

A Theological Perspective on Human Liberation¹

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by Richard Shaull

A number of modern historians have reminded us that the history of the West has been the history of revolution. And these revolutions have occurred not merely as the result of an objective crisis in society, but because a crisis was precipitated by the emergence and action of a new dynamic proletariat. In each case, this proletariat had been captured by a new vision of a new social order. Its members found themselves excluded from the benefits of the *status quo*, or repelled by its injustices. Eventually they reached a point where their consuming passion was to bring the old order down and build a new and they were willing to sacrifice their lives so that this could happen.

These movements became disruptive forces in their societies; in some instances, they overthrow the old order and, eventually, organized society on a new foundation, with new structures of economic, social and political life. They often failed to achieve their goals, yet when we look back on our history today, we can see that many of the most significant breakthroughs toward a more human society have occurred as a result of these revolutions.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the emergence of such revolutionary forces is once again the order of the day. In the United States, this new proletariat has made its appearance among the black militants and the radicals of a new student generation. But it is in the Third World, and especially in Latin America, that this phenomenon is most widespread. There a vanguard, composed of men and women, old and young, of different social classes, has come to the conclusion that the total situation in which it finds itself is intolerable and must be overcome. They are convinced that the lethargy and misery of the masses, the social injustice evident everywhere, and the sclerosis of obsolete structures are due to the total order of domination created and sustained by the wedding of colonial power with the internal structures of economic and political domination by a small oligarchy. Thus, a new generation will be able to affirm its self-hood, find the road to rapid and autonomous economic development, and shape its own destiny as a nation only as this old order as a whole is overcome, and a new one is built.

In the past, the Christian Church has not done a very creative job of responding to the challenge of revolution. In some instances,

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it has been one of the main bulwarks of the old order; in others, it has stood on the sidelines and watched the struggle. Usually, some decades after the success of a revolution, the Church has reluctantly entered into dialogue or established a *modus vivendi* with it. Must this necessarily be the case? Does the very nature of the Christian faith force us to take our stand in support of the old order? Or does it perhaps offer resources for understanding a revolutionary situation and participating in a struggle for social reconstruction? I have been forced to face this question in a very existential way in Latin America, where a new generation of Christians are now in the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle; and I would like to present, very briefly, some of the results of my theological work which was motivated by my relation with them.

I—*Theology and the Direction of Historical Development*

It is now a generally accepted axiom that our Judeo-Christian heritage overcame the dominance of the cyclical view of history. In its place, it introduced the idea that man's historical existence was gradually moving toward a goal, and that this goal was nothing less than the creation of a new humanity, a new possibility for human fulfilment within a new social order. The original Christian symbols which provided the resources for such understanding have produced a wide variety of eschatological views, often in contradiction with each other. Nevertheless, they suggest that God is at work in human history, breaking it open to a new tomorrow, and that we are best able to understand what is going on around us and respond to it when we have our eyes open to perceive new possibilities and strive to create them.

But all this is very vague. It suggests that we can look to the future with hope, but it gives us no clues as to the nature of the historical process, the shape of the new order, or how it can be brought into existence. Can we, without attempting to create some over-arching philosophy of history, say anything more specific, in theological terms, about this question? I believe that we can, especially at two points:

(1) A number of theologians have suggested in recent years, that in the perspective of Christian faith, the history of man is the history of human liberation. A German sociologist, Dietrich Von Oppen, claims that the person and teachings of Christ have had a revolutionary impact on the world. He finds the clue to this revolution in Jesus' words: 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.' This means, for Von Oppen, that all institutions lose their sacral, and thus authoritarian character. They exist to serve man, and thus must be seen as merely functional. To the degree that this attitude toward institutions has penetrated our culture, new structures have emerged which are open, flexible, limited in their area of influence and subject to constant critical examination; and the gradual creation of institutions of this type constitutes the context of human liberation.

A Dutch theologian, Arend van Leeuwen, concludes that primitive societies were entirely dominated by an 'ontocratic' pattern of life. By this he means that all aspects of divine and historical reality, the eternal and the temporal, were inextricably mixed together, in such a way that nature and society were sacralized. They belonged to the divine order, therefore they had authority over men and could not be tampered with. For Van Leeuwen, the Christian understanding of reality separated the divine from the created order, and thus led to the de-sacralizing of the world. Consequently, the growing impact of Christianity on the world has meant the gradual collapse of ontocratic structures, and thus has brought increasing freedom—to man and society—to create the future. Within this framework, God's redemptive action in the world is understood as an ongoing process of human liberation. As his impact is felt, those races, classes and communities of men that have been dehumanized, move to new discoveries of human self-consciousness, new realms of experience, and thus to a new self-identity. They discover that their future is open, and that, as individuals or communities, they move toward a new stage of fulfilment as they take their destiny into their own hands and order their existence around the goals which they create. In a very interesting chapter in his book, *Christianity in World History*, van Leeuwen traces the revolutionary impact of this 'virus' in our western world across the centuries.

If this is what is going on in a world in which God is at work, I find it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we today have arrived at a climactic moment in that process. For it is this new discovery of self-hood and this new will to shape the future which is at the heart of the Negro revolution and the new stirrings among youth and students in this country, as well as the new developments in the Third World. And if this is at the centre of God's action to transform and enrich human life and fill it with meaning, then we should feel ourselves closely identified with this struggle and the achievement of this goal should be our central concern as Christians at this time. In this case, our thought about Vietnam or Latin America will be determined, not primarily by the hope to see western institutions established there, or to have change without violence, or even by the desire to 'Stop Communism', but rather by our concern for the struggle of emerging people as they seek the freedom to develop a new way of life for themselves.

(2) The biblical story introduces a second element into our understanding of the historical process: History moves forward but it does not move upward in spirals because of the fact that time and again God's action for the liberation of man runs into difficulties. In the Old Testament, the messianic movement toward the new order is thwarted; therefore, it can go ahead only as God tears down in order to build up. Nowhere is this more strikingly stated than in the Magnificat, where the Virgin Mary speaks of the coming of the Messiah as

bringing a radical disruption of the established order. The powerful will be brought down and the humble exalted. The New Testament continues this same line, as the eschatological expectations for the future are mixed up with the apocalyptic. And as the imagery of the anti-Christ suggests, the growing influence of Christ in history leads to the union and dynamic activity of his adversaries, who have been called to life by His action. The liberating action of Christ sows the seeds of liberation in the lives of men, destroys authority of all those structures which block such liberation, and thus provokes a violent and often desperate reaction on the part of the old order.

In this context, history moves forward by leaps as the power of the old order is broken down, so that the new can emerge. It is this which leads Rosenstock-Huessey to affirm that the history of the West can only be understood as the history of revolutions. The major steps forward in the creation of new human institutions have occurred by such confrontation and struggle. And to the degree that these Christian symbols are operative in our understanding of what is going on around us, we should be prepared to recognize the importance of this element and respond creatively to the challenge it presents.

By this I mean that as Christians, we are free from the self-imposed limitations of American liberalism at this point. Nothing is more common than the affirmation that we are in favour of all efforts for the liberation of the depressed classes—as long as they do not upset too much the present system or run the risks of violence. Consequently, we are the first ones to withdraw from the struggle when it can no longer be fitted into this framework. In the perspective to which I have referred, however, the problem is seen quite differently. When the old order is no longer able to serve men adequately and is too sclerotic to change fast enough to keep up with events, it will have to be brought down or broken open by conflict and violence of one sort or another, and the dynamics of God's action in the world moves in that direction. In that situation, the violence of the struggle will be determined primarily by those in power, for it is up to them to decide whether the old can make way for the new without total confrontation and disruption. This does not justify any use of violence at any time by the agents of social change, but it does put the primary responsibility for dealing with this question where it belongs.

When I look at the world today with the biblical images in mind, I have the impression that they help me a great deal to make sense out of what I see. A new commitment to the construction of a new social order on the part of the Negro or student in this country or the new generation in the developing world is being met by tremendous efforts on the part of those in power to preserve the *status quo*. These new forces have rejected all relationships of paternalism on the part of the powerful, yet almost everything we do continues to express

this attitude in a variety of subtle ways, as e.g. when we assume that we know the solution to the problems of development of the poor nations, or that committees composed mostly of leaders of the Establishment can decide how to overcome the crisis in our urban ghettos. The emergence of a new self-identity of many national and ethnic groups, as well as that of a new generation, is met with extraordinarily well-organized and effective pressures for conformity, which make real independence and opposition almost impossible. And the longing of the powerless for power to determine their destiny – here and abroad – is met by an expanding system of domination no longer held in check by effective countervailing power. Those in power are so bound by their past and their irrelevant ideologies, that they are no longer able to respond creatively to the demands of a new day; while those who find themselves enveloped in the shroud of the old order have the choice between the surrender of everything that has become most important for them and their society, and an arduous revolutionary struggle. Christian realism should lead us, I believe, to accept this as the context within which we define our responsibility to work for social reconstruction today.

Obviously, no one can prove that there is a God at work in history in this way. To make the wager of faith means to bet that the dynamics of history revealed at one specific moment of time and in one particular place, does indeed offer us a possibility of understanding the dynamics of the wider historical process; that the symbols and stories that make up the biblical tradition have the power to make this reality transparent to us. In Christian perspective, that which is most real cannot be grasped by mere empirical observation; it is above all the reality of the new world that is coming to be, as the future breaks into our present and makes it pregnant with new possibilities. In the language of the tradition, the action of the Triune God in history is the reality in which human life is set, and it is this which pushes man toward new possibilities of fulfilment in the midst of conflict, crisis and social reconstruction. To live by faith is to trust that things work out that way and thus to participate in the struggle in hope.

II—*The Context of Personal Liberation*

At this point, a further observation is necessary: Christian faith affirms that the Christian symbols provide us with clues to the reality of historical development and of personal existence. Jesus Christ—crucified and risen—is both the Messiah who initiates a new era in human history and the Second Adam, the new man. The same dynamics which we perceive in the historical process are then operative in personal existence. As individuals, we move toward maturity and fulfilment in life as we allow the old to collapse and the new to arise out of death. The fact that this happens in society makes new forms of personal existence possible in the world;

while the new man who is formed through daily death and resurrection can be the free agent of social reconstruction.

For this reason, I believe that the central Christian symbols for us today are those of death and resurrection. No modern thinker has stated this more powerfully than Eugen Rosenstock-Huesey, in his book, *The Christian Future*. He puts it this way:

‘Christianity is the embodiment of one single truth through the ages: that death precedes birth, that birth is the fruit of death, and that the soul is precisely this power of transforming an end into a beginning by obeying a new name’ (p. 10).

In those few words we are challenged to a radical reorientation of our lives. For those who have been surprised by the irruption of the new in the midst of the old and expect to be surprised again and again on the road to the future, death can be brought into the centre of life and overcome. They are free to lose their lives in the hope of finding them; to break out of the dead end of stagnation and repetition by burying the old when its time has come, and working to give form to the new. In this framework, it is possible to contemplate and accept the loss of that which we most cherish, even though we do not yet know what will take its place. The willing acceptance of the agony of creation takes the place of security within the context of old stabilities, and those who have no future or give up the future already guaranteed for them, turn out to be the ones who are free to create a new tomorrow.

If this perspective is to be transformed into a style of life, we must discover what it means to run the risk of death every day: i.e. to allow the presuppositions on which we function to be brought out into the open and called into question; to contemplate the shattering of the neat systems of thought and life in which we feel sheltered and secure, and to have the courage to start putting the pieces together once again, expecting a new design to emerge. When this happens, the Christian community becomes a parable of the coming Kingdom rather than a relic of a dead order. It is the place where we serve others by forcing them to call their thought and existence into question, where we are sustained in the time of waiting, and find the courage to risk thinking new thoughts and living experimentally.

It is hardly necessary here to mention the importance of this in relation to the situation we now face at home or in our policy toward the Third World. For the failure of American liberalism is nowhere more evident than in its inability to bury its dead. We insist on dealing with the problems of Vietnam and Latin America in terms of an international situation of two decades ago, thus ignoring the dynamics of history and the emergence of new realities. Consequently, we use our power to destroy the most creative forces of new nations and run the risks of a Third World War because we are victims of our own slogans. We have allowed ourselves to be caught in a box in

which we can no longer discern the real alternatives or explore new and creative possibilities latent in the situation.

If, in the Christian community, we are able to make these resources of our heritage operative once again, something exciting could happen. It would be possible, in the midst of a dying order, to form men and women who would be free to perceive the inadequacy of old slogans, be open to new realities, develop new perspectives, and propose new alternatives. An honest look at the institutional Church or at the witness of history is not likely to give us much hope for this to happen in the Church as a whole. But it may well be that here and there small communities can arise that will meet this challenge in creative ways.

III—*The Church and the Struggle for Liberation in Latin America*

If this interpretation of the meaning of our Christian heritage is legitimate, it could well revolutionize our perspective on Latin America and lead us to a commitment to a new struggle there as well as in this country. If we are free to understand what is involved in the struggle for liberation in Latin America today, then our own responsibility will be sharply redefined. To my mind, the most significant work on this has been done by Professor Candido Mendes, of Brazil, whose participation in this organization (CICOP) and other international Catholic movements is well known to many of you. Professor Mendes contends that underdevelopment is not simply a lack of certain resources and techniques; it is a *total social fact*, which is the product of the structures of society and patterns of relationship with the outside world that developed during the colonial era. Each country was used as a source of raw materials and as a market for the products of the metropolis, and its social structures were shaped by this fact. The economic order was based on the large landowners in the country and the merchants in the city. The political system was the instrument by which this very small ruling class distributed patronage and developed a clientèle. The masses were submerged in a state of lethargy; there was no independent middle class; and the intellectual and cultural life of the élite was oriented toward the metropolis.

In this context, according to Candido Mendes, national emancipation and economic development depends upon overcoming this total situation of the past. This involves the integration of the nation around nationalist goals, comprehensive economic planning moving in the direction of socialism, together with the control and disciplined use of the economic resources available; intensive efforts to awaken the masses for full participation in creating a new society, and the encouragement of a new generation of leadership oriented toward national emancipation and development. In other words, this can mean nothing less than the end of the old order and the creation of new social, economic and political structures which can serve the

goals of national development. It inevitably means a radically changed relationship with the United States, because national development, by its very nature, requires that the new nations find their own solutions to their problems, build the structures most adequate for their situation, and be as independent as possible of outside economic domination.

A new generation in Latin America understands this and is committed to working for it in these terms. In recent years, especially among Catholic youth, extraordinary things have been happening, as they have thrown themselves into the struggle for development at many points, and worked at building a new political base for the creation of a new social order. But in many instances, their experience has been terribly frustrating, for they have discovered that the small ruling élites that are unable to take the initiative in social reconstruction and economic development, are nevertheless willing to pay any price to remain in power and preserve their privileges. And what is even more disastrous, these Catholic young people have become convinced that the use of U.S. power—economic, political and military—is the major force sustaining the old order and blocking the creation of a new one. The end result is very clear. For an increasing number of these people, there is only one hope: the organization of armed movements of national liberation, with all the sacrifice and bloodshed that it involves. In recent months, I have been amazed to discover how many groups of Catholics and Protestants have moved to this conclusion, after all their efforts to work for change by political means had been systematically destroyed.

These recent events confront all of us in the Church with a new call for decision. In the past, the Church has often been the bulwark of the *status quo*, or stood on the sidelines while the fight for a new society was going on. Fortunately, our awareness today of our Christian responsibility for economic development and national emancipation has pushed us beyond that point. Yet I suspect that for most of us, reliance on guerrilla warfare is not an attractive prospect. We are rightly horrified by the price this would demand, in bloodshed, the sacrifice of a new generation, and the long delay in urgent steps toward development.

But do we have any alternative to offer? The only possibility I see is if Christians and the Church could become a catalytic force in the development of a new type of opposition to the present trend and power structures. This would mean accepting all the risks involved in creating pressure groups that would try to break the situation open; confront the present forms of domination; insist on freedom to build the political power of peasants, workers and students; and support students, labour leaders, intellectuals and priests who are now working to build a new order. This would not be an easy or a pleasant task; it might not have much chance to succeed. But it could open the possibility for a rebirth of hope in the

political struggle for social reconstruction and I can think of nothing that would be more important in Latin America at this time.

Those of us who remain in the U.S.A. have an even more difficult task. If we are concerned about the future of Latin America, the important thing for most of us is not for us to go there but to remain here and accept the responsibility for a long-term struggle to change a society which, by its own inner logic, has become the enemy of movements of human liberation in the Third World—and here at home. And to change our policy toward that part of the world is not something that can be done by lobbying in Washington or pressing for more economic aid. It requires nothing less than a radical critique of our society, the development of a new basis of political power for radical change, and the gradual formation of a new public opinion on foreign policy. Only as these things happen can we hope, as a nation, to be sympathetic with and support the new forces in Latin America, encourage and permit them to develop the economic and political structures most adequate to their situation, and control the way in which U.S. private capital operates abroad.

Very few instruments now exist for doing this, so that today our most urgent task may be to work with other radicals in our society toward the creation of such small communities, willing to attack one or another of these problems on a long-term basis. In the past we have encouraged priests, nuns and laymen to serve the peoples of the Third World by giving their lives to missionary communities in these lands. Whatever the importance of this task may still be, we now face a new challenge: to encourage this type of commitment to communities in this country that are trying to serve the rest of the world by means of intense intellectual and political efforts to transform our society, and its structure of relations to other nations. I know of one group of twelve young people related to the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) who have formed such a team to work on the analysis and exposure of how U.S. power now operates in Latin America. To do this, they are living on a subsistence basis in New York, most of them taking part-time jobs in order to support themselves as they work at this task, I see this as only one small example of the type of communities now needed to work on a variety of issues in the university, in relation to church groups, in suburbia, and on many other fronts. Nothing less than this, I believe, will be adequate for the challenge now confronting us when we take seriously our responsibility as Christians in the contemporary struggle for human liberation.