

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

A Theology of Power and Conflict

REVOLUTION has always been an emotionally-charged word. For some, it evokes the greatest fears. For others, it is the only symbol of hope in a world where alienation and exploitation abound. There are some for whom it evokes memories of freedom, of new beginnings and the pursuit of happiness; whilst for others it recalls only violence, bloodshed and destruction. According to Dale Yoder, three distinct conceptions of revolution can be isolated. First, the word has been used to refer to a purely political phenomenon: a change in the location of sovereignty. If this definition is correct, then revolution as a political phenomenon has a long tradition and is not, as Hannah Arendt would maintain, a fairly recent phenomenon (cf her work *On Revolution*). For revolution would include Plato's *metabolai*, the quasi-natural transformation of one form of government into another, which is described in book eight of *The Republic*. It would include Aristotle's *stasis*, discussed in the fifth book of the *Politics*. It would include the roman version of the same phenomenon treated by Cicero in the first book of *De Republica*. The middle ages were familiar with this type of political change. Aquinas, for example, warned against the stasis which rends community in his political handbook, *De Regimine*. The Renaissance power-struggle was probed by Machiavelli in his treatise, *The Prince*. Finally, our own era has seen no end to changes in the location of sovereignty. Secondly, revolution has come to describe any and all abrupt social change. This conception would make political revolution a lesser component of this wider notion. Consequently, revolutions can be religious, economic, industrial, as well as political. This view also includes all sudden transformations of beliefs, ideas, or doctrines. Thirdly, there is another all-inclusive notion of revolution. This view considers revolution not merely the range of possible social transformations, as the second view maintains, but makes the concept involve all of these aspects as a whole. In this view, the real revolution is the change in the social attitudes and basic values of the traditional institutional order. The political, religious, industrial, or economic changes are overt manifestations of the deeper change which has previously taken place.¹

No matter, however, what connotation we give to the word, it signifies a characteristic common to the world of today as well as yesterday. As long as people are oppressed and justice neglected, revolution will remain a political fact of life. Since this is likely to be so for the foreseeable future, if not for all time, it must demand human investigation; and this on the level

of humanity's social existence. It is an apt subject for the ethician; and thus for christian social ethics and for theology. In fact, our times have seen revolution studied within each of these contexts. We have seen theologies of development elevated into theologies of liberation, and these latter subdivided into those advocating violent revolution, and those wishing to carry a non-violent cross.²

But perhaps all these theologies are *passé*. As we moved out of the activist 'sixties into the angry but contemplative 'seventies, we now find ourselves caught between the two. For theology in general, this raises the question of imposed versus intrinsic systems of relevance. Martin E. Marty, following Alfred Schutz, explains and applies this relevant distinction:

Imposed systems of relevance 'do not originate in acts of our discretion', 'are not connected with interests chosen by us', since we are 'not only centres of spontaneity, gearing into the world and creating changes within it'. The suburban moves of the 1950s made most of America's theological schools into producers-for-institutions. The traumas of the 1960s led them to find imposed a set of social-action relevance systems. Now the authority-seeking, experience-hungry, privacy-obsessed 'seventies have led them to retool around evangelism, spirituality, and pastoral care — often to the neglect of whatever else they ought to be about. Intrinsic systems of relevance 'are the outcome of our chosen interests, established by our spontaneous decision to solve a problem by our thinking, to attain a goal by our action, to bring forth a projected state of affairs'. (Schutz points out, of course, that the two sets of system are intermingled. Fortunately.) If theological educators and students pay attention to these, they will combine exploration of their traditions with some sort of philosophical inquiry and discourse about the nature of things, even as they are alert to what their environments imposed upon them. Having been responsible to their traditions and to other tested depths, they will be more likely to have something to bring to those environments.³

On the basis of this distinction, it appears that reflection on man's social, economic and political existence will and ought to retain its intrinsic relevance for the person of faith. And this should not be taken to mean that newer trends of the 'seventies had not their own intrinsic merits. The charismatic movement does not seem to be losing any of its momentum, and there is no slackening off in the search for deeper forms of spirituality.

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Endemic to the notion of revolution is power; and it is power that I wish to discuss here. Since it inevitably involves violence and conflict, it seems

important to explore the dialectic of violence that exists in our world. My ultimate purpose is to develop a *theology of power*, with the help of a theologian (Karl Rahner), and a social theorist (Lewis Coser). The concluding part of the essay will consist in my personal reflections.

The dialectic of violence

There is a sense in which man's world is a given. More precisely, the world of man is a social given. This social construction of reality occurs in three distinct but related phases.⁴

First, there is the process of *externalization*. This is the active creative phase of the process of world-building. Man acts on himself and his world, in order to superimpose order and meaning and to make it more useful for himself. From being a nomad, for example, he domesticated plants and became a farmer. He took control of the environment in a new way; and this provided him with a fresh basis for new levels of self-meaning and self-realization. Man is truly the steward of creation: the characteristic given him by Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12; cf Gen 1,26). Secondly, there occurs a process of *objectification*. Man's creations become objective. Where once these had a foundation either in creative insight or in 'happy chance', they now have a foundation in fact. They stand outside and over and against man himself. They become autonomous structures of reality, and acquire the capability of reflecting back on man himself: of creating him, conditioning him, shaping his consciousness and so on. For example, one consequence of farming was that man was presented with a new type of cultural configuration. It contrasted with his former nomadic pattern of existence, and entailed new ways for man to relate to man, and man to nature. It also made possible a new and growing differentiation of labour. Thirdly, there is the phase of *internalization*: the process by which structured reality is transmitted and passed on from one generation to the next.

Once the reality is objective, we in turn are born into it. We are born into an environment originally shaped by man, but now independent of us. It is still a reality for which, as human family, we are collectively responsible; and also as individuals, who ratify the reality in our own appropriation of it. But we begin to live before we attain such reflective and critical consciousness. In fact, it is only in the recent past that man has attained the reflective capacity to understand this very process itself. The result is that most of us are passive in the process of internalization. We never attain that degree of distance and freedom from it which is necessary first of all to understand the reality, and secondly to transform it, so as to bring it into harmony with what is for the common good.

Perhaps this is too pessimistic. Cultures and structures do change; and they are changed by men who are the agents of change. Yet it is still true to say that for the majority of humankind, the process of creating social reality is lost to its consciousness. It is this loss to consciousness which is at the root

of 'alienation' in the sociological sense. Theologically, alienation is never overcome simply by a change in social structures, or by a psycho-analytic process that leads to the free release and expression of what is, at least in part, the source of this alienation. This internalization or socialization process is grounded in the human being's early life within the family context.

I believe that this insight into the social construction of reality is essential for understanding the dialectic of violence. First of all 'violence' can be taken to refer to the relative state of injustice built into a given socio-economic system at a particular point in its history.⁵ For many people, especially for those who benefit from the system as exploitative, the unjust aspect of the system is invisible. Often for those who are oppressed by it, it is seen as the inevitable state of affairs. Both groups are alienated; but the first group more seriously, because they participate in a level of alienation that might be called social sin.

Whilst a system of injustice may appear homeostatic, especially to those who are blinded by the ruling ideology, in reality it is disequibrated and eventually, probably — I might even say inevitably — gives rise to a second violence. This second violence might be termed 'reactive-violence'. It is the violence of the protest, the uprising, the revolt, the revolution. For the revolutionaries, it is a response to the first violence endemic in the system. For the 'established', however, it is seen as the first, and of course illegitimate, violence. The question is, which is the greater violence? Is it more violent to kill outright than to apply a principle of triage that would eliminate whole nations from the development scene?⁶ This is what some scientists and ethicists are now advocating. But in effect their proposals largely reflect the present economic and political *status quo*. 'Conscientized' Christians are thus presented with an agonizing dilemma.⁷ On the one hand most western Christians are compromised and participate in the benefits and the perpetuation of the first violence. On the other hand, they are more and more encouraged to promote social justice. But it is almost impossible to respond to this call without participating in the second type of violence which, for the sensitive Christian as well as for the sensitive humanist, is abhorrent.

In the meantime, while conflicts emerge into the open, and Christians are caught in the tangle of their own consciousness and conscience, a third violence appears. This might be labelled 'repressive violence', which is frequently occurring in the counter-revolution which is so predominant a feature of life in Latin America. Recent examples are those of Chile, Guatemala and El Salvador, where the push for social change and social justice was countered by a military coup; in effect an agent of the internal 'Herodian class' (a term with obvious scriptural overtones coined to refer to that group within a country which benefits from its colonial and dependent status), and the external ruling élites of the corporate West. Since the third

violence only reinforces the first, there continues the dynamic dialectic of violence already described.

It seems obvious that Christians should not be a party to either the first or the third type of violence. But in effect we are; by espousing the first operationally, and by supporting the third when it occurs, as in El Salvador, and elsewhere.

In answering the question whether or not the Christian could support the second type, the 'reactive-violence', we must look carefully at the assumptive value entailed in all violence: power.

A theology of power

The Christian is caught. He holds values. By their very nature they demand and tend toward incarnation. Such is man's make-up. However, the Christian lives and loves in a world where anti-values are constantly being embodied in laws, and erected into institutions and social structures. Thus we have continual conflict. What are Christians to do? Retire from public life and build a little kingdom of their own, apart from the mainstream of society, as some have done and are doing? Or are they to reach after real power, attempting to construct a christian polity, a new Holy Roman Empire, as *Opus Dei* have recently been accused of doing?

The first alternative is hardly a solution; for there is no outside society, but only a form of compromise neutrality. The other has also been tried, but with what success is highly dubious.

A thorough-going examination of these alternatives would involve a consideration of the relationship between christian values and those of a bewildering variety of world cultures,⁸ which is already beyond the scope of this paper. Here we can only ask ourselves what is the christian attitude to power and conflict. For in our day, whether it is a question of abortion, or genetic engineering, of international justice or civil rights, the Christian is forced to come to grips with the powers that be, with the principalities of this world. Not to decide is itself a decision. Not to enter the conflict is to allow most of what the Christian believes in to be crushed out of official existence.

A german Jesuit, writing about the christian response in face of Nazi Germany, has put it well:

All of us, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, have experienced such extraordinary misuse of power that none of the earlier theologians or lawyers had, or could have, foreseen it; and in the face of this misuse, we were in teaching and in practice helpless to the point of suicide. At the same time a new phenomenon appeared; a terror was set up and power perverted, not by a monarch but by a party or a would-be universal régime. Thus the whole question of the right to resistance has been set in a new light by the turn of events, and it

must, therefore, be thought out afresh. . . . In times like these, situations can arise in which it is not enough for Christians to pray and suffer; it falls to them as a solemn duty to drive back with force, protecting and shielding themselves, their families and their nation from untold misery and injustice and the greatest danger to faith and morals. They must beware lest through the weakness and cowardice of the good, the power of the wicked should gain the upper hand in the world. And as the signs of the times continue to point to storms ahead, the faithful should be instructed about their duty to civil obedience, without anxious reserve, so that they may clearly understand not only the need for it but also its limits, and so that when occasion arises they will know their right and duty.⁹

In an attempt to answer the pressing problems raised here, one might reconstruct and set out the formal argument found in Karl Rahner's 'The Theology of Power'.¹⁰

This argument will, I believe, inform our consciousness with respect to power, and offer us a genuine context for reflection on the problems of conflict and violence. Rahner, in fact, presents and reflects on three theses:

1. In the order of salvation power stems from sin.
2. Power is not itself sin but a gift of God.
3. The exercise of power is a process either of salvation or perdition (*loc. cit.*, pp 393-402).

Since all three revolve around the notion of power, it is essential that its meaning and context be clearly specified and delineated from the outset. Rahner is very clear here; by power he means:

only one very particular type of power which could also be called force. It uses physical means which do not address themselves to the insight and freedom of the other — when it intervenes in the sphere of another, to act on it and change it without previous consent. It is this type of power which we will discuss (p 396).

Given this definition, we can examine the substance of his reflection (our second thesis) that power in itself is not sinful, but God's gift. We may set out his argument here as follows:

- (a) If a man is effectively free, then he uses power.
- (b) If he uses power, then he will enter into conflict with other effective freedoms.
- (c) If he is effectively free, then he will enter into conflict with other effective freedoms.
- (d) Man is effectively free.
- (e) Therefore, man will have conflict with other effective freedoms (pp 396-400).

The truth of the first premiss, (a), rests on the assertion that 'power is one of the existentials of man's existence, which cannot be eliminated from the nature of man on earth. . . . And as the space of freedom, it is the condition of the possibility of freedom' (p 396). This premiss is next to self-evident, and easily verifiable empirically; (b) Since man's living space is a shared space, a space that is situated and dated, it follows that:

This very exercise of freedom — being that of a creature, depending on prerequisites as the freedom of a material, interpersonal and communicative being — is at once a restriction of the space of another's freedom, essentially and inevitably. No one can act freely without impinging on the sphere of another's freedom without his previous consent, without doing 'violence' to him and using physical force, in a metaphysical but a very real sense. The freedom of one, when exercised in the one sphere of existence and freedom which is common to all, is necessarily violence towards others. . . . The bodily nature of man and its supporting environment are always involved in his free decision which is, therefore, a physical act, but he thereby impinges on the sphere of others, previous to their consent, because physical space is strictly common to all, and if there are any sections marked off in it, this is already due to free acts and mutual agreements (pp 396-97).

The third premiss, that if a man is effectively free, he will certainly enter into conflict with other effective freedoms, follows logically from the first two premisses. The fourth, that man is effectively free, is one that is phenomenologically verifiable in one's own existence. All people have the experience of deciding and acting in and on their environment, no matter how minimal the experience (for example handicapped people). Our conclusion, that man will have conflict with other effective freedoms, follows from premisses (c) and (d).

The above is a philosophical argument. However, we are trying to reflect in a theological context. Consequently, our argument must be married with a theological premiss: that man's freedom is a gift of God. From the conjunction of these two premisses — that if man's freedom is a gift of God and if this freedom entails conflict, then it follows: conflict is a human existential, willed by God.

We are forced then, to the inference that conflict is integral to the human condition: a conclusion which the average Christian would be most reluctant to admit, as Rahner points out:

How then, in view of the transcendental necessity of force for the exercise of freedom, is a form of human existence at all thinkable in which things would be otherwise, since one's own freedom is

exercised at the cost of the ambit of the other's freedom? How is an order of existence without power and force at all conceivable. . . . Whatever be the precise answer to this question . . . we must here repeat that this transcendental necessity of force, the condition of the possibility of created freedom, is therefore to be described as natural and willed by God. It is not intrinsically sinful (p 397).

We can now see two reasons why the alternative for the Christian of opting out of society is not in reality an alternative at all. First, given the material presuppositions of man's freedom, a purely private space and time is impossible. Man must interact. Even the Hutterites have been confronted from time to time with the power of the state in their quest for their quest for their own private kingdom. Secondly, since man's acceptance or refusal of salvation takes place in all the dimensions of human life:

the principle of the absolute renunciation of force would not therefore be a christian principle. It would be a heresy which misunderstood the nature of man, his sinfulness and his existence, as the interplay of persons in the one space of material being. An order of freedom would be misunderstood if it were taken to be an order of things in which force was considered reprehensible on principle. A fundamental and universal renunciation of physical force of all kinds is not merely impracticable. It is immoral, because it would mean renouncing the exercise of human freedom, which takes place in the material realm, and hence it would mean the self-destruction of the subject who is responsible to God (p 399).

Thus man has a responsibility, and the Christian an even greater one, to enter into and come to grips with the reality of power. Therefore, to opt out of society is to forsake one's responsibility.

The Christian will of course immediately raise the obvious objection. What about the numerous men and women who through the ages have 'left the world' and led a contemplative life, to the glory of God and the good of mankind? Does not this argument rule out their value and even put in jeopardy their salvation? I do not think so. There exist other and more influential forms of power. Among these must be numbered the power of knowledge and of doctrine, of faith, love, courage, prayer and so on (cf p 392).

Following Rahner, I would affirm that:

each of these acts of man affect the situation of another previous to his giving his consent and change it at least in certain respects and to some degree — and so they exercise power. Indeed, the dimension amenable to such an act and perhaps only accessible to such an act,

can, under certain circumstances, be of a higher degree of being and of dignity than another. And then the act in question will be 'power' in a much sublimer sense and with much more real significance — than another possibility which can act only on a lower dimension of being and dignity in another man (or being) (*ibid.*).

The question here is not that the contemplative life, for example, or other types of community life-styles are valid, but whether or not at least some members of the christian community must shoulder the gift and task of a lower form of power. As St Paul puts it: 'There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service but the same Lord, and there are varieties of working but it is the same God who inspires them . . .' (1 Cor 12,4-6).

We need both. Nothing less will suffice. Anything less will fail.

In the introduction to his work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Reinhold Niebuhr handily summarizes our previous reflections: 'conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power'.¹¹

But is conflict simply and solely a necessary evil, a concomitant of man's fallen nature? Modern sociology tends to cast some doubt on the customary thinking of the Christian. Here I would like to introduce some of the findings from the field of the social sciences relevant to our discussion. In the conclusion to his work, 'The Functions of Social Conflicts', Lewis Coser presents in a concise form the most noteworthy of the findings related to social conflict.¹² Chief among these are the following:

1. On the inter-personal level, we have the paradox, the closer the relationship the more intense the conflict. Thus in marriage situations or in religious communities, where the participants have involved the totality of their beings, the greater the likelihood of intense conflict (Coser, p 151). That such does not occur indicates one or other or both of two possibilities: either the hostility is being suppressed, in which case it will come out sooner or later with destructive results, or the relationships are really not that close. Both situations are often the case.
2. On the larger in-group level, conflict has been shown to be positively functional for the social structure. 'Such conflicts tend to make possible the readjustment of norms and power relations within the groups in accordance with the felt needs of its individual members or subgroups' (pp 153-54). All of this is conditional on a basic consensus among the group members. Where there are no longer shared values, if conflict occurs the disruption of the social structure often follows. Such seems to be the case in many families with respect to the generation gap, and in many religious communities where a pluralism of world-views are operative.

If this is the case then the religious community or Church is again on the horns of a dilemma. Pluralism tends to create a segmented existence with little involvement in the community. On the other hand, the nature of

ecclesial or religious life, if it is to remain viable, demands a total giving of self. The Church itself will survive such non-consensual conflicts, as she has done in the past; but no local church or religious community has the assurance of a perpetual existence within the Church.

3. Thirdly, there exist inter-group conflicts. Groups which are in continual conflict with the outside world (for example, the Society of Jesus throughout much of its early history) allow little internal conflict, because this would tend to incapacitate the group's ability to cope with the outside challenge or enemy (p 153).

Conversely, groups which are not continually in conflict with outside groups tend to allow more personal freedom, exhibit flexible structures, and as a result are able to equilibrate and stabilize impacts on the social structure. The multiple conflicts tend to prevent polarization that would irrevocably rend the group (p 157). For maximum participation, then, a group, say the Society of Jesus, needs an external challenge which will canalize the available energies of the group. But perhaps in the modern milieu of a pluralist world this is no longer possible. Perhaps it is only the dual and compenetrating tasks of liberation and evangelization that will mobilize the Church at large and the smaller units within it.

However, what is perhaps more dangerous than the conflict itself is a rigid structure 'which permits hostilities to accumulate and to be channelled along one major line of cleavage, once they break out in conflict' (*ibid.*). Such was the case during the Reformation; and it continues as the ever-present threat of schism within a Church with a rigid hierarchical structure.

What emerges from the above is, I think, the need we have to alter our habitual thinking on the problem of power and conflict: the way is now clear to think out afresh views with respect to the right to resistance and related topics. (A further reference, that we need to become acquainted with various ethical and moral levels of moral discourse is beyond the scope of the present paper.)¹³ But before concluding, I would like to proffer some personal theological reflections that will qualify the discussion and argumentation so far presented.

First, it seems we have given short shrift to the non-violent strategy and tactics that must always remain a christian ideal. Perhaps 'possible-impossible' is a term that aptly describes the christian predicament with regard to power and conflict. There will always be the need and, we may hope, there will always be those present within the Church who would witness to and work towards this ideal. Such witness and effort could be an effective means to achieve peace and justice.

Secondly, in speaking about power parameters, it is usually taken for granted that the discussion be limited to its personal and social dimensions. But perhaps as Christians we cannot be so naïve. For as Paul says, our struggle is not 'against flesh and blood, but against the principalities,

against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph 6,12). Heinrich Schlier translates the meaning of these names into a contemporary world-view.¹⁴

This power-matrix, as we know from scripture and as Schlier points out, has been in principle defeated. However, until the day of the Lord, it still exercises a considerable destructive influence on man and his world. Given this kind of a theological framework, one's reflections on man and power must be seriously qualified.

By way of a concluding statement what I am saying is that liberation from alienation must encompass the cosmic as well as the personal and the social dimensions of man's interrelatedness. It is perhaps in this area that the charismatic movement could make a contribution to a new synthesis between social activism and personalist trends within the Church.

Michael Stogre S.J.

NOTES

¹ Cf 'Current definitions of Revolution', in *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol 32 (1926), pp 433-41.

² For an example of the former, cf Juan Luis Segundo's series: *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, New York, 1973, and following). For an example of the latter, cf James W. Douglass, *Resistance and Contemplation* (New York, 1972).

³ Martin E. Marty, 'Some contributions to planning the future of theological education', in *Theological Education* (Autumn 1974), p 36.

⁴ Cf Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1967).

⁵ Cf Dom Helder Camara, *Spiral of Violence* (London, 1971).

⁶ For a recent discussion of the triage principle applied on a world scale, cf 'Again Triage', in *The New York Times Magazine* (5 January 1975), pp 9-11.

⁷ Recent papal utterances continue to highlight the difficulty.

⁸ On this topic cf H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, 1956).

⁹ Max Pribilla, *The Right to Resist* (Oxford, 1952), pp 27-30. Cf Jeremiah Newman, *Studies in Political Morality* (Dublin, 1963).

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Theology of Power* (Baltimore, 1966) pp 291-407.

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1960), p xv.

¹² Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York, 1964), p 152.

¹³ Jim Gustafson, 'Context versus principles: a misplaced debate in theological ethics', in *Harvard Theological Review*, 58 (April, 1965).

¹⁴ Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York, 1961), p 67.