

THE HUMAN COMMUNITY: REFLECTIONS FROM A DIVIDED FAMILY

INTRODUCTION

In July 1995 I committed the sin, for such it undoubtedly was in the eyes of the then Tory government, of marrying an asylum seeker. About a year before, Namissa had fled her home in Freetown, Sierra Leone, as a result of harassment from the army, who were allowed to do virtually what they liked by the military junta which had seized power in 1992. At the time, there was no visa requirement for Sierra Leoneans entering the UK; this was imposed not long afterwards as the civil war became more intense, and people fled in larger numbers. Like most refugees, she arrived in Britain with no idea how the system worked, little idea of what to do next, and certainly no desire to remain here permanently. When we became engaged, she was being dunned for several hundred pounds by one of the 'lawyers' who prey on people in her situation, charging over-inflated fees for extremely shoddy preparation of their cases for asylum here; I composed a suitable letter asking for an itemised bill, and she never heard from them again.

To flee from persecution is, of course, a persons' right under international law; article 14.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that *Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution*¹. Unfortunately, the treatment currently meted out to refugees in Britain is such as to raise concerns that what they find is not freedom from persecution, but persecution itself.

One immediate problem arose because the Home Office routinely impounds the passport of any asylum seeker. It is difficult to see the justification for this, but the result is that most people in this position find themselves unable to open a bank account. This was not rectified until after the wedding, when we finally managed to open a joint account after making a fuss at my branch, where I have had an account for a number of years. Permission had to be obtained from the Regional Office, but once we had got so far, it proved easy for her to open her own account, as she was then recognised as a customer, and received totally different treatment.

Employment discrimination has created longer-term problems. Work permits are routinely given to asylum seekers after six months, but as non-Western qualifications are not recognised here, people are normally unable to get anything but the most menial of work. Even with British qualifications, problems still continue: we had a Sierra Leonean church member with a PhD from the University of Birmingham; he could only find a cleaning job here, until he obtained a senior teaching post in the Caribbean.

Namissa is an experienced teacher; not only has she been unable to get so much as a classroom assistant post here, but there is no help available to enable her to requalify. When we married, she was doing agency work as a domestic; after almost a year and a half in Britain, she managed to find a casual cleaning job with Birmingham City Council, and after a year of that, finally obtained a permanent job as a care assistant.

Another example of discrimination occurred at the Neighbourhood Office, which is a sort of local town hall. I had to deal with the same Housing Officer three times, once to ask that the tenancy be in our joint names, and twice to ask for documentation for immigration purposes. Each time the request was refused, and each time, after enquiries, it was granted without difficulty by other officers. The person concerned eventually left after a number of complaints.

Immigration rules, however, have been our greatest problem, at least as far as the UK is concerned. An iniquitous piece of legislation known as the Primary Purpose Rule, now thankfully abolished by the new Labour Government, established a situation where, if anyone without permanent status in Britain married a person who did have such status, it was assumed that their marriage was for the purpose of gaining permanent residence in the UK, and it was incumbent on the couple to prove otherwise. The situation now is that the burden of proof is on the immigration officers; marriages are now 'genuine' until proved otherwise. It is a small, but important, change.

In our case, however, it meant that for a year - actually several months more than that, due to bureaucratic delays - Namissa had no status here. Permission was granted for a twelve months' stay, but during that time she had to remain with me - which has led to some tragic cases where women have married men who proved to be violent or abusive, and then been deported after their relationships broke up - and she had to prove that she was self-supporting here. This meant that she

was unable to claim any means-tested benefit for anything but a very brief period. I would have been able to claim, but the potential complications if, for instance, I had claimed Housing Benefit on a flat in our joint names are obvious. It was a stressful situation, her job was casual, and she could have lost it at any time, while mine is part-time and low-paid, and a period of serious illness could easily have rendered me unable to work at all for a considerable period. Even under the new government, the rules amount to an effective ban on marriages between the poorest section of the population and recent immigrants, as marriage applications are still means-tested; they infringed civil rights, and rendered a great many people extremely vulnerable in the early days of their marriages. It also meant that Namissa was unable to bring her children to Britain for a very considerable period. This enforced separation of families was clearly a breach of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 16.3, which states that *The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and state*², and in our case, has led to extremely serious consequences.

Namissa's permanent stay was finally granted in December 1996, by which time, the arrangements we had made for the care of her younger daughter had collapsed, owing to her brother's having suffered a serious stroke shortly after the wedding. We applied for permission for the two girls to settle here with us, and raised the necessary funds, mainly from Methodist sources. A great deal of documentation was sent to the British High Commission at Freetown, together with the quite extortionate visa fees. When nothing was heard from them, our solicitor telephoned the High Commission in April, and received a most evasive response, which caused him a good deal of concern. A further call in mid-May elicited the information that permission for their residence had in fact been granted on 23rd April, but nobody had been informed of the fact.

Shortly after this, on May 25th, we received a telephone call informing us that a coup had taken place. We were lucky to get through to Freetown on the phone that day; the lines were jammed and the city in chaos, but everyone appeared to be safe. My brother-in-law's house in the military district had been ransacked by soldiers while he lay helpless in bed, being seriously paralysed, and there was shooting all over the city, but no-one in the family had actually been harmed. Looting was a major problem throughout the week as soldiers who had been used to taking anything they liked during the period of military rule went back to their old ways with a vengeance. Whites, *hajjis*, and anyone who looked as though they had money were being targeted. One relative who runs a long-established business in the city dug a hole in the garden, put all the money and valuables at the bottom, filled it in with concrete, and sabotaged the wheels of all the vehicles, in order to prevent theft. She is now in the Gambia, after an uncomfortable escape up the coast on the deck of an overcrowded tugboat. Meanwhile, the incoming 'government', which consists of hangers-on of the last military regime who saw the corruption then and imagined that a takeover would mean automatic instant riches for them all, burnt down the courts and badly damaged the central bank, resulting in the closure of every bank in the country.

The background to this goes back a number of years, to the corrupt, incompetent and discredited government of Joseph Momoh. Momoh was overthrown on 29 April 1992³, shortly before elections were due to take place, by a group of junior officers led by Captain Valentine Strasser, who promptly declared himself President. Like so many coup leaders, Strasser came in promising reforms, then proved to have no programme whatsoever apart from theft on the grand scale. No attempt was made to end the civil war; Freetown was defended with the help of mercenaries, while the most appalling atrocities were carried out by both sides in the countryside. Growing evidence suggested that significant elements of the army were colluding with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which they had been fighting since 1991, and its leader, Foday Sankoh, is on record as having said that he obtained his weapons from the army. Meanwhile, both sides profited from the theft of the country's diamonds and gold.

Eventually, under intentional pressure, elections were agreed. There was a hiccup when Strasser wanted to change the constitution to allow him to stand, the result of which was that he was given safe conduct out of the country on 16 January 1996, and replaced by his deputy, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio. Strasser is now in the West Midlands, studying at Warwick University, where there have been complaints of threats against students who questioned his presence there. Clearly, there are issues around the fact that someone like this can come to Britain and do what he likes, while others, with legitimate reasons to seek sanctuary here, are refused entry, imprisoned or deported.

For some reason there are always countries which are willing to provide sanctuary for ex-dictators who should be sent home to face justice for their crimes.

Ahmed Tejan Kabba was elected President on 26th February 1996, despite efforts on the part of both the military and the rebels to intimidate people and prevent them from voting. His civilian government established a ceasefire with the RUF, though negotiations dragged on without a final peace agreement, possibly because Foday Sankoh was not offered a government post; feelings in Freetown ran so high against the rebels that this was probably not a viable possibility. It soon became clear that the army were unhappy with a government which would not allow the looting and other abuses which had been rife under Strasser and Maada Bio, and occasional 'rebel' attacks, which were probably carried out by soldiers, began in the north, where Tejan Kabba originates. This is a familiar tactic in the region; Foday Sankoh had at one time threatened to annihilate Strasser's home town. I was told of one incident where the soldiers drove down the road shooting everyone they saw, killing about ninety people, and another where a group of schoolchildren going to take their exams were attacked and their hands cut off. This type of mutilation has been carried out freely by both sides in the conflict, as blindings and amputations have been found to frighten people more than killings. It was clearly a situation where the government had lost control of its own armed forces, and this led, after a failed coup attempt in September 1996, to the coup of May 25th. A career diplomat rather than a politician, Tejan Kabba had made serious mistakes in his handling of the army, and it was probably his leniency towards individuals who were guilty of human rights abuses, atrocities, and even treason, which led to the current tragic situation.

Fighting began with attacks on the main prison, where all the prisoners were freed, including the previous coup plotters, and on the Nigerian ECOMOG troops guarding the government buildings. ECOMOG, the West African peacekeeping force, had been involved in defending Freetown since the beginning of the civil war, in support of successive governments; it was a main base for peacekeeping efforts in Liberia, which was a major factor in triggering civil war in the country. The original attacks were led by a Corporal Gborie, who called for the return of Foday Sankoh, currently under house arrest in Nigeria on charges of gun-running, and SAJ Musa, who had briefly been Vice-President after the 1992 coup; he had been ordered out of the country after a quarrel with Strasser, and had become a neighbour of ours. He left on the first available flight, again raising questions about why such people should be allowed to come here and use Britain as a base for destabilising legitimate governments at home. By the time he arrived, Gborie was in prison or dead, and a former plotter who had been released from prison, Major Johnny Koroma, had declared himself 'President'. Musa is now 'Vice-President' again.

During the following week, the coup received universal condemnation. This was a change from previous situations, where the West has been only too eager to recognise anybody, no matter how appalling their regime, provided its profits were not threatened. The Nigerian forces were heavily reinforced, with the establishment of a naval blockade, and panic set in as the looters targeted Whites in the capital. A massive operation was carried out to evacuate Western citizens, which filled the media for a few days. At this point I tried to get our girls evacuated, but the Foreign Office refused to take them, as they are not British citizens; the fact that they had clearance for permanent residence here made no difference. We were not the only family to be in this situation.

Negotiations continued through the week, and an agreement was reached whereby the rebels would leave the country in return for safe conduct, a very large bribe, and a government reshuffle. Unfortunately, Foday Sankoh, who had infiltrated several thousand of his RUF fighters into the city by this time, vetoed the deal, and negotiations collapsed, causing a mass panic in the city as it became obvious that a battle was in the offing. By this time the rebels had closed the borders, and were preventing anyone from leaving the city in an attempt to use them as a human shield. As it had previously been the only safe place in the country, Freetown was immensely crowded at the time, with several times its normal population. Our children were with different families, who attempted to evacuate them in opposite directions. Minata's father tried unsuccessfully to take her out of the city by road, heading for Kabala, his home town, which appeared at the time to be safe. Olakumbi was taken to the Cape Sierra Hotel, on the beachfront, in the hope of getting her on a ship leaving the next day for Ghana. On the face of it, this was a much more worrying possibility, as the last time something like it had been tried during the civil war, a ship full of several hundred people had ended

up sailing up and down the coast, being turned away from port after port, while the people on board starved.

Next morning, a Monday, the Nigerians launched a foolishly premature attack, and suffered a severe defeat after a day of heavy fighting. The irony of one of the world's most disreputable military dictatorships intervening in a neighbouring country in support of democracy is obvious, but such is the reality of West African politics. Olakumbi's hotel was cut off for twenty-four hours; the hotel next door was hit by shellfire and burnt out, with several hundred people fleeing into the Cape Sierra. The Red Cross organised a ceasefire on the Tuesday in order to evacuate people from the area, and a mass exodus began. Olakumbi was put on an American ship, which took her to Conakry, the capital of Guinea. We were under the impression that she was bound for Ghana, a thousand miles away, until we had a phone call out of the blue on the Thursday morning, saying that she was safe, and was believed to be on a plane to Stansted. She arrived in London that evening, having been flown out at Foreign Office expense. Why they were willing to fly her from Conakry but not from Freetown remains a mystery, but others had the same experience. Minata was taken out by road on the Wednesday, with a military escort as far as the city limits. We had no further news of her for six weeks, but at the time of writing she is known to be with her family at Kabala, now apparently the only place in the country where food supplies are still adequate. There is fighting going on in the area, which is decidedly unsafe, and her father is hoping to take her over the border to Conakry. The borders are closed, as the neighbouring countries have been unable to cope with the mass influx of refugees, but apparently people are still getting across.

Meanwhile, the situation in the country has steadily deteriorated. Looting has continued in Freetown; they come to people's houses at night, force their way in, ransack the place, and often cut heads or hands before they leave. In the morning, dismembered bodies lie in the street. The price of food has inflated enormously, with serious shortages; people often dare not go out; most of the banks have been destroyed, and everything has come to a halt. Several families are now dependent on us, and the funds we have raised are rapidly disappearing as a result. The city is closely invested by ECOMOG forces, mainly Nigerian, and the rebels now appear to be getting the worst of it. In the countryside, a mass popular uprising in support of democracy has led to fighting around most of the main towns. The rebels remain defiant, still apparently expecting to receive the recognition accorded to previous juntas, and time to enrich themselves before returning the country to democratic rule. It appears, however, that this is grossly unlikely, and fighting will doubtless continue until they are finally removed. The situation is relatively quiet at the time of writing, with diplomatic efforts proceeding, and a ceasefire in place. The city is largely depopulated, but sufficient people remain to make a pitched battle in the streets a horrifying, if likely, prospect.

ABANDONMENT

How can we speak of God in the context of horrors such as those being enacted in Sierra Leone as I write, where people wake up in the morning to find dismembered bodies lying in the streets outside? Not only Sierra Leone, but also the subtler evils of racism, imperialism economic exploitation, which not only underly the monstrosities of war, genocide, slavery, the Holocaust, and the rest of the abominations which have become so familiar, but which corrode the human spirit wherever they are to be found. Surely God is not relaxing in his nice comfortable heaven, like some corrupt dictator in his palace, while his image is despised and trampled, and his creation turned into a hell! This sort of horror is bound to produce a sense of abandonment, but surely the god who has vanished is the tame, one-dimensional deity of culture-Christianity and cosy false piety, not the robust God of the Bible or the Qur'an. Even the statement that God is suffering with the victims can easily turn into the type of superficial pat 'answer' that answers nothing. A god who is nothing but a passive sufferer is a god who does nothing to save his suffering people, and while nobody is likely to deny that the Gospel speaks not only of crucifixion, but also of resurrection, this is all too often turned into a matter of individuals going to an afterlife artificially disconnected from the context of their suffering, in the ultimate dereliction of love and solidarity for their sisters and brothers who remain in their hell.

The church is flooded with privatised, pietistic theologies - if that is the word for them - that indoctrinate people so efficiently that legions of those who sincerely believe themselves to be

Christians are effectively unable to read the Bible for themselves, being blinded to anything which differs from received dogma, and are unable to hear anything which disagrees with the false and oppressive 'gospel' they have received. There is a major issue of hermeneutics here, which needs to be considered seriously by the church, if we are to move forward in any meaningful way.

Christianity is nothing if it is not a religion of salvation from evil, yet so often evil is not taken seriously by the very people who trumpet salvation most loudly. The emphasis in the Bible is not on individual sins leading to individual damnation, but on the salvation of the entire community from present evils. Where individual sin is brought in, in the case of the rich young ruler, for instance (Luke 18:18-25), or the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the context is often that of a sin which damages the entire community. Moreover, these stories are not normally taken seriously by a church which tends to emphasise the sins of the poor and powerless, while excusing or abetting the sins of the powerful.

If we are going to take the Bible seriously, including texts like 1 John 4:20, which tells us that if we fail to love our fellow human beings, whom we have seen, then it is impossible for us to love God, whom we have not seen, or the constant OT emphasis on the *people* of God, then it becomes clear that the individualistic salvation sought by so many is ruled out. What we are so often offered is a micro-gospel; we cannot condemn all its insights, many of which do indeed belong to the Gospel, but we can and must condemn the whole, which excludes so much of the Gospel that, rather than standing in judgment over the monstrous evils that surround us, it affirms and buttresses the very things that create them. Salvation, however interpreted, is salvation in the context of community, and of deliverance from the injustice and oppression suffered by that community. God then, is not only suffering himself, he is also active in bringing about an end to the suffering. God is not passive in creation, nor in bringing about the Exodus; resurrection cannot be a passive thing either, but the real overcoming of real evil.

The Crucifixion was the ultimate act of usurpation; God's legitimate king was judicially murdered by the arbitrary act of corrupt powers which used God's world for their own selfish gain. This act was annulled by God's response in the Resurrection, displaying divine contempt for those who claim to rule God's creation, while rebelling against his commandments. If even their death sentence cannot stand in God's face, what chance is there for any of the acts of the wicked? The act of deliverance which began with individuals being released from disease or demonic power continues, as the great rebellion begins to unravel, in the final revelation of the majesty of God.

Jesus' is the voice which leads us on towards this unravelling of evil, and the church is the community of those called to celebrate the perilous memory of the Crucifixion, reminding the world that the wicked are not truly rulers, but rebels whose time is coming, and holding fast this apparent foolishness in the face of the triumphant power of an evil which could even hold God's Son briefly in its grasp.

But the good news Jesus brings is that their hour, long promised by the Prophets, really is at hand:

Hear, you who are far away, what I have done; and you who are near, acknowledge my might. The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: "Who among us can live with the devouring fire? Who among us can live with everlasting flames?" Those who walk righteously and speak uprightly, who despise the gain of oppression, who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it, who stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed and shut their eyes from looking on evil, they will live on the heights; their refuge will be the fortresses of rocks, their food will be supplied, their water assured. Your eyes will see the king in his beauty; they will behold a land that stretches far away (Isaiah 33:13-17)⁴.

At the end of the New Testament we find a vision of the final destruction of Rome and, by extension, every other oppressive, rebellious power which raises itself up in defiance of God:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around

the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:17).

Woe to those who have not wept! The desolation of the Cross is only the prelude to the final act of salvation, as rebellion is crushed, evil destroyed, and those who have relied on it for their hope left desolate.

Individualistic religion ultimately has no answer to the problem of evil: either suffering is punishment for sin - and what of innocent suffering? - or we have to fall back on the petty, insecure tyrant of Job, who hands the innocent Job over to his secret policeman, the Satan, and when asked the reason why, can only answer, 'Look, I can make wild beasts!' (Job 40:15-24). Once sin is seen in a more communal way, however, innocent suffering ceases to be an insurmountable problem; it is due to the sin of the wicked, or to the sin which inheres in social, political or economic structures and systems. Only a God who is presently active in liberating his people from evil in all its aspects, however, has any real reply to suffering. The god who looks passively on from his heaven is at the very least the accessory to evil, permitting it to happen, and as such is unworthy of worship.

UNITY

In Islam, with its more practical emphasis, *tawhid*, or unity, is a vital doctrine. There is one God, with whom nothing may ever be compared, and this is reflected in the unity of creation, and of humanity. Asghar Ali Engineer⁵ argues that this should be extended to humanity in all its aspects, implying a requirement for a totally united society, without class or any other division. The Church, unfortunately, has preferred speculative philosophical theology, individualism, and otherworldliness. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to develop a Christian equivalent of *tawhid*. The lack of any such doctrine has left us insufferably vulnerable to exploitation by anyone and everyone in a position of power who wanted to use religion to legitimise exploitation, oppression, enslavement, imperialism, nationalism, discrimination, divide and rule, or any of the other evils which trouble us. A faith which incorporates any and every evil and makes it a religious duty is clearly worthless; in order to guard against this sort of thing we need to make a real effort to move right away from individualism, and to develop more communal theologies.

God creates humankind in his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:27); the only distinction recognised is that of gender, and both sexes are specifically included, while the sense of the passage indicates that the human community is intended, rather than the isolated individual. The latter meaning, of course, would have been incomprehensible in any case, in an age when individualism had yet to be invented.

In the ancient world, the presence of a god's image indicated the presence of the god himself; it was to be treated with the respect due to the god⁶. In a world where human beings were essentially slaves, who might well be drowned *en masse* if they incurred the wrath of the gods by keeping them awake at night⁷, this gave people an essential, ontological value, laying the foundation for future concepts of human rights. This is shown in the difference between the law code of Hammurabi, where the law is different for different social classes, absolutising class in a way which denies the equal value of human beings, and Mosaic Law, which is the same for everybody, and which often bears more than a passing resemblance to Hammurabi's laws for the aristocracy. In establishing his covenant with his people and giving them his Law, God is attempting to establish a new sort of society; in a world filled with evil and exploitation, which was heavily buttressed by the

religious and legal systems of the day, then as now, he lays down the outline of a community based on justice, equality and love⁸.

Humanity is given a task; to have dominion over God's world (Genesis 1:28). In the religions of the other Middle-Eastern nations, this was the task of one of the gods. Once again, humankind is given a dignity and responsibility which is alien to the environment in which Israelite religion developed, but this time the point refers, not to ontology, but to a divine calling; in Islamic terms, we are to be God's viceroy, ruling his creation as his representatives within it.

There is one God, who is responsible for one creation, and within that creation, he is to be served by one humanity. God exists in Trinity; that is, in diversity, but this does not compromise his essential unity. It is unfortunate that the doctrine of the Trinity has at times been expressed in terms which have appeared to weaken it, but this is the failure of theologians, not of God. The diversity of God is mirrored in the extraordinary diversity of the world around us, yet, as has become painfully clear of recent years, it is one world. Similarly, human diversity does not alter that fact that there is one single humanity.

Not only is humanity created as one, but Jesus' reconciliation of humanity with God is also a reconciliation between ourselves in a restoration of the original unity. The barriers summed up in the story of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) were the result of sin; the Books of Ruth and Jonah are attempts to counteract the sinful exclusiveness of too much Israelite religion with a declaration of the inclusiveness of God. The inclusiveness of the Gospel is a continuation of this theme; Peter's speech in Acts Two, miraculously heard by a multinational crowd in their own local languages, explicitly declares the end of the sin of Babel. Human unity seems to have been one of the first of the insights of the infant church; Paul declares barriers to be broken down (Ephesians 2:14; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11), and constantly attempts in his letters to find practical ways for Greek and Jewish cultures to live together in peace, within a single church community.

Apartheid was the classic example of an attempt to divide humankind on what were basically theological grounds, and this was precisely the point which was picked up by the South African churches when they condemned it as heresy in 1992. The Anglican Province of South Africa, for instance, passed a *Resolution on Apartheid* stating that:

Whereas Apartheid by exalting a biological attribute to a universal principle thereby denies that what gives persons infinite value is the fact that they are created in God's image;

Whereas Apartheid further denies a central teaching of the Christian faith, namely that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself since it teaches the irreconcilability of certain races;

Whereas it further has involved an unacceptable cost in human suffering;

This Synod resolves that Apartheid is totally un-Christian, evil, and a heresy⁹

Other South African Churches produced comparable statements. Our humanity is thus founded in the ontological fact of the image of God, and our unity, at least in this *Resolution* is concerned, in the reconciling activity of Christ. By expressing its point in so radical a way, the church produced something which could equally well be used to condemn any oppressive division of the human race. Classism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination are thus also outlawed, at least by implication. The evil does not stop here, however.

Underlying *Apartheid* and other comparable systems is the reduction of human beings to commodity status; we are systematically robbed of our God-given humanity in order that we may be abused, exploited or disposed of for the profit of the few. All these attempts to divide humanity, on whatever grounds - and one cannot exclude the partitioning of God's earth into separate nations - come down eventually to the divide and rule policies carried out, whether consciously or not, firstly by those who stand to gain from the exploitation of others, and secondly by those who are blinded by ideology, allowing their consciousness to be controlled by those who profit from their destruction. In any culture, the prevailing ideology will be determined by the powerful, inevitably for their own profit. The resulting reduction of human beings to disposable commodities is the great evil of this or any other age, and the reduction of faith to the type of individualistic pietism which refuses to address such evil, and even makes submission to it a religious duty, merely represents a false piety which, far from offering salvation from evil, is in fact its handmaid.

Any system based on the systematic exploitation of others, taking 'surplus value' produced by the many for the benefit of the few, will inevitably pile evil upon evil as the few struggle to maintain control. The church in the West has no critique of the economic system worth mentioning; makes no stand for economic justice. It may make the occasional complaint about 'the unacceptable face of capitalism', but it completely fails to analyse the situation, and thus remains unaware that this is in fact capitalism working as it is designed to work, at its most efficient. Slavery, *Apartheid*, and poverty all result from the evil of economic exploitation, and until this is tackled seriously, we cannot make real progress against consequential evils like racism or nationalism. These latter do not happen because they happen, they are there because they are being maintained by racist and nationalistic governments which are determined to maintain the *status quo* by any means, or by media which are themselves owned by the very rich and powerful. These set the tone for the opinions of most people, determining the prevailing ideology in any nation.

God has made one world, within which every living thing depends on him from moment to moment (Psalm 104). Everything belongs to him, and specifically the land which is so valuable in a peasant society such as ancient Israel (Leviticus 25:23), while we are his tenants. The land is to be divided by lot, with each family having its share (Numbers 33:53-4). This share will then be the permanent possession of that family; if they fall on hard times, it may be leased out, but it is to be returned to them in the jubilee year (Leviticus 25:8-34). The land, then, is for the benefit of all; it is not to be exploited by the few for their own benefit, at the expense of others. The inevitability of some poverty is recognised, and mechanisms provided to deal with it, but the type of structural, inherited poverty with which we are so familiar is due entirely to human sinfulness, and if God's law is followed, there will be none of it (Deuteronomy 15:4-5).

The beginnings of an answer to this are to be found in the story of the Rich Young Ruler; those who, through no fault of their own, have inherited the ill-gotten gains of previous generations should restore what they have to the poor. If they refuse to do so, they participate in the sin of their ancestors, and are excluded from the Kingdom (Luke 18:18-27). We cannot, therefore, justify the possessions of the rich. If the Gospel declares something sinful, then for men to declare it 'legal' is sheer rebellion against God. In saying this, we have already gone beyond the individual level; human structures such as property laws which support and 'legitimise' sin are themselves expressions of sin. The first believers followed this insight, with rich members of the community like Barnabas selling their property and sharing the proceeds; we are told that no-one claimed private ownership of anything, and there was no needy person in the community (Acts 4:32-7).

Even beyond this level, however, we have the situation whereby nations claim exclusive ownership over parts of the earth, and pass laws to exclude others from entry. This practice goes back to the development of the centralised nation state after the Renaissance; in England, centralisation began in the Sixteenth Century, under the Tudors, and it was Elizabeth I who first imposed border controls.

The Bible speaks with many voices on the subject of nations. According to the story of Babel, they came into existence as the result of sin. In Acts, we find that God made them, and allotted them their places (17:26); running through most of the Old Testament is the conviction that Israel is God's 'chosen nation', with an exclusive right to inhabit the Promised Land. The witness of history is clearly that 'chosen nation' theologies of this type are grossly destructive, and this approach should therefore be discounted. God is undoubtedly sovereign over the nations, as he is over everything else, but given that he made only one humanity, any division must surely fall short of the ideal, and the New Testament conviction that all barriers are broken down in Christ confirms this.

The idea that any part of the earth is the exclusive property of one nation, allowing the exclusion of others does go directly against the Biblical witness. We have the repeated command to care for the alien (Exodus 22:21, etc.). There is to be one law for both native and alien, and if an alien wishes to be circumcised and join in the Passover celebration, they are to be regarded as a native (Exodus 12:48-9). The nation of Israel were aliens in Egypt, and Abraham lived as an alien most of his life. Jesus was himself a refugee when he was taken to Egypt to escape from Herod.

The modern practice of passing immigration laws which can be shown from cabinet papers released under the Thirty Year Rule to have been designed to discriminate against Black people is thus a clear breach of God's law. More than this, it ignores the lessons of history. Britain, and many other nations, have clearly gained immeasurably from centuries of immigration, whether for political

or economic reasons, and to attempt to prevent population movements in the selfish interests of the minute elites who hold the real power in our western 'democracies' can only hinder the future development of the human race as a whole.

The result of such prevention of population mobility can be seen in the development of the wealthy enclaves of the West, which maintain a sort of economic vampirism, drawing the wealth of the planet to themselves, until the rest of the world becomes so impoverished that it dissolves into the sort of chaos we are seeing in Sierra Leone. Not only have they done this in their own areas, but through their history of colonialism, they have been able to impose the nation state on all the world. In Africa, existing political and economic structures were deliberately destroyed in order to impose new ones which would work in the interests of the West; in the Islamic world, structures were imposed which run directly contrary to the philosophy of the indigenous civilisation, leading directly to the tragedy of the Gulf War. In one way or another, the established structures of the globe were destroyed or perverted in order to funnel ever greater wealth into the hands of those who thought that the power of the gun gave them, in effect, equality with God. To this day, despite the tragic history of Western domination, we remain saddled with the ideological assumption that that which is White, Western and middle-class is somehow fundamentally good, and the problems of humanity can still be solved by its further development.

The church has been directly involved with the development of the nation state since Luther's original alliance with princes who were trying to break free from the dominating power of Southern Europe. The result has been that in the chaos of the last few centuries we have all too often lost our universal vision, and in becoming too closely allied with the powers of 'this world' in the Johannine sense, we have fallen prey to the evils which control it, and when faced with the Beast of Revelation, have obediently bowed down and worshipped. How we are to break free from culture-Christianity and other forms of bondage to this world remains to be seen, but somehow we need to find ways in which we can truly begin to confess the Gospel once again, and if the promise that 'the gates of Hades shall not stand against us' (Matthew 16:18) means anything, then somehow the path must and shall be found.

Robert Brenchley 4.8.1997.

NOTES

- 1) In *The Amnesty International Handbook*, Macdonald Optima. 1990
- 2) *ibid.*
- 3) Dates from *The Europa World Yearbook 1996*. Europa. 1996. and *The Statesman's Year Book 1996-7*, Macmillan. 1996.
- 4) Biblical quotations from NRSV.
- 5) Asghar Ali Engineer, *On Developing Liberation Theology in Islam* in RS Sugitharajah, Ed., *Voices from the Margin*, SPCK. 1991.
- 6) See Pliny the Younger's use of images of Caesar and the Gods, in Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, OUP, 1963, pp.3-4.
- 7) *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. NK Sandars, Penguin Classics, 1974, p.108.
- 8) Antonio Moser & Bernardino Leers, *Moral Theology Dead Ends and Ways Forward*, Burns & Oates, 1990.
- 9) *Apartheid is a Heresy*, John W. de Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio, (eds.), David Philip & Eerdmans, 1983.