

# Some Christological Moments

In this second part of her recent talk in Spain on *The Christ Epic as a Vision of Human Quality*, Dinah Livingstone looks at some historical moments when the Christ Epic helped inspire people to struggle for a better life.

Jesus' gospel of the reign of God or the reign of kindness, the vision of humanity as one body all sharing the same bread, God the incarnate word 'come down, become flesh, become human' are all a vision of human quality achieved *on Earth*, in human *history*. Of course it is an ideal which has not yet been realised but the vision has inspired many struggles to improve the lot of humanity. So now I want to look very briefly at a few of what I call 'Christological moments' when the Christ Epic helped inspire struggles for a better life, a better human quality of life. There is no time to go into much detail but I can just mention them.

## The Peasants' Revolt and *Piers Plowman*

In 1381 the English peasants revolted against their harsh conditions, especially the imposition of a heavy, unjust tax called the poll tax, which demanded the same payment from every person in the land, however rich or poor. The revolt was contemporaneous with the great medieval poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, which describes Christ's death and descent into Hell, where he challenges Lucifer at Hell's gates:

Thou art Doctor of death, drink that thou madest!  
For I that am Lord of life, love is my drink,  
And for that drink today I died upon Earth.

One of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt, 'hedge priest' John Ball, quotes *Piers Plowman* in one of his letters rousing the peasants. And like Christ at the gates of Hell, they storm the gates of London and challenge the Chancellor who had imposed the poll tax. Incidentally, the peasants' other main leader was Wat Tyler who was killed in the Revolt. When at the end of the 1980s prime minister Margaret Thatcher tried to reintroduce the poll tax, this caused the massive demonstrations that resulted in her fall from power. Some of the demonstrators wore T-shirts printed: AVENGE WAT TYLER!

## The English Revolution and the Diggers

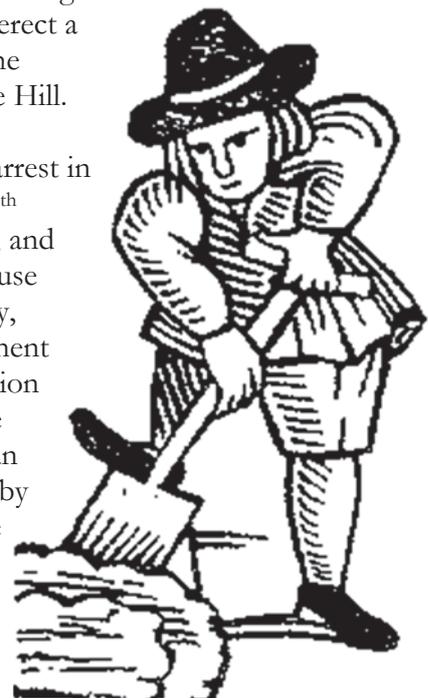
In the first Revolution of modern Europe, in 1649 the English executed their king Charles I, who claimed 'divine right' to rule. In the same year the Diggers occupied land on St George's Hill in Surrey to grow food on it. Their spokesman, Gerrard Winstanley wrote:

The work we are going about is this, to dig up George's Hill and the waste ground thereabouts and to sow corn and to eat our bread together by the sweat of our brows... that we may lay the foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury for all, both rich and poor alike...

Winstanley describes this action as 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters.' (In fact, Christian language was constantly used in the English Revolution.)

On the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Diggers' action, the protest group the Land is Ours occupied part of St George's Hill. On April 1<sup>st</sup> 1999 there was a big procession to erect a memorial to the Diggers on the Hill.

Not far away, following his arrest in London on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1998, and now under house arrest in Surrey, awaiting judgment on his extradition to Spain, to be tried for human rights abuses (by order of Judge Baltasar Garzón), was General Pinochet.



## The French Revolution and *Jerusalem*

Many English poets and intellectuals were inspired by the *liberté, égalité et fraternité* of the French Revolution of 1789. In his poem *The French Revolution* the poet Wordsworth wrote:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
but to be young was very heaven!...

the whole Earth  
the beauty wore of promise.

when people 'were called upon to exercise their skill':

... in the very world, which is the world  
Of all of us, the place where in the end  
We find our happiness, or not at all.

A few years later Wordsworth and many others – including the London poet William Blake – were appalled by the Terror in France. Blake knew Tom Paine, who wrote *The Rights of Man* (1791-2) and was involved in both the American and French Revolutions. Blake also knew Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *The Rights of Woman* (1792) and had spent time in revolutionary France. The French Revolution was avowedly atheist but perhaps Blake's profoundest poetic response to it was his long poem *Jerusalem*, written some years later between 1804 and 1820. In this poem his vision of a fair and kind society is his London, transformed into the shining city of Jerusalem, the bride of Christ the Lamb in the book of Revelation. He lists the familiar names of London districts (where now I also walk every day) to stress – like Wordsworth – that the reign of kindness, the new Jerusalem, is not 'pie in the sky when you die' but can only be realized here on Earth or nowhere:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,  
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,  
Were builded over with pillars of gold  
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

Her little ones ran on the fields,  
The Lamb of God among them seen  
And fair Jerusalem his Bride  
Among the little meadows green.

Pancras and Kentish Town repose  
Among her golden pillars high...

At the end of this lyric section he says:

In my exchanges every land  
Shall walk, and mine in every land  
Mutual shall build Jerusalem  
Both heart in heart and hand in hand.

Today more than 300 languages are spoken in London but we (and the rest of the world) still have plenty of work to do to build Jerusalem.

## Socialism and *News from Nowhere*

Karl Marx lived in London and wrote *Capital* in the British Museum. In 1864 he also compiled the *Provisional Rules for the First International*. An editorial in *The Times*, then Britain's most important newspaper, commented that the programme:

is not mere improvement of humanity but nothing less than a regeneration and that not of one nation only but of mankind. This is certainly the most extensive aim ever contemplated by any institution with the exception perhaps of the Christian Church.

Eleanor Marx, Karl's daughter, was involved in the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League, out of which arose the Independent Labour Party, the first socialist parliamentary party in Britain. So was the poet and artist William Morris. They actively supported important strikes, such as the London Dock Strike in 1889, and demonstrations for workers' rights which clashed violently with the authorities, such as the notorious 'Battle of Trafalgar Square' on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1887, that became known as Bloody Sunday. Marx, father and daughter, and Morris himself were atheists but Morris's (1890) utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, which begins with a fictionalised version of that great battle, describes the achievement of a kind and fair society in language that is deeply embedded in the tradition of the Christ Epic, including the wonderful harvest home feast at the end of the novel, which is much like an 'eschatological banquet'.

Fifty years later during the Second World War, Sir Richard Acland formed the Christian socialist Common Wealth party in 1942 and in that year he also published his ideas for a fair society in *What It Will be Like in the New Britain*. He gave his large estate in Devonshire to the National Trust for public enjoyment. After the War he

joined the Labour party (and was elected Labour MP for Gravesend at the 1947 by-election). The new postwar Labour government carried out a programme of nationalisation of public utilities and set up the National Health Service on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1948, offering universal free public health care. The Christian socialists saw this as part of the gospel of 'good news for the poor'. And of course one of the fundamental requirements of human quality is health.

## The Nicaraguan Revolution and the *Misa campesina*

In 1970 the poet priest Ernesto Cardenal visited Cuba and experienced what he described as his 'second conversion'. The Cuban Revolution was explicitly atheist but Cardenal was greatly impressed by its attempt not only to create a more just society but to make human beings themselves more generous, to become 'the new man' ('new humanity'): *el hombre nuevo*. This idea of *regeneration* had been present in Marx's *Provisional Rules for the First International*, and as Cardenal immediately saw, had been present long before that in the Christ Epic. He had read in Colossians: 'you have stripped off the old self ('man') with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self ('man') ... where Christ is all in all.'

In his *Oracle upon Managua*, published the year after the 1972 Managua earthquake, Cardenal develops a theology of the Revolution, and tells the story of the twenty year old poet Leonel Rugama, who left the seminary where he was training to be a priest and joined the urban guerrilla war. He was killed in 1970 in a famous shoot-out with the dictator's Guard: 'Announce that the kingdom of God is at hand... That's why you fought all evening in that house. After all God is also City... For the sake of that City you joined the urban guerrilla war.' Cardenal and his peasant community in the Solentiname Islands on Lake Nicaragua joined the Sandinista National Liberation Front and a group of them took part in the insurrection that eventually toppled the dictator Somoza.

After the triumph of the Revolution in 1979 Cardenal became Minister of Culture. Famous Nicaraguan singer-songwriter Carlos Mejía Godoy had visited the Solentiname community in their beautiful islands and afterwards wrote the *Misa campesina*. As with the English Revolution of

1649, much of the language of the Nicaraguan Revolution was Christian. Just as the Diggers had spoken of their action as 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters', the creed of the *Misa campesina* identifies the suffering people with the crucified Christ and their struggle with his resurrection:

I trust in you, comrade,  
human Christ, Christ the worker,  
death you've overcome.  
Your fearful suffering  
formed the new humanity  
born for freedom.  
You are rising now  
each time we raise an arm  
to defend the people  
from profiteering dominion,  
because you're living on the farm,  
in the factory and in school;  
your struggle goes on  
and you're rising again.

## Conclusion

Even if we think the story of Christ's resurrection is mythical, and the whole supernatural realm is a product of the human imagination, myths are still vital in the struggle for human quality. They are a powerful form of energy which, like electricity, can be very dangerous, but used wisely, can be of great benefit. Although, like any epic (including the socialist epic), the Christ Epic can and has been used for oppressive purposes, this vision of Christ, 'the Lord, the Universal Humanity' struggling for human fulfilment ('salvation'), killed by the forces against him and rising again, still inspires what is best in us. We can still believe in the gospel of the reign of kindness, peace and justice on Earth, a vision of abundant lives, a happy humanity at home on a well-cared for Earth. We can have faith that it *should* happen, that it *could* happen, even if we have no supernatural guarantee that it *will*. There is no problem in translating the epic into a purely humanist vision. The difficulty is translating the vision into reality. With no God to ensure it, that is a purely human task.

Although the Christ Epic is a 'poetic tale' and the whole supernatural realm is a creation of the human poetic genius, that does not mean they are not important. Poetry is necessary. Two essential things for human quality are kindness and poetry, in that order. Loving kindness is the most essential but without poetry (and the other arts)

we are less than human. The ‘transcendent’ is not supernatural but part of our natural endowment as poetic animals with power to make symbols and metaphors from whatever our ‘enlarged and numerous senses could perceive’.

Finally, it is vital to realize that the Christ Epic is not gnostic or quietest. Its vision of a fulfilled humanity begins with ‘good news to the poor’, the hungry eating their fill. It means decent housing, clean water, good health. Neither is the Christ Epic just about private holiness or individual salvation. It is a vision of a kingdom, a beautiful city, a *polis*. The Christ Epic is *incarnate word*, incarnate in both the physical body and the social body, ‘the whole Christ’. Just as the crucial insight of the Council of Chalcedon was that the Incarnate Word is not *either-or* – *either divine or human* – but *both-and*, so the Christ Epic’s vision of human quality is *both* physical *and* spiritual, *both* personal *and* political. In Spain the *indignados* with leaders like Sister Teresa Forcades, in England the Occupy movement, which camped in St Paul’s churchyard in London for four months in the winter of 2011, and many other protestors everywhere against economic injustice and oppression in these times of ‘austerity’, are fighting for ‘good news for the poor’. The Christ Epic’s vision of humanity embraces *both* the heights of contemplation, the greatest human poetic achievements *and* the struggle for a kind and fair society where human quality can thrive in everyone.

## Postscript

As we were in Spain, I had purposely finished my examples of ‘Christological moments’ with a Spanish-language event. In fact, when I finished my talk, the Latin American participants burst into singing the *Misa campesina*. But in the subsequent discussion one person said: ‘All your examples are in the past.’ So, to give a more up-to-date one I mentioned that when the Occupy movement camped in St Paul’s churchyard (St Paul was a tentmaker) in Advent 2011, the coloured tents looked like very pregnant women.

Pregnant with the word. When I visited the camp myself I was reminded of an ante-natal class with the expectant mums lying down doing breathing exercises. Perhaps that was somewhere at the back of the mind of Canon Chancellor of St Paul’s, Giles Fraser, when he said that if Christ was born on Earth this year, it would probably be

in one of those tents. Fraser had previously been vicar of St Mary’s Church, Putney, where they had mounted an exhibition of the 1647 Putney Debates (Rainsborough: ‘The poorest he hath a right to live as the greatest he...’), because that church was where the debates took place. Fraser resigned from his job at St Paul’s because he did not want those pregnant tents forcibly removed or smashed down.

In the prologue to St John’s gospel it says: ‘The word was made flesh and dwelt among us.’ The Greek word for ‘dwelt’ is ἐσκηνοσεν [*eskenosen*], which literally means ‘pitched a tent’. In the camp there was a wire fence-panel where anyone could pin up what they wanted. Among the many writings on this fence, written in Greek and English, it said: ὁ λογος σαρξ ἐγενετο και ἐσκηνοσεν ἐν ὑμιν [*ho logos sarx egeneto kai eskenosen en humin*]: the Word was made flesh and pitched its tent among us.



Pregnant tents of the Occupy camp, St Paul’s Churchyard, Advent 2011.

A fully referenced version of parts 1 and 2 of this talk is available from the editor: [editor@sofn.org.uk](mailto:editor@sofn.org.uk). The whole talk will be published shortly in Spanish by CETR in Barcelona in a book of their 2014 conference papers.