

Revolution and Revelation

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Of the whole gamut of possible definitions of the term “revolution” the one that has been consecrated by general use in school textbooks is the one that makes reference to social and political events “clearly different from all other phenomena because they suddenly cause a violent and far-reaching change in the whole pattern of society and especially in the traditional political structure that is being transformed and replaced by a new order.”¹ For the Christian as an individual and for the Church as a community, such events create an ethical problem that demands an answer: What position should they take? Isolation? Participation?

Obviously, the position that one takes depends, among other factors, on his political ideas. We must not deceive ourselves as to our objectivity; it is even possible to use theology to justify attitudes whose roots are not in revelation, as we would like to think, but in purely human premises. If we reject revolution, it may be that our rejection is due, more than anything else, to a compromise with the status quo and a fear that change might affect our own economic position. If we support revolution, on the other hand, it may be that our support is due to the fact that we have been conditioned by the myth of man’s ability to build a new world order. For this reason it is

urgent that we place our motives under the judgment of the revelation of God in his Word. This must be the starting-point of our theological consideration of revolution. And the purpose of this consideration must not be other than to clarify the significance of our commitment to Jesus Christ in relation to today's revolutionary ferment, to understand the mission that Christian discipleship involves in the midst of the conflicts and the political, social and economic changes that surround us. All this should result in a fuller, more integrated Christian life.

REVOLUTIONARY FERMENT IN THE BIBLE

Every revolution is characterized by a certain ambiguity that makes especially difficult an evaluation from the Christian point of view. It would be much easier to decide in favor of or against a revolution if all the factors involved were always perfectly clear and definable. The problem is that usually they are not. In every revolution there is a mixture of good and evil, light and darkness, black and white.

On the positive side, revolution presupposes the recognition that life in society is not what it ought to be, that it is deformed by evils that demand a radical change in the social structures. The revolutionary is, at least on the surface, a nonconformist par excellence. His very existence depends on the premise that something is wrong with the world—so wrong that whatever action taken to remedy the situation cannot be limited to mere reformation of the present order. What is required is a new order, a world purged of all the weeds, the abuses and the imperfections that alienate man. This is the world that he seeks to bring in by means of revolution.

The Christian cannot close his eyes to the injustices that surround him. To do so would be to deny an important aspect of the Judo-Christian tradition. Seven centuries before Jesus Christ, Amos, the shepherd from Tekoa, proclaimed the judgment of God against those who exploit the poor in the following words:

O you who turn justice to wormwood,
and cast down righteousness to the
earth! . . .
They hate him who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor him who speaks the
truth.
Therefore because you trample upon the
poor
and take from him exaction of wheat,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take
a bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.
Therefore he who is prudent will keep
silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.

(Amos 5:7, 10-13)

The same courageous denunciation of the abuses of the rich is found in the messages of other prophets of Israel: Isaiah², Micah³, Jeremiah⁴, and Ezekiel⁵. One of the greatest glories of the Jewish people is that from them arose the first champions of social justice.

This prophetic note breaks into the world of the first century in the preaching of John the Baptist. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our

father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."⁶ Asked about what conduct is fitting in the light of the judgment of God, he answers, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise"; tax collectors ought not to charge "more than is appointed" and soldiers should not take advantage of their position to become rich by extortion.⁷

Jesus Christ himself defines his mission in words of profound social significance when he says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."⁸ His whole ministry is marked by a constant identification with the destitute—an identification that won him the title "Friend of tax collectors and sinners."⁹ The masses move him to compassion, because they are "like sheep without a shepherd."¹⁰ He chooses his disciples from among the common people, the *am-ha-arets* scorned for their ignorance of the law. He teaches that no one can serve God and wealth,¹¹ he cautions against the deceitfulness of riches,¹² he warns the rich that their comfort in this world will be limited to their material possessions,¹³ and he accuses those who in the name of religion exploit widows.¹⁴ In his actions and in his words there is a revolutionary ferment that, apparently at least, corroborates the Jewish leader's accusations against him before the Roman authorities—that he is subverting the order. Although Robert Eisler's thesis that Jesus was a Zealot¹⁵ cannot be sustained on the

basis of biblical data, it must be recognized that there is a grain of truth in it—that Jesus shares with the Zealots their dissatisfaction with the established powers and their hope for the coming of the kingdom of God.

This prophetic tradition finds echo later in the teaching of James:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you. (James 5:1-6)

REVOLUTION AND HUMAN NATURE

From his position within the prophetic tradition mentioned above, the Christian agrees with the revolutionary in his desire for a better world where disenfranchised classes do not exist, where justice and liberty reign. Biblical faith does not permit the Christian to be resigned to the status quo nor to align himself with the oppressor. However, this same faith demands that he take a position of reservation in the face of the dynamic of the change proposed by the revolution.

Every revolutionary ideology presupposes a faith in man's ability to create a new world. It conceives of the historic process as the result of factors over which man has control. Obviously, not *any* man, but only the revolutionary. In

the midst of a sick society, plagued by the evils of misery and exploitation, the revolutionary represents the only hope for a new order, because he, and only he, is free of contamination by the regime in power. "Because of the historic possibility that it glimpses ahead of it, the revolutionary group (class or nation) considers itself a messianic group, the principal protagonist of history, for the period that its action initiates, and which is the final period."¹⁶ Underlying this messianic sense is the conviction that man is good by nature, that evil is not inherent in man, but only in the social structures that condition him. The immediate objective of the revolutionary, therefore is oriented toward changing these structures. And it is in order to accomplish this objective that he resorts to violence. Violence thus becomes the moving force of history, the way to usher in the perfect society.

The Christian agrees with the revolutionary in his dissatisfaction with the state of things as they are and the desire for a change in the situation. He admits with the revolutionary that what is needed is not only technological and industrial development, but a complete change, a transformation of the whole system. He disagrees with the revolutionary, nevertheless, in that he does not believe in violence as *the* solution for social problems, *the* road that leads to the perfect society. He may perhaps recognize with Reinhold Niebuhr that there may be occasions when the balance of power, necessary for justice, demands violence as the comparatively lesser evil.¹⁷ That would be the case in a "borderline situation," in which the Christian would accept violence and at the same time the blame and the necessity of God's forgiveness which violence implies.¹⁸ What simply does not fit into the mental system of the Christian is violence as the norm of history.

The Christian's rejection of violence is consistent with his understanding of man and society. The unjust conditions that prevail in society are not brought about primarily by causes outside of man. They are, rather, the result of the inclination toward evil that is inherent in man. This is basically a *moral* question. It finds its center in the very essence of man. In the words of Jesus Christ, "*From within, out of the heart of man*" come "all these evil things" and defile man.¹⁹ In the final analysis, here is the root of all social evils. "This is the center of the ills of humanity—the I out of place," says E. Stanley Jones.²⁰ And he adds, "Everything else is a symptom—this is the disease." Quacks try to cure the symptoms, doctors cure the diseases.

All of human history corroborates this analysis. In political, social and economic reality there is an element that eludes examination by politicians, sociologists and economists and that, nevertheless, determines to a large extent the course of historic events—the moral corruption of man, human depravation, what theology calls *sin*. Every interpretation of history that ignores this element will necessarily be idealistic. If there is anything that history teaches us, says Herbert Butterfield, it is that human nature cannot be trusted: "The essential thing is not to have faith in human nature. Such faith is a new heresy and will lead us to disaster."²¹

Like the revolutionary, the Christian desires the destruction of all the patterns of the established order that enslave man. He echoes the words of the prophet, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream."²² But, like Jesus Christ, he "knows what is in man."²³ Furthermore, he sees in history the judgment that falls upon those who try to transform society before transforming the individual, that "law of gravity" which

pulls down to earth man's dreams of building for himself a new world. For this reason, he discounts "the" revolutionary solution and looks for a revolution that is still more radical, more complete. A revolution that would correct the estrangement between man and God and between man and his neighbor. As the famous thinker Nicholas Berdyaeff says, "The Christian is the eternal revolutionary who is not satisfied with any way of life, because he seeks the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, because he aspires to a more radical transformation of man, of society and of the world."²⁴

The problem with violence is not that it is radical, but rather that it is not radical enough. It attempts to eliminate the symptoms without curing the illness. It prescribes tranquilizers when what is needed is a surgical operation. Its error stems from an erroneous concept of man. The revolutionary closes his eyes to the moral deformity of human nature—this evil whose depth even the idealist Kant has forced to admit—and thus trusts in the adequacy of his ideology to establish a new order. He assumes that social evils are a question of political, social and economic organization, and that they will disappear through changes external to man. Sooner or later his ideal of a perfect society will be shipwrecked on the reef of the human ego. From this not even the revolutionary is exempt—no political party nor social class, neither the bourgeois nor the proletarian, is immune to the desire to convert itself into a god and appeal to force to achieve its own ends. Revolution does not change man; it does not touch the root of social evils. For this reason, as soon as the revolutionary regime is established the injustices of the old order reappear and the revolutionary class becomes a new oligarchy. The revolutionary becomes the defender of the status

quo and his ideology of change becomes the *instrumentum regni*, the means of power that is transmitted to the masses on the basis of authority, thanks to a monopoly on education, literature and the mass media. As Romano Guardini has warned, man has power over many things—and today more than ever!—but he does not have power over his own power.²⁵

THE GOSPEL OF REVOLUTION.

Every revolution sets before the Christian faith the question of the relation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of men, between eschatology and history. In the final analysis, every revolution is a human attempt to create *hic et nunc* the perfect society that God has promised to create at the end of the present age. The problem is to know to what extent the new order introduced by the revolution is the fulfillment or (at least) the beginning of the fulfillment of the purpose of God in history.

We must begin by recognizing that nothing in the world lies outside the control of God. God rules over all the nations of the earth and he executes his government through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is Lord not only of the church but also of the whole creation. This is the consistent teaching of the New Testament concerning the Lordship of Christ.²⁶ Furthermore, according to the biblical record, God uses "secular" powers that remain outside the sphere of redemption to work out his purposes for the world. In *Isaiah*, for example, Cyrus is described as Jehovah's anointed one, raised up "to subdue nations before him and ungird the loins of kings."²⁷ In *Romans* Paul refers to the authorities as "ministers of God."²⁸ Furthermore, in the presence of Pilate Jesus Christ himself admits that the judgment being

passed on him is based on an authority that comes from God himself.²⁹ Are we then to say that God is the author of violent revolutions?

This, in effect, is the thesis sustained by some contemporary theologians. To them, revolutions are nothing less than the means through which God is carrying out his purpose in history. God's action is of a political nature—it is oriented toward the transformation of social structures. Harvey Cox says that God is present above all in political events, in revolutions, in revolts, in invasions, in defeats.³⁰ God not only permits or desires change, but he carries it out, and he does this through revolutions.³¹ Richard Shaull, in agreement with Paul Lehmann, maintains that "revolution must be understood theological-ly, for it is set firmly in the context of God's humanizing activity in history. As a political form of change, revolution represents the cutting edge of humanization."³² He believes that the presence and power of God in the renovation of life are manifested above all wherever there is a struggle to make human life more human, "on the frontiers of change where the old order is passing away and the new order is coming into being in the world."³³ In the light of this concept of revolution, the responsibility of the Christian is obvious—to be present in the revolution, involved in the struggle for "humanization," though always aware of the possibility of "dehumanization" and ready to admit the limitations of the new revolutionary order.³⁴ Cox concludes, "God is acting; if we want to relate ourselves to him, it is imperative, then that we also should act."³⁵ Shaull says, "Our task is not to impose certain values, but rather to recognize and live according to those that hold sway in the world; it is not to give meaning to life, but rather to discover the meaning that life has in

the world that participates in redemption; not to establish order in the universe, but rather to share in the new order of things that is taking shape through social transformation."³⁶

This position, which the Conference on Church and Society held in Geneva in 1966 adopted as its platform, represents above all a way of thinking characteristic of our time, particularly in underdeveloped countries—the position according to which violence offers the masses the only hope of change. Salvador de Madariaga, the Spanish writer, has observed that the West today lives in the disillusionment that belongs to a post-revolutionary stage in which it has lost faith in violence and has chosen to submit to dictatorial governments.³⁷ Whatever the validity of this thesis may be in regard to the West, in the rest of the world the hope generally prevails that, on the basis of a supposed dialectic of history, revolution will create the new society that the majority desires. The "theology of revolution" under consideration takes it upon itself to provide theological justification for this hope. All its errors stem from the fact that it takes as its starting point the revolutionary situation and interprets Scripture on the basis of presuppositions derived from leftist ideologies. Instead of showing the relevance of Revelation to Revolution, it makes Revolution its source of Revelation. The result is a secular gospel whose dominant emphases parallel those of Marxism.

The "theology of revolution" is in essence a new version of the "other gospel" that Paul combatted so vigorously in the first century. Like it, it holds that man can attain the Kingdom of God by means of his own works. It is basically a negation of the Gospel of Grace. It puts man in the place of God. Not even concrete man as he exists in history, with the limitations that his sinful state

place on him, but an idealized man, a mere projection of an optimism devoid of biblical content. It ignores the biblical diagnosis of human nature and takes as its basis the simplistic thesis that evil is external to man and consequently can be eradicated through change in the social structures. Its concept of man coincides with that of Marxism, not with the Christian concept, although it pretends to be an expression of Christianity.

In the final analysis, what the "theology of revolution" challenges is Christian eschatology. As Michael Schmaus says, the worldly optimism reflected in utopian concepts of history is the death of the Christian hope.³⁸ In the New Testament, the only hope that has validity is that which is based in Jesus Christ—He is "our hope."³⁹ In this other gospel, the hope is epitomized in revolution. In the New Testament the action of God is oriented toward the creation of a new humanity in which the moral image of Jesus Christ, the New Man, will be reflected; in this other gospel, the purpose of God in history is a "humanization" to be understood in economic terms, a "salvation" of the social structures within history. One fact, the recognition of which constitutes a basic premise in the biblical message, is completely ignored—that the ultimate cause of the injustice that prevails in the world resides in man and creates disorder in the whole of society; that this is a power that cannot be purged from the present order by means of any program contrived by man. Because they believed this, the Old Testament prophets "set all their hope on a new creation of the world through the power of God, and rejected, as a radical delusion, the idea that a new humanity and new conditions could be created through human reforms."⁴⁰ Their hope is carried over into the New Testament because Jesus Christ and his apostles agree with the

prophets of yesteryear in their diagnosis of the human situation. The "theology of revolution" idealizes man and consequently converts the Gospel into a utopian ideology that employs theological terminology but has little relation with the eschatological message of the Bible.

We do not deny, of course, that the supporters of this type of theology conceive of revolution not as an exclusively human effort, but as the result of "the humanizing activity of God" in history. From this point of view Shaull, for example, argues that revolution is not an inevitable process, determined by a law of history, but rather a reciprocal action involving a challenge for change from God's side and the response of obedience from man's side.⁴¹ Instead of solving the problem of the anthropocentrism that is found at the very root of this other gospel, this reference to God as the ultimate author of revolution aggravates the problem, for it assumes that a human program has God's approval. In other words, there is a "sanctification" of revolution, which puts God at man's service. It may well be asked if this identification of revolution with "what God is doing in the world to humanize man" is not a fulfillment of Jesus Christ's prophetic warning regarding the proclamation of false christs in the last days.⁴²

What allows the theologians of revolution to think that revolutions are the place where the action of God intervenes in history is what Paul Ramsey has aptly called "a mutilated Barthianism."⁴³ Taking as their starting point a Barthian objectification of the work of Jesus Christ, they assume that the world *has been reconciled* and that all that now is asked of men is to recognize that *they are in effect living* under the sovereign rule of Jesus Christ. But they neglect Barth's "christocentric" ethic and inter-

pret social transformation indiscriminately as the expression of the will of God to place all things under the feet of Christ. The net result is the "sacralization" of violence which eliminates any possibility of discerning the elements of evil involved in all revolutions. Furthermore, if one's starting point is the principle that, since God has reconciled the world, revolution cannot be understood except as the expression of his redemptive purpose, it is difficult to understand why the conservative should not defend the status quo in the name of the same universal reconciliation. When revolution is understood as an event that originates in the will of God, the Christian becomes, as in the conservative position, a slave to the social order. In spite of all the apparent differences, between the revolutionary and the conservative there is basically one essential agreement—both identify the purpose of God with the present historic situation. In the one there is a conformity with the status quo; in the other a conformity with the revolution. "In the final analysis, both positions identify the will of God with the so-called permanent necessities of history."⁴⁴

The attitude of Jesus Christ toward the revolutionary program of the Zealots should suffice to define a Christian attitude toward revolutionary movements today. Oscar Cullmann has shown that even though Jesus evidently recognized the Zealots' concern for the Kingdom of God, at every opportunity he rejected their attempts to bring in this Kingdom by force of arms and to establish it as a political power.⁴⁵ For Jesus, says Cullmann, the ideal Zealot was "the real temptation" from the beginning until the end of his career. Nevertheless, he rejected the way of violence and chose the way of sacrifice.

The modern idea of creating a perfect society through revolution is no less

satanic than the Zealot's conception of the Messiah as a political leader called to establish the Kingdom of God by the power of the sword. And the attitude that the disciple of Christ should take toward it cannot differ from that of his Master: "He who does not take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."⁴⁶

FOOTNOTES

¹ Arend Th. van Leeuwen, *Desarrollo y Revolución* (Buenos Aires, 1967), pp. 36f.

² Isaiah 1:17, 23; 3:14f.

³ Micah 2:1-2, 8-11; 3:9-11; 6:9-12; 7:2.

⁴ Jeremiah 2:34; 22:3.

⁵ Ezekiel 22:29.

⁶ Luke 3:7-9, RSV.

⁷ Luke 3:11-14.

⁸ Luke 4:18-19, RSV.

⁹ Luke 7:34.

¹⁰ Mark 6:34.

¹¹ Matthew 6:24.

¹² Mark 4:19.

¹³ Luke 6:24.

¹⁴ Matthew 23:14.

¹⁵ In *Insous Basileus ou Basileusas*, 2 vols. (Heidelberg: Religionswissenschaftliche Bibliothek, 1928-). Robert Eisler presents Jesus as a revolutionary justly condemned by the Romans. In the judgment of many authors of all tendencies, this work is little more than fiction.

¹⁶ Georges Marie-Martin Cottier, "Muerte de las ideologías?", *Criterio*, LXII: 1569 (April 10, 1969), p. 204.

¹⁷ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Cleveland, 1956), pp. 170ff.

¹⁸ Helmut Thielicke has rightly emphasized the guilt of the Christian who is forced by circumstances to follow a course of action opposed to the law of God. "In such extreme cases," writes he, "untruth cannot be regarded as a 'commanded' way of escape, for if we regard it as commanded, what we have is again an evasion of the conflict situation, and this is always wrong. It is rather that in such cases a man is prepared to accept the guilt of untruth... He is willing to take this guilt upon himself not in the name of the tragics, but in the name of forgiveness." *Theological Ethics: Foundation*, Vol. I (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 662.

¹⁹ Mark 7:21-23.

²⁰ *La Victoria Personal* (Nashville, 1966), p. 20. Only the Spanish translation was available to the author.

²¹ *El Cristianismo y la Historia* (Buenos Aires, 1957), p. 59. Only the Spanish translation was available to the author.

²² Amos 5:24.

²³ John 2:25.

²⁴ *La Afirmación Cristiana de la Realidad Social* (México, 1936), p. 24.

²⁵ Romano Guadini, *The End of the Modern World* (London, 1957), p. 109.

²⁶ Matthew 28:18; I Corinthians 8:6; Romans 10:6; Ephesians 1:10, 21-23; Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 1:18.

²⁷ Isaiah 45:1.

²⁸ Romans 13:6; Cf. 13:4.

²⁹ John 19:11.

³⁰ *El Cristiano como Rebelde* (Madrid, 1968), p. 23. Only Spanish version available to the author.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³² "Revolutionary Change in Theological Perspective," *Christian Social Ethics in a Changing World*, ed. John C. Bennett (New York, 1966), p. 32.

³³ "The New Challenge before the Younger Churches," *Christianity and World Revolution*, ed. Edwin H. Rian (New York, 1963), p. 210.

³⁴ Richard Shaull, "Revolutionary Change in Theological Perspective," pp. 32ff.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

³⁶ "Y un Dios que actúa y transforma la historia," *América Hoy*, published by I.S.A.L. (=Church and Society in Latin America; Montevideo, 1966), p. 61.

³⁷ *De la Angustia a la Libertad* (Buenos Aires,

1966), p. 41. Another author, J.C. Hoekendijk, likewise asserts that man today is a "rebellious conformist" but not a revolutionary. *The Church Inside Out*, (London, 1964), p. 46.

³⁸ *El Problema Escatológico* (Barcelona, 1964), p. 27.

³⁹ 1 Timothy 1:1.

⁴⁰ Walther Eichrodt, "The Question of Property in the Light of the Testament," *Biblical Authority for Today*, ed. Alan Richardson and W. Schweitzer (London, 1951), p. 273.

⁴¹ "Revolutionary Change in Theological Perspective," pp. 34ff.

⁴² Matthew 24:23-25.

⁴³ *Who Speaks for the Church?* (Nashville, 1967), p. 77.

⁴⁴ Arthur Rich, "La Revolución como Problema Teológico," *Cuadernos Teológicos*, XVI: 61 (January-December, 1967), p. 90. The whole article is a cutting criticism of the "theology of revolution." Rich's warning is most timely: "We must be careful that theological social positivism (which it is hoped has been abandoned once for all) should not be replaced by a revolutionary theological positivism that accepts revolutionary changes in history simply *because they occur*. Should this happen, we would lose the necessary critical distance in relation to the dynamic, revolutionary events of our time. This would only lead to a change from conservative conformity to "revolutionary" conformity; this is one of the great dangers of every theology of *kairos*, into which in the past more than one lawyer and admirer of early religious socialism fell" (*ibid.*).

⁴⁵ *The State in the New Testament* (London, 1957), pp. 17f.

⁴⁶ Luke 14:27.

"Technical tools and population increase can create a kind of mechanical solidarity which suppresses the meeting of persons in favor of a multiplicity of external contacts, by the creation of a 'lonely crowd.' It is a terrible thing to mistake a 'public service' with the service of love."

Jacques Ellul, *Fausse présence au monde moderne*
(Paris: Les bergers et les mages, 1963), p. 64.