

# Reform or Revolution?

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Our age is wrongly labelled the age of permissiveness. We are supposed to be living in a time of tolerance: yet never has there been so much violent protest against other people's beliefs and activities.

Ours is an age when, in the West at least, the old beliefs which held society together have gone, and no new and commonly accepted belief has taken their place. This is a dangerous state for a free society, for freedom requires a society which disciplines itself. A self-disciplined society requires an agreed basis of belief, an agreed authority to which to appeal.

Christianity can establish that authority — it has done so in the past. Humanism, which is the only visible alternative, cannot do so. Quite apart from whether it is true or not, humanism has no grass-roots support. The humanist who tells the working man that racial discrimination is wrong is written off as a so-and-so intellectual and told what to go and do with himself. Yet humanism is now beginning to take over from the Christian faith as the intellectual system on which the establishment relies as the basis for ideas and laws for running society.

But to change the basis of belief without carrying the country is to head straight for trouble, to oppose the liberal establishment against the rednecks, the protesters against

the skinheads. The only reason humanism has got so far is that Christians have lost their nerve. So often they have opted out of the major issues which face society. They have been afraid to oppose the humanist with a well-thought-out and solidly established Christian point of view. In so far as they have any public position at all, they have been content to reflect as inoffensively as possible whatever happens to be the current tide of intellectual opinion. As a result the average person is like a sheep without a shepherd. Hardly any of the major issues of humanist reform have enjoyed popular support, let alone been carried in response to popular opinion. Some of the changes may have been right, some were undoubtedly wrong, but the majority of people have been left behind. This is to leave the way open for the demagogue—and there is more than one about.

The protest movement is in some ways a response to this situation, an attempt to widen the base of intellectual ideals, or at least to give them a front of popular support. But the protest movement also does not carry the average member of the population with it. Protest is an assertion rather than an argument, and if the average man is unconvinced the situation is worse than before. The liberal establishment is embarrassed and not helped.

The Christian church, on the other hand, is organized in the grass roots of society. It is organized to argue, in that the pulpit and the sermon are the centre of the Protestant service.

And it is organized above all to relate men's knowledge of society as it is lived to a theory of what life should really be like. The abdication of the Christian church from its role in society is a catastrophe for both church and society.

## Christian and non-Christian attitudes to social change

Of course humanism has picked up many of its ideas from Christianity, and so there are many issues on which the Christian will agree with the humanist. But there are also many points on which he will disagree. The Christian gospel gives a picture of human nature which the non-Christian will not always share. It gives an order of priorities which he will not always want to follow. Above all, the Christian will test the mood of the moment, the intellectually accepted ideas, against the eternal truths of the faith, so he will not always be carried away by a wave of intellectual opinion.

So the Christian cannot seek the limited objectives of the protesters regardless of everything else. He has to keep a balance. The Christian faith is a comprehensive and systematic faith. It is a total way of life where every part is balanced with every other. We cannot find quick solutions to one problem at the cost of raising half a dozen others. The Christian cannot pin his cause to a slogan—or even to a proof-text. He has to abide by a balanced doctrine of human nature and human affairs. The Christian way may be slower and less spectacular than the grand protest, but it is a good deal more certain and effective. The Christian is less concerned with the poses of protest and more concerned with their practical effect. And in the Christian way there are no short cuts, especially not that of violence.

But it is not only on the issue of violence that the Christian parts company with the protest movement. Basic beliefs are involved, such as the Christian conviction that all men are sinners. The rich are sinners, but so are the poor. The right are sinners, but so are the left. The national enemies are sinners, but so are the nationalists.

The oppressors are sinners, but so are the oppressed. The junta in power are sinners, but so are the revolutionaries. The anti-party group are sinners, but so is the party. This view must at least dampen the belief in revolution as a short cut to paradise. The Christian must at least hesitate to throw over society if he has the shrewd suspicion that the revolutionaries, for all their ardour and idealism out of office, will be subject to the same temptations in office, and with no greater power to resist them, than the men they have just turned out. If that is true, it is scarcely worth destroying society in the process of making the change.

But in disbelieving the starry-eyed supporters of revolution, the Christian does not have to be a complete cynic. It is, of course, possible to have a change for the better. Life would be intolerable if it were not. Without Christ human nature may not change. But human behaviour can change. This needs a change of society, not just a change of government. Governments, even autocratic governments, must all reflect, to a large extent, the society they govern. There is a grain of truth in the maxim that a nation gets the government it deserves. An ungovernable society will certainly produce repressive governments. A corrupt society will probably produce corrupt governments. Christians who want better government will get more mileage from efforts to change society than they will from devising better schemes for seizing the radio station or kidnapping ministers.

### **Christian involvement in social reform**

There are also Christians, however, who believe that only a change in human nature, by the saving power of Christ, can change human behaviour. They are neither revolutionaries nor reformers. They would wash their hands of all worldly affairs. They are in an old tradition, as old as the monasteries and convents of the dark ages. But

they are not in the mainstream of Protestant tradition and, above all, they are not in the tradition of Christ Himself. He did not teach that expectation of future bliss can allow Christians to ignore present misery. He taught His followers about the life hereafter where there would be no sin and the Father's will would be done, but He also taught them to pray to the Father, 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' He died to save men's souls from eternal death, but while He was alive He also saved their bodies from present disease and suffering. He preached to them of the bread of life which never perishes, but He would not dream of sending the crowds away when they were hungry until they had been fed with ordinary, perishable, earthly bread. He preached life eternal, but He also restored life on earth to the widow's son, the centurion's daughter and to Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus.

The teaching of the Bible, of both Old and New Testaments, is that God rules over earth as well as heaven. This is His creation and we are His creatures. The creation has been spoiled through sin. The light of His glory has been dimmed; the fruit of His work has been corrupted. But He has put His church on earth so that there should be some limit, so that His glory should not be completely blacked out nor His world utterly corrupted. Those who follow Him are to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. We are to show our fellow-men how the Maker intended mankind to live. Men were given the world in trust, and the Christian has been given the laws by which that trust is to be carried out.

At first sight this may seem arrogant. But it is not. The view which the Christian puts and which he tries to act out in his life is not his own view. He has no pride of authorship. The Christian view of life is passed down from a divine Author and has been acted out through a hundred generations. There is no arrogance in putting forward a view of life based on that authorship and that weight of

experience. The arrogance of today lies in those who assert that in their generation alone, indeed in their fraction of a generation, lies the key to truth; that their unaided intellects and their untested assertions are sufficient for all the harsh problems of life.

What Christian, believing the truth of the Christian message, believing that the law of God is as necessary for this world as for the world to come, believing that it is the schoolmaster to lead his own generation to Christ, can be content to leave the field to the unproved philosophies which are now being put forward? It may not be a sin of commission, but it is most certainly a sin of omission. A Protestant monasticism which refuses to be involved in public affairs is not the path to a holy life. It is a breach of the second great commandment, that we are to love our neighbour as ourself. To try to improve society is not worldliness but love. To wash your hands of society is not love but worldliness.

It may be argued by those with long memories that this is no more than the old social gospel, and that in abandoning the gospel of salvation for the social gospel seventy or eighty years ago the church went badly astray. And so it did. A social gospel cannot save. It is salvation by works under another name. Christians are right to be worried when the clergy cease to make spiritual care their first objective. Not only is the teaching of the flock a full-time job, but the preaching of eternal truth must be separated from shifting arguments over temporal affairs where the moral and technical arguments can be sorted out only by the expert who is also a Christian.

This involves preaching a social law, not a social gospel. Without the law, the world sees no need of the gospel. This generation will not find its way to the Christian faith if the gospel is preached without the ground work of the law. And the law must not only be preached in church, it must be preached through the lives of Christians who have thought out its implications and who live it and act it in full

view of a watching world.

Others may react to a call to change society by saying that the Christian can do little in the face of overwhelming evil. Are we not told by John that 'the whole world is in the power of the evil one', and by Paul that 'evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse'? The church itself represents only a fraction of the population. And, within the professing church, the great majority scarcely believe the Christian gospel. If you are a minority within a minority, how can you have any influence? How can a Christian living under a totalitarian regime hope to argue with the regime on Christian grounds? How can mere words move the massive power structure of a feudal society? Even in the West, what hope has a Christian ethic in face of the shift of the intellectual to secular thought and the indifference of the vast bulk of society?

#### Four reasons for Christian action

If we believe in the sovereignty of Almighty God, however, then all this is within His power. His grace, as Paul tells us, is sufficient, and His strength is made perfect in our weakness. He does not command His followers to make futile gestures.

The whole Bible is an account of the sovereignty of God. He brought Israel up out of Egypt. He gave His people the promised land. When they followed Him, He strengthened this little kingdom against its enemies. When they left Him, He let events take their course and they were taken into captivity. When the seventy years of captivity were over, He moved a heathen king to send them back. He enabled Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem in the face of hostility all around. The Christian church itself started as a few frightened men and women in a locked room.

If the first reason for not giving in to objections to the need for Christians to change society is doctrinal, the second is historical. Over two thousand years the Christian church and the Christian faith have

had enormous influence. When it was born, the Roman Empire dominated the scene. If Christianity is a fraction of a fraction now, what was it then? The Empire was totalitarian and powerful. The ideology which was supposed to cement it together was Emperor-worship, as alien to the Christians as any ideology today. Yet it was the church which survived, not the Empire. It was the belief in the deity of the Emperor which faded, not the belief in the deity of Christ. The faith has had its times of peril — more peril from its professed followers once it became respectable than from Goth or Vandal, Saracen or Moor, Communist or Fascist. It has had its times of weakness, but always there has been the power of God to pull it back, to set it on course and to re-establish its vigour.

The third reason is practical. The Christian faith is true. It gives a true account of human nature. The Bible is the Maker's handbook. It gives the only authentic and consistent account of how men can live together in society. When it is applied it works. When some other ideology is applied, it does not work. The Christian is not a quack, experimenting on society with the latest bright and untried ideas. He is the sound practitioner, to whom society instinctively turns when the latest bout of quackery has brought it to its knees.

Of course much has passed for Christianity which is nothing of the kind. The kingdom of God, Jesus told us, is like a great tree which shelters many strange fowl. Men may have been hanged for stealing sheep in a so-called Christian country, but they were not hanged on any Christian principle. Although the laws of ancient Israel are not binding on the Christian church, it is interesting to note that they were a good deal more severe on offences against the person than on offences against property. They would certainly not have punished a train robber more severely than a murderer.

In putting forward policies for today's world which are based on

Christian principles, we are not trying to push some way-out or impractical ideal. Solutions and policies put forward on Christian principles should be more practical, more balanced, freer from unforeseen side-effects than those put forward on other principles. Take one example, often seen as a niggling bone of contention—Sunday. The Christian rule of one day in seven, when everyone who can takes the whole day off work, is now almost universally adopted, at least in principle, even in Communist countries. And even if the onslaught on it today is substantial, the Christian can be sure of solid support from the working man; and not just for the principle of one day in seven away from work, but for one day in the week when business closes down—which is a good deal more restful than a day when you are off work but everyone else is working.

Christian views of respect for the individual are seen too in the move since the Reformation to more democratic forms of government and latterly in the free collective bargaining of trades unions. It is interesting to note that it is only in countries strongly influenced by the Protestant ethic that democracy and free collective bargaining have taken strong root. Christian views of the material universe, which take it as a gift from God, to be held in trust and developed for the benefit of mankind, are behind the now universally accepted ideas of economic growth and development. There is no government which would now dare to admit that it had no policies of economic development for its people, no rich country which would refuse to subscribe to the development of a poorer country.

The fourth reason for positive Christian action is spiritual, in that it is based on the fact that God's Spirit operates to some extent in all men. Orthodox Christians have reacted strongly against the heresy which, despite all the evidence to the contrary, makes salvation universal, whatever a man's beliefs or actions. But, in his reaction, the orthodox Christian has gone too far

and has tended to ignore, if not deny, the doctrine of 'common grace', that all men were made in the image of God (however marred the image might be), that men have a moral sense and an ability to be creative in their turn, in 'subduing the earth' and 'having dominion' over it. So, for instance, I know a Christian in a Communist country who, when dealing with Communist officials on church business, appeals to their consciences. He says, 'They are just like any other men. They all have consciences. They know in their hearts what is right and what is wrong.'

### Reform or revolution?

So the Christian case for the positive reform of society is based on

sound doctrinal, historical, practical and spiritual reasons. The case is that there is a need for reform in every society; that the Christian has a duty to tackle it; and that, given time and patience, Christian reform is likely to be both practical and effective.

But if the Christian is likely to be effective as a reformer, by the same token there is no need for him to be a revolutionary. The biggest single argument for revolution is the ineffectiveness of reform. A South American Christian once told me, 'You in Britain know nothing of the problems we face. Nothing but revolution will move things in Latin America.' But my argument is that reform by Christians on Christian principles is the only truly effective force for

change. Non-Christian reform on non-Christian principles is likely to be ineffective. Contrast the history of many nineteenth-century 'liberal' movements in non-Protestant Europe with the reforms actually effected during the same century in Britain.

Revolution is also likely to be ineffective. The French have as much experience of revolution as anyone in Europe, and they have an axiom, 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.' The revolution of 1789 produced the Emperor Napoleon—which was certainly not the object of the exercise. The revolution of 1848 produced another Emperor, Louis Napoleon, which was certainly not the object of that exercise, either. The Russian revolution produced Stalin. The

## Future Dates

12 March 1971

**RSCF London Open Meeting.** Professor S.J. Taylor: 'Understanding Miracles in a Scientific Age'. YWCA 7.30 p.m.

1 May 1971

'School, Family and Community'. CEF/SWCF Conference, Bedford College, London.

1 May 1971

**Historians' Study Group day meeting,** Bedford College, London.

7 May 1971

**GF London Meeting.** Canon Geoffrey Rogers: 'Prayer'. YWCA 7.30 p.m.

26-29 July 1971

**Overseas Service Conference,** Chislehurst, Kent.

26-29 July 1971

**Theological Education in the Third World, Conference,** Tyndale House, Cambridge.

25 September 1971

**RSCF Annual Conference, in conjunction with CEF.** 'Science and the Bible'. Bedford College, London.

9 October 1971

**CEF Day Conference for RE teachers in Primary Schools.** Bedford College, London.

15 October 1971

**GF London Meeting.** Sir Frederick Catherwood: 'Strikes'. Whitefield Memorial Church Hall, 7.30 p.m.

31 December 1971 — 3 January 1972

**GF Annual Conference,** Swanwick. 'The Christian and Culture in the 70's': Professor H.R. Rookmaaker, The Rev. Philip Hacking.

Germans threw over the Kaiser only to land themselves with Hitler.

This is not a series of coincidences. Revolution removes the landmarks of society. In a state of social chaos, when nothing holds, and when nothing and no-one can be taken for granted, those who find themselves in power have to crack down ten times as hard as they would in a stable society where there is trust between citizen and government and a social system which is largely self-policing. The force necessary for effective revolution is immensely destructive. Because it requires men to change their actions without changing their minds, everything has to be imposed by force. In the absence of self-regulation, the revolutionaries are driven to resort to terror. In the course of the terror, the hard men come out on top and if the idealists protest, they are liquidated. Then, as the saying goes, 'The revolution devours its own.'

The hard men come out on top, not just because they are hard men, but because society demands order. Human nature cannot tolerate prolonged chaos. People do not like the uncertainty of troubled times; they want to crawl out of the rubble, light a fire, open a shop, bury the bodies and restore the familiar round. Whoever gives them normal life again, even at the cost of special powers for the police, will have their grudging support.

The history of revolution is a history of failed ideals. Maybe the initial objectives succeed. Maybe an unpopular ruler is toppled. That is not too difficult in some countries. But that is only the beginning. The question is whether the ideals behind the revolution come to anything. And in nine times out of ten they do not. In nine times out of ten, the backlash is more powerful than the revolution. And in the tenth case one wonders whether the ideals might not have been attained without the revolution.

There is a sense in which the Christian message is a powerful revolutionary agent. It was reported of the early Christians, 'These men

have turned the world upside down.' And so they had. But though the Christian is a revolutionary in one sense, he is most strictly instructed by the apostle Paul (in Romans 13) that he must not rebel against 'the powers that be'. For 'there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.'

Paul goes on to give the reason: 'For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad . . . he is God's servant for your good . . . Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.' Paul does not define exactly what is meant by the 'authorities', the 'powers that be'. However it is clear from the passage that they are the powers which 'bear the sword' and to whom the citizens 'pay taxes'. They are the effective government of the country, the government capable of exercising justice and levying taxation. The prohibition, in other words, does not cover such minor powers as the public company, the trades union and the university. In a free society the relation of the individual with these powers is one of contract. In most societies, some appeal lies in any case from the lower power to the higher. But what seems to be absolutely prohibited to the Christian is any attempt to overthrow the recognized government.

### Christian arguments for revolution

Now in a revolutionary age, where the authorities are always the villains and the revolutionary always the hero, this is a hard saying. It is a tough proposition to swallow. However unsuccessful revolutions may be, when revolution is in the air the idealism of many Christians is stirred. A number of arguments are used to oppose these very plain words.

First, there is the appeal to the Protestant heroes, Coligny in France, William the Silent in Holland, Cromwell and William of

Orange in England, Gustavus Adolphus in Germany, and maybe some would even go so far as to include that American revolutionary, George Washington. We are asked, were all these men wrong? And what would have happened to Christian liberty without them? This is a big subject, but there are three broad answers to this proposition.

The first is that not even a Protestant hero can overthrow apostolic teaching. Indeed, as the history of Ulster shows, it is even possible to have a surfeit of Protestant heroes. Ulster might be a more Christian province if it heard less of William of Orange and more of Christian charity.

The second is that it is not at all clear that the revolutions of these heroes were all that beneficial to the Christian cause. Coligny took the sword and perished by the sword. It is possible to argue that had the Huguenots not joined the movement against the King, the monarchy would not, when it regained its strength, have revoked the edict protecting them and effectively banished them from France. William the Silent may have gained the United Provinces, but he lost the rest of the Netherlands, which then became the 'cock-pit of Europe'. It is arguable, too, that the Thirty Years War between Protestant and Catholic in Germany not only damaged Germany, but the whole cause of the Christian religion. The Protestant cause was as mixed up with the politics of the German princes as that of the Huguenots was with the French princes. Hard men were using religious feeling for their own ends and the final peace left not a triumphant Protestant cause, but a Germany sickened of religious strife. Cromwell held power for a brief decade, but as soon as he was dead, there was a violent reaction and the restored Stuart king ejected the Puritans from the churches. The Stuarts even outlasted William of Orange and died out only when Anne died without surviving children. As for George Washington's historic breach in the English-speaking nation, it is at

least arguable that the world would be a better place if the breach had never taken place and that, to the extent that we have ignored the breach, it has been a better place. It is certainly arguable that the generation of the Great Reform Bill would have conceded what George III and Lord North refused.

Whether or not we agree with these arguments, I hope I have said enough to show that the answers to these questions are not to be found by waving the Protestant banner. But there is a third answer which gives more credit to the Protestant leaders. Each of them faced the problem of rebellion and each of them argued that they were not in fact in rebellion. The Huguenots argued in *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos* that the King of France had exceeded his constitutional powers. The Dutch argued that the acknowledged power in their country was William, the Stadtholder of Holland, and not the distant Spanish King. Cromwell argued that the British power was the King in Parliament and only in Parliament. The German princes argued their constitutional rights against those of the throne of the Holy Roman Empire. William of Orange argued that his father-in-law had abdicated in favour of his daughter, William's wife, who had asked William to share her throne. And George Washington argued that power resided in the American states and not in the Court of St. James, 4,000 miles away.

So every single Protestant leader who came into conflict with an authority which might be held to be the civil power of apostolic teaching felt compelled to argue that it was not. None, because of Christian teaching, felt it sufficient to argue a straightforward case for a forcible change of government. If they took note of Paul's injunctions we must at least do the same if we use them to support our case.

The other major argument used for the Christian's involvement in forcible revolution is that if the government is patently not 'God's servant for your good' then its authority falls to the ground and the Christian is no longer under

any obligation to obey it. I understand that this has been Ian Paisley's reason for disobeying the Ulster government.

But the government ruling over the people to whom Paul's letter was addressed was the Imperial government of Rome, arbitrary, autocratic and corrupt and, under Nero, wildly irresponsible. Yet they were to obey it. Of course when they were asked to disobey a higher law and worship the Emperor as God, or when they were ordered not to preach, they obeyed God rather than men. But they respected the Roman imperium. Paul told a runaway slave to return to his owner (though he suggested that the owner might release him for Christian service), he respected the Roman courts, he stood on his rights as a Roman citizen, he appealed from the local courts to Caesar's own court at Rome. At no point did he order the slaves to throw off the Roman yoke. At no point did Jesus Himself tell His followers to rise against Caesar. The Jews did rise and were slaughtered and dispersed. The Christians did not rise and they prevailed not by force of arms, but by force of influence and example. That surely is the Christian way: to promote peace and not war, to promote love and not violence.

Sometimes the case for the Christian to stand against Nazi tyranny is cited as an example of the rare occasion when the Christian may rebel. Hitler rose to power in a Germany in which nine people in ten attended church, and the world has been asking ever since why the German people did not stop this tyranny. But this is surely an argument against revolution and not for it. Hitler was the revolutionary, the user of force in the streets, helped, of course, by the revolutionary creed of Communism which enabled him to excuse his violence as the self-appointed protector of the people against Communism itself. But if the churches had been in sound condition, if their authority and self-confidence had not been weakened by absurdly exaggerated literary criticism of the Bible, if

they had worked out a Christian attitude to racialism and nationalism and revolution, then Hitler would never have succeeded. He would never have picked up enough seats in the Reichstag to be appointed Chancellor. He would never have been allowed so to intimidate his opponents that he could pass the 'special laws' under duress. And, even when in power, he would never have had the political support to do the things he did. The documents now show him to be as sensitive to political support as any politician. Had the German churches been what they should have been, there would have been no need for them to be revolutionaries. As they were not, they were incapable of launching an effective revolution even if it had been right to do so. 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?' Certainly not by revolution.

The German Christians did not know that they were to be tested. Had they known, they would no doubt have prepared. But it is not for us to condemn them. The question is whether we are prepared for what may happen in our own generation. If we are not, then future generations may look on us as we look on the German Christians of the thirties, as the holders of eternal truth who failed to hold up that truth against the mood of the day and show where that mood would lead.

Whatever our circumstances, it is up to us to put a Christian alternative. We must take the steam out of genuine grievance by constructive reform. We must be as lights in a dark world. We must be the salt which prevents the corruption of our own society.

We must not fail. But if we are to succeed we must act, and act now.

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