

World Disinheritance

I was at the heart of the Vatican during preparations for the 1967 Laity Congress in Rome, when I heard top-brass ecclesiastics mutter that they would not want to canonize Pope John XXIII but to anathematize him forever. What did they have against him? ‘He opened too many doors and windows – we can’t close them all’. The word Pope John used was ‘aggiornamento’, usually and accurately translated ‘updating’, but really pointing to the need for the church to face seriously the realities of our world and not be trapped in obsolete patterns of life or live in a religious cloudland. The Vatican II Council was a liberating experience for so many, enabling them to bring creative and imaginative thinking to bear on the calling of the church in the world. To others it was an upsetting experience, disturbing certainties they had lived by, dislocating the calm tenor of their life, leaving them rudderless when they thought previously that they had dependable charts and reliable steering to guide the church ship through safe channels to its goal. Those disturbed found opportunity to resist the openness of Vatican II in 1968, a year of riots and near revolutions. They contended that everything was going to chaos, and moved to restore features of the pre-Council church.

I was recently given an autobiographical reflection of Bishop Patrick Kalibombe, dated 1998. It included his description of the impact of the Council in Malawi and Zambia dioceses when he was on the staff of Kachebere Seminary from 1964 to 1972.

The fact that in Rome the Vatican Council was in full swing had a peculiar impact on the study courses. Both staff members and students were quite aware that at that Council lively discussions were going on concerning what hitherto had been accepted as the perennial, immutable traditions of the Church in doctrinal matters as well as in discipline and legislation. There was a widespread foreboding that, by the time the Council ended, things would not be the same as before. In light of this situation, the traditional manuals on which seminary studies had been based until then lost their character of definitiveness. Students kept questioning the validity of whatever they were being taught; and in many cases the teachers could only give provisional answers adding that we all had to wait and see what came out of the Council! In the meantime there was ample scope for discussion. In a way, this was a rather unhealthy predicament: on the one hand you needed to feel sure of the basis on which you were preparing future ministers, and yet on the other, there seemed to be no such easily available solid ground! We muddled along as best we could, trying to take in the changes that were happening, while we hoped and prayed that the Holy Spirit would not stop guiding our steps. Nevertheless you do end up abandoning the idea of possessing a complete ready-made baggage of clear absolutes. You learn to live with areas of uncertainty where further inquiry is perfectly in order, while clinging faithfully to those basic orientations that you know are dependable. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council a lot of people in the Church have been feeling quite lost in the midst of so many changes; they look back with nostalgia to what they think was a time of certitude and clarity, and would like to forget Vatican II as a bad dream and recreate the certainties of that idealised past. My experience at Kachebere taught me to be a bit more realistic. Vatican II is here to stay. What we leaders and pastors need to do is to develop the kind of skills and spirituality that can equip us to serve as

dependable guides of God's People even in times of disconcerting changes. Bishop Kalilombe is clear about the gift the Vatican II Council produced in changing the ecclesiastical landscape. He looks back on a church too wrapped up in itself when it was called to speak for the world God loves:

'The insistence here is not so much on the Church being the (only authentic) instrument of salvation to which all must visibly belong if they want to be saved. It is rather on the church as the embodiment of Christ the Servant of Yahweh, (the covenant name for God), a visible challenging and attractive and imitable Sign of that redeemed, transformed and divinised humanity according to which God has always been intending to make the world'.

Hence '...The mission of a Church like the one we are trying to build up cannot confine itself to 'purely spiritual matters' but must encompass the whole of people's life, individual as well as social, spiritual as well as secular. It must touch on such aspects of civil life as individual, family and public morality, human rights, justice and peace, education and health, employment development and general policies.'

The church exists to spend its life for the world to reshape the world for true living.

One of the other studies of the World Council of Churches during my time concerned its understanding of the church's life assignment: 'the world is the agenda'. The Vatican II Council has helped this conviction to be at the heart of the changed ecclesiastical landscape.

But it is understandable that those who look to the bible for guidance get confused. For the church's relationship to the world seems to be spoken of in contradictory ways.

The first letter of John to the churches shows the same loving concern as a pastor and friend as does John's gospel. It warns: 'Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world.....' Yet in the gospel of John we find: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only SonGod did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him'. The word 'world' (or 'aeon') is used in two ways, to describe the way the world develops where God is ignored and the way the world develops where God's way is honoured and followed.

The world was made good but is fallen away. God sends the Son to restore it to its true being. Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples: 'I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world'. He is speaking of a world fallen away from God. That world needs redemption for its promise to be fulfilled. The quote from John's first letter gives one or two features of the kind of world we are to reject: '...what the sinful self craves, what people see and covet (consumerism), and everything in this world that people are so proud of'. God invites us to manage the world as junior partners with himself. He knows how to bring the world to the fullness of its promise. If we rebel and choose to take over the running to shape it our selfish way we mess things up. Jesus Christ came to reveal a true humanity with which the Father could work to transform the world's life, so as to fulfil its promise.

On one occasion when I was visiting lecturer in Matanzas Theological Seminary in Cuba I was asked to speak to theological students in their senior year of the Baptist

seminary in Santiago de Cuba on the Scottish Reformation. When it came to the role of the magistrate, I found that they were determined to locate his work to the secular field, not the spiritual. The Reformers made no such distinction. We live in one world. The ordering of that world, for its health, must be marked by justice, truth and peace to gain the fulfilment of its promise. People live in the world pursuing God's purpose or substituting ambitions and initiatives which suit themselves. There is one world, material and spiritual to cope with directed God's way or hostile to that way.

The Secular Sphere

Pope Benedict XVI has targeted secularism as a demonic force in our time. In 'The Guardian' of June 1st, 2012 John Hooper writes on the pope's letter of March announcing a top-level investigation into clerical sex abuse in Ireland, and comments: 'In his letter, the pope appeared to cast much of the blame for sex abuse on Ireland's secularisation'. Pope Benedict is getting it wrong. But then popes do. The meaning and emphasis of the word have changed throughout history.

a) Originally the Latin word 'saecularis' referred to an identifiable, lengthy period of time which needed to be understood in its integrity without importing ideas and questions which belong to a different era.

b) In mediaeval times there was a shift of meaning accompanying a move to the autonomy of spheres of responsibility which had previously come under the church's direct patronage. When Constantine the Great gave legal recognition to Christianity, it meant relief from periods of persecution; but when the Roman empire collapsed, the church was left to pick up the pieces, to provide a basis of order in spheres of education, health care, social provision, justice, parish relief for instance. This issued in a paternalism which was ultimately resented, and which inhibited progress in these areas. Over time the civil sphere achieved independence from the ecclesiastical. These came to represent separate areas of responsibility whether they were thought of as working in partnership or whether the religious sphere was dismissed and given no credence.

To make the religious way of thinking separate from the rest of life, was rejected by Jesus in his time; 'I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness....' He saw that the practice of religion could be both superficial and oppressive. Speaking to religious leaders who resembled 'whited sepulchres' he said 'you on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness'. What Jesus looked for was faith which stemmed from a tried and tested bedrock of reality and found practical expression in compassionate, committed life-styles.

Human experience echoes that of Jesus. Fidel Castro had a religious background. He discarded it because, as he grew up he became more acutely aware of the church's collaboration with the oppressive and corrupt regime of the dictator Batista. He found in Marxism a reading of life and emphasis on justice which he could affirm. In the early 1970's I just missed him in Chile, when I stayed with members of the recently formed Christians for Socialism. Fidel had met and talked with them long into the night. His conclusion was 'With Christians such as you are, Marxists such as I am can have not only tactical but strategic alliances.' True, he invested in the USSR connection, and led Cuba into membership of COMECON. But he was ill at ease with hardline elements in Cuban communism and when the USSR collapsed in 1991 it was with some relief that Cuba disengaged and became a lay state. In his recent biography Fidel states his position as that of a Christian whose social analysis

is Marxist/Leninist.

With secularism there remains a problem if the element of transcendence is missed out in defining the human. That leaves powers-that-be to tidy their favoured understandings into line with their favoured ideologies. For Hitler, Aryans, for Stalin the Party faithful, for Mao aficionados of the Red Book were taken to provide examples of authentic humanity.

c) Secularism may be recognised as a practical resource which insists that the realities which have to be faced in life are addressed squarely without evasion or cover-up, honouring the terms available for getting purchase on situations.

This approach found supreme expression in the incarnation. Jesus Christ came without privilege or protection, exposed to all the vagaries of human nature, enduring its contrasts. He knew what was in human nature and accepted the consequences.

He came announcing not church but kingdom – the whole fabric of created life transformed so that it is marked by justice, truth and peace. That we take the world seriously, exactly as it is, is accordingly an article of faith.

In the letter to the Colossians, Paul lays emphasis on the claim that Jesus Christ, the head of the church is also the Lord of the world. He is presented as the source and sign that commanding forces ‘Thrones, dominions, rulers, powers’ have lost their way. To validate their existence and to contribute to a world order which is just, they must take ‘the form of the servant’: ‘The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over others and their great ones dominate. That is not to be your way. Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave: just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many’. Not only persons but institutions, corporations, nations will fulfil their purpose when they learn his servant way of working. It is for that that they were created. A corollary of this emphasis on the kingdom, on a world to be transformed under Jesus Christ’s headship, is that religious language is not a requirement for authentic responses, personal or corporate. When it came to true ways of living the church may instruct the world, but the world may also instruct the church. The church’s role is provisional as is the world’s. In fulfilled life, depicted as a City, there is no Temple.

I do not know what form of secularism Polly Toynbee of ‘the Guardian’ embraces; but I believe that life is enriched by her determination to dig into and expose the underlying reality of situations, her good judgement in illuminating what should be supported and what combated, her acute concern that justice and truth should prevail in human life.

If the papal judgement were pressed, secularists would have every right to raise awkward questions. Is it just by chance that church dignitaries are appointed – Bishops, Archbishops, Cardinals – and that their rank assures them of attention, and headlines in the secular press? How is the servant/slave status which Jesus commended as the way of being church to be expressed by centring a church on the sovereign state of the Vatican, with ambassadors and all the trimmings of secular power?

Don’t forget that, in the parable of the Last Judgement, those whom Jesus affirms do not even recognise him and have not religious words in their response. They exercise straight forward secular responsibilities feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving hospitality to the stranger, caring for the sick, visiting prisoners. That is enough to merit his ‘Well done!’.

This is not a time to square up to secularism but to recognise and receive the gift that

it contains. This is not a time when humanity is ignoring the call for a new world order ('the kingdom') but when the church is being told, 'You have your part to play, but don't try to hog the agenda. The call goes to all earth's people and those who respond do so in their own way and language'.

One World in One Creation

However hard it was for him to reckon with at the time, we benefit from Paul's letters where they deal with obstacles to faith. In the letter to the Colossians, Paul had to deal with the heresy that Jesus Christ is but one of the mediators between God and humankind. Only about three decades after Jesus' crucifixion, Paul is able to dismiss that limited view of Jesus' place:

'He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for by him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is head of the body the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead so that he might come to have first place in everything'.

In Jesus Christ God and God's purpose are made fully manifest. The creation of the world develops as he decrees – it is not an alien and hostile sphere or a mere accident – it has in it, rooted and unshakeable, what is acknowledged in an Iona Community prayer:

'We affirm God's goodness at the heart of humanity planted more deeply than all that is wrong

We celebrate the miracle and the wonder of life
the unfolding purposes of God
forever at work in ourselves and the world'

But how deal with the mighty powers which can shape life for good or ill and seem determined and able to do their worst: 'thrones, dominions, rulers, powers'? Where they distort God's purpose in order to achieve their own ends they need to be brought to heel and turned around to work in an effective and fulfilling way – adopting, as Jesus Christ's way of handling power, the way of a servant.

What may be thought of as secular instruments, such as critical analysis, public enquiry, forms of accountability, all effective means of getting at the truth can be deployed in the human search to find in what ways God-in-Christ meant the world to work. Human resources may have been misused to get hands on power levers.

What needs to be done is to reclaim initiatives for their true purpose. Senator Salonga, a Baptist lay preacher in the Philippines, spoke to me of *'the evangelical necessity of research into multinationals, lest the world get into a powerful grip which is other than God's'*. Research has gospel significance. If the grip is God's all is well. The creation was designed to work that way. A grip hostile to God's intention for creation disturbs and damages the order of creation.

God is on a much larger job than the church can compass. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus proclaimed, is bigger than the kirk. I have, in my time, resisted an attempt to replace the word 'kingdom' with the word 'sovereignty'. The word does imply sovereignty but it is much more than a matter of God reigning in our hearts and in the life of faith communities. Kingdom covers textures of life, structures, institutions, corporations, political agencies – these need to be converted to their true use. The whole fabric of created life needs to be transformed to work the way it is designed.

God's large purpose links Che Guevara, mid-20th century Czechs, Teilhard de Chardin, Brian Cox and Kenneth Latourette with Jesus Christ's human self-giving to the point of crucifixion. Che was convinced there had to come into being 'the new man'. The Czechs longed for 'socialism with a human face'. Teilhard de Chardin envisaged the evolution of the whole human race to a transformed human state. Brian Cox saw, in the universe, the death of stars engendering fresh star clusters – is resurrection the pulse of creation? Kenneth Latourette saw the progression of humanity like a tide which retreats only to gather greater strength to edge further and further up life's beaches. What is in view is not some individual, or even family or national brands plucked from the burning but a progression of humanity to make common cause and attain an attitude to life which is not marked by self-interest but by loving concern for others.

With Jesus Christ that meant crucifixion. That may be part of the package. He revealed a humanity which spent itself in love and praise and became the Suffering Servant prophesied in Isaiah:

'He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hid their faces he was despised and counted for nothing'. Yet 'he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; the punishment which brought us peace was upon him by his wounds we are healed'.

The writer takes account of one view that this was 'a punishment sent by God' and dismisses it. It was our sins which produced the suffering he endured – he offered his life to deal with them. God could not work with humanity bent on self-interest. Jesus embodied a different humanity – a humanity which was tested to the limit but kept faith against the odds. Even when bearing on the cross the wretched weight of God-forsakenness, he trusted his dying spirit into the Father's hands. He exhibited a humanity which, to the end, did not fail the Father. There was opened up the possibility that human beings could 'put on Christ'. That did not imply Christ taking over their own being but enabling it to be fulfilled and made a contribution to the transfiguring of the whole creation.

Since Jesus Christ is Lord of the world as well as head of the church, we can expect to find 'out in the world' forms of sacrificial self-giving which answer the prayer 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven'. That includes those who would not think of putting such a longing into words of prayer. Jesus said of one such 'I have not found such faith, no not in Israel'. Such was the life-style of the atheist, Communist secretary I met in Madagascar and many others who were officially outside the ranks of the church.

A contemporary event related to an ancient message draws attention to the fact that it is one's bearing in the world which reveals where one's genuine allegiance lies.

The Persian king, Cyrus the Great recorded on a stone cylinder his capture of Babylon in 539 B.C. and the consequent treatment of captives from other countries. Deported people were freed to return to their own homelands. This included Jewish exiles who were given resources to restore that life and refurbish the Temple with treasures which had been stolen. The U.S.A. is now to receive that original cylinder to display in museums next year. A replica already exists in the U.N. headquarters.

The importance of this text for the U.S.A. is described by Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum which owns the cylinder: 'What appealed to the founding fathers about Cyrus was the notion of a secular state that was not on the French model. In

other words, the notion of a state that was equidistant from all religions, rather than adopting a state religion or else being anticlerical'. (In Latin America this is called 'a lay state').

A most unusual reference to Cyrus is made in Isaiah 45.1. Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem for over 40 years. In the Old Testament book under that name there may be more than one writer but there is consistency in the tradition. Isaiah makes but one mention of an anointed-by-God person, a Messiah, and that ascription is to Cyrus! Now Cyrus gives the Babylonian God Marduk the credit for guiding him. Isaiah gives that credit to God. What impressed the prophet were the generous actions of Cyrus as a great liberator, concerned for human rights. That was what told in the end.

When John the Baptist sent to Jesus to let him know whether or not he was the Coming One, Jesus did not say 'yes' or 'no': 'The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news brought to them'. The signs of Messiahship told their own story.

It is how we live in the world that counts.

What kind of church acknowledges its Head to be the World's Lord?

For his large work Jesus Christ looks to the church to strive with him for world-transformation but is not shackled to the church. At times and in places the church can give a lead to the world. But the world also, where reclaimed for its true life, can give a lead to the church. The church must always be alert for such occasions, for the Lord of the World is also its Head.

The church must always be critically examining its relationship to the world to see to it that it plays its part in the world's redemption.

Is it inclined to be self-absorbed, living to itself overemphasising internal interests, wanting the public to give attention to these, headlining them? That is betrayal. It is not a distraction from its responsibilities but a testimony to their importance to see to it that the church becomes an ever more adequate instrument to fulfil God's purpose for it in the world. That includes self-critical appraisal of its life so as to get rid of 'spots, wrinkles, and any such thing' in order to become 'holy (that is not set apart from the world, but set apart for God in the world) and without blemish'. The 'church-as-is' must always be open to criticism which can make it nearer to 'church-as-given-to-be'.

Is it protective of its own status, its good name, its reputation in the eyes of the public? Jesus Christ, as is said in Philippians 2 'made himself a nothing', and said to his followers: 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely, on my account'. The case of paedophile priests provides a warning. A church which covers up the wrecking of young lives to protect its good name, relocating the culprits and continuing the victimisation, deservedly gets a bad name.

Is it anxious to boost members and importance? Pope Shenouda of the Coptic Orthodox Church confided to me his concern about conservative evangelical missionaries mainly from the U.S.A.. They found the Egyptians too hard nuts to crack and, to boost members and keep finance flowing, resorted to sheep-stealing from the Orthodox flock. Is the church clear about distinction between evangelism which respects people's own space and proselytism which involves trying to get people to come on chosen ground and see life through chosen eyes?

Are good things done trumpeted, or offered as a quiet service – as the least we might offer others who are ourselves so privileged and indebted?

Are the powers-that-be accommodated, fitted in with, for good or bad? The Russian Orthodox Church, challenged about its accommodation to Putin, says church and government ought to work together. Where should such accommodation draw a line? 'By their fruits you shall know them' said Jesus. Not by their words. If the fruits are not there, the roots from which the tree grows become suspect.

What kind of church?

What kind of church can be trusted to live out God's love for the world?

The character and structure of churches vary according to differences in theology, history, culture, personal factors. A sign remains significant, going back to the earliest days of the church, and still very much in evidence in the world today. You will not find it among the big battalions – except in offshoots from the main stem. You will still find the equivalent of 'bishops' or 'elders', women and men, turned to and looked to because of their wisdom and insights and love; but they will have no status as such. They simply remain at the heart of the church – not even wanting to be looked on as a teacher, mindful of Jesus' warning; 'You are not to be called 'Teacher' – you have one Master/Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brothers and sisters'. It is fully church 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'. It is flexible, taking shape according to the culture in which it exists, situations in which it emerges, the people whom it draws into community. The church which began its life when the Holy Spirit, descending on expectant people like tongues of fire, gave them gifts and power to communicate, was to set the world ablaze and put it on the way to transformation in justice, truth and peace. 'The church born from below' emerged as house churches in the first century which sprouted all around by spontaneous combustion of the Holy Spirit. Under the Spirit, women and men, in small communities brought different gifts together to undertake the work to which they were sent: 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth'.

Few of the original apostles are heard of from this point on. It is likely that they disappeared into the dynamic of the Pentecost-generated communities. When a major question affecting all of them arose, they would hold a representative conference to deal with the matter. Of great importance was the gathering of house churches in Jerusalem in 49 A.D.. It was not chaired by an apostle but by James, the brother of the Lord, who had not believed in Jesus' messiahship till the resurrection convinced him. James was also looked to sum up the mind of the conference. What was faced was decisive for the future of the church. The question at issue was, since the church had developed from Jewish roots, was it necessary for members to be circumcised, as were Jewish men, and adopt other Jewish practices – or could converts from other nations become members without conforming to such a requirement. The gathering definitively decided on the latter. The Jewish rooting led to a church which became worldwide.

There was no overarching structural framework into which the house churches fitted. They kept in touch, learned from and shared with one another, met to make decisions affecting all members. It is so today. The first European congress of basic ecclesial communities was held in Holland, and Margaret and I were asked to be the British representatives on a body which might, as required, arrange area, regional or larger meetings when some common issue had to be worked through. As recently as 2009 I took part, in New Delhi, in such a gathering of house churches and small Christian communities from over 40 countries. The 'church born from below' sprouts everywhere.

If atheism were to run through the world like a forest fire, the 'church born from below', sown in good earth by the Spirit, would not only survive but would use the ash of that dead conflagration as fertiliser to spread fresh growth all over the planet.

The focus of the ecumenical movement is not churches, not even churches coming together. The focus is the oikoumene, the whole inhabited earth, the world God so loved as to send the Son. There is ecumenical seriousness where churches come together to serve the world with a like love.

The first objective of churches which established Scottish Churches House in 1960 was 'to serve the world with integrity'.