

by Ian Hislop O.P.

The central christian tradition has always carried the teaching that men are, before God, equal: that the differences due to social rank, class or race are only of accidental importance compared with the fundamental truth that each human being, as made in the image of God, may not, without sin, be deprived of his dignity or proper freedom. Though this is a statement about what is most real in man, a statement about his meaning as a being created by God, it none the less wears a very abstract character. Each generation of christians must find for it its historical verification, and the pious mind, being prone to dwell in the world of aspiration and ideal, is only too often content, in the name of subjective peace, to refuse to come to grips with concrete circumstances. The result is that the cynic often seems to have justice on his side when he says that it is a nice bit of rationalisation that is never allowed to influence the structure of society, or our social motivation. Excessive stress on the 'before God' leads either to the view that what happens in history is irrelevant to salvation, which is a heresy, or to the attitude that after all it is a personal matter between the individual and God. This implies a very naive view of the influence of environment and society on the individual. One does not need to be a marxist to be aware of this, it was quite clear to Plato and Aristotle, while every perceptive pastor finds that the preaching of the Gospel involves an understanding of, and a love for, the cultural and historical circumstances of the persons he serves. The point does not need to be laboured; what is clear is that christian principle makes a demand not just on opinion, or on one's personal code of good manners, but must be translated into action; Our Lord does not reject good thoughts, but the mere saying of Lord, Lord profits little, if it does not find expression in care for the hungry, and love for the deprived, and that not because they are the means of our improvement, but because they are our brothers.

The unhappy fact is that very often Christians in their social actions contradict the Gospel; it is not only that we are weak and cowardly, but we have developed a genius for asserting noble truths about man in society, while in fact we find that christian, or so called christian groups, have tended to succumb to the prejudices of the nation to which they belong; prejudices which in some cases they have inherited, in others shaped, while in other cases they have acted as the guardians of discrimination springing from such prejudices. Among a

whole cluster of problems, perhaps the evil effects of this are seen most clearly in the case of what is called the race or colour question. No case makes more demand on the European christian, and it is not an exaggeration to say that his response to it will determine, under God, the future of the church. As Martin Luther King says, Africans knocking at the door of the church seeking the bread of social justice have either been ignored, or told to wait till later, which almost always means never, American Negroes starving for the bread of freedom have usually been greeted by cold indifference or blatant hypocrisy; and he goes on to say that we are more prone to follow the expedient than the ethical path. One may add that this is so often the argument for doing nothing, but the expedient can never be an ultimate norm in ethics, while the prudent, if not more than a mask for timidity and self interest, ends up with burying one's talent through fear.

It cannot be too often emphasized that there is no rational basis in terms of our common humanity for racial discrimination, and that all prejudice and discrimination rests on unanalysed feelings of hostility or on self-interest. If we describe a race as a population that shares in common a certain set of genes so that the identification of such a population is a matter of physical differences, of which colour is the most obvious, and there is no other way of talking intelligibly about race, we are compelled to accept the conclusions that follow. Not only is the genetic relationship between the various recognisable physical differences extremely complicated, but given historical populations are linked by almost every degree of intermediacy. There is no evidence of harmful effects arising out of hybridization, the effects quoted by racialists are typical of situations in which persons are subjected to social discrimination. The word 'primitive' is one to which the physical anthropologist can attach no simple description. It is impossible to measure mental capacity relative to any one of the population descriptions, and, indeed, an objective assessment of mental capacity is almost impossible if the subjects come from different environments, and cultural backgrounds. If we accept these statements, the mere platitudes of the anthropological world, it becomes impossible for those who belong to the West European tradition to accept, if they are honest, the terms in which the colour question is so often posed.

In spite of this we carry within our tradition elements that make it difficult for us to face this, perhaps the most testing of all questions. Not only is the history of Europe the story of great technical achievement, it is also the story of restless violence. From the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 to Belsen this violence has fed on and justified itself by a harsh contempt for those who are different, or were unable to protect themselves. For many years the English liberal tradition has prided itself on an enlightened colonial administration, a fair legal system and a freedom from prejudice in the area of personal relationships, and it has come as a surprise that others have found us smug,

patronising and paternalistic. We were content to rebuke Aristotle for his talk of the 'natural slave' and to smile when he wrote, 'The Hellenes do not like to call Hellenes slaves, but confine the term to barbarians'. We may have rejected Gobineau's teaching that 'all civilizations derive from the white race', but we have written our history as if, for instance, that of Africa was simply the story of barbaric chaos into which we enter, as a retired colonial governor wrote, 'as the world's redeemers', which betrays not only a lack of proper historical perspective, but also of a sense of humour. It has been with surprise, and with some reluctance, as the story of the Benin bronzes shows, that we have recognised that African society is creative: Like Hume, we accepted, indeed we had to accept it, for it was the justification of much that we did, the view that Africa has produced 'no ingenious manufactures . . . no arts, no sciences'. We have often gone on as Eric Williams has shown (*British Historians and the West Indies*, London 1966) to assert propositions which in fact involve strong racial prejudice, at least in the sense in which they attempt to explain social and economic phenomena in terms of colour. It is true that the views of that rancid Scot, Thomas Carlyle, as expressed in his essay of 1849, called the Nigger Question, and his references to 'the beneficent whip' did not commend themselves to the educated English public, but in a more moderate form many of the shapers of Victorian opinion, such as Trollope and Froude, provided a justification for the elite status claimed by Europeans during the colonial period. Even that most distinguished of colonial administrators, Lord Lugard, could write in 1921 that though there should be equal opportunity for all, there should be in matters social and racial a separate path. Such views served to provide a justification for those actions on which our present prosperity so largely rests, and still serve to support the non-rational element in prejudice. This centres round the 'Black' seen as a child without intelligence, yet capable of frightening violence, and envied for his fancied sexual prowess, the personification of our primitive dreads, the carrier of our frustrations, ultimately identified with the dark forces that threaten us. If it were simply a matter of an antipathy merely cultural, one customary in origin, and hence open to modification by rational means (but also exploitable by unscrupulous seekers after power), the situation would be serious enough. But Dr Benton points out that 10 per cent of the population is prejudiced in the sense that they can only be dealt with by treating them as individuals suffering from imbalance. All the evidence suggests that the darker the skin is the deeper the antipathy. It is not then surprising that with the growth of self-consciousness the Negro peoples should have begun to formulate their counter-mythology, at a crude level in Ethiopianism or Ras Tafariism, so brilliantly described by Ralph Ellison in 'The Invisible Man', or at a highly sophisticated level in some of the work of James Baldwin, or in some elements in Senghor's concept of *negritude*. Once one becomes aware of the influence of racist views one is

provided with the key to so much in our conventional attitudes – the love of popular novelists for lighter races, usually noble and warlike, the administrator's preference for aristocratic groups, and the soldier's for the martial races, which have led them to undervalue the Babu, the educated native, whose more subtle arts overthrew their Empires. Once the simple fact of superior force was no longer quite as simple as it was when Belloc wrote 'whatever happens we have got the maxim gun and they have not', the European was left, in his simplicity, feeling frustrated and vaguely cheated.

It is here that our re-education must begin. Prejudice if left untreated, not only leads to acts of discrimination, but it is increased by the institutional or customary devices it creates, while it masks those social and economic privileges which the acts of discrimination protect and perpetuate. In theory separation of various culture groups has much to recommend it, but in practice it always serves to provide a justification for the action of a dominant, exploiting group, and all the evidence suggests that it is impossible to maintain it in a pure form in an industrialised society. Nor, one may observe, has it ever been practised without exploitation in an agricultural one, as the examples of Mexico and Ruanda indicate. It is not that the problems of culture-contact are ever easy, in whatever form they are encountered. They are both unavoidable, and far more complex, than even such a liberal thinker as J. S. Mill imagined when he wrote, in his *Essay on Liberty*, that in discussing Liberty we 'may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage,' and added: 'despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified as actually effective to that end'. This takes one right back to the beginning, for to propose to judge that a people is culturally backward and barbarous, and that one knows how to correct this is to make very large claims for oneself, unless one is going to say that lack of a certain kind of technical sophistication debar a people from the exercise of their fundamental rights. It would be, however, equally irrational to adopt the noble savage view, which tempted even Adam Smith. A man is not more noble, or more human, because he is black, though he may be, because he is a victim. As a social being he must be seen as shaped by the history of the society, or social group to which he belongs. The understanding of this may well involve studies of great complexity. For instance, most Histories of the West Indies I have picked up, have turned out to be the story of the fortunes of the white elite, of European power conflicts, of sugar and the slave trade in which the history of the vast majority of the population only emerges in terms of European profit or guilt . . . Yet it is in the social and economic history of the people as a whole that the explanation, in so far as history can provide an explanation, of present political motivation lies, as well as the motivation of individuals within their groupings.

When Lord North said that slavery was a necessity for every European nation he was not only pointing to the great and determining influence the plantation system, and the sugar trade, had on the policy of the powers; he was bearing witness to the dominant influence of the economic over the moral and humanitarian in the story of the West Indies. By and large the plural structure of the society that had emerged as a result in the West Indian islands by about 1820 has remained intact to the present day, with its division of society into a dominant elite group, distinguished by European outlook and light colour, and a folk group, which till recently was African (in at least the very complicated sense, which resists easy generalisation, that this applies as a magic term in the West Indies); together with certain intermediary groups. Behind, and conditioning, what Henriques describes as the almost complete acceptance by each West Indian group of the superiority of the white, lies the brute fact of the experience of slavery. From this stems the prejudice and the discrimination, in the sense that the racial variable, as culturally defined, provides a useful basis of differentiation, by which racism justifies the plural society in which power and prestige belong to the light elite group. Brought into being by economic demand, the trade was quite unlike the family slavery of most of the ancient world, it was a large scale industrial undertaking showing a very high degree of profit. It involved the displacement of millions of persons (more than 24 million), a very high death rate, the ruin of kingdoms, war, devastation, slave codes of sickening rigour, the treatment of human beings as objects, revolts, constant fear leading to ever greater barbarities, the degradation of the slave and the corruption of the owner – it is a chastening thought that the first speech Gladstone made in the House was a defence of the slave owners. Long ago Dominicans, like Père Labat, could own slaves with a tranquil conscience, and justify punishment in terms of self-protection; in our day a greater consciousness of our common humanity compels us to recognise the consequences of the crime. The point is not whether the social order is just or not; it is clearly unjust. What is at issue is whether the structures of society can be changed. In the deep sense they remain untouched by christianity. The stereotype of colour is already associated in the U.S.A. with low status jobs, and there is a danger in this country that a real coloured proletariat will emerge. These people, for the most part, come from areas from which we have had our profit, areas whose educational systems were till recently under our control; and we must act if we are not to become even further involved in the hypocritical attitude which reduces a people by war, or by economic or social discrimination, to a deprived status, and then uses the effects of this deprivation as an argument for holding that they deserve or should continue to be deprived. This is a question about which the Church must be intransigent. The truths of revelation are not only for the white man, and the demonstration of this is a matter of fighting housing discrimination, of assisting with educational pro-

jects, of concern about local social problems, of an openness on the part of priest and people to other peoples whose ways are rather different, but are none the worse for that. Too many of us tend to treat the immigrant by rules of thumb suitable for a priest in 1850 dealing with someone from Connemara (though even then not very inspiring). It is true that we are no better than our fathers, but events have forced on us an awareness, the terrible history of the last centuries has enforced a lesson, and to refuse to learn it is not only to inflict an injustice on others but to wound our own humanity.

The real indictment of our society is, to use James Baldwin's phrase, that we cannot assume that humanity is more real than colour. Because of this we must ensure that shifty politicians are not allowed to avoid the issues raised by discrimination, and it is a christian duty for instance, to see that teeth are put into legislation against such discrimination. Our society was called christian, but how does it look when compared with the teaching of the one whom James Baldwin calls the 'Disreputable sun-baked Hebrew'. The challenge of Christ is to all known social orders. He demands that radical change in personal life that just cannot coexist with the rule of power and of Mammon, the kingship of the Gentiles. Not only have we to strive to be the servants of our brother, but we have to create the conditions in which it is possible to be brothers. Any discrimination, any segregation involves limiting the brotherhood, and curtailing our experience of brotherhood: it sets a limit to our love, it cripples our understanding, and frustrates full awareness of the content of the image of God; for it is not one people that carries this image, but all men and all peoples: each mirrors something of his truth and his beauty.