragg goes on to note the very realistic way in which both Judaism and Islam shy away from any beliefs about the possibility of redemption and about the power of God's grace which seem to them to be over-romantic, sentimental or not backed up by actual experience. As we have already said above, Judaism finds the Christian emphasis on grace very romantic. Cragg quotes Martin Buber as saying that 'the Christian is to the Jew the reckless man who in an unredeemed world affirms that its redemption is accomplished'. The same author is quoted as speaking of the Christian 'lofty impotence' over against the evils of history. Christians have retired from history, says Buber, into an unreality that is 'propositional, cerebral and individualised'. Or if Christians do think about the world, says Buber, they rush to the extreme of over-emphasising the Fall: they become unbalanced about the doctrine of Creation and consign the world and history to demonic forces. Buber says that he prefers the middle way of Judaism, with its warm and trustful self-awareness which rests on the doctrine of the Creation. Cragg underlines this Jewish questioning of Christianity, and points out that it has been particularly marked since the Belsen-type experiences of the Jews in recent history: 'How can you say that the Messiah has come when evil is still so rampant?' One wonders whether the Jews and the fanatically Jewish Christians of Matthew's day may not have made the same remarks, for the the destruction of Jewish lives and places in the Jewish-Roman war of AD 66 to 70 was a very cruel destruction.

In fact, however, Cragg sees no huge difference between Jewish and Christian convictions on the above issue, since, he says, Christianity has never actually claimed that the belief in the Messiah as having already come means that there is no more conquest of evil to be achieved. But he does see it as a salutary thing for Christians to have to hear the Jewish point here, and to be made to enter into Jewry's centuries-old

experience of being powerless and despised: so that both Jewry and Christianity together may recognise more deeply some of the authentic dimensions of the Cross. Cragg sees the possibility of there being a new common ground of realism as between Jews and Christians in this matter, in a world situation in which both Jews and Christians are faced by an age of marked irreligion, unbelief and secularism.

In many passages in his writings (as we have already suggested above) Cragg accepts the considerable amount of common ground that there is between the three faiths on the matter of God's grace and forgiveness. In relation to Islam he says that 'The theme of forgiveness is vital in Islam'. He cites *Quran*, Surah 42.37 which commends those who when angered, forgive. He also mentions *Quran*, Surah 1.7 where Muslims are spoken of as being those upon whom God has been gracious, 'not those with whom thou art angry'. In addition reference is made to *Quran*, Surah 11.113 which says that 'It is the good things which outweigh (or 'rout') the evil things'. Cragg admits that this may simply be a maxim about rewards, but thinks himself that in the context (about the call to patience) there is a hint here of the principle that goodness has the power of outstaying the worst that evil can do and so of undoing and transmuting its authority. In relation to the Muslim belief that one of the titles of God is the Merciful, he says that 'There is a Muslim yearning for what lies beyond law, to forgiveness, renewal and true piety'. Cragg says that there are in Christianity and Islam many of the same awarenesses about the mystery of forgiveness.

However, the central issue of there being a mainly law-emphasis in Semitic religion as a whole and a mainly grace-emphasis in Christianity is seen to be important, and to be an area of wide divergence. Cragg allows that it is in relation to grace and forgiveness that the disparities between Christianity and Islam are at their widest. He says that the Muslim belief in God's mercy must be admitted to leave something always 'unpredictable' about the mercy. He says that he feels that Islam's strong point of 'realism', reflected in its law-emphasis and political-power approach, fails in fact to be totally realistic about the possibility of renewal in among the

world of evil and its dead ends. He notes that Islam has never felt able to say that 'God is love'. As a Christian, he admits to missing in Islam and Judaism any recognition of what he calls 'the gentleness of the Kingdom of heaven', which for Christians is the outcome of Jesus' 'sense of sonship of the Father'. He misses the Cross as the central revelation of God's nature. He finds in the Christian understanding and experience of these things a creative and recreative power for the conquest of evil and for the forgiveness of sins that is a deep part of the divine Creatorship. But when this has been said, he clearly remains convinced that the great Islamic apprehension of the truth of God as Creator and Ruler has in it the implication also of the truth of God's 'costly hallowing of man'. He sees all Islam's hints about the divine forgiveness as pointing in a clear direction. He believes that by a greater openness and dialogue between Islam and Christianity some of Islam's hidden implications about redemption and forgiveness can be made more explicit and more real for Muslims, and Christians be helped towards a greater realism.

As a response to the Law, there is of course a major emphasis on obedience in Judaism and Islam, says Cragg. He stresses the nobility of their ethical ideals, and how much people of other faiths have to learn from Muslim and Jewish practical attitudes (e.g. on hospitality, discipline and family affection). The tension between the Jewish and Muslim emphasis on obedience, for example, and the Christian emphasis on faith is noted, but as Cragg points out, it is closely linked up with the different understandings of the Messiah: the Jews, for example, seeing him as yet to come, and as an object only of hope, but the Christians seeing him as already come, and as an object of faith as well. Cragg says, 'The Jewish sense of a Messianic hope and the Christian persuasion of the Messianic faith may yet attain to a common Messianic service, the one anticipating, the other recognizing, its cost and mystery'.

Matthew's Gospel, in its inclusiveness, seems to present a very similar attempt to hold together both the great Semitic insights about the solemnity of the divine law and the great Christian insights about grace, redemption and renewal.

Matthew's well-known emphasis on judgement is an example of one side of this holding together. This comes out especially clearly in Matthew, chapters 19 to 25: the large block of material about decision and judgement near the climax of the gospel. This seems to be a main feature of a gospel that is anyway full of apocalyptic language. The gospel-writer focuses attention on the rejection and judgement of the Jews, people who, as he makes clear, ought so easily to have recognised their king. The gospel seems to have been written for a church which has lost its first love (as in Revelation 2:4). It says in effect, 'Judgement came on the Jews. It could come on you'.¹⁴ It is very realistic about the power of evil in the world and in human beings generally. There is nothing sentimental or over-romantic in this presentation of the good news in Christ. But there is a final message of salvation in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. This salvation, because of the power of evil, could only come in a way that involved Jesus in suffering and death, but it comes. And the gospel ends on a note of assurance (Matt. 28:18, 20), forgiveness, release, and grace.

As we have already noted above, the one who brings salvation, the Messiah, is a Man of power, because only the Man of power can overcome the immense forces of evil in the universe. Matthew's Gospel nowhere minimises the demonic power which is ranged against the Messiah. This is found particularly at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Matthew, in chapters 8 and 9, material which is full of Jesus' deeds of power (e.g. Matt. 8:2ff.) Here Matthew is developing a presentation found originally in Mark chapter 1 onwards, but the atmosphere of this being a campaign by Jesus against the power of evil is perhaps if anything even more pronounced in Matthew than in Mark. But here again the Man of power is seen also as the Man of peace and love (Matt. 21:1-11). And in the gospel as a whole the realistic picture of the fight against evil that has to be won before there can be peace is matched by the other sort of realism of the gospel's insight that in the end only the power of love can effect the big breakthrough in the fight against evil.

In Matthew Jesus is portrayed very clearly as the bringer of

the new Law (Torah). Jesus is the new Moses, giving a new Law, revealing God's glory on a mountain, establishing a new covenant, and so on. But the law that Jesus brings is always the law of love. A key verse in Matthew is 23:23 – 'You have overlooked the weightier demands of the Law, justice, mercy and good faith' (NEB). Perhaps the most distinctive holding together of the Law and Grace theme comes in the Matthaean presentation of the Sermon on the Mount, especially in chapter 5. The remarkable contrast between the words of Jesus recorded in 5:18 ('Till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished') and the words recorded in a verse such as 5:40 ('If anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well') has often been noted. The first of those verses obviously uses the language of law, the second the language of grace. But the significance of this contrast for an understanding of Matthew's approach as a whole has not always been spotted. In a sense, Jesus is only distinguishing between two strands in the Old Testament heritage, but this paradox of truth does not in the end lessen the deeply significant contrast that he is making.

The material in Matthew chapter 5 seems to be central to an understanding of Matthew's purpose. Its teaching has to be seen in the context of Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God in the preceding chapter (Matt. 4, especially verses such as 4:17, 23). Chapter 5 expands the theme by describing the priorities of God's Kingdom as seen by Jesus. It describes the qualities to be found in those who have committed themselves to the standards of the Kingdom and the 'family life' of the Kingdom (5:1–16). By the phrase 'the Kingdom of heaven', which is a very Jewish phrase, Jesus seems to have meant something such as today we might express by the phrase 'God's movement of change'.¹⁵ Jesus shows that God's movement of change takes place and becomes effective both through the power of law (the revelation of the divine will) and through the power of grace (the means by which God's will becomes real and gets practised among men and women).

The teaching in Matthew chapter 5 has also to be seen in

the context of passages that come later in the same gospel. The figure of Jesus on the Cross clearly symbolises both Law (judgement) and Grace (love). Jesus takes upon himself a judgement which should really fall on other people, that is on the nation. Simultaneously Jesus shows forth a love that is limitless. Throughout the gospel we find a Matthaean presentation of Jesus and the good news of the Kingdom which stresses not legalism, but law – and stresses not law alone, but law and grace together: that is, the law of love. This last phrase is a paradox, but there is no attempt to evade the paradox which is the paradox of truth.

Matthew has a very strong ethical emphasis on obedience, as we have already seen. Of all the gospel-writers, he is perhaps the one who brings out specifically the practical implications of Christian discipleship. Modern studies of Matthew's Gospel have underlined the thread of the theme of obedience that runs right through the gospel. Starting from Matthew 23:23, with its threefold ethical emphasis on justice, love and honesty, some scholars have directed attention also to another trio of words that appears much in Matthew: 'deed', 'will' and 'word'.¹⁶ Jesus as the Messiah or Christ (the great Christological title in Matthew) is he who does the 'deeds' of God and sees 'justice' done for the oppressed; Jesus' followers must be marked by a strong sense of justice. Jesus as the Son of David, a main Matthaean title for Jesus, is he who does the loving 'will' of God and acts out the 'mercy' of God; his followers must also act with compassion and mercy. Jesus as the Son of Abraham, another main Matthaean title for Jesus, is he who hears the 'word' of God and has brought God's 'word' of promise and faithfulness to men; his followers must be marked by 'good faith' and honesty. This trio of words and themes underlies, for example, the story of the Temptation narrative in Matthew 4:1–11, where an attempt is made to deflect Jesus from the word of God and from keeping faith with God (Matt. 4:4), from the will of God (4:7) and from the deeds of God or the service of God (4:10). The same trio of words may also be seen as an underlying pattern in the Matthaean Passion narrative, where Jesus continues to the end keeping faith with God and trusting God's word and

will (Matt. 27:43), and where he seals his mission with a voluntary act of offering (27:50).

But in addition to the emphasis on obedience, Matthew also contains a strong emphasis on faith in the sense of the acceptance of the grace of sonship. Peter's decisive expression of faith in Jesus Christ in Matthew 16:16 ('You are the Christ, the Son of the living God') is central to the whole gospel. The story of the growth of faith in the people among whom Jesus moves about had begun with Matthew 14:23 and its surrounding verses about the disciples' faith. It proceeds through Matthew 15:28 and its surrounding verses, telling of the incident of the growth of faith on the part of a non-Jew, a Canaanite. It reaches its climax in chapter 16. Matthew 16:1-12 is all about faith, and the chapter as a whole gives by implication a definition of the community that gathers round Jesus (and so a definition of the Church as it was to become) as 'the community of faith', the body of people who have faith in Jesus as Messiah. Verses 13-16 tell of Peter's supreme moment of awareness of Jesus' Messiahship. Verse 17 makes it clear that by revelation and faith Peter is led into the heart of the great secret about Jesus, something he had never grasped or accepted by the ordinary processes of human reasoning. Peter makes that essential, explicit commitment which is of the utmost significance for all human beings to make.



Looking at the way in which both the author of Matthew and Bishop Cragg, as I have suggested, hold together different insights about power and redemptive weaknesses, authority and sonship, law and grace, obedience and faith, I conclude that both of them may be said to have taken seriously the 'pluralistic' situation of their own day. I have described their attitude as one of inclusiveness. I believe that this inclusiveness enabled Matthew to help people in his day to keep away from that sort of ghettoism that can afflict folk of any faith. His gospel can still do that for us today, among the many things that it offers us.

Notes

1. *The Call of the Minaret*, OUP, 1956, is one of his earliest and best-known works.
2. For example, Gunther Bornkamm in various writings stresses the individual creativity, as writer and theologian, of the author (editor) of the Gospel of Matthew. See also R. P. Martin's article on 'Matthew's Gospel in Recent Study' in the *Expository Times* for Feb. 1969. M. Goulder's *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*, SPCK, 1974 is also relevant.
3. See an article by Dr W. R. Farmer entitled 'Jesus and the Gospels' in the *Perkins School of Theology Journal* for winter 1975. Professor Farmer's name is widely associated with the theory that Matthew was the first of the gospels to be written. But the important 1975 article referred to here is not concerned primarily with matters of dating. Its significance is of a different sort.
4. Cragg, *Alive to God*, Oxford, 1970, p. 34.
5. Cragg, *The Privilege of Man*, Athlone Press, 1968, p. 145.
6. Cragg, *Alive to God*, p. 44.
7. Cragg, *Christianity in World Perspective*, Lutterworth Press, 1968, p. 137.
8. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, pp. 289–292.
9. Cragg, *The Privilege of Man*, p. 109.
10. Cragg, *Christianity in World Perspective*, p. 33.
11. Cragg, *The Privilege of Man*, pp. 52–70.
12. Cragg, *op. cit.* See the chapter on 'The Grace of Sonship'.
13. See Edouard Schweizer in an article entitled 'Law Observance and Charismatic Activity in Matthew' in *New Testament Studies*, vol. 16.
14. The substance of the last few sentences is taken from Bishop Stephen Neill's *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1961*, Oxford, 1966.
15. See Alan Richardson's note in *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, SCM Press, under 'kingdom', for the active sense in which God's kingship is spoken of in the Bible.
16. Dr James M. Gibbs has brought this out well in a number of writings.

Questions and Suggestions for study

- A. Read right through the Gospel of Matthew and list any passages in which the authority of Jesus is emphasised.
- B. Read the central chapters of Matthew's Gospel (chapters 14 to 18) with the help of something like Pierson Parker's notes in *Good News in Matthew* (Collins Fontana paperback, 1976). Note all references to faith in Christ and the sonship of grace, and references to the community of faith.
- C. Read the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7), and see in what sense it holds together law and grace.
- D. Do you agree that Christians have anything to learn from people of other faiths? Is it one of the implications of Matthew's Gospel that they should be ready to do so?
- E. In the light of what Matthew's Gospel says about power, do you see anything more vigorous that Christians should be doing in your own country concerning inequalities inside the country or between the nations?

3: M. M. Thomas and the Gospel of Luke

Many commentaries on Luke's Gospel have helped us to see it as the most straightforward and down-to-earth gospel for the ordinary person. It has been presented, rightly I think, as the gospel that brings out best the total compassion of Jesus in all its universal range. Recently the writer of a small but striking commentary on Luke described it as a 'secular' gospel, contrasting it with Mark's more apocalyptic and otherworldly picture of Jesus.¹ This helps us to get some idea of Luke's special thrust in his presentation of Jesus Christ.

But I believe that to get the real feel of Luke's Gospel in its significance for us today we need to read alongside it the writings of a modern writer like Dr M. M. Thomas, of India. In this chapter I have set down a number of points in the thinking and writing of Dr Thomas, comparing them with Lucan emphases. As I compare the two writers, I hear many echoes of Luke in M. M. Thomas. I also take from M. M. Thomas' writings certain challenges that seem to illuminate similar challenges in Luke's Gospel.

Dr Thomas is a noted Indian Christian leader. A member of the Mar Thoma Church, his early training was as a sociologist and social worker. He was later for many years Director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore. He also became widely known as chairman for many years of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. He is a lay theologian, ecumenical statesman, and social analyst.

One of his main concerns has been to encourage the Indian Churches to take a full part in what is sometimes called India's task of 'nation-building' since Independence in 1947. He has been concerned that Christians in India, although numerically a very small minority of the population, should participate fully in the mainstream of Indian national thinking about citizenship and politics. He has had the satisfaction

of knowing that the writings of himself and his colleagues in the Christian Institute's journal *Religion and Society* have been read and taken seriously in political circles in Delhi and elsewhere in India. In the very recent past he took a courageous stand on behalf of rights of free speech for Indian citizens at a time when the government of the day was exercising widespread political detention, without trial, of people who opposed its policies.

It is perhaps significant that Dr Thomas' own state is Kerala. This state has a higher percentage of Christians in its population than any other state in India; and it is also the state in which the Marxist movement has been most influential, and in which the first elected Communist state-governments in India were to be found. The long dialogue over many years in Kerala between Christians and Marxists has been one of the factors that have produced a considerable number of Christian leaders from Kerala with a strong sense of social awareness. M. M. Thomas has been one of the most distinguished of such leaders.

The following passage (taken from his book *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, pp. 105–106, and written in the 1960s) states well M. M. Thomas' vigorous approach on the issue of the Church's concern with the world.

It is precisely here that the Churches in Asia are most under judgement, weighed and found wanting. Several studies of the Churches in Asia have shown that the Churches are living spiritually and socially in what are called mission compounds, 'Christian ghettos' of their own creation, inward-looking and concerned with themselves. A study, for instance, of the Church in Delhi has shown how the self-understanding of the Christian community in Delhi tends to be that of one closed caste among many closed castes, concerned with safeguarding its communal interests, considering even evangelism, with its possibility of new converts, as a threat to its security. Evangelistic mission in the sense of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ and his Kingdom may be a special vocation of some in the Church, undertaken by people separated by the Church or called by God for

it. But whether a special vocation for separated people or not, it cannot stand in isolation from the life of the Church vis-à-vis its involvement with the social and spiritual problems inherent in the contemporary Asian revolution. Evangelism has meaning at depth only as a word coming out of a Church engaged with all people in their struggle for personal dignity and social justice and as relevant to the spiritual awakening it represents. It was this which gave the evangel relevance and appeal among the outcastes and other oppressed classes of Asia as well as among the Asian intellectuals. Today, when whole peoples are awake to the tasks of building a more human society and culture, a partnership in nation-building between Christians and non-Christians is the proper context for evangelism. It means that the Christian community must get into the mainstream of national life, not with any idea of controlling it, but to serve man's manhood in it, and in that process to be a witness to Jesus Christ and his power which can make and keep human life human.

The importance of historical events

One of M. M. Thomas' great emphases has been on God's movement of salvation within ordinary history and human society, as will have been clear from the above quotation. He sees the political arena and the field of social and economic struggle as areas of life where God is significantly at work. He understands God's concern to be with the whole created world and with all human history and not just with one particular part of it that might be called a 'believing' part. He sees this point to be very important, both in relation to Asia's traditional lack of 'historical consciousness', as he calls it, and in relation to all types of spiritual escapism from the world.² He writes much about a contemporary spiritual awakening in different parts of the world (an awakening in which he sees Christianity as able to play a significant part) in the sense that many people are awakening to a new sense of 'historical destiny' and to the responsibilities of new nationhood. He writes as an Asian: as we read his writings we are reminded

that religious concern with history and political events is often more clearly emphasised by people in awakening nations than by people in nations who are in a period of withdrawal. It is arguable that we get from the awakening nations a better interpretation of writers like Luke who proclaim God's saving work in history than we get from other parts of the world!

M. M. Thomas is against any driving of a wedge between 'the historical' and 'the eternal': he insists on 'the inter-relatedness of the historical and the eternal, of the reality of the historical and the human in the eternal, and the presence of the eternal in the historical and the human'.³ While admitting that the historical is 'the temporal and the provisional', he stresses its central importance for all Christian thinking. He speaks a good deal about 'salvation-history' in the sense of a movement which is 'to the discerning eye of faith . . . the eternal future being fulfilled in the contemporary present' and as a movement to be found not only within Christian history but also within many other areas of the world's life, including secular humanism, radical ideologies and the renaissance of other faiths.

This emphasis on history and the secular world in M. M. Thomas' thinking is of course based on the cardinal belief that God has acted in a unique way in what he describes as 'a secular historical event', namely the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the establishment of his Kingdom. Within this, particular stress is also put on the Resurrection. M. M. Thomas sees the bodily Resurrection of Jesus as the supremely significant 'happening in secular history'.⁴ It is seen as 'the inauguration of a historical movement towards the establishment of Christ's victory not only over sin, but also over principalities and powers, and finally over death itself, and being consummated in the Kingdom of God'. It is also seen as carrying the implication that in the ultimate spiritual destiny of man there is to be included 'a redemption and consummation of his history'. In a real sense M. M. Thomas' theology is a theology of resurrection, though the centrality of the Cross is also fully upheld.⁵

Opposition to this theological standpoint (which was also

the standpoint of the Report of the Uppsala World Council of Churches Assembly in 1968) comes from those who wish to see more emphasis put on eschatology than on history, or who have differing ideas on the relationship between the sacred and the secular. M. M. Thomas cites the writings of Dr P. Beyerhaus of Tübingen as one example of such opposition. Beyerhaus sees salvation as that which is eternal and which lies beyond history; he sees it as concerned with what is supernatural and not with what is natural; he is critical of too much emphasis on God's working within secular or political movements. M. M. Thomas says that he himself has never suggested that salvation is to be understood as some easy or natural process of evolution. He is entirely realistic about the huge weight of 'accumulated sin in social history' and the fact that even idealistic liberation movements cannot expect to go forward with blind optimism ignoring the 'idolatries' of unredeemed human nature. He upholds the ultimacy of the eschatological, as does Beyerhaus. But M. M. Thomas asks for a realisation of the possibility that the eschatological dimension can break in on history and on politics, including the breaking in of the spirit of divine forgiveness upon a world of struggle and ambiguity, transforming the struggle and making it more human. He writes:

There cannot be any historical triumphalism which eliminates the need of suffering, defeat and death in Christian witness: salvation remains eschatological. But . . . the ultimate destiny of man in the Resurrection beyond sin, guilt and death must have its realisation, however partial it may be, in terms of his historical destiny.

Or again,

Even the most perfect society bounded by sin and death cannot be the ultimate Kingdom of God. but the Kingdom of resurrection life, whether for individual or community, does not start only after death: it begins and is partly realised here and now, within the dimension of a history facing death and disintegration.

M. M. Thomas cites as support for this broad view of salvation the case of some of the great Christian missionaries

of former times, such as William Carey. Carey in India not only combined food-production and evangelism, but had also previously belonged to a group in England which took a stand against slavery and which boycotted sugar produced by slave-labour in the West Indies.⁶

All the above seems to me to be relevant to Luke's emphasis in his writings on God's saving movement within history ('salvation-history' or 'redemptive history'), including the ongoing movement in history after the Resurrection of Jesus. Modern commentaries on Luke, especially since Conzelmann's work,⁷ have reminded us of Luke's stress on the importance of all history, past, present and future. They have isolated two or three stages in the divine plan of salvation as Luke presents it in the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles: there is the pre-Christian stage in past history and in Old Testament times (Luke's strong interest in the redemption of Israel and the mercy shown to Samaria is often noted); there is the central stage of the Messianic events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection; and there is, as Luke sees it, the final and decisive stage of ongoing history after that, starting with important events in Gentile and not only Jewish parts of the world.

The significance of the Resurrection of Jesus for Luke has often been commented on. For Luke, the Resurrection and what follows it has special meaning, because it is not seen as a sort of last chapter in history or as a final point of climax, but in a particularly forceful way as a new fresh beginning, with the birth of the Church in history.

Luke's reliability as a historian has been much discussed. His emphasis on miraculous events, his editorial freedom with his sources, and his apparent chronological inexactness in some places have been mentioned by some modern commentators as suggesting that Luke was not a careful historian in any sense. But other commentators have modified these strictures considerably and have taken more seriously Luke's claim in Luke 1:1-4 to be writing a careful narrative. We may note the conclusion of E. Earle Ellis, in the Century Bible commentary on Luke in 1966, that Luke is a careful historian but not a disinterested one, in the sense that he mixes history

and interpretation.

One aspect of Luke's emphasis on God's action within history and society is his obvious stress on Jesus' social sympathies for the oppressed and the destitute. He clearly wished to present Jesus to us as someone with an intense concern for all those with whom life had dealt hardly and all those who were not able to realise that full dignity of human life for which they had been created by God. Luke shows from the start of his gospel how Jesus had in any case been nurtured in traditions where concern for the oppressed was prominent (Luke 1:51-53; 3:11-13; 4:18-19). It is in his gospel in particular that there is a focus on the dangers of affluence (Luke 6:20-26; 12:13-21, 33; 14:12-14 and many parts of chapter 16). It is agreed by most commentators that behind the language in Luke about 'the poor' and 'the rich' we should see Judaism's metaphorical use of these terms, as found in the Psalter or the Psalms of Solomon: 'the poor' virtually means 'the faithful and the good', and 'the rich' means 'the godless and the self-satisfied'. The terms probably have religious connotations as well as economic, and Luke perhaps shares more of Matthew's spiritualising tendencies than we sometimes think. But in spite of this, seen in the context of Luke's presentation as a whole, a social significance of the terms can still be seen as present and as important. The social sympathies of Luke's Jesus are just one example of Luke's attempt to present Jesus' life and teachings as directly concerned with everyday life in society and the world. John Drury has put Luke's overall achievement in this respect very clearly and succinctly:

Luke's achievement was to write a secular gospel: the eternal revealed in a developing story tied into human time and character, bound into the history and fate of the Jews and of the church, declaring himself in an ethical demand for compassion, reconciliation and decision-for-the-good which nobody could mistake or evade.⁸

It is possible to find in Luke's Gospel evidence that he wanted to present the end of the world as imminent: for example, Luke 10:9-11; 12:38-40, 41-48, 54; 13:9; 18:8,

where 18:8b says that the delay before the Coming will be short. But there is evidence also that he wanted to stress the importance and possible extended length of the time before the end: for example, in Luke 19:11 Jesus is shown as telling a parable to people 'who supposed that the Kingdom of God was to appear immediately' (see also Luke 9:27; 19:41; 21:20-24; 21:9 as compared with Mark 13:7 and Luke 22:69 as compared with Mark 14:62). It is arguable that, all in all, Luke was concerned to hold a tension between the importance of otherworldly reality likely to break in at any time on the earthly scene, and the importance of developments on earth prior to the Coming.⁹ It seems to me that in all this Luke's position is not unlike that of M. M. Thomas mentioned above. Both positions include a strong emphasis on the historical.¹⁰ At least it seems helpful to try and interpret Luke's position through looking at a probably similar Christian writer in our own day, from whom we get a rather more explicit explanation of how he holds together the tension between the eschatological and the historical.

A passage such as Luke 13:22-35 must be noted in any consideration of Luke's attitude to the events of this world. The first part of this passage shows Jesus speaking about the coming of the Kingdom, not so much or specifically among Jesus' immediate followers, or in the Church, as in history as a whole and in the world as a whole. In the second part of this passage, Jesus is seen as a prophetic figure (13:33) in confrontation with a political situation involving Herod. Jesus stresses that the coming of God's Kingdom is going to mean a lot of reversals in the expected course of history. Unexpected people will come into the Kingdom. Secular figures will come in often in place of religious figures. This comes out clearly in what has been called 'the rejected seekers' parable' (13:25-27). Jewish Pharisaic leaders will be found missing from the Kingdom. The often-rejected Jewish prophets, together with many other categories of human beings from different parts of the world, will be the ones included (13:28-29). This parable is obviously to be interpreted primarily in relation to Judaism, Jewish history, and what has been called 'redemptive history'. But 13:29 ('Men will come

from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the Kingdom of God') implies a wide vision of a growing human influx of both Jews and non-Jews into the Kingdom, and a touching on all human history. Luke always seems to want to make it clear that redemptive history is to be related to secular history.¹¹

Other passages in Luke also portray Jesus as a prophet who is outspoken in relation to state authorities. This outspokenness might seem to contradict the point often made by commentators on the Acts of the Apostles that Luke presented the story of the Early Church and of leaders like Paul in such a way as to try and show that Christianity was politically innocent. Luke in Acts clearly wanted to show that it had been proved all along, in courts of law and before civil governors, that Christianity was not a subversive political movement, but that Christians were loyal citizens of the Roman Empire (e.g. Agrippa the king and Festus the governor in Acts 26:31 say about Paul, 'This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment'). But in fact the outspokenness and the loyalty, as a combination, are surely natural, as a parallel with M. M. Thomas might show. As we said earlier, M. M. Thomas has been keen that Indian Christians should both play a prophetic role in history and should also at the same time make it clear that Christianity does not turn people in on themselves in an escapist manner or make them 'anti-society'.

Making the world more human

One of the central themes in M. M. Thomas' writing and thinking is Christianity's part in the struggle for a more human existence for the many people in the world whose conditions of living are dehumanised and depersonalised. He writes much of the need for us to work for 'a fuller realisation of man's humanity', in relation to such world issues as poverty and every type of discrimination and injustice. He speaks of the Christian invitation to men and women to 'put on the New Humanity offered to all men by God in the New Man, Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified, and risen'. There is a radical personalism and a Christian humanism running throughout

his thinking. He speaks of the many liberation movements in the world as being points of man's awakening 'to his human dignity as a personal being with a historical destiny'. He sees this struggle for a more human existence for the world as something which all men and women must engage in and as a struggle in which people of different faiths and ideologies can find a useful meeting point. He quotes with approval that part of Pope John's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* which recognises in a secular faith such as Marxism 'elements that are positive and deserving of approval' and which acknowledges such secular faiths in so far as they are 'interpreters of the lawful aspirations of the human person'. He gives it as his own view that such secular faiths have in fact 'helped Christianity to discover new truths about Christ and man'. He also takes seriously the emphasis in such movements as renascent Hinduism on the awakening of man to a new dignity and responsibility. He says that humanism and not 'divinism' is the most technologically valid meeting point between Christianity and other religions.

Here again, M. M. Thomas notes that this theological position of his (along with the similar position of the World Council of Churches Uppsala Assembly) has come in for criticism from Dr Beyerhaus and others, on the grounds that there has been 'a radical shift of the centre (of thinking) from God to man, and accordingly the replacement of Theology by Anthropology'. But in reply he firmly upholds his belief that anthropology can be our best contemporary 'point of entry . . . for the understanding of man's ultimate destiny in the purpose of God, i.e. his eternal salvation'. He does not admit that Christianity can allow a wedge to be driven between the divine and the human, any more than between the eternal and the historical.

His thinking is here of course based on a Christology that is expressed in terms of the Divine Humanity of Jesus Christ and the significance of Jesus as Prophet. Writing in India, where some main religious traditions have tended to deny the religious significance of human personality (as of history), he says that there is considerable hope in a situation in which not only Christianity but also renascent movements in Hinduism

are seeking 'an idea of salvation which does not negate but comprehends and fulfils human personality and history'. He affirms his belief in Christianity's insistence that Jesus is not only a Principle and Symbol but also a Person. He defines Jesus Christ both as the Saviour of the world and as 'the bearer of human destiny'.¹²

As we read M. M. Thomas and Luke alongside one another, we find this same theme of M. M. Thomas (with an obviously different terminology arising from the difference between the twentieth century and the first century) echoed in Luke. There is a notable emphasis in Luke, as we have already said, on Jesus' compassion for various groups of 'outsiders' or virtual outcasts, whether leprosy sufferers or Samaritans or 'sinners' or some of the women whose social position in Mediterranean society at that time was a low one. Jesus is portrayed throughout as giving immense importance to such human and personal values as compassion, reconciliation and decision-making, which can help to make life more truly human and dignified for those whose existence has become dehumanised.

Some commentators have described Luke as a Christian humanist. The fact that he seems to have been an educated and cultured man, as well as a medical man, is perhaps well gathered up into this general description of him as a Christian humanist. And Luke's Christology underlies his humanism. As G. B. Caird has written: 'Luke's interest from start to finish is in the human Jesus, "a man singled out for you by God" (Acts 2:22) and "anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38)'.¹³ Caird adds that while in Mark and Q the title 'Son of God' is a high Christological title, yet in Luke 'Jesus is Son of God because he can trace his descent back to Adam'. Conzelmann also says that in the Lucan presentation of the title 'Son of Man' of Jesus, the traditional concept of the phrase as found in Mark does not seem to be intended: for him it has a lower Christology. Similarly, it seems, with the title 'Lord'.¹⁴

It has been noted by some scholars that Luke has omitted from his gospel any sayings which give atoning significance to the Cross. Do we conclude from this that Luke's theology

is shallow or reductionist? That idea has been suggested. But we probably get our best light on this point from seeing how M. M. Thomas holds together an emphasis both on the divinity and the humanity without any superficiality or reductionism. Or we may conclude that it was the particular overall emphasis that Luke wanted to make which dictated his presentation rather than any supposed superficiality or reductionism.

To sum up the overall emphasis of Luke, one commentator, E. J. Tinsley, has written: 'More than the other evangelists, Luke presents Jesus as the pattern man, and the Christian life as, through the Spirit, the imitation of Christ'.¹⁵ And Tinsley shows that this emphasis in presentation is particularly noticeable in Luke's treatment of the Passion story, where his main stress seems to be on Jesus as the model sufferer and endurer, whose demeanour his followers are called to imitate. In Luke, says Tinsley, 'Christ is the one unique model for all men', who teaches us to be truly human.

Linked with the question of history is the issue of 'Kingdom or Church?' M. M. Thomas once wrote:

We have overdone the idea of the church in the last fifty years of ecumenical thinking. I do not think we can go back to any non-church understanding of Christianity, but we have to look at the question of how the church as a congregation is different from the traditional idea of religious community.¹⁶

He is not questioning the essential existence of the Church, but asking what form the Church should take. Elsewhere he says that it should be an 'open fellowship' and not a 'communal entity', though elsewhere again he adds that 'an open church must also be deeply committed to the person of Jesus Christ'. He pleads that the Church should exercise a more prophetic ministry and not only an institutional one.

He appears to be reminding us of the importance for the Christian of the Kingdom as well as the Church.

The boundary of the new humanity in Christ is not the same as that of the empirical Church of Christ, which is but the witness of the new creation. The new creation, the Kingdom, cuts across the Church and the world.

Writing against the Indian background of Christian Churches set among a variety of religious communities of different faiths, he speaks of his longing to see the Church understand itself

not as one community among many communities, each with its own gods, but as 'a kind of firstfruits of His creatures' (James 1:18), that is as 'the part' which consciously acknowledges, declares and manifests the spiritual destiny of the 'whole' mankind in Jesus Christ.

M. M. Thomas has also raised the question of how far our present patterns of baptism are suitable in countries such as India where by baptism individuals are as it were extracted from their own ancestral, natural, cultural and social community, and transplanted into a new, separate Christian community. He has asked whether this does not take away from the New Testament significance of baptism as the moment when one passes not so much into a new separate part of humanity as into a new experience of what humanity as a whole is to be.

This distinctive note in M. M. Thomas' writings appears to link up with a similar distinctive note in the Lucan presentation. Although Luke never questions the importance of the Church (for example, in the Acts of the Apostles his emphasis on the growth of the Church is obvious), yet he might be said to put even more emphasis on that broader term 'the Kingdom' (and on Jesus as king) than on the term 'church'. The records and traditions about Jesus have been placed by Luke not in the more ecclesiastical setting which they obviously have in Matthew, but are given a more general human setting. Luke presents many of Jesus' teachings as having a definitely universalist tone (see again Luke 13:29 and also Acts 10:34-35 about Cornelius). By this I do not mean that Luke presents Jesus as saying that everyone will be saved in the end: on the contrary, Luke has a strong emphasis on the divine judgement, and on the importance of men and women making the right decision now on earth. But I mean that Luke transmits to us a great sense of Jesus' vision of the universal scope of God's love and God's salvation. A central block of material in Luke's Gospel (13:22 to 16:31) is con-

cerned with Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom and on the sort of people who will be found in the Kingdom. Perhaps we best understand the balance between church and kingdom as found in Luke's writings if we compare his situation (of a Church spreading no longer just into Jewish areas but also into non-Jewish areas and proximity to pagan communities) with the situation for which M. M. Thomas is writing.

Matter and Spirit

Emphasis on God's concern with the material and economic issues of secular history might suggest to some people that there is no underlying spirituality in the position of a man like M. M. Thomas. This would of course be entirely misleading. It is true that he expresses himself as uninterested in any merely escapist or individualistic spirituality. But he is clearly convinced of the importance of, and deeply committed to, what he calls a 'prophetic type of spirituality'. He writes that 'the spirituality of the Incarnation and the Cross is continuous with the spirituality of the prophets of the Old Testament'.¹⁷ He speaks of true spirituality as something to be found mainly in the corporate spiritual life of a renewed community of people who are realising their vocation within the movements of history and the world's affairs. He defines spirituality in one place as 'the inwardness or interiority of men's historical vocation'. He has also spoken of Christian spirituality as distinctively 'a spirituality of hope': he believes that any prophetic spirituality will be marked, as was true in the case of the Old Testament prophets, by a yearning, in the depths of its devotion, for God's new humanity to come to men and women who are living under oppression. In other words, his emphasis is on the mutual inter-relatedness of prayer and history, meditation and action. And he sees prayer as particularly an activity of hope, and closely related to the deep expectation of what can come from God's great movement of change within history.

So with Luke. The fact that his gospel has been described as a 'secular' gospel does not mean that he shows no sense of the supernatural or the transcendent. In fact it has in it a lot about prayer and spirituality (including early in the gospel a

vivid and devout prophetic group of people around Anna in Luke 2:38 who 'were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem'). There is much also about striking events achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of the exalted risen Christ; and he ties together prayer and action in all his storytelling, the eternal and the historical. He presents God's eternal power as at work through what today we call 'practical Christianity'; and, in Luke's story, prayer is the means by which the spiritual power of the Kingdom enters into history. There is a clear link-up in Luke between the themes of Spirit, Kingdom and Prayer. Major salvation-events in Luke are usually found to be accompanied by some mention of prayer, or mention of Jesus as the King, or mention of the Spirit. In Luke's presentation, the Kingdom is where the Spirit is.¹⁸ (Luke 1:30, 35 and 38, and Acts 1:3-8 are relevant passages.)

With this we may remember Luke's theology of Resurrection and Exaltation, his theology of hope, and his central theme of the Kingship of Jesus. In spite of all Luke's emphasis on ongoing history, he shows the eschatological events of Christ's exaltation as able to be appropriated now by the believer, directly, by faith. As Flender writes, 'The redemptive event comes direct from heaven and becomes present for the individual in the moment of confrontation'.¹⁹

In reading Luke's Gospel, some parallel-reading from M. M. Thomas, as a modern writer who has explicitly related his own understanding of spiritual experience to action in history, seems to help us to see something of Luke's rich combination of spiritual experience and secular concern.

Notes

1. J. Drury, *Commentary on Luke*, Collins Fontana, 1973.
2. M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, SCM Press, 1966, p. 70.
3. M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, Christian Literature Society, Madras, 1971, p. 10.
4. M. M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
5. See p. vii of M. M. Thomas', *The Realization of the Cross*, CLS, Madras, 1972. His thinking on the Resurrection is developed in his *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, CLS, Madras, pp. 302ff.
6. M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, pp. 8 and 9.

7. H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke*, Faber, 1960.
8. J. Drury, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
9. See E. Earle Ellis, article on 'Present and Future Eschatology in Luke' in *New Testament Studies*, Oct., 1965.
10. Eric Franklin, in *Christ the Lord* (SPCK, 1975) says, probably rightly, that Conzelmann polarised things too much in implying that Luke wanted to push far away into an indefinite future the whole eschatological concept of the Parousia. But most scholars have accepted that Luke puts an emphasis on the importance of history. Ernst Käsemann accepts this, though he goes on to declare that Luke's presentation in Luke-Acts is uneschatological and romantically superficial. See *Jesus Means Freedom*, pp. 123-125. (Compare Beyerhaus' criticisms of M. M. Thomas.)
11. See R. H. Fuller, *Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, Duckworth, 1966, p. 120. He cites Luke 2:1 and 3:1, with their references to secular history.
12. M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization*, p. 35.
13. G. B. Caird on p. 67 of his chapter on 'The Development of the Doctrine of Christ in the New Testament' in *Christ for us Today*, ed. N. Pittenger, SCM Press, 1968.
14. H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke*, p. 170.
15. E. J. Tinsley in his introduction to his commentary on Luke in the Cambridge Bible Commentary series.
16. M. M. Thomas, from his contribution to a document called *From Letters Concerning the Missionary Structure of the Congregation*, WCC.
17. M. M. Thomas, article entitled 'The Pattern of Christian Spirituality' in the journal *Religion and Society* (Bangalore) for June, 1969.
18. See S. S. Smalley, 'Spirit, Kingdom and Prayer in Luke-Acts' in *Novum Testamentum* 15, Jan. 1973.
19. Helmut Flender, *St Luke, Theologian of Redemptive History*, SPCK, 1967, p. 167.

Questions and suggestions for study

- A. Read right through Luke's Gospel at one sitting, and list passages that seem to you relevant to our modern situation in which there are underprivileged groups in so many parts of the world.
- B. Study Luke 13:22-35 with the help of something such as Wilf Wilkinson's notes in *Good News in Luke* (Collins Fontana paperback, 1974). See what you think the gospel says about the prophetic role in history of Jesus and his followers.
- C. Do you like the phrase 'secular gospel' for Luke's Gospel? Do you prefer the description of a commentator of a previous generation who called Luke 'the scribe of the compassion of Christ'? What is the most adequate description in your view?
- D. Study with a commentary Luke chapter 24, with its note of expectation at the end, looking on towards the events recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.

4: Thomas Merton and the Gospel of John

The life and writings of Thomas Merton came to revolve round two main themes: what today we usually describe as 'contemplation' and 'struggle'. This, for me, ties up with and sheds light on the rich combination of material which we find in the Fourth Gospel on the contemplative Christ ('Christ in the Silence', as C. F. Andrews put it in the title of his book on the Fourth Gospel) and the Christ of prophetic challenge.

As we read the gospel, most of us of course tend to notice one side of the picture, the side that most appeals to us. Many people, as they read the Fourth Gospel, find that they are taken deeper into a realisation of personal religion, spirituality and interiority. As C. F. D. Moule has said, this is the gospel par excellence of the individual in his approach to God.¹ The great Johannine theme of abiding in Christ in faith (John 15:4) concentrates our attention on the dimension of 'being' and 'inwardness' rather than on 'doing' and 'outwardness'. However, when we have said that, we immediately have to qualify it by stating the other side of the picture. Unlike the group of people we have just mentioned, many other people, as they read the Fourth Gospel, take away from it something very different: they hear in it a great emphasis on 'doing the will of the Father' and 'working as the Father works' (John 5:17). They hear above all Jesus' very strong words about the conflict between light and darkness, with all the implications that these words raise in their minds for the modern fight against evil, corruption and oppression in the world.

This twin content shows the richness of the Johannine presentation of Jesus Christ. We have to add of course that it is a richness which contains within it some apparent contradictions: for example, the apparent contradictions between prayer and action, or between love and judgement. This sometimes leaves people confused, in the sense that they find

it hard to see the gospel as a whole or its picture of Jesus Christ as a whole.

It is here, I believe, that the modern Christian Thomas Merton, who died in 1968 at the age of 53, can help us to get the feel of the Fourth Gospel. I suspect that he had the same sort of mind as the person who compiled the Fourth Gospel. He can help us both to enter into something of the richness of the gospel and also to hold together without a sense of contradiction each side of its total presentation of Jesus Christ. In his life and thinking, Thomas Merton was someone who held together in one personality both contemplation and struggle, an emphasis both on inward realisation and outward prophetic challenge.

One rather striking similarity between the author of the Fourth Gospel and Thomas Merton is this: their exploratory minds caused great perplexity to some of their fellow-Christians. People in the early centuries of the Church were at first puzzled by the Fourth Gospel. It appears to have been welcomed first by heretical Gnostics and not by orthodox Christians. Its experimentation with non-traditional-Christian categories of expression and symbolism seems to have made some people question it as an authentic Christian presentation of Jesus Christ. So also in Merton's case. His idea of the many-sidedness of truth led him to explore Buddhism at the same time as retaining his Christian faith. This was interpreted by some people as a mark of inconsistency or unorthodoxy or contradiction. A. M. Allchin mentions this in a (sympathetic) review of a book about Thomas Merton written in 1975:

During Thomas Merton's life rumours constantly circulated that he had left his monastery or was on the point of doing so; since his death such rumours have not entirely ceased. He had, it is said, become a Buddhist; he was about to settle in Japan; and then it is added with a dark innuendo, 'It's as well for the Church that he died when he did . . .'²

I share the book-reviewer's conclusion that Merton's 'many-sided' approach was a mark of profundity and not of inconsistency. I would go on to reflect that this was the con-

clusion which the mainstream of Christian tradition in the early centuries came to believe about the Fourth Gospel's apparent inconsistencies.

Contemplation and struggle

Let us look in rather more detail at Thomas Merton and some of the key-points in his thinking. He needs no introduction to many modern readers. He was an American Catholic monk, of American and New Zealand parentage, who spent many years as a Trappist, Cistercian monk in America, where the rule of silence was strict and severe. Very many people have benefited from his writings, his poetry and his many insights drawn from a life of prayer. He died in Bangkok in an accident on a world tour in 1968 at the comparatively early age of 53. His approach to life was a remarkable combination of contemplative detachment and social commitment. His contemplative side never took the form of escapism. His last piece of writing was a paper significantly entitled 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives'. Someone has summed up his main quality by the paradoxical phrase 'subversive contemplation'. Merton maintained that monks, beginning with the early Fathers, had always been called to 'take up a critical attitude towards the world and its structures', with all that that meant in terms of being involved in questions of world history and world culture. But he maintained throughout his strong emphasis on silence and contemplation. He wrote this about monks and their life of prayer: 'In the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be like trees which exist silently in the dark, and by their vital presence purify the air'.³ He explored more and more intensively the links between oriental mysticism and the Christian mysticism in which he had been brought up. His emphasis in this respect was on interiority and on interior habits of silence and praise, penitence and love, reflection and free-speaking.⁴ His overall attitude is echoed, reflected and developed in such recent Christian movements as those associated with the Taizé community in France. Let us look in more detail at the twin aspects of his outlook.

Merton believed that contemplation and poetry were

closely linked together, and that there were many resemblances between the experience of the artist and that of the mystic. He was himself a poet, and wrote: 'Contemplation has much to offer poetry. And poetry, in its turn, has something to offer contemplation'.⁵ He wrote much about the cosmic symbols of light and darkness, sun and moon, trees and water. He saw them as the common heritage of mankind, emerging in poetic form as symbols of revelation. He said that they needed to be restored from their often degraded use in superstition, to be again the channels of divine revelation.⁶

This outlook brings him close to the Gospel of John with all its poetic symbolism.⁷ But in the end the basis of Merton's contemplative approach is his concentration on the theme of the Love of God as revealed in the Incarnation, and it is above all this that brings him very close to the Johannine outlook. He had a tremendous sense of the centrality of the Incarnation. 'Christ was not a wise man', he wrote, 'who came to teach a doctrine. He is God, who became incarnate in order to effect a mystical transformation of mankind'.⁸ This transformation for Merton consisted both in the transforming of the situation in the individual human heart and also the transforming of the corporate life of man in society. He was concerned with the love of God doing its work within the human heart and doing its work in the world of human relationships. The two aspects of the divine movement of transformation are inseparably linked by the theme of love. This is obviously a very Johannine combination: 'let my love abide in you', and 'love one another'. Contemplation for Merton meant the realisation of God's love in one's own life: but he never separated this from a similar realisation in the social dimension of life. 'Contemplation', he wrote, 'is out of the question for anyone who does not try to cultivate compassion for other men'.⁹ He followed up this remark by quotations from 1 John 3:14, 'He who does not love remains in death'; John 17:22-23, 'I in them and thou, Father, in me, that they may become perfectly one . . . The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one'; and John 13:35, 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one

another'.

In his last book, *Opening the Bible*, Merton seems to want to avoid the word 'mysticism', since it implies 'escapist mysticism' to most people.¹⁰ He is insistent that he does not go to a book like the Gospel of John to find there any escapist type of mysticism or a manual of meditation. He says that John's Gospel, so far from being a book of withdrawal, is basically a prophetic message about the significance of history and God's movement of loving liberation within history. There is a strong indication that he did not go along with attempts such as those of his fellow-American Fr Edgar Brunns¹¹ to see Buddhist influence in John's Gospel. But Merton's approach remains fully contemplative, and he sees the Gospel of John also as basically about the true inwardness of life as we are meant to live it. He understands the Johannine message as being about the possibility of man's realisation of the presence of Christ within him at the centre of his existence. Merton's language here is existentialist language. He describes God as the 'ultimate Free-one' or as 'absolute Freedom'. John 8:32 is quoted as a key text: 'The truth will make you free'. God in Christ is revealed as one who is desperately concerned with man's finding of freedom in his heart. This freedom is only found when man moves beyond the superficial freedom of a mere following of his inclinations, to find the deeper freedom for which he was created which comes from personal covenant with God. Merton sees the Johannine theme of freedom as proclaiming God's concern also with the movement towards freedom in society and in history: God is both 'the Free-one' and also 'the freedom that guides events'. Merton has this very Johannine combined emphasis on 'the inward' and 'the prophetic'.

Merton's message about the relationship between the inward and the outward comes out well in this passage which he wrote about the Bible:

The basic claim of the Bible is not to be interpreted in such terms as these: 'Yes, there is an ordinary world in which you live your normal life with your fellow-men. But this world is wicked and you are insignificant. While continuing to live in it and to obey its rules, you

have to carefully learn a whole new body of truths which will seem to you senseless and incomprehensible, and you must add this superstructure of strange ideas on to what you see and know by your natural reason. You must now live in two worlds at the same time, one visible and the other invisible: one comprehensible and the other incomprehensible: one familiar and the other frightening and strange: one where you can be yourself and another where you must strive to be unnaturally 'good': one which you instinctively take to be real, but which you must repudiate for the other which is truly real, though to you it seems totally superfluous'. This divisive and destructive pattern of life and thought is not the Bible message at all. The message of the Bible is precisely a message of unity and reconciliation, an all-embracing and positive revelation from which nothing real is excluded and in which all receives its full due and its ultimate meaning. One-sided distortions of the Bible have made it seem partial, and have restricted it to narrow, exclusive areas of 'the sacred' and 'the devout', as if to understand God's message one had to shut out God's world and man and history and time . . .

It is perhaps Merton's essentially unitary view of biblical truth and of truth generally that makes him good parallel-reading to the Gospel of John.

But, in spite of the above passage, and in spite of the fact that as we have seen Merton was not keen to see the Gospel of John as a sort of manual of Asian-type mysticism, he did in general engage in a very radical exploration of the common ground, as well as the differences, between Christianity and Asian mysticism, especially Buddhist mysticism. His sensitive discussions on the relationship between spirit and matter sometimes seem to come near either to Buddhism and an impersonal monism (with theories of the world as illusion and emptiness) or to a thoroughgoing dualism. We can perhaps here see some similarity with those Johannine verses which warn us against materialism and point us to a concentration on 'the really real': for example, John 6:63 'it is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail'; or 1 John 2:15 'do

not love the world and the things of the world'. But with Merton, as with John, the approach is never one of a cosmological and metaphysical dualism between spirit and matter, as though matter were evil. He constantly comes back to the truth of the Incarnation, that 'God loved the world so much . . . that he gave . . .' (John 3:16), and if there is contradiction here with 1 John 2:15 the contradiction is seen as only apparent. Merton is especially interested in the existentialist (and in a sense, 'prophetic') message of Zen Buddhism. But he stresses throughout the distinctive Christian eschatological theme of the Kingdom of God to come, that is, the new creation and the restoration of all things in Christ: and he describes this as 'a dimension which does not enter into the realm of Zen'.¹² In all this we may see similarity with the great Johannine combination of Christian eschatology and Christian mysticism.

As time went on, Merton became more and more connected with radical social movements in America. Although not a Marxist, he was perhaps the main creative mind (alongside people in the American Catholic Worker Movement) behind what has been called the 'Communitarian Anarchism' of the American Catholic Left in the 1960s. This radical movement was best known for its opposition to the Vietnam war, as displayed in street demonstrations, protest fasts, tax resistance, and imprisonment for draft refusal.¹³

As we have noted, Merton started with the conviction that monastic spirituality had always had a vocation to be the seed-bed for radical brotherhoods that would align themselves with the poor. He showed that in the early centuries of Christianity the monks had fulfilled this vocation, and had not hesitated to attack ecclesiastical and social hierarchies, if necessary, in language drawn from the Apocalypse. Through retreats at his Gethsemani monastery in USA, through his writings and voluminous correspondence, he helped to form a spirituality that transformed prayer into protest, and contemplation into resistance to the powers and principalities of a murderous world. He provided the background of thought for the spirituality of such protesters as Dan Berrigan, Jim Forrest and Jim Douglas.

Merton re-connected spirituality with its roots in apocalyptic and eschatology. The theme of 'rejection of the world' was interpreted not so much as the rejection of the struggle against 'the things of the flesh' as rejection of the struggle against the powers and principalities of the great empires, with America as their most recent representative.

The anarchist radicalism and community radicalism which resulted from this outlook was very much less political than Marxism – than, say, the outlook of the Christian Marxist in Latin America. It was more a 'personalist' movement. It had what has been described as an 'incarnate mysticism' which sent individuals into the ultimate clash between good and evil. Its radicalism has been said to be 'both as valid and as impractical as that of Jeremiah or Ezekiel . . . or Jesus'! For this radicalism, action meant not the prolonged political and economic programmes of Marxism, but the 'lonely prophetic journey', resulting in 'momentary fusions of finite with final judgement', and in 'an instantaneous unity of word with flesh'.

Merton's spirituality has led to a re-interpretation of some of the great Christian symbols and concepts such as Incarnation, Revelation and Resurrection. To be incarnate means to be fully 'involved'. Revelation means 'awareness' and 'conscientisation'. Resurrection means human beings being born into a new humanity and a new society. But this is not to reduce theology to sociology, as Marxists tend to do. If its undoubted secularisation of concepts seems to some people to be the very opposite of spirituality, Merton no doubt would have replied that the new attitude is the attitude of a truly spiritual apocalyptic and a truly spiritual understanding of hope. The United States Catholic Left has tended towards what has been called 'an apocalyptic pessimism' about the world rather than to sociology, but it is a pessimism that is not without ultimate hope.

To Marxists, of course, this attitude is less than a totally radical one. Its 'personalist' preference for small groups rather than the political strategy of the mass movement and its effort to carve out some small spaces of humanisation (within which to keep one's sanity of soul through the long

dark night of resistance) must appear to the Marxist to be a very limited type of programme. The Marxist is concerned with mass historical change. Similarly with the watchword of 'resistance' rather than 'revolution'. The refusal to go on to violence and the stopping short at a sort of grim holding out in the face of evil must to the Marxist look like failure finally to be willing to take action in the world. And it must be admitted that this sort of spirituality does open up the gulf between religion and politics. It is determined to give full weight to both terms in the 'spirituality and struggle' combination ('contemplation and struggle'), and to the Marxist this is bound to seem too complex a business.

Merton, however, can claim that only this sort of attitude rescues the socially concerned Christian from adopting the political, economic and military methods of the enemy, which must be seen as something unholy. The Merton outlook hangs on to that dimension of Christian hope which cannot be reduced to politics or even to history; it does not give up the vision of that absolute transcendence which is other than every power and principality, even those of the forward movement; it keeps its eyes on that final boundary situation where the individual steps out beyond the conditions of historical existence and glimpses the contours of the ultimate New Humanity of the Resurrection from the Dead.

There is a tension between these two types of outlook in the Catholic Left in America, North America and Latin America. There is a tension between the Marxist view and the Merton view. Both views are held with conviction by committed Christians in different parts of America, and elsewhere. It is however likely, in my view, that it is the Merton type of 'active mysticism' that comes closest to the outlook found in the Gospel of John and the Johannine writings as a whole. The thinking of Merton here seems to shed a great deal of light for us in fact upon the ultimate significance of those biblical writings.

The 'now' and the 'not yet'

How far does our statement of Merton's outlook fit in with the views of modern New Testament scholarship about the

Fourth Gospel?

One point is interesting, as it were by the way. The 'monastic' tone of much of the Johannine material has been a point of wide acceptance, in the sense that strong links have been recognised between the Gospel of John and the writings discovered from the monastic Qumran community near the Dead Sea. The Qumran documents, while of course focusing on the Torah as the centre of attention and not on Jesus Christ, do give us part of the first-century Jewish background out of which the Fourth Gospel sprang. Many echoes are heard in the gospel of expressions used by this closely-knit Qumran community in their Manual of Discipline. The idea of the Fourth Gospel as a piece of writing having monastic undertones seems to fit in, in a very general sort of way, with our suggestion of the Johannine characteristic emphasis being on contemplation and struggle.¹⁴

A main discussion among scholars has been on the relationship between Hebraic elements and Hellenistic elements in the gospel, that is between Jewish elements (especially prophetic, apocalyptic and eschatological Jewishness) and non-Jewish elements (especially contemplative and mystical non-Jewishness). A conclusion is reached by a good many scholars not too different from the 'struggle and contemplation' combination which we have been discussing. For example, C. K. Barrett describes the theology of the Fourth Gospel as being a combination of both eschatology and mysticism, of emphasis both on the 'now' note and the 'not yet' note in John.¹⁵ And this combination is seen as having been imposed on the author by his received material. John's emphasis on what we may call the Ultimate disclosed in Christ is seen as an emphasis on both the Ultimate as a goal within or at the end of history and time, and on the eternal Ultimate realisable in the present moment. In fact, of course, any neat analysis of Hebraic and non-Hebraic parts in the gospel is seen as almost impossible: the Judaism in the Fourth Gospel is seen as a very Hellenistic Judaism (perhaps the marginal Judaism of the Hellenists of the early Jerusalem Church and of the early mission to Samaria)¹⁶ and the Hellenism in the Fourth Gospel is seen as a very Hebraic-influenced

Hellenism.

C. K. Barrett sees a theology of struggle and hope, based on the apocalyptic and eschatological thinking of early Christianity, as a big part of the Fourth Gospel's message. An ongoing struggle – and witness – till the End is envisaged. John 17:15 comes to mind: 'Father, I do not pray that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one'. At the same time, Barrett recognises the more Hellenistic and contemplative outlook also to be found in the Fourth Gospel: 'John was not satisfied', he writes, 'with an account of Jesus himself in simply apocalyptic-eschatological terms'. The strong Johannine emphasis on 'eternal life now' is noted. Barrett is at pains to point out that the Johannine mysticism is not any form of escapism or ethical relativism or individualism, but that the gospel is mystical in the sense that it is all about oneness with God in Christ, and about abiding in the Father and in the Son.

It is instructive to note also Barrett's tentative reconstruction of how the Johannine writings originated.

John the Apostle migrated from Palestine and lived in Ephesus, where, true to character as a Son of Thunder, he composed apocalyptic works . . . A man of commanding influence, he gathered about him a number of pupils. In course of time he died; his death fanned the apocalyptic hopes of some, scandalized others [who had expected him to survive till the Parousia] and induced a few to ponder deeply over the meaning of Christian eschatology. One pupil of the Apostle incorporated his written works in the canonical Apocalypse . . . Another pupil was responsible for the epistles . . . Yet another, a bolder thinker, and one more widely read both in Judaism and Hellenism, produced John 1–20.¹⁷

The 'now' and the 'not yet' emphases in John can be seen, for example, in what may be called the typically-Johannine chapter 9 of the gospel; the story of the man born blind. A noted Indian New Testament scholar, Fr George Soares-Prabhu, has done a study of this chapter which brings out the point very clearly.¹⁸ He says that as far as its message to people in India today is concerned, it says two things. First, it

directs them back to some of the deepest concerns of traditional Indian thought and spirituality. As one reads of how Christ enables the man, made conscious of his oneness with the Lord, to get insight into 'the really real' and to get healing and deliverance, one is taken deep, says Soares-Prabhu, into the centrality of the truth about Oneness of Being (John 9:38 – The man said, 'Lord, I believe'). But secondly, says Soares-Prabhu, the story shakes one's Pharisaic complacency and social inaction in the face of poverty and under-privilege. As one reads about Jesus' challenging judgement upon the establishment world of his day (the Pharisees play a big part in the story) and its established theologies and social structures, Jesus is seen in full prophetic power (John 9:39 – 'For judgement I came into this world'). It is this judgement, too, that provides the end-climax of the chapter, it is noted. True light consists in realising the darkness and obscurantism of one's situation. True light leads on to struggle and change. This is a chapter and a story about struggle, as well as about spiritual realisation in the inner sense.

We must not of course claim too much significance for this convergence of views about John's 'contemplation and struggle' combination. The convergence is of a very general sort. But it is an interesting convergence and a somewhat new phenomenon. It seems to be of use to those of us who try and get a clear line of direction for our reading and study of John's Gospel.

The mystical and the prophetic

Some of the more striking and novel comments on John's Gospel today come from thinkers who concentrate not on the *combination* of 'contemplation and struggle' in John, but on one aspect of that twin-motif.

This closing section looks at the comments of Fr M. A. Amaladoss of India, who takes us deeper into what are for him some important mystical or contemplative aspects of the Fourth Gospel; and at the comments of Fr Jose Miranda of Mexico who brings before us what he feels to be the prophetic aspects of the gospel.

Fr Amaladoss, in an article entitled 'An Indian Reads St

John's Gospel'¹⁹, expands the point on which we have already touched about the link between the Fourth Gospel and traditional Indian spirituality. He says that just as the western Churches have tried to explore the mystery of unity and the concept of Oneness of Being as found in the Fourth Gospel, so now 'perhaps it is the time of the Indian Church to explore it'.

Amaladoss fully accepts the undoubted ethical nature of the Fourth Gospel's mysticism. There is no attempt to soft-pedal such key-verses as John 14:23 – 'If a man love me, *he will keep my word*, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him'. But there is more than a suggestion in Amaladoss' viewpoint that western (northern?) interpretations of the Fourth Gospel with their repeated stress on maintaining correct distinctions between creature and Creator, believer and Lord, have not yet managed to enter fully into the whole significance of the great Johannine concept of 'abiding in God' and 'abiding in Christ' (15:4). Again, there is no attempt on the part of Amaladoss to soft-pedal the central importance in the Fourth Gospel of personal fellowship between the believer and the Lord. But Amaladoss makes it clear that he sees more than a little danger in any merely personalist understanding of the text of John's Gospel: the danger, that is, of unduly self-centred concepts creeping in. He sees the language of the Fourth Gospel as a challenge to the reader to a re-centring of the self, away from mere individuality or from any superficial egoism, on to the idea of communion with the 'Lord in the cave of the heart' (as the Upanishads say), that Lord being the deepest part of one's selfhood, who is known in traditional Christian terminology as 'the Holy Spirit'. In the last resort, says Amaladoss, in the unity there is no 'Thou'. There is only an 'I' that keeps resounding at various depths.

These points have only recently been articulated quite so clearly from the Indian Christian viewpoint.²⁰ They augur well for a new liveliness of dialogue between Christians themselves and between Christians and others on vital matters of the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. It is because the Fourth Gospel leads people into this area of exploration

that the writings and experience of someone such as Thomas Merton seem relevant as parallel-reading. Merton's emphasis on God as the ground and centre of human existence is one part of his mystical and theological thinking that seems relevant at this point.

Fr Jose Miranda makes a strong emphasis on 'struggle' in what he writes about the Fourth Gospel in his book *Marx and the Bible*.²¹ He aims to back up with detailed exposition of the text the point that the main theme of the Fourth Gospel is 'God's justice for the oppressed'. He is not the first person to have drawn attention to the numerous Johannine passages in which Jesus may be said to be making a strong protest against the authorities or the status quo, on behalf of the underprivileged person or the outsider. We have touched on this briefly above in what we have said about John chapter 9. Mention has also often been made by commentators on 'protest' passages such as the cleansing of the temple (chapter 2); Jesus' championing and healing of a sick man (chapter 5); Jesus' strong attacks on those Jews who opposed the truth (chapters 7 and 8) and were no more than hirelings and false shepherds (chapter 10); and Jesus' meeting with the woman caught in adultery (chapter 8). It is widely recognised that 'conflict chapters' abound in John's Gospel. However, Miranda has perhaps been the first person to attempt a scholarly exposition of this theme in the Fourth Gospel, combining this scholarly approach with the impetus of Latin American experience. Miranda emphasises the Old Testament background of the material in the Fourth Gospel, not least the Hebrew prophetic background.

He criticises strongly the merely inward or individualist sense in which the Fourth Gospel references to 'love' or to 'oneness with the Father' are usually interpreted. In addition to a major emphasis on the theme of judgement in the Fourth Gospel already noted by us (he concentrates especially on judgement on those who refuse to love and help their fellow-beings), Miranda's points may be summarised as follows.

(a) When Jesus says that his words and his deeds are not his own but his Father's (12:49), he is really saying that he is one

with the fatherly God of Old Testament revelation whose main concern all along had been known to be that of bringing in an age of justice and love. Jesus' main aim is declared to be the same. Note is taken of the way in which John's Gospel constantly echoes Old Testament phrases: the 'I am' phrases of John (e.g., 8:28 – 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he') echo the 'I am' phrases of Second Isaiah (e.g., Isaiah 48:12 in the Greek version of the Old Testament – 'Hearken to me, O Jacob, and Israel whom I have called: I am he, I am the first and I am the last').

(b) When Jesus speaks about loving one another (John 13:34) he is referring, says Miranda, above all in a very Old Testament manner to justice and brotherhood and the struggle against all mercilessness, not mainly to fellowship in an inner group. Other Johannine writings, he says, make this clear about the Johannine vocabulary (e.g. 1 John 3:17 – 'If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?'). 'Love' in the Fourth Gospel means 'Love-justice for the brother in need'.

(c) When Jesus speaks constantly in the Farewell Discourses about 'going to the Father' (e.g., John 16:28) he is not speaking primarily about his metaphysical relationship with the Father, but about his followers' actions when he is gone. He is saying, 'Continue my work'. The emphasis comes out clearly, says Miranda, if one follows the context: for example, if one sees how 16:28 is followed by 17:11 – 'Now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world'. 'What Jesus wants to emphasise', writes Miranda, 'is that he is going away and the Christians will remain behind in his place'. This emphasis is in line with Jesus' earlier statements about his 'work' and on the importance of 'doing the will of the Father' (5:17; 7:17). In John chapter 13 the significance of Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet is not only something about Christ himself (i.e. that his power is found in his humility), but is expressly said in the gospel to be 'so that you also (my followers) should do as I have done to you' (13:15). Again, in 14:12 it is emphasised, says Miranda, that the vital thing is

that the Father's work should continue through the works of Jesus' followers: 'Whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself: he will perform even greater works, for I am going to the Father'. Father and Son will dwell with the believer who keeps God's word; that is, who lives a life of action (14:23).

Miranda concludes, 'The goal of God's intervention in our history is not that we should see God'. Note, he says, 1 John 4:12 – 'No man has ever seen God: if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us'. The goal is rather 'that God be in us, and this consists in our loving one another'.

The points of Miranda strongly articulate important Christian understandings of the Fourth Gospel and feed them into the worldwide Christian exploration of the significance of that gospel.

Obviously the gist of this present chapter has been to suggest, not that we should try and make a choice between particular polarised emphases in either the 'contemplation' or the 'struggle' direction, but that we should try and go deeper into both sides of the twin-motif.



For this reason, I believe that there is some value in approaching a gospel such as the Fourth Gospel via a writer such as Thomas Merton. I have suggested that the composite material which is the Fourth Gospel is the result of some personal combination of characteristics in the compiler (working, maybe, with associates), and that one of the avenues of understanding it is through comparison with another personal figure such as Thomas Merton. In Merton we have seen the possibility of apparent opposites being held together in one personality. This gives us a clue perhaps as to how we may get the feel of what the gospel is saying to us.

I do not suggest that the author of the Fourth Gospel is saying just what Thomas Merton has said to us. I do suggest that there is a helpful comparison to be made.

Notes

1. C. F. D Moule, *Novum Testamentum* 5, 1962, pp. 171–190.
2. A. M. Allchin, in a book review in the *Church Times*.
3. Quoted in Olive Wyon's *Living Springs*, SCM Press, 1963, p. 77. Original reference untraced.
4. Merton's most mature writing on prayer is probably found in the volume *Contemplative Prayer*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973.
5. Merton, *Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal*. Among Merton's writings on this theme, see 'Poetry and the Contemplative Life' in *Figures for an Apocalypse*, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1948.
6. Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness*, Burns Oates, 1976.
7. The fact that much Johannine symbolism comes from places such as the Jewish Wisdom literature does not mean that John himself was not a poet.
8. Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*.
9. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Burns Oates, 1962.
10. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, Unwin, 1972.
11. Fr Edgar Bruns, *The Art and Thought of John*, 1961; and *The Christian Buddhism of John's Gospel*, 1971, Paulist Press, Paramus, New Jersey, USA.
12. For a discussion of Merton's position, see *Thomas Merton on Zen*, Sheldon Press, 1976.
13. I am indebted for the material in this section to Rosemary Ruether's article 'Monks and Marxists' in the supplement of the British SCM journal *Movement* for May–June 1974, from which I have freely quoted.
14. Much study has also been done on similarities between phrases in John's Gospel and phrases in the Christian Gnostic Nag Hammadi writings discovered 30 years ago. For example, phrases about God as Life, Truth and Love. The Gospel of John seems to have made its own special contribution to Christian gnosticism in the early centuries, just as Merton made his own special contribution to movements of modern mysticism.
15. C. K. Barrett, *New Testament Essays*, 1972 (see especially chapter 4 on 'The Dialectical Theology of St John'). Rudolf Bultmann's well-known emphasis on the themes of Christ the Prophet-Judge and Christ the bringer of present existential truth, in his writings on John's Gospel, may also be cited.
16. See Oscar Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle*, SCM Press, 1976.
17. C. K. Barrett's commentary, *The Gospel according to St John*, SPCK, 1955, p. 113.

18. See pp. 65–77 of *India's Search for Reality and the Relevance of the Gospel of John* (ed. C. Duraisingh and C. Hargreaves), ISPCK, Delhi, 1975.

19. See pp. 7–24 of the book noted under 18 above.

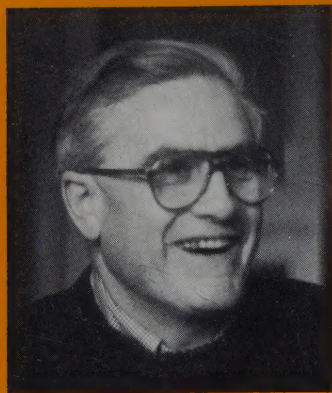
20. But the writings of Bishop A. J. Appasamy, of more than a generation ago, and from a different angle, should not be forgotten. Though a strong 'personalist', Bishop Appasamy also spoke of the dangers of a Christian conceiving of God as no more than 'a magnified human being'.

21. Fr Jose Miranda, British Edition, SCM Press, 1977. See especially pp. 127–137 for comments on the Fourth Gospel. In our present chapter, p. 88 and p. 223 of Miranda's book are also referred to.

Questions and suggestions for study

- A. 'Decisive action' seems to have been a main theme both in the writings of Thomas Merton and of the author of the Fourth Gospel (from John 1:14 onwards). Read through John's Gospel chapters 1 to 12, and list the points at which Jesus is shown as taking some decisive action.
- B. John chapters 13 to 17 have been said to provide the basis for all true spirituality. Read these chapters, and try and write down in modern terms what you think 'abiding in Christ' (15:4) and other such phrases really mean.
- C. Read John chapter 9 with the help of something like Douglas Webster's notes in *Good News in John* (Collins Fontana paperback, 1974). Would you describe the chapter as primarily a story on a 'contemplation and struggle' theme (see our chapter above), or in some other way?
- D. Read the whole Gospel of John through at one stretch, and try to summarise in one sentence what you think Jesus according to the Fourth Gospel actually means by 'salvation'.
- E. An artist, after reading John's Gospel, said he was most vividly struck by Jesus' illustrations about doors, doorways and gates, and about the 'doorway of the heart'. See John 10:7–9, and 5:2. (See also Rev. 3:20.) Which piece of imagery in the Fourth Gospel strikes you most vividly?

THE GOSPELS IN A WORLD CONTEXT



The Rev. Cecil Hargreaves

'I have in this book suggested some parallels between the gospels and certain modern Christian writers in different parts of the world . . . These modern writers can help us considerably . . . to get the feel of what the gospels were saying . . . and can bring out for us something of their modern significance.'



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