other voices

FEAR IN OUR TIME

While recent events in this country would tend to confirm the most pessimistic view of prospects for peaceful change, there are those who have maintained a steadfast commitment to the principles and practice of nonviolence as a means of restructuring the social order. The dedication of one such group, the Catholic Worker movement, is clearly illustrated in this article by Dorothy Day who, together with the French peasant Peter Maurin, founded the movement more than thirty years ago. It has been excerpted from the April issue of the Catholic Worker newspaper (priced now, as initially, at a penny a copy).

People probably do not realize with what fear and trembling I speak or write about the Catholic Worker, our ideas and our point of view. It is an extreme point of view, and yet it is tested and proved over and over again; it is almost as if God says to us “Do you really mean what you say?” and then gives us a chance to prove it. We have to live with the positions we take, and at the same time we are bound to be beset with all kinds of human doubts: who are we, who have so seldom been tried and have not suffered as others have in war, to take such a position? I remember having a nightmare during World War II in which, thinking of our pacifist position, I heard a voice saying “Be kind, Cain,” as if such words could ward off the blow that was about to fall. I know what human fear is and how often it keeps us from following our conscience. We find so many ways of rationalizing our positions. There are all kinds of fear: fear of losing our bodily goods, fear of poverty, fear of losing our job, our reputation, and not least of all there is the strange business of bodily fear. Gandhi’s son once described the humiliation he felt at seeing his father beaten up in a railway station in South Africa. Nothing is worse than that sense of utter humiliation we feel when pain is inflicted on us. We are reduced to an animal status; we are lesser men for having taken a blow or endured pain.

It seems to me that we must begin to equal a little bit the courage of the Communists. One of the ways my Communist friends taunt me is by saying, in effect: “People who are religious believe in everlasting life, and yet look how cowardly they are. And we who believe only in this life, see how hard we work and how much we sacrifice. We are not trying to enjoy all this and heaven too. We are willing to give up our life in order to save it.”

There is really no answer to this kind of taunt. When I was in Cuba in September 1962, I witnessed what a Franciscan priest, Herve Chaigne, has called an “exemplary” revolution. I felt that it was an example to us in zeal, in idealism and in self-sacrifice and that unless we began to approach in our profession of Christianity some of this zeal of the Communists, we weren’t going to get anywhere. But we have to go ahead and think in terms of a third way, not just those two alternatives, capitalism or communism, or my country or the fellowship of all men. We have to begin to see what Christianity really is, that “our God is a living fire; though He slay me yet will I trust Him.” We have to think in terms of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount and have this readiness to suffer. “We have not yet resisted unto blood.” We have not yet loved our neighbor with the kind of love that is a precept to the extent of laying down our life for him. And our life very often means our money, money that we have sweated for; it means our bread, our daily living, our rent, our clothes. We haven’t shown ourselves ready to lay down our life. This is a new precept, it is a new way, it is the new man we are supposed to become. I always comfort myself by saying that Christianity is only two days old (a thousand years are as one day in the sight of God) and so it is only a couple of days that are past and now it is about time we began to take these things literally, to begin tomorrow morning and say, “now I have begun.”

We do have examples of this willingness to suffer. After World War II, a young man in Chicago named John Doebele, who had been in charge of a CW house in Baltimore before the war and had trained to be an anesthetist at the Alexian Brothers Hospital, read a news item about a Negro woman whose house on the edge of a white neighborhood had been burnt down by neighboring whites. John took a few hundred dollars, which was all the money he had, collected more in the county hospital where he was working as an anesthetist and took it to the woman so that she could make a down payment on another house. On the way home he was set upon by a group of negro youths who beat him up and kicked his ribs in so that he ended up a patient in the hospital. When his friends visited him, he said, “We scarcely have begun to be accounted worthy to suffer.”

What is there to expect except suffering in work of this kind? St. Paul said; “Rejoice in tribulation.” I suppose that one of the reasons conscientious objectors and pacifists go to jail is to show that they can take it. It is a hard thing to be a pacifist when men are showing such great courage and have endured so much in the armies. We can’t talk about these things
in colleges without having some of the kids ask “Do you think my father is guilty of mortal sin because he was in the army?” Well, a man must follow his conscience, being in the army often demands great courage, and who is to judge?

Everyone used to laugh at Ammon Hennacy who boasted about how many times he had been in prison and would always ask people, “Have you been in jail?” If you hadn’t been in jail you were scarcely of the fraternity. Well, you go to jail, and you think that here maybe you will have a chance to be really poor. We talk about poverty and being poor in spirit. But meanwhile we have to admit that we have comfortable backgrounds, we have had an education, we have all kinds of enjoyments, like reading and listening to music. We have our luxuries even while we talk about voluntary poverty. And we realize that all the time.

When you go to jail you finally feel that you are being stripped of whatever you have. You look on as the police empty your handbag. You start right out being humiliated by having so much in your handbag. I remember when we first demonstrated against taking shelter in an air-raid drill, in 1955. There were twenty-eight of us and we had to be photographed, fingerprinted, stripped, showered and examined. It went on until 4:00 in the morning. We were put in tiny cells that were anything but clean; the mattresses were stained and dirty. You look at the equipment of a city prison in the great city of New York in the richest country of the world and you think how unbelievable it is that they cannot afford anything better than this for their prisoners.

There’s a little element of fear there too because one of the things that has been done when people are in prison for conscience is to instigate, to build up resentment, especially in wartime, among the other prisoners, by saying that pacifists are spies, Communists, etc.; people have been maltreated and abused in prison because of this. There is also the hostility between negroes and whites that is quite apt to break out, so that there is an element of fear in your imagination that conjures up these things.

But in general, there is a feeling of relief when you are in prison. Here you are now, stripped of everything, no responsibility of any kind, no telephones, no mail; you are there, and Holy Mother the State is taking care of you. The food in the city prison was good, just as good as Catholic Worker food, and there was a great abundance of it. As a matter of fact, we saw so much being thrown out after every meal, as it is in the army, and thought, what a horrible waste.

The cells were small, we were confined and got little air; there were tiny little windows and we almost stifled in summer time. So we had our discomforts. But there was a commissary and I was able to buy some instant coffee and take my missal and lie down on my cot free of all responsibility. So there was luxury even there.

I have often thought of the youths in the fiery furnace who sang the Psalms and the fire was just like a gentle wind and they were conscious of another person with them. In Shackleton’s account of his explorations in the Arctic he tells how he and two companions were going over a horrible glacier, a journey that involved much danger and suffering. And all of them said afterwards that they had been conscious of another person along with them. The youths of Uganda, Protestant and Catholic, who were buried alive in the 1880’s also went to their doom singing hymns. Since then we have the example of Buddhist monks and American war protesters submitting themselves to the flames. It is hard to believe and we cringe in fear at the very thought. And we don’t believe that we’ll ever have the strength to take the way of non-violence which may result in physical martyrdom. We don’t believe in God’s mercy, and we can only say: “Help thou mine unbelief . . . Take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh . . . In thee have I hoped, let me never be confounded.” These are the acts of faith, hope and charity.

Before World War II one of our friends used to drive a truck around to factories in Baltimore, selling coffee, sandwiches and doughnuts, and began to drop off the leftovers at our House of Hospitality in that city. Pretty soon he came to feel that this was not doing enough for the poor, so he joined the group and donated his truck. He stayed with us for a long time. He was the kind of person who went to great extremes. He slept on a bundle of clothes in the clothing room and was abused by the poor who came. When he didn’t have anything for them, they would accuse him of being a drunken bum who had sold the clothes for a bottle. He put up with this kind of contempt and abuse and lived a life of complete sacrifice. Later he joined the Trappists and was put to work baking.
bread. One day the spiritual reading at table described a soldier who used to utter ejaculatory prayers while machine-gunning the enemy. Poor Smitty suddenly began to weep and cry in the most uncontrollable fashion. He rushed up to the Father Abbot and fell on his knees by him, weeping and sobbing and asking how the Mystical Body of Christ could thus rend itself.

I have seen two mental hospitals where people rend themselves; it is a horrible sight. Our conscientious objectors worked in one, a place without hope where one man had to be permanently tied down to his bed because he tore at his own flesh. He had already put out his own eyes. The Mystical Body of Christ rending itself in this way. It seems to me that these are the kind of things we must meditate on.

It is not worthwhile writing or speaking unless you say what is in your heart and say it as you see things. This is the way. This is what converts expect when they come into the Church and they find it in the lives of the saints who accept the idea of death in whatever form it takes. We say all these things in our prayers and don’t mean them. And God takes us at our word, fortunately, and so we are saved in spite of ourselves; we are just dragged in by the hair of the head. But this is the message that we try to give at the Catholic Worker. It is painful to speak of and that is one of the reasons we rejoice in tribulation, we rejoice in suffering and so we can speak in those terms.

We have been called necrophiliacs, we have been accused of taking a morbid delight in the gutter and worshipping ashcans. The fact of the matter is that God transforms it all, so that out of this junkheap comes beauty. We have poetry and painting and sculpture and music and all of these things for the delight of the senses that are given to us right in the midst of filth and degradation and mires so that I often feel we know whereof we speak. God certainly comes to the rescue over and over again and enables us to do what seems utterly impossible. Many a person comes into the Church under utterly impossible circumstances; it is as though they were taking their own life, as though they were dying, in order to do this. I have seen people unhinged by it. We have quite a few with us who are disturbed, who have suffered extremely, have cut themselves off from their families and backgrounds. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is not anything that we can take except with the utmost seriousness and yet it is of course the greatest joy in the world.

**Toward A Christian Theology of Contemporary Judaism**


by Monika Hellwig

Good books are written not from other books but from life, and they are usually written with passion. Professor Eckardt’s second attempt at a Christian theology of contemporary Judaism, like his first written some twenty years earlier, qualifies as a good book on both scores.

The present volume ought really to be read in succession to Eckardt’s doctoral dissertation, *Christianity and the Children of Israel* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1948). The earlier book gives a rather painstaking historical argumentation in the perspective of Protestant Neo-Reformation theology but does not venture a personal solution to the problem posed. The later book takes this historical argumentation for granted, sets the problem within a much wider horizon of contemporary research in psychology and the social sciences, and proceeds to a bold and constructive personal solution.

The point of departure in both books is the phenomenon of Christian anti-Semitism. The first two chapters of *Elder and Younger Brothers* isolate the Christian ideological factors in this phenomenon and present the paradox: Some of the claims that have been made by the Christian Church in its account of itself are identifiable as important contributory causes of anti-Semitism, while Christian ethics has simultaneously and explicitly been opposing anti-Semitism.

Eckardt suggests that the problem inherent in this paradox can only be met “head-on” by asking without any evasion how the continuing historical reality of Israel is to be understood in the context of Christian theology, with the proviso that good theology cannot be rooted in bad history. He therefore devotes three chapters to an analysis of the concept People of God, as understood by contemporary Christian theologians. In the light of the earlier book these chapters, though rambling, are very much to the point. Without that histori-