

# Letters to a White Liberal

THOMAS MERTON

## III

How is Christianity involved in the Negro struggle? Dr Martin Luther King has appealed to strictly Christian motives. He has based his non-violence on his belief that love can unite men, even enemies, in truth. That is to say that he has clearly spelled out the struggle for freedom not as a struggle for the Negro alone, but also for the white man. From the start, the non-violent element in the Negro struggle is oriented toward 'healing' the sin of racism and toward unity in reconciliation. An absolutely necessary element in this reconciliation is that the white man should allow himself to learn the mute lesson which is addressed to him in the suffering, the non-violent protest, the loving acceptance of punishment for the violation of unjust laws, which the Negro freely and willingly brings down upon himself in the white man's presence, in the hope that the oppressor may come to see his own injustice.

The purpose of this suffering, freely sought and accepted in the spirit of Christ, is the liberation of the Negro and the redemption of the white man, blinded by his endemic sin of racial injustice. In other words, the struggle for liberty is not merely regarded by this most significant sector of the Negro population, as a fight for political rights. It is this, and it is also much more. It is what Gandhi called *Satyagraha*—a struggle first of all for the *truth*, outside and independent of specific political contingencies.

The mystique of Negro non-violence holds that the victory of truth is inevitable, but that the redemption of individuals is not inevitable. Though the truth will win, since in Christ it has already conquered, not everyone can 'come to the light'—for if his works are darkness, he fears to let them be seen.

The Negro children who walked calmly up to the police dogs that lunged at them with a fury capable of tearing their small bodies to pieces, were not only confronting the truth in an exalted moment of faith, a providential *kairos*. They were also in their simplicity, bearing heroic Christian witness to the truth, for they were exposing their bodies to death in order to show God and man that they believed in the

just rights of their people, knew that those rights had been unjustly, shamefully and systematically violated, and realized that the violation called for expiation and redemptive protest, because it was an offence against God and His truth.

They were stating clearly that the time had come where such violations could no longer be tolerated. These Negro followers of Dr King are convinced that there is more at stake than civic rights. They believe that the survival of America is itself in question. They believe that the sin of white America has reached such a proportion that it may call down a dreadful judgement, perhaps total destruction, on the whole country, unless atonement is made.

These Negroes are not simply judging the white man and rejecting him. On the contrary, they are seeking by Christian love and sacrifice to redeem him, to enlighten him, so as not only to save his soul from perdition, but also to awaken his mind and his conscience, and stir him to initiate the reform and renewal which may still be capable of saving our society. But this renewal must be the work of both the white and the Negro together. It cannot be planned and carried out by the white man alone or even by the Negro under the white man's paternal guidance. It demands some Negro initiative, and the white man cannot collaborate fruitfully until he recognizes the necessity of this initiative. The Negro is not going to be placated with assurances of respect and vague encouragement from our side. He is going to make sure that we are listening and that we have understood him, before he will believe in our attempts to help.

The purpose of non-violent protest, in its deepest and most spiritual dimensions is then to awaken the conscience of the white man to the awful reality of his injustice and of his sin, so that he will be able to see that the Negro problem is really a *white* problem: that the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society and is only partly manifested in racial segregation with all its consequences, is rooted in the heart of the white man himself. Only if the white man sees this will he be able gradually to understand the real nature of the problem and take steps to save himself and his society from complete ruin. As the Negro sees it, the Cold War and its fatal insanities are to a great extent generated within the purblind, guilt ridden, self-deceiving, self-tormenting and self-destructive psyche of the white man.

It is curious that while the Southern whites are surrounding their houses with floodlights, to protect themselves in case Negroes creep up to murder them in the dark, all the violence in the South to date has

been on the part of the whites themselves. Barbara Deming, a white New England woman who demonstrated with the Negro children in Birmingham, was sent to jail with them. The jail was of course segregated. She was thrown into a cell full of white prostitutes and other delinquents, and found them not only furious and hostile towards her, but terrified lest the Negro children (who were still singing hymns after a sublime display of Christian heroism) might rape and murder them in the jail. Curious that these white Southerners (people to be pitied indeed), from their half-world of violence, petty thievery, vice and addiction, were the ones who felt themselves menaced, and menaced by children! The truth is that they had very good reason to fear. The action of the children was aimed at them, and aimed directly at them. It was an attack not upon their property, their jobs, their social status, but upon their inmost conscience. And unless that attack could be met and deflected, these people would not be able to continue as they were.

In all literal truth, if they 'heard' the message of the Negro children, they would cease to be the people they were. They would have to 'die' to everything which was familiar and secure. They would have to die to their past, to their society with its prejudices and its inertia, die to its false beliefs, and go over to the side of the Negroes. For a Southern white, this would be a real 'death'.

This is the radical challenge of Negro non-violence today. This is why it is a source of uneasiness and fear to all white men who are attached to their security. If they are forced to listen to what the Negro is trying to say, the whites may have to admit that their prosperity is rooted to some extent in injustice and in sin. And, in consequence, this might lead to a complete re-examination of the political motives behind all our current policies, domestic and foreign, with the possible admission that we are wrong. Such an admission might, in fact, be so disastrous that its effects would dislocate our whole economy and ruin the country. These are not things that are consciously admitted, but they are confusedly present in our minds. They account for the passionate and mindless desperation with which we plunge this way and that, trying to evade the implications of our present crisis.

Certainly some such drives as these must underly the apparent ambiguity in the Southern white's concept of 'order'. On a certain level, pathological if you like but none the less experientially real, Southern white society feels itself faced with destruction. It is menaced in its inmost being, even though that 'inmost being' is in fact only an imago. But we know, from experience with other notorious historical forms of

fanaticism, that societies which 'experience their reality' on this oniric and psychopathic level are precisely those whose members are most convinced of their own rightness, their own integrity, indeed their own complete moral infallibility. It is this experience of one's unreality as real, and as something to be defended against objective facts and rights as though against the devil himself, that produces the inferno of racism and race conflict. The South is apparently in a state of perfect ripeness for this disastrous eruption of pathological hatreds and for all the fatal consequences that it brings with it. But the comparative sophistication of the North is no guarantee that the same evil is not present there, though perhaps in a more subtle form.

I have spoken of the ambiguity in the white Southern concept of 'order'. What is this? When in September of 1963 a cruel and senseless bombing, too carefully planned and executed to have been the work of an ordinary group of criminals, destroyed a Baptist Church in Birmingham and killed four Negro children, Governor Wallace called out the National Guard to 'keep order'. The Negroes immediately appealed to President Kennedy to send United States troops to protect them against this local Alabama militia. It was evident to all that the Governor's concept of 'order' had nothing whatever to do with the protection of the rights or lives of Negroes. In the Southern white mind the concept that a Negro might have rights in the same sense and in the same way as a white man simply does not exist. Hence the idea of 'order' in the minds of people like Governor Wallace is simply that the whites may be guaranteed safety in doing anything they like to the Negro without fear of retaliation. The function of the National Guard was purely and simply to ensure that the Negroes would not be able to fight back effectively after the bombing. In other words the National Guard is supposed to 'keep order' in much the same way that the SS kept order under Hitler.

And again, much like their prototypes, these militiamen are there perhaps also to provoke violence in order to have something concrete to 'prevent'. This is a slightly more subtle phenomenon that at first sight appears, because of the subjective conviction that the Negroes are really thirsting for white blood. But this is the form, the only acceptable form, in which the Southern mind can face its own moral hazard. Subconsciously a vestigial Christian sense of guilt proclaims the wrong done and the remedies that are demanded. But this filters through into consciousness as a murderous threat to the symbolic 'whiteness' which clothes the infantile Southern fixation on the lost paradise before the

Civil War. In fighting the Negro, the Southerner thinks he is fighting sin, death, the devil, Communism, immorality, lechery, hate, murder, and hell itself. But what he is really fighting is the present.

For this reason the 'fear of attack' represents in actual fact a very serious and earnest *desire to be attacked*. Not in order to be hurt, or to suffer, far from it: but in order to find the psychopathic myth verified, and to justify it in all its practical conclusions. Therefore when the National Guard is called out to 'keep order' everyone recognizes, at least obscurely, that this expresses an urgent and almost official appeal for disorder. It manifests a desire and a hope bred by guilt. It seeks to turn itself by every possible means into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The *non-violent* and *religious* protest of the Negro against white racism and injustice is precisely what the Southern white (with his image of himself as upright and Christian) is least prepared to tolerate or to understand. It has to be seen as an obviously sinister cloak for Communist machinations. It has to be unmasked as pure malevolence, so that the appeal it aims at the white conscience may be discredited and ignored.

We are familiar with the saying that Gandhian non-violence worked because it was aimed against a conscience that was able to respond to it, but that it would never have worked against the Nazis. Is this a cliché, or is there some serious truth in it? I think that if the Negroes' non-violent campaign continues in the South we will one day know, one way or the other. The Southern white conscience is not that of the British raj.

Unfortunately, not all Negroes can appreciate the Christian foundation of non-violent action as it is practised by the followers of Dr King. Many Northern Negro leaders, and especially the organizers of the Black Muslim movement, categorically reject Dr King's ideas as sentimental. They believe that his non-violence is a masochistic exhibition of defeatism which flatters the whites, plays into their hands, and degrades the Negro still further by forcing him to submit uselessly to violence and humiliation. In some cases, the sharp criticism of Martin Luther King is carried so far as to accuse him of deliberately and cynically sacrificing his followers in order to get power and prestige for himself in white society.

This reaction against what is basically a Christian protest leads to another extreme: a black racism as intransigent and as fanatical as that of the white racists themselves. It is true that the Black Muslims must not be painted as a corporation of devils. Yet the Muslim movement is one of absolutely hostile rejection of all that is white, including

Christianity, conceived as the 'white man's religion'. Instead, Islam, regarded as 'African religion' and as the worship of a 'Black God' or at least of the Black Man's God, is substituted for it. Emphasis is laid on the martial and combative elements in the faith of Islam, and the first principle of all race relations is that the white man is never to be trusted. He is worthy only of hatred and contempt. No 'dialogue' is possible between white and black, and all that can be achieved is a complete separation. Their aim is to achieve this separation without violence, in so far as this may be possible: but they will not hesitate to use violence if this becomes necessary. Theoretically, then, the Black Muslims do not have a systematic programme of violent attack on the white population, as some seem to imagine. But since the separation of which they dream is, and can be, no more than a dream, the tension between the races in the big cities of the North, where the Muslims are concentrated, will undoubtedly produce some violence sooner or later. It can be said, however, that the fact that the Muslims are disciplined and organized makes them to some extent an asset: they will certainly try to control violence and direct it. This is preferable to completely uncontrolled and in some ways 'uncaused' rioting, exploding at the slightest spark and spreading in aimless fury through whole cities until its force is spent. Yet the Muslims, however disciplined they themselves may be, can easily start a general conflagration.

The Black Muslims have so far had no influence in the South, and although the Negro spokesmen in the North are often hostile to Martin Luther King, he has immense prestige wherever Negroes are to be found in the United States, though Birmingham was not understood by all of them as a 'victory' for their race. It seems, however, that all hope of really constructive and positive results from the Civil Rights Movement is to be placed in the Christian elements. It is also very likely that as the movement gains in power, the reasonableness and the Christian fervor of these elements will recede into the background and the Movement will become more and more an unreasoning and intransigent mass movement dedicated to the conquest of sheer power, more and more inclined to violence.

If the Christian and non-violent element in Negro protest is finally discredited it will mean that Christianity itself will become meaningless in Negro eyes. Those Negroes who attack their Christian leaders in the South are usually completely disillusioned with Christianity, if not bitterly hostile to it, because they are convinced that it has no other function than to keep the Negro in passive and helpless submission to

his white oppressors. When white Christians express admiration and sympathy for Dr King, this is immediately interpreted by his Negro critics as evidence of their own negative thesis.

As for the attitude of white Christians toward the Negro freedom movement, both Protestants and Catholics alike are at best confused and evasive in their sympathies. One gets the impression that they mean well, and that they recognize the validity of the Negro's protest, but that they are so out of contact with the realities of the time that they have no idea how they can effectively help him. Here and there a Catholic bishop takes action to integrate his schools or to castigate the worst abuses of discrimination. Here and there Christian leaders get together to make encouraging statements. Yet at the same time, even those white Christians most favorable to the Negro cause, have been quick to react against the protests in Birmingham and Jackson, censuring them and demanding 'more patience' on the Negro's part, sincerely believing that the whole problem can be adequately settled only by the administration in Washington. This, to the Negro, is more than naïve. He cannot help but interpret it as evasion and bad faith, and consequently he has little or no confidence in *any* white Christian group, including the Catholic Church.

Evidently, many white Christians will be grieved and disappointed at this evaluation of their sincere concern over the Negro's struggle for his rights. They will remind the Negro that they *have* taken certain steps in his favor. They will expect him to be more grateful. I think the time has come to say two things about this attitude.

First of all, it shows that they do not grasp the real dimensions of the problem as the Negro sees it. Like the average liberal, they think that the Negro is simply presenting a few reasonable demands which can be met by legislative action. And, as a corollary to this, they assume that if the Negro were to ask any more than this, he would be unreasonable if not rebellious. In actual fact the Negro is not simply asking to be 'accepted into' the white man's society, and eventually 'absorbed by it', so that race relations in the United States may finally come to be something like those in Latin America. I think that most Catholics tend, half consciously, to imagine that this would be a reasonable outcome: let the United States imitate those countries that were settled by Catholics in the first place, and where there has never been a very strict colour line. Catholic values will triumph and there will be no more racial problems, because the United States will be like Brazil. As present events in Brazil make quite clear, this is no solution.

The actions and attitudes of white Christians all, without exception, contain a basic and axiomatic assumption of white superiority, even when the pleas of the Negro for equal rights are hailed with the greatest good will. It is simply taken for granted that, since the white man is superior, the Negro wants to become a white man. And we, liberals and Christians that we are, advance generously, with open arms, to embrace our little black brother and welcome him into white society.

The Negro is not only not grateful, he is not even impressed. In fact, he shows by his attitude that he is at the same time antagonized and disgusted by our stupidity. And here, I think, is where all Christians including Catholics are, innocently no doubt, doing the gravest harm to Christian truth. For some unknown reason, the white man (especially the Southern white) does not seem to realize that he has been rather closely observed, for the last two centuries, by his Negro slaves, servants, share-croppers, mistresses and bastards. He does not seem to be aware of the fact that they know a great deal about him, and, in fact, understand him in some ways better than he understands himself. This information has never been passed on to the white man, who has never dreamed of asking for it. He has assumed that the ideas of the Negro were more or less worthless in the first place. Do Negroes think? Of course not: they just sing, dance, make love, and lie in the shade doing nothing, because they are *different*. They haven't got the energy to think!

The Negro knows precisely why the white man imagines that the Negro wants to be a white man. The white man is too insecure in his fatuous self-complacency to be able to imagine anything else. Consequently, when the Catholic Church gives the impression that it regards the South as a vast potential pool of 'Negro converts' in which a zealous and ardent white apostolate can transform a few million Uncle Toms into reasonably respectable imitations of white Catholics, this actually does very little to make the Negro respect the truth of Christ, practically nothing to help him understand the mystery of Christ in His Church.

It is often quite evident that the genuine warm sympathy which so many Catholics have for the Negro is nevertheless something the Negro himself now accepts only with resignation and disillusionment. What we love in the Negro tends to be, once again, the same old image of the vaudeville darkie, the quaint Black Mammy of plantation days, the Pullman porter with ready wit, the devoted retainer whose whole family has served a white Southern feudal tribe for generations. This is a caricature of the Negro of which the Negro himself has long since



grown tired, and its chief function is to flatter the white man's sense of superiority. One has yet to find very many Catholics, including especially priests, who are really able to deal with Negroes on an equal footing, that is to say without the specious and fraudulent mediation of this image. Most of us are congenitally unable to think black, and yet that is precisely what we must do before we can even hope to understand the crisis in which we find ourselves, and our best considered and most sympathetic consideration of the Negro's plight is one calculated to antagonize him because it reflects such pitiful inability to *see* him, right before our nose, as a real human being and not a higher type of domestic animal. Furthermore we do not bother really to listen to what he says, because we assume that when the dialogue really begins, he will already be thinking just like ourselves. And in the meantime we are not too disposed to offend the white racists, either. We still want to please everybody with soft words and pleasant generalizations, which we convince ourselves are necessary for charity.

A genuinely Catholic approach to the Negro would assume not only that White and the Negro are essentially equal in dignity (and this, I think, we do generally assume) but also that they are brothers in the fullest sense of the word. This means to say that a genuinely Catholic attitude in matters of race is one which concretely accepts and fully recognizes the fact that different races and cultures are correlative. *They mutually complete one another.* The white man needs the Negro, and needs to know that he needs him.

White calls for black just as black calls for white. Our significance as white men is to be seen entirely in the fact that all men are not white. Until this fact is grasped, we will never realize our true place in the world, and we will never achieve what we are meant to achieve in it. The white man is *for* the black man: that is why he is white. The black man is for the white man: that is why he is black. But so far, we have managed only to see these relationships in a very unsatisfactory and distorted fashion.

First of all, there was the crude initial concept: the black man was *for* the white man, in the sense that he belonged to him as his slave. But in the relationship of master and slave there is no correlative responsibility. The master is like God, who cannot enter into a relationship with a creature: the creature can only enter into a relationship with Him. So the master could do what he liked with the slave, and perhaps, incidentally, he might find himself, without realizing it, living to some extent *for* the slave whom he had come to trust and love. But though

there was a germinating humanity in this 'relationship', there was no sense of a real social obligation to slaves as such, who therefore were never really admitted to be human beings. Thus though the South of slavery days was a kind of Eden for the white man (and is still remembered in the Southern myth as Eden), it was without human significance because it was empty of basic truth: the truth of *Man* was absent, because here were two different kinds of men who were supposed, in the order of nature, to complete one another as correlatives, and one of them was not admitted to human status.

The Civil War came, and the Negro acquired a human status on the books of law: but only on the books. In actual fact his position was even less human than before.

To assume the superiority of the white race and of European-American culture as axiomatic, and to proceed from there to 'integrate' all other races and cultures by a purely one-sided operation is a pure travesty of Catholic unity in truth. In fact, this fake Catholicism, this parody of unity which is no unity at all but a one-sided and arbitrary attempt to reduce others to a condition of identity with ourselves, is one of the most disastrous of misconceptions.

It may be true that a French missionary who brings the truth of the Gospel to a West African pagan is bringing him the truth indeed. But unfortunately, the fatal tendency has too often been to assume that *everything* he was bringing, down to his clothes, his table manners, his Cartesian habits of thought, his Gallic self-esteem and in a word, the infallibility of the *bien pensant*, were all pure revelations of God and His Church. In such conditions, missionaries have assumed, with extreme generosity, that their only function was to *give* of their sublime fulness, and that it was never necessary for them to receive, to learn, to accept any kind of a spiritual gift from the native and from his indigenous culture. Material contributions—yes. But nothing else. There has generally been no conception at all that the white man had anything to learn from the Negro. And now, the irony is that the Negro (especially the Christian Negro of the heroic stamp of Dr King) is offering the white man a 'message of salvation' and the white man is so blinded by his self-sufficiency and self-conceit that he does not recognize the peril in which he puts himself by ignoring the offer.

But is the white man in a position to recognize the providential character of this hour? If I say that the Negro offers him an 'opportunity', the white man will perhaps scrutinize him afresh in order to find out what he has to sell. And what will he see? Something at once

disturbing and unattractive. Processions of discontented black men and women carrying signs. Groups of exalted children singing hymns. Frightened but determined people letting themselves be rolled around the street by the power of firehoses. There is courage there, no doubt, and they obviously mean business. But we have courage too, and there is no need at all for us to have the hoses turned on us.

But this is not the point. The Negro, in fact, has nothing to sell. He is only offering us the occasion to enter with him into a providential reciprocity willed for us by God. He is inviting us to understand him as necessary to our own lives, and as completing them. He is warning us that we cannot do without him, and that if we insist on regarding him as an enemy, an object of contempt, or a rival, we will perhaps sterilize and ruin our own lives. He is telling us that unless we can enter into a vital and Christian relationship with him, there will be hate, violence and civil war indeed: and from this violence perhaps none of us will emerge whole.

It must then be said that this most critical moment in American history is the providential 'hour', the *kairos* not merely of the Negro, but of the white man. It is, or at any rate it can be, God's hour. It can be the hour of vocation, the moment in which, hearing and understanding the will of God as expressed in the urgent need of our Negro brother, we can respond to that inscrutable will in a faith that faces the need of reform and creative change, in order that the demands of truth and justice may not go unfulfilled. It is for this reason that the 'prudence' and the (self-styled) wisdom of some white Christian leaders may well prove to be a sign of spiritual blindness, and as such it may be decisive in leading the Negro away from Christian truth and natural reason, to embark on a violent and chaotic fight for power characterized only by brutality and pragmatism. In this struggle the lessons given by the white police and politicians in the South will certainly be turned to good advantage.

What the Negro now seeks and expects (or perhaps what he has entirely given up expecting) from the white Christian is not sermons on patience, but a creative and enlightened understanding of his effort to meet the demands of God in this, his *kairos*. What he expects of us is some indication that we are capable of seeing a little of the vision he has seen, and of sharing his risks and his courage. What he asks us is not the same old string of meaningless platitudes that we have always offered him in lieu of advice. He asks us to listen to him, and to pay some attention to what *he* has to say. He seriously demands that we learn

something from him, because he is convinced that we need this, and need it badly.

Negro writers like James Baldwin, have repeatedly demonstrated that this conviction lends an extraordinary power to their words. There is no question that they have more to say than anybody else writing in America today. Many have read their books and heard their message, but few are prepared to understand it because they simply cannot conceive of a white man learning anything worthwhile from a Negro. Still less can they imagine that the Negro might quite possibly have a prophetic message from God to the society of our time.

In simple terms, I would say that the message is this: white society has sinned in many ways. It has betrayed Christ by its injustices to races it considered 'inferior' and to countries which it colonized. In particular it has sinned against Christ in its lamentable injustices and cruelties to the Negro. The time has come when both white and Negro have been granted, by God, a unique and momentous opportunity. We have this opportunity because the Negro has taken the steps which made it possible. He has refused to accept the iniquity and injustice of white discrimination. He has seen that to acquiesce in this injustice is no virtue, but only collaboration in evil. He has declared that he rejects both the physical evil of segregation and the moral evil of passive acquiescence in the white man's sin. But this is only the beginning. Now the white man must do his share, or the Negro's efforts will have no fruit.

The sin of the white man is to be expiated, through a genuine response to the redemptive love of the Negro for him. The Negro is ready to suffer, if necessary to die, if this will make the white man understand his sin, repent of it and atone for it. But this atonement must consist of two things:

(1) A complete reform of the social system which permits and breeds such injustices.

(2) This work of reorganization must be carried out under the inspiration of the Negro whose providential time has now arrived, and who has received from God enough light, ardour and spiritual strength to free the white man in freeing himself from the white man.

I state these two conditions as nakedly and unequivocally as I find them in the words of Negro leaders. My only comment is that in making these demands, they are committing themselves very heavily to provide answers, in case we should ever ask them any questions. The Negro is saying that in effect he has answers. So far, his actions at Birmingham make his claim credible. I, for one, am willing to hear more.

But I must admit there is as yet a certain vagueness in the inconclusive remarks so far advanced concerning the future. I am not too sure the Negro knows, any better than anyone else, where this country is actually going.

Yet this is a challenge and a very bold one. The Negro leaders are making some fantastic claims. And they are perhaps all the more fantastic because those who make them have half despaired of ever being heard. Certainly, all the official good will of the Administration is in no sense an acknowledgement that these claims have even been considered in their depth. That is because Washington is professionally capable only of seeing this as a political issue. Actually, it is a spiritual and religious one, and this element is by far the most important. But it is the element that no one is ready to see. A white detective in Birmingham, watching the children file by the score into the paddy wagons, gave expression to the mind of the nation when he said: 'If that is religion I don't want any part of it'. If this is really what the mind of white America has concluded, then we stand judged by our own thought. What is demanded of us is not necessarily that we believe that the Negro has mysterious and magic answers in the realm of politics and social control, but that his spiritual insight into our common crisis is something we must take seriously. By and large, in the midst of the clamor of every possible kind of jaded and laughable false prophet, the voice of the American Negro has in it a genuine prophetic ring. Who knows if we will ever get another chance to hear it?

In any case the Negro demands that his conditions be met with full attention and seriousness. The white man may not fully succeed in this—but he must at least try with all the earnestness at his command. Otherwise, the moment of grace will pass without effect. The merciful *kairos* of truth will turn into the dark hour of destruction and of hate. The awakened Negro will forget his moment of Christian hope and Christian inspiration. He will deliberately drive out of his heart the merciful love of Christ. He will no longer be the gentle, wide-eyed child singing hymns while police dogs lunge at his throat. There will be no more hymns and no more prayer vigils. He will become a Samson whose African strength flows ominously back into his arms. He will suddenly pull the pillars of white society crashing down upon himself and his oppressor. And perhaps, somewhere, out of the ruins, a new world (a black world) will one day arise.

This is the message which the Negro is trying to give white America. I have spelled it out for myself, subject to correction, in order to see

whether a white man is even capable of grasping the words, let alone believing them. For the rest, you have Moses and the Prophets: Martin Luther King, James Baldwin and the others. Read them, and see for yourself what they are saying.

## Piers Plowman at Vatican II

ANSELM ATKINS

The front cover of the Penguin paperback *Piers the Ploughman* shows a woodcut of Langland lying beside a Malvern stream watching his vision of Piers. Piers is plowing the field of the world—there are the jackdaws flapping up out of the furrows and the sun shining hotly. Piers is giving Will a straight look, and Will is looking back: respectful, but a little dull and sheepish. They are both, naturally, barefoot. Then this other book, in covers exceedingly hard, and with no woodcut, opens to page thirty-five and, after a pointed quotation from St Augustine, commences a summary: ‘The Church needs, not only one to form her in the first place, but always, because she is deformed, a *reformer*. And this is Christ himself. This is why, throughout everything that we must not shirk saying, and in painful compassion and sorrowfully recognizing our co-responsibility, about the shadow-side of the Church, yet we can always firmly believe, in glad and unshakable faith, not in a sinful Church but in the holy Church.’ And further down the page (of *The Council, Reform and Reunion*) Hans Küng goes on: ‘. . . insofar as God’s holy Church is a Church of men and sinful men, she, with everything that she is and has, is subject to that word of the Lord which reads “Do penance and be converted.” Insofar as the Church is deformed, she has to be reformed: *ecclesia reformanda*.’

The churchman who says the Church *may* be reformed, or *must* do penance, has a healthy secure faith. He knows the Church is going to come out alright; thick or thin, it makes no difference. He can allow reform; even help it along; even let it touch himself. It is not (he believes) the word of man but the word of the Lord that calls him and the Church to penance. It is not transalpine busybodies who administer pur-