

128280

World Conference on Church and Society  
Geneva 12th - 26th July, 1966

C.A. 16

THE REVOLUTIONARY CHALLENGE TO CHURCH AND THEOLOGY

Prof. Richard Shaull

EL COLEGIO DE MEXICO

Ever since the modern world began to take shape around us with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the churches of the West have tended to absent themselves from the frontlines of the human struggle and assume a conservative attitude toward social change. Ecumenical social thought has attempted, over the years, to move beyond this, and with the preparations for this conference - and what has happened thus far in it - it is just possible that a significant breakthrough could occur. This is evidenced by the attention which has been given to the most recent developments in the technological and social revolutions and the presence among us of a significant number of people fully involved in them; it is also demonstrated by a shift of emphasis in our theological reflection on social problems. In Volume I of the preparatory studies, many contributors develop the thesis that God's redemptive work in history, as expressed in the central doctrines of faith, calls us to work for the transformation of society; in fact, for a new social order. To cite one example, Professor Roger Mehl declares that "God in Christ has made all things new and requires us to share in this transformation of the world". The imminence of the Kingdom of God means not only that the future is wide open but also that "the future is already present"; and the Lordship of Christ "breaks the established order, the established injustice, and calls us to take part in the great renewal of history." (pp.52-53).

Professor Wendland has gone much further in working out the significance and implications of this eschatological perspective and has brought us to the point where we are challenged to recognize, to use the phrase of Arthur Rich, that Christian existence is revolutionary existence, and that the church's service to the world is that of being the "pioneer of every social reform", without making any claims for Christianity or trying to Christianize the revolution. I realize that not every theologian will accept this interpretation; at the same time, I find myself obliged theologically to support it and rejoice in it. I see here a sign of hope that, from this point onward, those who, because of their Christian faith, find themselves called to participate in the revolutionary struggle, will be able to turn to the Christian community for theological and moral support.

This evening, however, I should like to attempt to push the debate a bit further. A new generation of Christians, in many parts of the world, is taking this responsibility for revolution, "for the great renewal of history", seriously. When they do so, they find themselves in a strange, new - and sometimes shocking - world; and are part of a dynamic historical process. Within this situation, some issues are seen quite differently than they appear to those outside, and the specific way in which they are raised changes on the road to the future. All of our encouraging theological reflections will not be of much help to the new revolutionary unless they are set within this concrete revolutionary situation and related to the questions arising there. Our first theological task is to take that step.

This means, I believe, that we must examine more carefully, precisely what is involved in bringing about social change today; i.e., what is the concrete shape of the revolutionary struggle. On this, I would like to present three points as a basis for discussion:-

1. The discovery that technology for all its revolutionary impact on the structures of modern society, has tended thus far in its most advanced stages, toward a total system of social domination and an ethos, which offer almost unlimited possibilities for preserving the established order. One of the major characteristics of the new revolutionary posture is the conviction that those who want to bring about a significant transformation of society are up against a total system of power and are called to work for a fundamental change in the direction and structure of that system. This conclusion, by and large, is the result of the experience of people who began by attempting small social reforms and were forced to a more radical position. In the developing world, it is now clear that development is not merely a question of rapid technological advance and industrialization, but of changing the whole complex of factors which constituted the feudal-colonial order, as has been demonstrated by the writings of the Brazilian scholar, Candido Mendes de Almeida. Likewise, the students and leaders of the poor in the urban ghettos in the United States soon find that they confront a comparable situation in the inner city and cannot solve their problems until fundamental changes occur in the whole structure. At the present moment, the civil rights movement is moving to a new stage of radicalization partly as a result of a similar discovery.

The most important new factor in all this is the growing awareness that overarching, and in some sense sustaining, all these developments, is the power of the established technological order itself. This is the reason why in recent months a book by Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, has been making such an impact on this student generation in North America. His thesis is that advanced technology, together with the ideological ethos accompanying it, is producing a system which tends to be totalitarian. The development of ever larger economic and political units, together with the integration of the economic and political orders, create a society in which certain material needs of a large percentage of the people are met, but they have no significant opportunity to participate in the decisions regarding their own future. The system not only has tremendous power but it also reduces to ineffectiveness those forces which might otherwise bring constant pressure for social transformation. The white collar as well as the blue collar workers have a certain sense of satisfaction with the system, if not a vested interest in it. The major political parties no longer offer fundamental choices regarding the structure and direction of social development; and a politics of consensus seeks to avoid deep political conflict. Countervailing power exists except where it would counter the whole system; and the whole order is so rational in its irrationality that those who oppose it can easily be portrayed as lacking in judgement and common sense. For Marcuse, these developments in the economic and political spheres are accompanied by an ethos of "secularity" which reduces social science to the empirical analysis of given structures, restricts the universe of discourse of philosophy and removes, from culture, the critical, transcending power it has often had in the past. The end result may be one-dimensional existence, without vitality, creativity or excitement; a society without power for its own renewal.

I am not prepared to evaluate <sup>or defend</sup> Marcuse's thesis. The point I want to make is that a significant number of young people today, from widely different backgrounds, who are committed to the construction of a more just and human society, have been pushed to a position in which this makes sense to them. As a result, they are convinced that technology can contribute, in the long run, to human well-being and fulfillment only as it is challenged by revolution, and thus choose revolution as the only road they can take in working for the future of man. Moreover, it is this fact which creates a new identity of outlook and purpose between the revolutionaries in the developing nations and a minority in advanced technological society.

2. At this point, a problem arises. If we are convinced that revolution is necessary for the humanization of modern society, we must also face the possibility that the traditional type of social revolution, which aims at the overthrow of the whole social order and a total change in the structures of power, may now be practically impossible. If by chance it should succeed, it could result in social and economic disorganization that would have disastrous consequences for a long period of time.

(Here: part on Flg's speech)

In the preparatory volumes, this is stated most sharply by Professor André Philip, who cannot be accused of wanting to maintain the status quo. He claims that the type of action now needed "must be technical in character and in no way revolutionary or violent. Violence seems to be impossible, even apart from ethical considerations. In the industrialized countries, the technical structure is too elaborate and the different elements overlap too much, for any sudden break to be made without upsetting the whole system of production and consequently impoverishing the masses." (II, p. 120.) Without much effort, most of us can think of any number of instances in recent history which confirm this statement.

3. For Professor Philip, this means "the end of revolution". For those of us who do not have his trust in the capacity of the established order to renew itself without strong revolutionary pressures upon it, it means rather the search for a new strategy of revolution. The justification for and possibility of this search may be found in certain characteristics of the society now taking shape around us. Thus far, technological advance and the conservation of the established order have gone hand in hand. But as Robert Theobald has pointed out to me, there is nothing in technology itself which makes this inevitable. In fact, as technology advances, the instruments as well as the atmosphere which it creates could just as easily serve the cause of social transformation and emancipation. Moreover, the breakdown of the stable, ontocratic, authoritarian patterns of the past and the dynamic character of modern society create a new potential instability and a very precarious social balance. Sudden pressures applied effectively at the right place at the right time may have a surprisingly wide and deep impact; and small changes can set forces in motion which will produce much greater changes in the future. In this situation, revolutionary strategy is a question of developing those bases from which a system unwilling to initiate major changes when they are most urgently needed, can be constantly bombarded by strong pressures for small changes at many different points. Without such revolutionary forces in our societies today, the prospects for the future are not encouraging. But these efforts could help to keep society open and flexible, renew it in spite of itself, create a new social context for technology, and perhaps lead eventually to the type of social institution that would be sufficiently responsive to human need as to make revolution unnecessary.

In recent decades, a revolution has occurred in military strategy through the use of guerrilla warfare. Small revolutionary groups, confronted by overwhelming military power, discovered that they could fight a winning battle in some situations by means of a strategy of concentrated surprise attacks by small disciplined units with limited objectives; by maintaining flexibility and freedom of operation, and by keeping the initiative and advancing to new fronts whenever blocked on old ones. Guerrilla warfare is a military strategy; its aim has usually been total conflict and the complete overthrow of the old structures of power. But a careful examination of these movements may suggest a strategy for effective political action of a revolutionary type today. In fact, the formation of such "guerrilla" units, with a clear sense of self-identity,

a vision of a new social order, and a commitment to constant struggle for change, inside or outside certain social structures, may offer one interesting prospect for building a new society at this time.

This limited struggle of small groups in permanent revolution is here envisaged primarily as a political strategy. To the degree that it succeeds, the temptation of the oppressed to rely on violence should be reduced. But we would not go as far as Professors Wendland and Philip to urge exclusive reliance on non-violent action, or insist that the Christians should have no participation in the use of violence. There may, in fact, be some situations, in which only the threat or use of violence can set the process of change in motion. What is important is not whether violence is outlawed, but whether its use, when absolutely necessary, is geared to a strategy of constant struggle for limited changes in society, or is set in the context, as so often in the past, of total warfare and the total overthrow of the social order.

If the strategy we have suggested is to succeed, it cannot be a matter of isolated, sporadic efforts. It must rather include the constant formation throughout society of small nuclei with revolutionary objectives; an intensive effort at the type of education which will open new perspectives on social problems and point the way to new experiments and new solutions; and close coordination of the work being done by the various revolutionary movements.

My conclusion - in this first area of discussion - then is this: If the church is inclined to take seriously the vocation to which Professor Wendland and others have called it, then it should provide the context in which people are set free for and encouraged to accept this revolutionary commitment, and are helped to work out a theological perspective on and an ethic for revolution. No one can guarantee that the churches or even the ecumenical movement will accept such a challenge. But we would take a great step forward if we decided really to listen to those who come from the developing nations, the representatives of a new student generation in our advanced technological societies, and others who incarnate the urgency of his concern for fundamental and rapid changes in the present order.

This leads to the second major issue that I should like to raise for further discussion: that of the relationship of theology to the revolutionary struggle. Professor Wendland has stated his position clearly when he argues that the Christian should work positively and critically for revolution without an ideology of total revolution and without utopian dreams of a perfect society. From this I conclude that our principal theological task is that of exposing and challenging the latent idolatry in all such movements. This is always an important task for Christians in society; it is especially important among those who are called to pay the price of a revolutionary struggle. But I am not convinced that this is our primary theological responsibility at the present stage of revolution. This is partly due to the fact that other forces in our contemporary society seem to be doing a more effective job at this point than we are. The "incognito Christ", if I may use that phrase, working through technology and secularity, has broken the dominance of old absolutes and shattered utopian dreams. Today a strong sense of the limitations of knowledge about society and of the ambiguities in a revolutionary struggle can be found among the new revolutionaries in Latin America, the new student left in the United States and new groups of philosophers and writers in Marxist societies. In fact, one of the most forceful statements of this attitude that I know is an essay by the Polish philosopher Kolakowski, entitled, "The Priest and the Jester". All these groups may need the encouragement and support which Christian faith can provide, but our major responsibility lies elsewhere.

If the new revolutionary is to carry on a long and arduous struggle without absolutes and without utopian illusions, something quite different is called for. What he now needs are those resources of understanding and community that can sustain and orient such an effort: the possibility of believing that the future is really open, the hope that weakness can be victorious over established power, and that meaning and fulfillment are possible in a life lived in an intense revolutionary struggle. What is perhaps even more important, the new revolutionary needs those resources of transcendence and transgression which free him to break the bonds of the secular, empirical ethos, dream new dreams about the future of man, and cultivate the creative imagination so as to be capable of thinking about new problems in new ways, and defining new goals and models for a new society. What the revolutionary needs, in the words of Professor Roger Mehl, is "a new vision of the world and a new conception of man". Thus, the real question before us theologically is that of the vitality of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in its diverse forms, and its capacity to relate to the human situation today in such a way as to liberate old images, symbols and concepts and create new ones that can perform this task.

Given the present state of the churches and of theology, can we expect this to happen? Each of us must answer this in the light of his faith and experience. On the basis of my own experience with revolutionary movements on two Continents, I can only say that I believe it is a live possibility - on one condition: that theologians take seriously the fact of the death and resurrection of the Logos as indicating the only road open to us in this situation. In closing, let me try to suggest two examples of what this may mean:

1. Much of our Christian social thought has been and to a certain extent still is dominated by an a-historical way of thinking. I was reminded again of this as I read Professor Hallowell's essay in Volume II, especially his quotation from Cicero:

"There is in fact a true law - namely right reason - which is in accordance with nature, applies to all men, and is unchangeable and eternal...To invalidate this law by human legislation is never morally right, nor is it permissible ever to restrict its operation, and to annul it is wholly impossible...It will not lay down one rule at Rome, and another at Athens, nor will it be one rule today and another tomorrow. But there will be one law, eternal and unchangeable, binding at all times upon all peoples; and there will be as it were, one common master and ruler of men, namely God, who is the author of the law, its interpreter and sponsor".

I suspect that for many people involved in evolution today this sounds like a voice from a far distant past, belonging to a completely alien world view. For the reality that the revolutionary knows is that of his involvement in dynamic historical existence, which is constantly being shaped and reshaped in very concrete and unexpected ways. It is not a stable, eternal, rational order, but one in which he has some slight hope of imposing order as he attempts to shape the future in the direction of certain specific goals. In other words, we are now well aware of what Troetsch, decades ago, described as "the fundamental historicizing of all our thought about man, his culture and his values" and we cannot escape his conclusion that only the type of thought which is rooted in the raw factuality of concrete historical events can be of any use in this situation.

In recent years, there has been some discussion as to whether ecumenical social thought should give attention primarily to principles, values and middle axioms, or become contextual, or allow one to be a corrective to the other. The discussion in these terms will, I believe, produce very meagre results. Perhaps our task at this moment is to recognize this fact of the radical historicizing of all of our thought and work through the theological implications of it, allowing it to lead us where it will.

This evening we can do no more than call attention to this problem. What I take it to mean is that ethical orientation can be provided only as values are translated into specific social goals, specific human needs, and specific technical possibilities and priorities. No set of abstract principles or ideas like the responsible society will be of much help unless we succeed at this job of translation, which will have to be done again and again in changing situations. What can make a significant contribution is an ongoing process of reflection on specific questions in the light of the perspective on history provided by the particular history into which we as Christians have been incorporated, and in the light of the shape of the new man that is coming into existence, as portrayed by one man, Jesus of Nazareth. It is out of this sort of biblical and theological reflection that the broader dimensions of thought about the renewal of man and his historical existence may be kept in the centre of the revolutionary struggle. In this way, they can become <sup>perhaps</sup> an explosive ethical force, as they break the limitations which man tends to impose on his thought and actions and make real a higher order of life which stands in judgement upon all his achievements.

2. All this may sound very well, but the experience of many contemporary Christian revolutionaries is that the theology we have provided for them does not equip them for such transgression and transcendence in the secular order. Much of our traditional theology - as well as our ethical thought - reflects such a degree of acculturation of Christianity that it has lost its iconoclastic and transfiguring power. For a brief period in our recent past, neo-orthodoxy performed this task in a rather striking way. With its emphasis upon the Otherness of God, the Word which stands over against all human thought and achievement, the work of Karl Barth especially provided us with an amazing new freedom in relation to culture and society and suggested a new vision of man and of human relationships. Unfortunately, as Bonhoeffer understood, this effort ended up in a theological restoration, the restoration of concepts and terms which belonged to a very different world view and historical situation. Thus our theological thought about the world, with all its potential richness, was even more closely bound to concepts that are now largely meaningless. The experience of participation in radical historical existence through social revolution has now made this clear.

It is for this reason that many of a new generation have only the memory of a meaningful Christian faith, but no way to take hold of it concretely, or of relating it to the problems of personal and social existence. It is this situation that has produced a new ferment in theology. Younger theologians are appearing on the scene who are convinced that all the old images and concepts have lost their power; they can no longer serve as bearers of the Christian message of radical iconoclasm and transcendence, or contribute creatively to the formation of a new image of man or a new style of life. Thus these men are searching for a new language which can point to this reality in a more adequate way. In the United States at least, even the wildest of the death-of-God theologians reveal this longing for a new language capable of doing in our time what our more orthodox theologies did when they were first formulated.

This search for a new language of faith is not an easy one. It requires first of all, not a new language, but a new involvement, in those places in the world where God is most dynamically at work. And involvement must be accompanied by patience, for we may have to wait for a long time until authentic new theological language and new concepts emerge. In the meantime, there is a job that needs to be done, and theology is called to do it: to keep going the difficult but <sup>in the meantime necessary</sup> ~~not impossible~~ running conversation between the full biblical and theological tradition and the contemporary human situation, and discover how, in this context, to point concretely to signs of hope and of grace, of meaning and fulfillment, in the midst of the ongoing struggle for the future of man. This is what I believe Harvey Cox has succeeded in doing in his book The Secular City. It is this same precarious pointing to God's work of renewal in the midst of social revolution which seems to me to be urgently called for at the present time. And out of such crucifixion of the logos of theology, a theological resurrection may once again take place.

