

THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT AND THE DEMONS

KENNETH LEECH
Rector of St Matthew
Bethnal Green,
London, E2.

In the New Testament, the symbol of the demonic is used of warped institutions in the ordering of society. "'Satan' and 'Beelzebul' are names for warped institutions" (1). Behind the "powers that be" in the world, there are angeloi, daimoniai, archai, exousiai, there are the "world rulers of this present darkness", the "rudiments of the world" (2). It is from the word exousia, authority, that we derive our word exorcism, and in the New Testament it is both a theological and political concept. It is very probable that the demonology which is assumed by the New Testament writers derives from the widespread astral beliefs of the period, and there is a central theme of cosmic warfare, involving heaven as well as earth, and involving a great army of invisible beings (3). "It is these invisible beings who in some way...stand behind what occurs in the world." (4)

The coming of the Kingdom of God and the liberation of man is seen, both in the Gospel exorcisms and in the thinking of Galatians and Colossians in particular, as being manifested in the freeing of man from slavery to the demonic powers. The exorcisms in the Gospels are "signs of the coming of the Kingdom" (5). Christ, according to the New Testament, has conquered the powers, and Paul in Romans looks forward to the liberation of the entire created order, perhaps including the demonic powers themselves, from oppression and slavery (6).

It seems clear then that the liberation of man from slavery to the demons is not something which is peripheral to the New Testament, but is rather "an altogether central article of faith" (7). "Most of us", wrote Harvey Cox, "would prefer to forget that for many of his contemporaries, Jesus' exorcisms was in no way peripheral but stood at the heart of his work" (8). In Galilee, exorcism was certainly "his main occupation" (9). It is, however, equally clear that the cases cited in the Synoptic writers were cases of disease for which we today would offer a different kind of explanation and description: mental disturbances, epilepsy, convulsions, dumbness, and blindness (10). What is crucial, therefore, is that in all cases, physical and mental healing was accompanied by the setting free of the person from oppression, from those forces which stunted and distorted his humanity. It is this liberation, this achievement of the freedom of man, to be fully human, which is the central purpose of the Christian Gospel. The contemporary demonology expressed the oppression in terms of evil spirits, but the reality of oppression is still present, and it is this which is portrayed in the demonic symbol.

There seem now to be two current misconceptions about exorcism, and they are reflected in most recent writing, including the open letter from the "65 theologians". One is the view that exorcism is inseparable from, or limited to, the concept of possession. In fact, in the traditional practice of the western church, as well as in psychiatric experience, possession is rare, though the "possession syndrome" is well-known. Freud, in an essay of 1923, noted the similarity between the demonological theory of possession and the psychoanalytic theory of hysteria. "...The neuroses of those early times emerge in demonological trappings.....The states of possession correspond to our neuroses.....In our eyes the demons are bad and reprehensible wishes,

derivatives of instinctual impulses that have been repudiated and repressed." (11). A recent psychiatric writer, Rollo May, has said that demonic possession is simply "the traditional name throughout history for psychosis" (12). Since the work of Jung in the whole area of the Unconscious and its symbolism, we cannot claim that the categories of theology and psychopathology are alternatives or mutually exclusive (13). Yet the solemn exorcism of the possessed has always in practice represented a small range of cases, and the idea of exorcism is a much wider one. It is certainly not of medieval origin, as has been claimed, and indeed it was an integral element of the Baptismal liturgy from the earliest times. Many of the Fathers refer to the drowning of the demons in the waters (14). As early as Hippolytus, there is a pre-Baptismal exorcism. The rejection of the dominion of Satan is a crucial element in the Baptismal teaching of St Cyril of Jerusalem and St Gregory of Nyssa. The watering-down of this element in modern Anglicanism has serious repercussions in the acceptance of so much in the realm of darkness, and in the avoidance of any real conflict with the Devil or the fallen world-order. In the modern Roman Baptismal rite, the Prayer of Exorcism is a prayer that God who sent his only Son into the world to cast out the power of Satan, the spirit of evil, to rescue man from the kingdom of darkness and to bring him into the splendour of his Kingdom of Grace, would set the candidate free from original sin, make him a temple of God's glory, and send him the Holy Spirit. Thus exorcism is one element in a total liturgy of deliverance and healing, in which the realm of evil is rejected, and man is restored to the Divine realm.

The second error is to isolate the demonic from its origins in political theology. So the demonic ceases to be a powerful symbol of deeply rooted evil in the created order, and becomes a literal description of entities within people. In the process of pseudo-spiritualisation, the real demons in the world are missed. It is striking that Black Theology, a theology rooted in the experience of human racial oppression, has rediscovered the true sense of the demonic.

"Already the demons are being named. The enemy is being identified. Its names are legion. Racism is a demon. War is a demon. Poverty is a demon. Powerlessness is a demon. Self-depreciation is a demon. And those who prop them up are demonic in effect. A strategy of liberation includes a ministry of exorcism, the naming and casting out of demons" (15).

Daniel Berrigan has taken up the symbol of the Beast in Revelation 12-13 as a way of understanding the present crisis of American history.

"The mark of the Beast is the super-imposition upon the human spirit of the military or para-military claim, which claim designedly erases the claim of Christ, replaces it with a total ethos of violence, a total claim of death whose ruling metaphor is the military kind of defused form. It reaches all across the world, especially across Europe, I would think, laying its claim upon the Third World in the form of life and death control over the religious and economic, social and political life of men and women.....There is nothing mystical about it all. It is a total claim for numbers, you and myself....To be a citizen is to be a killer; it is to wear the mark of the Beast whose first task is control, possession, and whose methods....are that awesome combination of violence, deceit, and a kind of pseudo- or quasi-religious awe. 'Who can combat the Beast?' is the great cry that rises from the despairing masses of people....." (16)

It is absolutely essential to realise that it is this kind of de-humanising oppression which is the essence of the New Testament idea of the demonic.

Today the "Charismatic Movement" or, to use a less emotive and less loaded term, Neo-Pentecostalism, seems to lend itself to the distortion of the demonic symbol, and to an unbalanced and harmful pre-occupation with demonology. There are a number of reasons why this is so. First, Biblical literalism of an extremely unintelligent kind is very common, if not the norm, among Pentecostals, and it can lead to irrational and often absurd interpretations of Biblical concepts. Of course, it is frequently argued today that Biblical literalism is not essential in those who share the "charismatic experience", but in actual practice the group expression and interpretations of that experience seems to go hand in hand with traditional Pentecostal use of the Bible.

Secondly, the absence of a sacramental life seems to lead to an unbalanced stress on such forms as exorcism or speaking in tongues which may come to assume the status of pseudo-sacraments. The routine sacramental means of deliverance and healing are under-valued, and emphasis is placed on the unusual and the sensational. To some extent, the spread of Neo-Pentecostalism is a reaction against the dreary anti-sacramentalist types of Protestantism which have marked so much of western Christianity for so long, and a desperate search for ways of expressing the inarticulate element in worship which the non-sacramental, over-cerebral style has obscured or ignored.

Thirdly, the individualistic theology which lies behind most forms of Pentecostalism leads to a view of evil and the demonic which is theologically unsound, pastorally dangerous, and socio-politically reactionary. Theologically, one can point to the doctrine of total depravity, the absence of a real theology of grace and nature, a wrong view of man's relationship to the created world, and a sectarian and elitist vision of the working of God's Spirit. Pastorally, such views can lead to serious mis-handling of people, and there are now many cases of disturbed individuals who have fallen into the hands of enthusiastic exorcists and healers with Pentecostal views, and whose condition has subsequently become much worse. Sadly, but not altogether surprisingly, it seems that a high proportion of ministers and others who become pre-occupied with exorcism soon become obsessed with it, and may themselves become psychologically unbalanced as well as theologically heretical. A recent Roman Catholic theological memorandum on the charismatic movement warned that "excessive preoccupation with the demonic and an indiscriminate exercise of deliverance ministries is based upon a distortion of the biblical evidence and is pastorally harmful" (17).

In terms of social and political thought and action, there is a real danger that the false demonology of the Pentecostal tradition will lead in practice to a blindness to, and therefore indirectly a support of, the really demonic forces in the world. It has been claimed that the "charismatic renewal has the potential for developing a far more solid, long-term, radical commitment to social justice at all levels than any other movement in the church" (18), and the highly respected authority on Pentecostalism, W.J.Hollenweger, has recently argued that there are indications of radicalising trends in white Pentecostal movements (19). One cannot simply write off such views, but the evidence from Britain seems to be heavily against them. If anything, the spread of the Pentecostal movement in Britain seems to have aided the general shift to the political Right, the suspicion of working-class movements, and the spiritual defence of a dying capitalist order.

Worst of all, there seems to be a fundamental irrationality and lack

of theological and intellectual seriousness which prevents any real assessment of these dangers and trends within the movement. The Pentecostal experience often seems to produce a sentimentality and immaturity in human relations, and an abdication of hard theological analysis in favour of pietism. In a society so complex as ours, the retreat into pietistic forms of religion was predictable, and there are strong indications that the charismatic movement is only one way of evading problems in the real world which are too difficult to handle. In terms of social ethics, the movement is virtually barren. In its social and political witness, it is either very trivial or positively reactionary, identifying as demonic the very forces which are working for change and for justice in society. In general, there is a loss of the wholeness of Christian truth in the movement to such an extent that the description "heretical" might not be too strong. The heretical demonology is certainly merely one facet of a wider breakdown.

Notes

- (1) John Pairman Brown, The Liberated Zone (SCM 1970,) 39.
- (2) 1 Cor.2:6-8; Eph. 6:12; Gal.4:3; Col.2:8.
- (3) See G.H.C.McGregor, "Principalities and powers: the cosmic background to Paul's thought", NT Studies 1 (1954-5), 17-28.
- (4) O.Cullman, Christ and Time, 192.
- (5) C.H.Dodd, The Coming of Christ, 60.
- (6) McGregor, 23.
- (7) O.Cullman, The State in the New Testament, 102.
- (8) The Secular City (SCM 1965) 149.
- (9) G.Vernes, Jesus the Jew (Collins 1973) 22.
- (10) Mk.5:1-13; 9:15-27; 1:23-26; 9:32-34; 12:22-24.
- (11) cited in T.S.Szasz, The Manufacture of Madness (Paladin 1973 ed) 102.
- (12) Rollo May, Love and Will (Fontana 1972 ed.) 123.
- (13) On this see Victor White, God and the Unconscious (Fontana 1967 ed) especially Chapter 10 "Devils and Complexes."
- (14) See Bo Reicke, The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism (1946) and Jean Danielou, The Bible and the Liturgy.
- (15) Reuben A. Sheares II cited in Dibinga Wa Said, "An African theology of decolonisation", Harvard Theological Review 64 (1971) 524.
- (16) in Alistair Kee (ed.) Seeds of Liberation (SCM 1973) 10.
- (17) Theological and Pastoral Orientations on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (Malines, Belgium, May 21-26, 1974) 55.
- (18) Dan Danielson, "Charismatic renewal and social concern" in Post American, February 1975 25.
- (19) W.J.Hollenweger, Pentecost Between Black and White (Belfast 1974)