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Towards a Theology of Protest

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We live in an age of protest, when rebellion is in the air all over the world. Particularly among the younger generation the mood is one of revolt against established ways and time-worn institutions—political, academic, social and religious. This great uprising is quite unprecedented, and in spite of the fact that it is so often amorphous, unbalanced or just plain ridiculous in some of its manifestations, an attempt must certainly be made to come to terms with it theologically. Does the Christian Faith have a 'challenging relevance' in an age of protest or are the Christian options only an unqualified benediction or a cynical detachment from all such movements?

Gunnar Myrdal repeats a very popular view when he suggests that religion is inimicable to change, revolution or constructive protest. He writes: 'Religion should be studied for what it really is: a ritualized and stratified complex of highly emotional beliefs and valuations that gave the sanction of sacredness, taboo, and immutability to inherited arrangements, modes of living, and attitudes . . . Understood in this realistic and comprehensive sense, religion usually acts as a tremendous force for social inertia. The writer knows of no instance in present-day South Asia where religion has induced social change. Least of all does it foster realization of the modernization ideals . . . From a planning point of view, this inertia related to religion, like other obstacles, must be overcome by policies for inducing changes, formulated in a plan for development. But the religiously sanctioned beliefs and valuations not only act as obstacles among the people to getting the plan accepted and effectuated but also as inhibitions in the planners themselves in so far as they share them, or are afraid to counteract them.'¹ It is perhaps only too easy to criticize such wild generalizations as betraying an almost total ignorance of the impact of Christianity in India, and of contemporary movements within Hinduism. Indeed Myrdal may be in many ways a *śiṣya* of Max Weber, but in his negative evaluation of the social significance of religion he stands at the opposite extreme from his master. But for all that, we should in fairness admit that Myrdal is closer to the truth than most of us would care to confess in an

¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1968, pp. 103-104.

age when change, revolution and protest have such popularity. However much the theologians and Church leaders may speak about participation in nation-building, involvement in rapid social change, theologies of protest and new reformations, we are left with the uneasy feeling that Christian practice and the life of the Church have been almost totally unaffected, and that a great deal of what has been said and written may be accounted as 'jumping on the bandwagon' of the present mood rather than a searching examination of the Christian heritage, and a practical obedience to new-found insights. Only such new insights and such changes of practice can make plain the 'challenging relevance' of the Gospel in an age of protest.

It is, of course, only fair to say that theology shows signs of realignment in response to the challenges of the day. This is shown, for example, by the mounting revulsion against the rather superficial and dangerous abstraction from ethical issues represented by most varieties of existentialist theology. For Kierkegaard the social was a 'trap', and existentialism is now increasingly felt to be an irresponsible escape from social responsibility which in the end is barely distinguishable from typically Lutheran conservatism. With Moltmann and Pannenberg we recover a faith that is more concerned with the objective. Moltmann and the new 'Christian Marxists', much influenced by the thought of Ernst Bloch, mark a quite new stage in the meeting of Christianity and Marxism, in many ways far more sophisticated and constructive than anything that has gone before. One might say that only now is dialogue in the true sense coming into being. Moltmann is significant in a number of ways. As against the Barthians he asserts the ultimate seriousness for Christians of questions of social and adopts a more radical stand. His doctrine of history and eschatology avoids the extraordinary fuzziness which existentialist theologians have given these concepts. Faith is concerned with objective happenings at least as much as subjective states. And at the centre of his thought he puts an objective resurrection. The old dichotomy of *heilsgeschichte* and 'ordinary' history must now be set aside in order that history as such may be taken seriously.

There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years on the 'theology of revolution'. Much of it has a strong air of *a posteriori* justification. Some of the writing has focused on the question of the 'just revolution'—how far is the use of violence permissible as an instrument of social change? This debate is always in danger of degenerating into scholasticism in view of its close parallels with classical, and now astoundingly dated, discussion of the just war, but is of interest as a demonstration of how generally absolute pacifism is now rejected as *the* Christian ethical stance. An odd feature of much of the recent writing under this head is that it tends to assume without much question that revolution—political, social and economic—is good from a Christian point of view. Without much reference to the Scripture or the

Christian tradition, an oddly uncritical attitude to revolutionary change in all its forms and nuances is commonly adopted.

It is obviously healthy that ethics and action should find their way back to the centre of Christian concern, as long as this tendency does not simply indicate a nervous anxiety to reflect the mood of the day but rather a desire to relate the Gospel constructively to that mood. It is perhaps far too easily assumed that Jesus was a political, social and economic revolutionary, disregarding the abundant scriptural evidence that he refused to identify himself with radical political movements. The radicalism of Jesus is surely more subtle, more comprehensive, and more penetrating than is often suspected, and the Christian Faith accordingly has a distinctively restless and rebellious quality which makes it singularly capable of making a constructive contribution at the present movement.

These reflections sent me back to a rather neglected book: David Cairns's *The Faith that Rebels* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1928, Sixth Edition, 1954). In certain rather superficial ways which do not affect the substance of the argument, this is a dated book, but it seems to me to argue remarkably convincingly that very close to the heart of the Christian Faith is revolt against evil and suffering, injustice and inhumanity, and even death itself. The time has perhaps come for a revival and development of Cairns's thought. The book is explicitly a reinterpretation of the miracles of Jesus; but at least in embryo we find here the beginnings of a thorough-going reinterpretation of Christianity of immense contemporary relevance. The following by no means adequate outline will, I hope, lead some to the examination of the fuller argument in the book itself.

Cairns begins by discussing two interpretations of the miracles, the 'traditional' and the 'modernist', both of which he rejects. In the traditional view the miracles are seen as proofs of Christ's claims and power, as Christian evidences. They were regarded not as part of the Gospel, but as helps towards the acceptance of the Gospel, seals on a document, not the document itself (p. 25). But this, argues Cairns, is to go counter to the whole tendency of the Gospels themselves. Jesus as he is depicted in Scripture never sought publicity for his miracles, never used them to force people into believing in him, or to prove beyond dispute that he was who he claimed to be. The miracles were never used to coerce faith, but they are virtually always described as occurring in the context of already existing faith which they may strengthen. Instances are recorded where Jesus could not perform miracles because of lack of faith. But if the traditional interpretation is unbiblical, it also suffers from the fact that in the modern world hardly anyone would accept the miracles of Jesus as in any way convincing evidence for the truth of the Gospel. They represent an understanding of the universe which is so alien from the modern *weltanschauung* that if they are to be accepted at all it can only be as a consequence rather than a cause of faith in Jesus.

The modernist position shows profound uneasiness with the concept of miracle as such, and attempts to divest the Gospel of its miraculous element as purely a set of pious imaginings produced by the superstitious attitudes of the ancient world. A 'closed system' view of the world can have no place for miracles, and if miracles in themselves are suspect it is quite clear that so far from miracles proving the Gospel it is necessary to bowdlerize it of the whole miraculous element, or at least as much as possible. Miracles may be explained away or rejected altogether without losing the essence of the message of Jesus, and indeed this message can only speak clearly and truly to modern man when divested of its miraculous dress. Thus the feeding of the 5,000 is explained by what one might call the 'sandwich theory': some of the multitude had brought food with them and were provoked to share it by the example of the winsome altruism of Jesus. The healing miracles may be explained as the work of 'the well-known Galilean psychiatrist', and the nature miracles as the illusions of credulous and simple men utterly devoted to their Lord. Even the Resurrection has to go as an objective happening: the tomb could not have been empty, but the disciples had visions or inward experiences which they chose to interpret in crude and material terms. Miracles, to the modernist, are an embarrassment.

As against such views, Cairns argues that the miracles are an essential part of the stuff of the Gospel, and provide an indispensable clue to our understanding of Jesus and of faith. It is true that Jesus gloried in his miracles, but as what? Surely as the opening and decisive victories in the war against evil and sin. This war, according to the New Testament, was continued in the miracles of the Apostles and of other men of faith. The ending of miracles, or at least the great reduction in their number, was not an indication of the end of the Apostolic Age, but of a great decline in strong and living faith. Cairns quotes Harnack: 'The common life of the Church has now its priests, its altar, its sacraments, its holy book and rule of faith. But it no longer possesses "the Spirit and power"'. As the proofs of "the Spirit and of power" subsided after the beginning of the third century, the extraordinary moral tension also became relaxed, paving the way gradually for a morality which was adapted to a worldly life' (pp. 20-21). The lack of miracles and suspicion of the miraculous is a sign of declining faith and also of moral compromise.

The miracles of Jesus which had once been the 'glories of the faith of all' have now become 'burdens on the faith of many modern Christians' (p. 23). And with the rejection of the past reality and present possibility of miracle goes a subtle transformation of the Christian Faith. The picture of Jesus is changed: he ceases to be a rebel whose acts are decisive in the struggle against evil, and instead becomes merely a teacher and example of righteous life. Indeed the Gospel accounts of his life are so garnished with an unacceptable miraculous element that it is hard not to see him, when the miracles are removed, as 'one who should

rather have been taken care of than crucified' (p. 44). The coinage of faith is devalued, and prayer becomes a psychological exercise which may be salutary to one's inner spiritual condition, but certainly cannot move mountains. The ethic of compromise, resignation and submission to the inexorable will of God replaces the ethic of protest in obedience to a loving God.

The modernist view that Cairns attacks, like the more recently fashionable existentialist position, depends on cutting the world into two halves. Religion, faith and prayer are relevant only in the subjective, inward realm; outward things are the proper concern of science, and theology must preserve silence in relation to them. But this dichotomy, whatever form it takes, is clearly untenable, as Bonhoeffer has since emphasized. Either the Christian Faith is concerned with the whole of life or with nothing at all; and each year it becomes increasingly difficult to point to any realm that is immune to scientific investigation. Christianity cannot insulate itself from the challenge of science by withdrawing into some esoteric and impregnable realm of Spirit; nor can science guarantee to leave to religion an exclusive demesne. Christianity must have a cosmology no less than an anthropology, and cannot escape from the dialogue with science and with movements of protest and revolution.

The miracle stories, says Cairns, give a remarkable picture of Jesus at war with evil and show faith to be something positive, optimistic and, above all, rebellious. For Jesus the healing of disease and the taming of nature were essential parts of the Kingdom. Prayer, therefore, is not something passive but active—not 'passive self-surrender to an inevitable will' but the essential concomitant to effort to combat evil, concerned for objective things as well as subjective graces. 'The cumulative case,' he writes, 'seems to me irresistible. The Gospel theory of the "miracles" of Jesus is that they are the answers of God to the prayers of the Ideal Son, the Man who is the supreme instance in history of Faith, Hope and Love; and they say with unambiguous plainness that that Ideal Man invited his disciples to similar enterprises of faith, encouraging them to believe that in proportion to their faith would be the manifestation of God's order, the revelation of man's life as God meant it to be' (p. 85).

The practical and ethical implications of Cairns's view are of the greatest significance. It is only too easy to think of the natural order, or of the development of history, or of evolution as unequivocal manifestations of the divine order. Or, on the other hand, one may attempt to limit God entirely to the subjective. In either case the consequence is ethical resignation and miracles become absurd interruptions, deviations, problems. But what if the miracles of Jesus are themselves the clues to the nature of the divine order? In that case faith ceases to be in any way unqualified resignation or acceptance of the *status quo*; but rather a critical, active rebellion, armed with the Grace of God. The faith to which we are called is anything rather than 'acquies-

cence, it is rather . . . uncompromising rebellion against what seems the natural course of events' (p. 224).

Christianity, then, is only rightly understood as 'the Faith that Rebels'. As this it distinguishes itself clearly from the religion of resignation to circumstances, of acceptance of things as they are, the religion of detachment from the world, of tolerance as the supreme virtue; and displays itself as a religion of protest of action, a religion which refuses to resign itself to a world in which there is suffering, inhumanity, disease, pain, poverty and war, a religion which struggles as it prays that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. This is a religion of restlessness, of disturbance, a religion that creates dissatisfaction rather than producing solace, a movement of protest.

But even if we accept the broad outlines and intentions of Cairns's interpretation of Christianity, we must be careful to put it in such a way that it is more than a Christian alignment with the current mood of protest, a jumping on the bandwagon. A great deal in modern movements of protest is diffuse, unspecific and ultimately irresponsible. Protest sometimes takes the form of bohemian abstraction from the problems and possibilities of life. But nevertheless an age of protest ought to be an age in which the challenging relevance of Christian Faith can more easily be accepted, and in which the Church is provoked to the recovery of lost visions.

And Cairns surely requires to be qualified and modified in certain important respects. Christian protest must be released from too specific and exclusive involvement with miracle. This is not to say that Cairns's interpretation of miracle is unconvincing, or that Christians should not pray and hope for miracles; nor that otherworldliness or the supernatural element should be rejected—these, after all, provide the distinctive Christian perspective on life. But surely we must also assert (what Cairns would not have denied) that the Christian attitude of protest is expressed no less in loving work, medical, scientific, educational, and so on, or in active involvement in social protest than in prayer for miracles.

Further, it is necessary to develop Cairns's thought on the relation of Science and Christianity. It has often been argued that the Christian belief in the rationality of God the Creator was at the root of the development of modern science, and that the scientific attitude could hardly have appeared without this. But is it not perhaps just as important to say that the Christian mood of protest against slavery to nature (Paul's 'beggarly elements'), against suffering, against ignorance are at the roots of science, technology, modern medicine, and much social protest? It required more than a conviction of order and rationality in the universe to produce the scientific attitude; more than a theistic conviction that the universe was put in subjection to man; it demanded the acceptance of a moral obligation to change things that were known to be evil; it called for obedience, conscious or unconscious, to God's commands; it involved at least implicitly a faith that rebels

rather than a faith in the uniformity of nature. This is, not to baptize these developments against their will; it is simply to recognize their intimate connection with God's purposes as mediated and made explicit in the Gospel. Nor is it to say that they are the only, or morally unequivocal expressions of God's will.

In the third place, it is surely necessary to supplement Cairns's interpretation by placing it in the context of a Christian view of history far more explicitly than he does himself. Here I feel, Cairns's thought may very well be grafted on to Moltmann's eschatology. The Faith that Rebels is a striving towards God's future, and is pregnant with hope, not despair. It looks forward, as well as backward, to Jesus. Christian protest is historical through and through. It is optimistic, confident, joyful, and as a protest for God it bears on the widest possible range of affairs. It is aware of the significance of structures, movements and historical processes and dares to evaluate them in the light of the Gospel, and work in and through them.

Fourthly, we must not forget that judgement begins with the household or faith. If Christianity essentially and inevitably involves protest, this must first be directed against the Church of Christ itself. For this reason it would be fatal to shrug off as a temporary aberration the present mood of revolt, inside and outside the Church, against so-called orthodox theologies and venerable forms of worship, against ecclesiastical detachment from great social issues, against legalism and scholasticism and lovelessness, against rigid structures and meaningless rituals. Here we should see the judgement of God and a call to the recovery of the Faith that Rebels by the Church which is the proper Guardian of that Faith.

If protest is accepted as a fundamental element in Christian Faith, we must examine carefully how this insight affects Christian thought and practice and organization, and perhaps above all the extent and nature of Christian involvement in other movements of protest. It provides a basis for a constructive dialogue with Marxism, and the occasion for the re-examination of commonly accepted positions on race, poverty, violence and countless other problems. But the most exacting and exciting task is to plot by reference to the Bible and particularly the life of Jesus the nature and extent of Christian protest and its bearing on all manner of situations. For if protest today is to be authentically Christian it must be in continuity with that of Jesus and with that of the Church down the ages.