

Che, the New Man and the New Woman

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The 'Catholic Left' in Britain, during its short life, showed little interest either in spirituality or in political activity outside journalism. There are quite good reasons for these omissions, but it is interesting to find that they are not repeated in the practice of left-wing Catholics in Latin America. Action and spirituality, and the tension between them, are important themes of Sheila Cassidy's account of her experiences in Chile,¹ and her story is all the more interesting because she is so patently not a Catholic left groupie.

The personality which comes through this book is very much that described by Michael Hollings in his introduction: 'enthusiastic . . . efficient, impetuous, starry-eyed, down-to-earth, practical, emotionally uninhibited, politically a child'. The rambling and occasionally gushing narrative almost makes one forget at times that its author was obscenely tortured with electric shocks by the Chilean secret police.

These qualities also give the story an appealing freshness. It is almost a classical adventure story, in which the author became involved largely by accident. No political or religious motives took Dr Cassidy to Chile. She had got to know a Chilean medical student during her own studies, and one of Chile's attractions was the chance to gain surgical experience with less night work than in Britain. Dr Cassidy spent two years in Chile before returning to England to see her dying father, and a further two from the beginning of 1974. The military coup against the Allende government took place towards the end of the first period and Dr Cassidy's imprisonment occupied the last two months of the second.

Dr Cassidy describes very well the effects of the coup on the most ordinary aspects of daily life. Being a doctor, she does this most tellingly in her description of health care in Chile before and after the coup. Under Allende wine had been taxed and milk subsidised, but after the coup there was no free milk for the children of the unemployed and babies had to be given tea. There had been free hospital treatment, but after the coup charges were introduced, with the result that the chronically ill who had been under treatment could no longer afford it. After the coup state hospitals

¹ *Audacity to Believe*, Collins, London 1977, pp. 336+ xiv, £4.50

were starved of penicillin, which meant that infections which otherwise might have been cured developed into chronic and debilitating illnesses. It is valuable, if one is 'political' and supports the Chilean resistance semi-automatically, to be reminded of the reality to which the slogans and appeals refer: 'I still have stamped on my heart the memory of a young couple, both in tears, walking slowly away from the hospital carrying just a white shawl. In Chile many children die in the first two years of life, of diarrhoea, bronchitis and malnutrition'. (p 42) The children who die, of course, are the children of the poor, the dwellers in the shanty-towns on the edges of the cities, not the children of the rich. One of the most poignant descriptions in the book is of Dr Cassidy's attempt to get a leading paediatrician and his dietician to produce a balanced diet for the children of the poor: back came a neatly typed list of quantities of milk, fish and cheese, all beyond the reach of these families. The dietician 'could not believe that there were children in Santiago who never saw meat or fish or cheese and who lived on beans and potatoes, bread and spaghetti and seaweed'. (p 153) Odd but not too bad, one might think, till one realises that this means one meal a day, and that only for the lucky ones; for every child who comes to the dining rooms supported by groups like the Chile Solidarity Campaign there are five who cannot be fed.

Besides this basic poverty there was also the pettiness which characterises the supporters of the junta. A woman Sheila Cassidy met in prison was there because she had protested at the withdrawal from her fellow workers and herself of the customary cup of hot water to make tea. This gratuitous nastiness still continues: in February 1978 a Chilean seaman is applying for political asylum in Liverpool because he faces a concentration camp at home after protesting about conditions on his ship.

Sheila Cassidy paints a moving, almost romantic picture of the Christians, lay people, priests and nuns, who are giving their lives to the poor by living the same lives in the shanty-towns on the edges of the cities. Her involvement with this church made it hard for her to understand why many of her fellow-prisoners hated the church as a prop of the unjust system: as she says, 'this church was a stranger to me' (p 314). This church is captured in a song of Violetta Parra, which is quoted in the book:

And to continue the lie
They call the priest
Who says that God does not wish
Revolution
Nor petitions nor trade unions
Which offend his heart. (p 313)

The committed church with which Sheila Cassidy became involved found itself drawn, by its work with the poor, into politics,

and Dr Cassidy's rediscovered faith led her, eventually, to torture and imprisonment. On returning to Chile after her father's death, she was introduced to some of the missionary priests and nuns who live and work among the people of the shanty-towns, and was drawn into work for the church-run clinics and dining-rooms. This apparently humanitarian activity is political in Pinochet's Chile, for, as Dr Cassidy observed, only left-wingers and missionaries worked in the shanty-towns. To be a known left-winger of the Allende period is now to be an outlaw, and priests, nuns and even prelates have found themselves sheltering wanted men. To find such a variety of ecclesiastical involvement in the resistance was the despair of the good Catholics in the secret police: 'Nuns, priests, bishops, it's all too much!' Dr Cassidy was asked by friends to treat a man with a bullet wound in the leg who turned out to be Nelson Gutierrez, a leading member of the left-wing group MIR. She saw him twice, but was unable to do much for want of facilities, and he was eventually taken to the safety of the Papal Nuncio's residence. Those two visits brought Sheila Cassidy to the attention of the secret police, the DINA (now the CNI). They burst into the house of a priest friend where she was nursing a sick nun, shot the maid dead and arrested her. She was taken to the interrogation centre, the Casa Grimaldi, and questioned under electric shocks. The names and addresses she gave at first were false, as the DINA soon found. Subjected to more vicious shock treatment, she broke and talked, and subsequently spent a further two months in detention before being deported. As she observes herself, she was fortunate. She was not raped, her hearing was not destroyed by blows on the ears nor was she broken down physically and mentally by being beaten while blindfolded. She had no children to be brought to hear her screams. She was not tortured to death and then officially reported killed resisting arrest. All these things happened, and no doubt still happen, to others, and Dr Cassidy's evidence is valuable for anyone who thinks the horror stories are exaggerated.

Imprisonment was also, for Sheila Cassidy, a spiritual experience. It came at a time when she felt she had decided a question which had preoccupied her at intervals since adolescence, whether or not she had a vocation to be a nun. After an Ignatian retreat she decided she had, and the decision made her 'on fire with a love for all the world and possessed by a peace and joy apparently out of all proportion to the life I was leading'. (p 155)

The language conveys the headiness of this sense of vocation. It is part of an attitude which is enraptured by sunrises and mountains and the Benedictine liturgy, the agony and ecstasy school of vocation, which belongs rather self-consciously to one tradition of Catholic spirituality: 'How can one convey the agony and the ecstasy of being called by God? . . . so, as hundreds of men and

women had done before me, I said my "Fiat" (p 123). It goes with agonised introspection and questioning of motives, the dangers of which Dr Cassidy realises. In her case, it was also about the problem of breaking down the 'protective wall' between herself and others, getting out from behind the safety of her doctor's white coat and giving herself totally. The context of this desire was Dr Cassidy's meeting with the nuns who worked in the shantytowns, but it has an intensity which might also be given a psychological label.

In prison Dr Cassidy maintained this sort of spirituality, working a cross into the springs of her bed, looking for the shape of the cross in cracks in masonry, but she was also brought up against the commitment of her companions who were non-Christian revolutionaries. She describes how she could communicate with them on a level she could not reach with many fellow Christians. With impressive honesty she records the lessons she learned about unselfconscious care for others, and describes the conflict between her desire to make individual gestures of generosity and the total sharing agreed on by the prisoners. The odd thing is that in the situation of the prison camp the scruples which elsewhere seemed slightly neurotic now seem proper. Dr Cassidy was on occasion brought English delicacies by the British ambassador, and each time wanted to share them with her special friends rather than add them to the communal stock. She describes movingly the argument she had with a fellow prisoner whom she had persuaded to accept a sweet as an individual gift and who subsequently felt that by doing so she had betrayed the community. The lives of the women revolutionaries prompt her to a description of asceticism which makes sense both to Christian and to Marxist:

The courage to die for their beliefs is given only to those who have the courage to live for them. The final victory over their terror of pain and physical death is the last of a thousand victories in the war which is fought daily and hourly in the human mind and soul: the war in the overcoming of self. Dissected and examined in detail, this is a most unglamorous battle and to the outsider seems absurd: but it is the constant denial of the natural human urge to stay in bed longer than necessary, to eat or drink more than is justifiable, to be intolerant of the stupid and to accumulate more of this world's goods, that makes possible the gradual freeing of the human spirit'. (p 300)

This convergence of Christian and revolutionary commitment should not be exaggerated. Sheila Cassidy's experience is from the extreme situation of a prison camp, which heightens relationships anyway. Dr Cassidy's companions in prison did not become Christians, nor did she become a Marxist. And there seems to be no parallel in the atheist revolutionary commitment to the folly of the contemplative life Dr Cassidy puzzles over earlier in the book.

Theoretical syntheses of Christianity and Marxism seem less attractive in Latin America than in Europe, and there are signs that those Latin American Christians who commit themselves to revolution become, paradoxically, more otherworldly (eschatological?) rather than less, with something of the lunacy which characterised the early Christians. This, at least, is the evidence of the lives of the Bolivian priest Camilo Torres and of the Bolivian Nestor Paz, whom Dr Cassidy quotes (pp 306-07). On the other hand, awareness and acceptance of extreme situations as inevitable is a fundamental link between Christian and non-Christian revolutionaries. When the kingdom is at hand, or when the coup comes, normal life, family, friends and food, become precarious, to be enjoyed but not held on to. If you try to hold on to them you may be lost—arrested or distracted from the movement. The problem, of course, is to translate this eschatological sense into a way of life in periods when the end seems further away, and it is one which notoriously affects both Christianity and Marxism.

Attempts to amalgamate Christianity and Marxism as theories are not just futile, but also, and more importantly, false to the experience of Christians and Marxists. On the other hand, there is a central shared concern with man and the world, and one might expect on theoretical grounds that any coming together will only result from a common attempt to bear fruit, to change the world. When this attempt is made, as it is in Latin America, there are occasional glimpses of a shared confession. It would be wrong to exaggerate them, but they are there to tantalise and encourage. Sheila Cassidy quotes the defiant lines of the singer Victor Jara, who was murdered by the junta:

I believe in nothing
But the love of human beings.

against which one can set another of the book's many quotations, this time from Che Guevara, with New Testament resonances which are unmistakable:

Each and everyone of us will pay, on demand, his part of sacrifice . . . knowing that all together we are getting ever closer to the new man, whose figure is beginning to appear.

Part of the appearance of the new man is the growth, in the prison camps of Latin America, of the new church and the new revolutionary movement. It is interesting that in both, as Sheila Cassidy's book bears witness, the new woman plays an important part. The names of Luz Ayres and Gladys Diaz, and those of the American nuns who wear trousers and only have first names, Frances, Anna, Elizabeth and Helen, stand for many more, in the shanty-towns and in the camps, who are working and waiting for what they call, according to tradition, the new dawn or the sun of justice.