

- 7 On this patristic background, see R.L.P. Milburn, *Early Christian Interpretations of History* (London 1954); L.G. Patterson, *God and History in Early Christian Thought* (London 1967).
- 8 Cf. Mark 7: 24—30; Matthew 15: 21—28 (the Syro-Phoenician woman); John 4:4—42 (the woman of Samaria); Matthew 8:5—13, Luke 7:1—10 (the Roman centurion); John 12:20—21 (the ‘Greeks’). See J. Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations* (ET London 1958); F. Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament* (ET London 1965) for full discussion of the significance of these references.
- 9 For an illuminating account of the Church as communion, by an Orthodox open to the notion of a (Roman) universal ‘centre d’accord’, see O. Clément, ‘L’Ecclesiologie orthodoxe comme ecclesiologie de communion’, *Contacts* 61 (1968), pp. 10—36.
- 10 Op. cit. pp. 138—9. See also idem., *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (London 1970), pp. 1—152).
- 11 *Nationalism*, p. 140.
- 12 Published as ‘Europe Tomorrow’, in *Briefing* (Bishops’ Conferences of Great Britain) vol. 18 No 22, 11 November 1988, pp. 471—3, and here at p. 471.
- 13 Ibid. p. 473.
- 14 Born in 1887, became Emperor of Austria 1916, abdicated 1918, died of tuberculosis in poverty in exile in 1922. His short reign was dedicated to expediting the end of the First World War, improving the living conditions of his peoples (he instituted the first Health Ministry in the modern state) and, above all, to reducing inter-ethnic tensions by the promulgation of a new vision of multiple local self-expression (including republican forms) within an over-arching imperial polity. During his last years he prayed constantly for the cause of harmony in Central and Eastern Europe. See E. Feigl ed., *Kaiser Karl. Persönliche Aufzeichnungen, Zeugnisse und Dokumente* (Vienna 1984); E.J. Görliche, *Der letzte Kaiser — ein Heiliger?* (Stein am Rhein 1986 3rd edn.); also E. Feigl, *Kaiserin Zita von Oesterreich, nach Oesterreich* (Vienna 1986, 4th edn.), pp. 383—390.

Bastille Day, the Bible, and Mrs Thatcher

Graham Harvey

Last July, while in Paris for this year’s most widely-covered anniversary, Mrs Thatcher pointed out—correctly—that the French Revolution was not the first move towards Human Rights.

Whether this was worth saying (especially during the celebrations of that Revolution) is questionable. Previous moves towards Human Rights had been countered either deliberately or by neglect, so that the French Revolution was perceived to be necessary, and some of the previous moves towards Human Rights cited by Mrs Thatcher had never had any effect in France. This, though, is not the only question, nor even the most important one.

Among steps towards Human Rights, Mrs Thatcher cited the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Now, were these in fact really anything at all to do with Human *Rights*?

Certainly, 'I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'—suggesting slavery is antithetical to people's good and God's desires—makes a good start in this direction. But 'You shall have no other gods before me' denies the Right to religious freedom. (I am not arguing that this, or any other of the Ten Commandments, should be abandoned. What I am questioning is whether this has anything to do with Human Rights.)

Nor is there any Right to free expression within the one permitted religion; the commandment against images attempted to restrict the freedom of artists to portray the experience of God in sensual forms. In fact some Jewish and Christian interpretations of this Commandment have found it possible to permit and even encourage paintings, icons, statues and even films which, it might be thought, are against the 'letter of the Law'.

In the sabbath commandment Human Rights are given with one hand and withdrawn with the other. Everyone and everything is to rest every Saturday, workers are not to be made to work while the managers rest. Very liberating. But the workers here include slaves (the translation 'servant' should not mislead: the Israelites were 'servants' in Egypt). So one step towards one Human Right in fact enshrines the possession of some people by other people. The people possessed include wives and servants, who are equivalent, as property, to houses, fields, oxen and asses. Only by 'hearing the silences of the text' (as some Feminist and Liberation theologians say) could religious support be found for the emancipation of women and slaves.

The Right of older people to be respected is decreed. However, in the appeal to self-interest, 'so that it may go well with you in the land Yahweh your God gives you', lies a serious threat to Human Rights. Israel seems to have the Right to a place to live, but this is predicated upon the 'right of conquest' and the decree that all Canaanites be slaughtered. A very tenuous right to a home (and life), then.

This also leads to a problem with 'Do not kill'. Here we are moving towards an individualisation and internalisation of God's law which continued in the Sermon on the Mount. 'Do not kill' can only be addressed to individuals; but it leaves society and nations free, in fact committed, to war.

It is really quite quite difficult to consider the Ten Commandments as having anything to do with *Human Rights*.

It takes an even more remarkable imagination to consider the Sermon on the Mount to be about Human Rights. It, like the Ten Commandments, is better seen as about duty. The Ten Commandments are duties of people in Israelite society, the Sermon on the Mount is on the duties of Christian disciples. Its prescriptions should never have been applied to outsiders.

The Sermon on the Mount declares, very clearly, that it is a vigorous restatement of the demand for obedience—and that no relaxation is

permitted. In effect the Sermon furthers the internalisation of religious morality. Arguably, it so internalises its prescriptions that it doesn't leave people free to resent being oppressed and even decrees how one should *feel*... People are 'blessed' if they are poor, hungry, mourning and reviled, and should be 'glad'.

In past ages Christians have attempted to impose this world-view on others. But it can only correctly be applied to those already within the Believing Community. The Ten Words (to give them their Jewish title) were spoken (and should now be spoken) to those for whom 'I am *your* God' makes sense. The Sermon on the Mount was spoken to those who had chosen to follow Jesus. To those belonging to the community of those who have experienced 'God's Salvation' these things can have meaning. They can be heard as a charter of the duties or responsibilities of those living in that Tradition. They describe the actions and, increasingly, the character expected of those who are willing to commit themselves to that Tradition's precepts. Those people will have access to wider traditions which make plain the continuing and very necessary moves towards Freedom within the Faith.

In the past various parts of the Christian Church have attempted to impose adherence to the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount on non-Christians. They have, for example, not merely recommended the value of a day of rest but have imposed 'Sabbath Observance' (albeit on Sunday). Presumably this has been done as part of the Church's Mission. Believing that these texts are God's Law and therefore to be obeyed, they have thought it possible to bring people into Christendom—or, at least towards it—by legislation. They may even have considered that the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount are a summary of 'God's best advice to humanity'.

It is possible that Mrs Thatcher is of this persuasion. But, finding it hard to picture her in the image of a missionary (though certainly a crusader), I believe that her words in Paris were not some momentary aberration but part of her whole 'New Right' world-view. They were part of a refusal to consider social inequalities as anything but personal issues. Revolution and even Protest can have no meaning if one is forced to consider oneself 'blessed' for being poor and persecuted.

These were very inappropriate examples to cite in looking for Human Rights. Worse: Mrs Thatcher's misuse of the Bible is an attempt to impose individualism. It does not take into account the context (social, theological or literary) of the Commandments or Sermon and should not be greeted by Christians as evidence that our nation has Christian principles. Mrs Thatcher's words were not merely an insult to the French but part of a policy to dismiss Human Rights in favour of an extreme individualism and internalistic 'morality'. Synagogue and Church should make it very clear that the Ten Commandments and Sermon on the Mount are not defining Human Rights but believer's duties.