Jesus: Freedom-Fighter or Prince of Peace?

(*A paper written from the Biblical angle*)

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In an anonymous letter addressed to both Catholic and Protestant Churches in West Berlin at Christmas 1969, the supporters of the Palestine Liberation Front, Al Fatah, challenged the pastors of these churches to speak out openly in favour of this Front, presenting Christ as an example 'who fought against the Roman occupation power'. Did Jesus fight against the Roman occupation power? Was Jesus a Freedom-Fighter?

Der Spiegel, a left-wing Germany newsweekly, in 1966 published a series of articles on 'Jesus the Revolutionist', one of them with a caption: 'Christ too would have taken a machine gun'.

A Christian underground newspaper described the rebellious Jesus:

> 'Wanted
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> Jesus Christ
>
> Alias *The Messiah, the Son of God,*
> King of Kings, Lord of Lords.
> —Notorious leader of an underground liberation movement,
> —Practising medicine, wine-making and food distribution without license,
> —Interfering with the businessmen in the temple, Associating with known criminals, radicals, subversives, prostitutes and street people.
>
> **Beware:** This man is extremely dangerous. His insidiously inflammatory message is particularly dangerous to young people who haven't been taught to ignore him yet. He changes men and claims to set them free'. (*Time*, June 21, 1971.)

These are some sample passages from recent literature trying to present Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, the figure of Jesus has always been the subject of study for theologians, as well as writers of all sorts, past and present. But it has now taken on a new emphasis and a new poignancy in recent times, approaching him from diverging perspectives: historical, existential, political as well as secular. In the absence of any historical certainty, the name 'Jesus' has been made an empty receptacle into which every theologian pours his own ideas.[1] Then each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts

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[1] Cf. A. Kalthoff, *Das Christusproblem: Grundlinien zu einer Sozialtheologie*, Leipzig, 1902, p. 23.

in Jesus; that is, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live. More than that, each individual theologian created Jesus in accordance with his own character[2]. It is inevitable that men who think seriously about God and his action in the world seek to relate the contemporary events to the Lord they worship, and specifically to Jesus Christ. They wish to make God and Christ 'relevant' to the world of today. They want models for living and acting in today's world, and the best model is God in Christ.[3] Men have always sought to shape the divine in their own image and to meet current needs. It is precisely in this context that we have to look at this problem: Was Jesus a Freedom Fighter or a Prince of Peace?

The question is equally relevant in India as this country is passing through a period of crisis at all levels, including theology. In a recent book entitled *Jesus the Rebel*[4], against the traditional picture of Jesus who 'emptied himself taking the form of a servant', of the Babe of Bethlahem lying in the manger as the one inviting us to imitate him because he is meek and mild of heart (Mt 11:28), the author presents Jesus as a rebel against the existing order of things in the world of his time. According to him, Jesus' message was a veritable bombshell. To his searching mother in the temple, sharp and stabbing came the reply of the rebellious son: 'How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house'? Jesus rebelled against parental claims that wanted to make him a good gentleman of the world. He rebelled lest the family thwart his mission. Conclusion: We are also called on to rebel against the order in our own times because it is tainted with evil and sin. Hence this order must be fought against, defeated, purified.

Before we begin to analyse this problem of whether Jesus was a Freedom Fighter or a Prince of Peace, it is important to call to mind the fact that all that we hear today about a political Christ[5], about Christ as a Revolutionist and Rebel, about Jesus and the Revolutionaries[6], about Jesus and Revolution, about Jesus and the Zealots[7], is coupled with the discussion about the larger issue of the relevance

[2] Cf. A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A critical study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, tr. by W. Montgomery, London, 1910, p. 4.

[3] We recall here such revolutionist leaders as Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the physician who played a leading role in the Cuban revolt and was killed in Bolivia in October, 1967, as a guerilla leader; Dom Camillo Torres, the catholic priest who perished as a revolutionary in Columbia on February 15, 1966; the Rev. Charles Keen, of St Columbia's Church, who leads the Black United Front against the regime in Cairo, Illinois.

[4] Augustine Isaac, *Jesus the Rebel*, Sallak Books, Mangalore, 1974.

[5] Cf. Alan Richardson, *The Political Christ*, London, 1973.

[6] O. Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, New York, 1970. Cullmann holds that Jesus was an 'eschatological radical', but 'not of this world' in the way the Zealots were.

[7] S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A study in the political factor in primitive Christianity*, Manchester, 1967. He sees Jesus sympathetic to the Zealots, condemned for political reasons; this side of the story being glossed over by the evangelists in an apologetic way when they wrote years afterwards.

of the teaching and ministry of Jesus to the construction of a contemporary social ethic[8]. Through all the talk about the Church as the continuation of the ministry of Christ, and through the realization that things have not been in the past as they should have been, and through the need to see some vital connection between these two things, there is gradually emerging among Christians all over the world a sense that new ways of talking about Christ and his Church have to be formulated. The result has been a flood of literature on the theology of revolution[9], political theology[10], theology for radical politics[11], the language of Christian revolution[12], and the like[13]. Without going into any evaluation of these trends in theological literature, it can safely be said that their authors search for a support for their views in the pages of the NT, and to a great extent they succeed in coming across data which enable them to carry on their researches. The most obvious thing is that many of them look for a model, and this model they find in Jesus of Nazareth.

(a) Jesus as a Revolutionist and Freedom Fighter

Georg Strecker considers the portrait of 'Jesus as Revolutionist' one of the four essential 'types of conceptions' which must be taken seriously[14]. This statement cannot be brushed aside lightly when we remember that nationalist feeling was strong amongst the Jews of the period. The nation was united in believing that God's people should not be ruled by a heathen power, precisely because Yahweh himself had expressly forbidden government by a foreigner (Dt 17:15). The majority, however, taught by the Pharisees, regarded the presence of the Romans as a divine judgement upon their failure to keep the Law of Moses. Resistance was useless. The maximum they could do was to cherish an internal dislike for the Romans, and especially the publicans who collected taxes from the Jews for the foreign government.

[8] Thus, for example, Hans-Werner Bartsch says: Jesus is to be seen against the political-social background of his day and the continuing tasks of Christians today; Jesus proclaimed the reign of God as an altering of social relationships. Cf. *New Theology*, No. 6, (1969) pp. 185-198.

[9] F. Houtart and A. Rousseau, *The Church and Revolution*, New York, 1971; Boston, Bruce, O. 'How are Revelation and Revolution Related?', *Theology Today* 26 (1969)-70) 142-155; Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, New York, 1973.

[10] J. Metz, *Theology of the World*, New York, 1969.

[11] M. Novak, *A theology for radical politics*, New York, 1969; Beardslee, William A., 'New Testament Perspectives on Revolution as a Theological problem', *Journal of Religion* 51(1971), 15-53.

[12] N. Middleton, *The Language of Christian Revolution*, London, 1968; Gensichen, Hans-Werner, 'Revolution and Mission in the Third World', *Lutheran World*, 16(1969), 12-28.

[13] G. Vicedom, *Mission in einer Welt der Revolution*, Wuppertal, 1969. For a detailed bibliography on the Theology of Revolution, cf. M. Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* Facet Book, Philadelphia, 1971, pp. 42-45.

[14] G. Strecker, '*Die historische und theologische Problematike der Jesusfrage*', *Ev. Theol.* 2(1969), 460ff.

A concrete expression of the resentment of Judaism towards the Roman rule was the origin of the Zealot movement, the roots of which lie far behind in the Maccabean revolt in the second century B.C. Characteristic of this movement was its 'zeal for the Law', which Josephus calls the 'Fourth Philosophy'. But according to many modern scholars it was not a messianic insurrection. The leader of this movement, Judas the Galilean, did not aim at making himself a king. In point of fact, though writers often suggest that a number of messianic pretenders arose in the Roman period, the first of whom we have any knowledge as proclaiming himself to be the expected Messiah was Bar Cochba in A.D. 132. The revolutionaries, whoever they were, in the time of Jesus, were not messianic in character. To be sure, Judas of Galilee left behind him a tradition of revolution, which ultimately led to the outbreak of the Jewish revolt in A.D. 66. Neither Josephus nor any other source supplies evidence for the existence of an organised party of revolutionaries called Zealots at the time of Jesus[15].

The theory that Jesus was a member of the Zealot movement is as old as NT criticism itself. H.S. Reimarus (1694-1768) already proposed the idea. Robert Eisler in his *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist*[16] brought the theories of Reimarus into prominence for a time, and more recently Paul Winter in his book *On the Trial of Jesus*[17] restated the argument. The fact that Jesus had been and is being presented as a revolutionist and freedom fighter has been encouraged by several factors which the NT and the political situation of Palestine at the time of Jesus provided. Lk 13:1-4 has been sometimes referred to as proof of Jesus' involvement in some revolutionary activity. This passage is said to reflect an incident during the fighting when Jesus' insurrectionists from Galilee took the tower of Siloam and were dislodged only when Roman battering rams overthrew the tower. But Jesus does not refer to this incident to make revolutionary propaganda but rather to correct the popular false theory about suffering: victims of disasters, such as capricious deeds of violence or the collapse of the tower of Siloam, were not to be regarded as having received divine retribution for some concealed hideous sinfulness[18].

Those who look for Jesus as associated with the Zealot movement try to find evidence for this in the fact that Jesus had in his company a certain Simon the Zealot. Lk 6:15 calls him 'Simon the Zealot'. The word 'zealot' was added to distinguish him from Simon whom Jesus called Peter (Lk 6:14). Luke is correctly translating into Greek (*zēlōtēs*) the Hebrew 'cananaean' which appears in the list of the Twelve in Mt 10:4 and Mk 3:18. This word has nothing to do with Canaan (KJV); it means 'zealous', 'eager', 'enthusiastic', 'jealous'. The NEB inaccurately paraphrases Mt 10:4 and Mk 3:18 as 'Simon, a member of the Zealot party'. The word *zēlōtēs* does not normally mean a member of a political revolutionary party of the Zealots; the

[15] A. Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-31.

[16] R. Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist*, tr. by A. H. Krappe, New York, 1931.

[17] P. Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, Berlin, 1961.

[18] A. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

general sense of it in the NT is 'religious zeal' or 'religious sectarian rivalry' (cf. Acts 5:17; 7:9; 13:15; 21:20; 22:23; Rom 10:2; 1 Cor 3:3; Gal 1:14; 4:17). The word is used in a favourable or unfavourable sense, according to what one is zealous for or jealous about, but never refers to the Zealot party. What we could say about Simon the Zealot was that he was a converted Pharisee of the stricter sect. There is evidence of such a stricter sect called *qannaim* at an earlier period than the first century A.D. and Paul must have been one of them (cf. Acts 26:5; Phil 3:5; Gal 1:14)[19].

The circumstances of the crucifixion of Jesus have been sometimes produced to conclude that he had something to do with a revolutionist party. Jesus was executed by the order of the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate and the fact that he was executed by crucifixion is proof of its political overtone, because crucifixion was a punishment reserved for slaves as well as for rebels amongst subject races. Moreover the *titulus* on the cross in all four Gospels describes him as 'King of the Jews'. According to Bultmann himself, Jesus was executed 'because his activity was misconstrued as a political activity'. The mockery of the Roman soldiers likewise attests the ground of his accusation. Jesus died as a messianic pretender. It was the one charge upon which the pharisees and the Roman authorities could all unite. According to the Gospels Pilate had his doubts in the matter, since Jesus did not look dangerous to him and the evidence was flimsy; but he could not risk the charge against himself that he was not Caesar's friend[20].

The political overtone of the event is further accentuated by the fact that Jesus was crucified between the *lēstai* (Mt 27:38, 44; Mk 15:27) who reviled him. Luke calls them 'evil doers' and does not use the word *lēstai*. Moreover, he has his own theory of the penitent thief (Lk 23: 39-43). But the important point is that the word *lēstai*, means 'robbers', 'plunderers', 'brigands', 'pirates'. It is used in Mk 11:17 (para) at the incident known as the Cleansing of the Temple, when Jesus, quoting Jer 7:11, declares that the traders have made the temple a den of *lēstai*. It is also used by Luke in the parable of the Good Samaritan who took care of the traveller fallen among the *lēstai* (Lk 10:20, 36)[21].

Equally inconclusive is the suggestion that Jesus' crucifixion was related to his revolutionist movement because Barabbas was released on the occasion. Only John (Jn 18:40) calls him a *lēstes*; the Synoptic Gospels speak of him as a 'notable prisoner and murderer' (Mt 27:16-26; Mk 15:7; Lk 23:18, 25). Even in John the word *lēstes* seems to have the meaning of 'robber' (cf. Jn 10:1, 8). Moreover, the general emphasis of all the Gospels is upon the contrast between Jesus and Barabbas. It is unlikely that Pilate could have released a dangerous revolutionist in exchange for Jesus. Some even doubt the historical value of the Barabbas story, as we know nothing about the alleged 'custom' of releasing a prisoner at the feast as a favour to the Jews[22].

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 41-44; M. Hengel, *op. cit.*, 10ff.

[20] M. Hengel, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[21] A. Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-33.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

(b) The So-Called Revolutionary Teaching of Jesus

(1) *Mt. 10:34*: 'You must not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a *sword*'. This passage refers to the division created in family life when a member accepted faith in Jesus; the saying would be preserved because it spoke to the actual situation of those who found themselves ostracised by their closest relatives and friends on account of their christian allegiance. Jesus' call to decision and response forces one to take a position, and this creates division, strife and even persecution, right in the midst of the families. In fact, Lk 12:51 has here 'division' (*diamerismes*).

(2) *Mt 11:12*: 'From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence (*biazetai*), and men of violence (*biastai*) take it by force'. (cf. Lk. 16:16). It is a *crux* for interpreters. Some have suggested that the 'men of violence' are the Zealots, who seek to establish the Kingdom of God by revolutionary action. But the verb *biazetai* can have both a middle and passive meaning; in the former case it means the kingdom exercising power on man with its coming. Who are then the *biastai*? Some suggest that they are the rejected common people (Lk 15:1). Or it may be a reference to the powers of evil opposing the kingdom. In any case it has nothing to do with the establishment of a kingdom through revolution.

(3) *Lk. 22: 35-38*: The saying about the sword in this passage is most difficult exegetically and in terms of content. In its present context it is directed to the disciples with reference to the period after the departure of Jesus. No longer are they to go forth unequipped, without money, traveller's bags, or sandals, as when the disciples were sent forth (Lk 10:4), but well-equipped with everything, purse, bag—and sword. 'Whoever has no sword, let him sell his mantle and buy one'. The sword belongs to the normal equipment of the Jewish traveller as protection against robbers and wild animals. It could be that this passage has been awkwardly placed in its present context to account for the disciples having swords at the arrest of Jesus (Lk 22:50). To suggest that Jesus was preparing the disciples for an armed resistance to his arrest is unconvincing, since two swords would hardly have been adequate against well-armed troops who came to arrest Jesus. But Eisler cleverly interpreted this passage: 'They answer by showing him, each of them, naturally, two swords'.[23]

(c) The Jesus of the Gospels

If Jesus was not a Freedom Fighter in the accepted sense of the term, who was he? Here we come to the real task of evaluating the NT and the Gospels in particular against the background of their understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. On the one hand it is no more than a pietism to take Jesus as a Prince of Peace who went about doing good while his enemies went about doing him harm and planning to kill him. Jesus was a man in his own right who knew what was in a man (Jn.

[23] R. Eisler, *Iesous Basileus ou basileusas* (Jesus, a King not Ruling) Heidelberg, 1931, Vol. II, p. 268.

2:25). As a prophet of a cosmic involvement he had his message to give, his criticisms to raise, and his task to fulfil. The overall picture of this mission of Christ we would very well call FREEDOM, but a freedom of its own kind, a freedom no religious founder has ever stood for and achieved even at the cost of his own life.

Jesus came to preach and establish a community of mankind in which every man becomes a free human being. The essence of the Kingdom he preached was mainly this. As the basis of this freedom Jesus revealed himself as our brother and God as our Father. The dimensions of this revolutionary idea were far-reaching. We can only hint at a few points. It is seen in his teaching about loving one's enemies, doing good to those who hate us, forgiving those who offend us, rejoicing under persecution, giving one's cloak to the villain who has already taken one's coat, regarding even the Samaritan as one's neighbour and recognising virtue in a Roman centurion.[24]

The freedom Jesus stood for is a freedom through non-violence, a freedom of personal appeal, directed primarily to the conscience of the individual, the way of patient persuasion and concrete assistance in life. He exhorted men to metanoia, he taught them the true meaning of life and showed them the greatness of being the children of God. The freedom given by Jesus is the freedom of Diakonia, and the freedom of Agape, where it is not force that is at work, but a spirit of sacrifice and humility. This particular nature of freedom established by Christ made it necessary that Jesus had to act against conventions and established patterns of behaviour. 'Blessed are you poor', proclaimed Jesus; but 'woe to you that are rich', he told the rich. This proclamation was challenging the powers that ruled the world. He kept company with the sinners and the tax-collectors (Lk 15:1-2), and he stood on the side of the women taken in adultery and challenged the self-righteous men to throw the first stone at her (Jn 8:1-11)[25].

The most important aspect of the freedom that is given by Christ is that it is a freedom which he gained through suffering, sacrifice and death. As the eschatological prophet, he came into conflict with the Sacred Torah thus being branded as the despiser of the word of God and hence deserving the gallows. Jesus' remarkable courage shown in the cleansing of the temple was an act of prophetic rebellion and challenge that upset the temple management and the priestly class. This naturally led him to the cross and to death.[26]

Jesus rose from the death and that was the supreme expression of the freedom he could give to mankind. In the language of Paul, Christ gave us a freedom from the Law, from Sin and from Death. 'Christ set us free, to be free men. Stand firm, then, and refuse to be tied to the yoke of slavery' (Gal. 5:1), Paul wrote to the Galatians. 'In Christ Jesus the life-giving law of the Spirit has set you free from the law of Sin and Death' (Rom 8:2), Paul again wrote to the Romans.

[24] Cf. A. Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47; John R. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, Eerdemans, 1972.

[25] Cf. S. Ryan, 'The Call to be Free' *Jeevadhara* 3 (1973), 222-223.

[26] Augustine Isaac, *op. cit.*, *passim.*

It is the freedom of the authentic men, the freedom of the children of God, the freedom in the spirit of God. It is a freedom from our egoism and selfishness. It is a costly freedom, a freedom man is afraid of attempting and ashamed of accomplishing.

Living Christian Freedom Today

Our discussion about whether Jesus was a Freedom Fighter or Prince of Peace is not a mere academic joke but a relevant and vital issue in the context of India, both in its 'religious' and in its 'secular' dimensions. There is now emerging in this country a new awareness that the freedom gained for us by Christ is something every Indian Christian and every Indian citizen is entitled to enjoy. Among people accustomed to long authoritarian traditions, irresponsible obedience and unquestioning conformism, there now emerges a process by which men begin to challenge the totalitarian ideologies and ask for the freedom of the gospel to play its role. It is a matter of great satisfaction to see numerous points of growth in the area of freedom, the freedom for which Jesus stood and paid a price. It could be said that this process of the liberation of man is gradually expanding and accelerating in all spheres of life within the church and without, in the very concept of religion and church, of authority and teaching, and of the central values of existence, both christian and human.

It is within the context of the call to freedom and the craving for it in every human heart that we have to think of the nature of the freedom we have to exercise. In the same way as Christ constituted this freedom through his suffering and death, through his self-abnegation and self-denial, we too have to exercise our freedom in terms of the other, caring for the other, serving the other, being for the other. True Christian freedom can be enjoyed only in so far as man becomes unselfish and altruistic. In the language of Paul it means ceasing to live according to the flesh and starting to live according to the Spirit. It is an expensive freedom. No one should look out for his own interests; he should on the other hand consider the interests of others. Freedom is not an excuse for indulging one's self. Paul describes the nature of this freedom in 1 Cor. 12-14 and Rom. 14, and shows how it seeks to help others, respect others, avoid hurt to others, how it attends to persons and concrete situations, how tactful and flexible it is, how delicate and respectful, how divine and human it is. It is a freedom that lives by dying, a freedom that grows by self-giving. Christian freedom is sacrificial freedom, and it gives and works itself out for others, bearing others' burdens of poverty and sickness, loneliness and guilt, forsakeness and wretchedness. Christ fought for this freedom and died for this freedom and through that he became the Prince of *shalom*, a *shalom* between God and man as well as between man and man.[27]

[27] Christian Duquoc, *Jésus, homme libre, Esquisse d'une Christologie*, Les Editions du Cerf. Paris, 1974.