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POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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It is impossible to remain loyal to Marxism, to the Revolution, without treating insurrection as an art.
—Lenin, quoting Karl Marx

I. THE ISSUES

Where liberation theology is concerned, perhaps no issue has been more controversial than its relation to violence. When it comes to Marxism/Leninism there is no question of its dependence on the use of violence, so that this question plagues all liberation theories. On the one hand, the ties that bind humans in bondage may be so strong that violence is needed to release us. On the other hand, it is well known that violence often breeds its own downfall and that terror, more often than peace, results.

Since the beginning of time, probably any theory seeking to release human beings to their full potential has had to consider the use of violence to achieve its ends and its known potential dangers. Yet this issue takes on a new urgency in our time due to two significant changes in our situation: (1) Communist proposals have resulted in worldwide change, but many have asserted the necessity to use force if we are to be set free. Yet (2) in recent times liberation theology has been espoused by some Christian theologians, and the adoption of pacifism or the abhorrence of violence by most Christian groups is well known. Religion's intrusion into the political realm is problem enough, but to add the question of violence raises the issue to a new intensity.

Various approaches have well-developed positions regarding violence and nonviolence. Where Christianity is concerned, it is instructive to begin by looking at the life and words of Jesus. Christianity will be our frame of reference in discussing these issues, since liberation theology developed in a Christian context. First we have to ask: "Is the use of violence to achieve political ends always ruled out or do some circumstances justify it as an acceptable tool for Christian use?" Traditionally Jesus is pictured as rejecting the use of violence and as having suffered violence himself. Can anything change this image so that it would make violence acceptable on Christian grounds?

We first have to note that Jesus himself lived under political oppression. If we consider Jewish expectations for the Messiah, as this role came to be projected onto Jesus, it is the Jews' hope for release from

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Roman oppressors that focused such high expectations on Jesus. Although Christians came to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, nothing could be more clear than that he did not live to fulfill the role of a political liberator. After his death Jewish political fortunes went from bad to worse. Thus the peoples' expectations of gaining release by the hand of Jesus did not result in a change in political fortunes. Christians have entered into politics and governments, and some welcome changes can be attributed to "Christian influence." But such improvements cannot be directly attributed to Jesus' efforts in his own lifetime.

This leads us to one of the points of conflict Christians have with communist programs. Following the optimism of the modern scientific age, Marxism/Leninism claimed that the age of science offers us the possibility for "utopia now." On the other hand, Christianity is represented as offering release only later, an event delayed until some future day. Thus the Christian must face the taunt that communism offers an achievable ideal state now, one within our reach due to scientific advances, whereas Christianity can hold only a little hope for us in this world. Liberation theology certainly arises at least partly as a Christian "answer" to the Marxist challenge. One issue is the question of whether the use of violence is compatible with Christianity. Can, then, Christian liberation theologians accept parts of communist historical analysis without compromising the core of their belief?

If Christians cannot promise immediate release as Marxists can, they are at a disadvantage competing in a world dominated by revolutionary fever. If Marxists have achieved the overthrow of oppressive political regimes, what can Christians offer to compete with this, other than a distant heaven? Christians claim that we human beings can be born anew, thus achieving an internal renewal, but how can this largely unseen change compete with revolutionary overthrow and the establishment of new social orders? What overt change can Christians claim to achieve, and what means can they legitimately and consistently employ?

Before exploring this basic issue further, let me state the thesis I will offer. This might seem to be reaching the conclusion before the analysis of the issue, but stating a thesis at this point may in fact clarify the issues. Anyone who deals with Christian texts and traditions has no choice except to pick some focal point as a reference. Once one makes this selection, other notions fall in around it. I believe there is no neutral focal point, except of course that some selections can be shown to be minor and unusual when considered against religious tradition. What I propose has often been selected as crucial for Christian interpretation, even if it has been a bit enigmatic in its interpretation.

When Jesus is asked if it was proper to pay taxes to Caesar, he asks for a coin. Showing the image of Caesar on it, he is quoted as saying: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's."[1] Although this seems an astute reply, it

[1] Matt 22:21 (*KJV*).

is not so easy to interpret in detail as it might at first seem. All abstract principles often become murky when practical decisions are required. I do not take this as a special fault of Jesus' utterances but as a fact of our moral life. That is, no principle applies easily and universally without requiring difficult decisions on our part. This does not render general rules and principles useless, but the enunciation of general principles is only the beginning of the human decision process.

In this case, how does Jesus' neat division of the affairs of Caesar and the affairs of God help us with the question of whether a Christian resort to violence to achieve change is ruled out? Quite often this saying of Jesus is appealed to in order to argue for a rigid separation. This makes Christianity purely a thing of the spirit to be conducted in isolation from the mundane matters with which Christians are sometimes advised to have nothing to do. Religion becomes an interior, spiritual matter, leaving the affairs of state overtly unaffected. In contrast I want to argue the reverse, that in fact this important saying can be interpreted otherwise so as to leave Christians free in the practical world. This can be done with one crucial provision: Christians cannot appeal to Jesus or to religious principles as some absolute justification for their political/public activity. Each person must accept responsibility and justify his or her actions on their own.

To say this may seem to compartmentalize religion. Yet seen in another way it actually authorizes any activity the individual may wish to undertake. It is just that he or she must take the responsibility for what is done. Nor does it claim that religion, particularly Christianity, is purely an internal, spiritual affair with no external applications. It simply tells us that, if you feel some principle—such as compassion for those who are poor or suffering—requires action on your part, you must undertake the action that you deem necessary without putting responsibility off on other shoulders, particularly on Jesus'. Jesus clearly did not use violence and seems to have preached against its use. If you now think that violence is needed to release human beings from their bonds of suffering, fine. But the means you adopt are your choice, and the consequences are on your shoulders. Of course most liberation theologians want to analyze Christian texts and traditions so that they justify their actions, even sometimes violence. Instead, I believe, God places all justification on our shoulders.

Any argument that seems to claim that all Christians must or should support some one program of action cannot be justified in the long run. No argument within Christianity has received (or I believe can receive) unanimous approval as expressing what all Christians must believe or do. This does not mean that all arguments claiming Christian support are equally valid. But it does mean that it is dangerous to try to fix one "Christian position" as binding on all. Since our differences have not ceased to exist, the only sense in which we might reach universal agreement would be to stop trying to force all of Christianity into some single form or program. Diversity may be Christianity's essence. Could we accept this as a fact, it might keep us from internally destructive

arguments, ones that appear to head us toward unity but in fact promote division.

On this view, one can live in South Africa and claim justification for one's racial views, although never without dispute, since neither God nor Jesus enjoins any one program. Jesus' stress on love and the love of enemies is so central, however, that one does need to reconcile any outlook with that Christian theme. The medieval person who asserted the divine right of kings is as much at fault as the revolutionary who argues that Jesus offers liberation in a way that authorized violence, should its use be necessary to break "the ties that bind" us in debilitating lifestyles. Jesus not only did not resort to violence himself but in fact seems to have opposed it. Yet I believe that even that fact does not prevent the dedicated Christian from arguing for the necessity of violence as a means, if he or she is convinced that it is the only way the oppressive structure can be forced to release us.

One problem with this interpretation will be spotted quickly, both by dedicated revolutionaries and by Christians who want liberation theology to result in social change: Effective liberation and revolutionary movements need unified support. To have the required effectiveness one cannot sink into an "each do as one pleases" attitude. We know that revolutionary action is of necessity intolerant where opposition to the new programs is concerned. The well-known liberal tolerance for diversity in viewpoints does not breed success for revolutionary or liberation movements. Such actions have often been intolerant of opposing views and have felt that the destruction of opposition is a prime requirement for success.

Can the Christian accept the singularity of interpretation that effective action seems to require? If the Christian liberation theologian argues that all Christians cannot be required to accept some program of action, he or she is limited by the division induced by plurality. But neither can the Christian revolutionary activist be told that his program is "un-Christian" as judged by some singular, authoritative standard. Of course the chief complication in saying this lies with an hierarchical Church that establishes authorities to formulate doctrine. The Christian who wants to act differently from what the structure of such a Church allows will either have to (1) find a way to act independently and still stay within that community, (2) convince the hierarchy of the rightness of the position, in which case the Church's official position becomes his own, or (3) leave the Church for another less doctrinally rigid Christian community.

II. IS THE USE OF VIOLENCE NECESSARY FOR LIBERATION?

Until this point we have assumed that any effective liberation of human beings requires the use of violence. To deal with this question, we must first differentiate between the inner and outer human nature. As is known, Christianity tends to do this and has often claimed to offer a new

inner freedom. It talks of being "born again," but this can tend to involve the inner nature more than the physical human being. Of course external change sometimes results too, but usually it is said to come at a later time, not now.

From Jesus' statements it is clear that, no matter what later interpretations may conclude, his followers were enjoined to help the poor, heal the sick, and relieve suffering. No specific instructions are given as to how this is to be done, which is the basis for a Marxist complaint about the lack of an action program. Still the Christian intent is clear. I have argued that any implementation program is the responsibility of the individual and that no single plan is as such enjoined in its specifics by Christian doctrine. We are only told that some action should be undertaken. This provokes the Christian individual crisis: I must do something for human relief. But the burden is mine as to how I choose to do this, no group plan being laid out.

Furthermore, two problems plague Christianity: (1) the Marxist doctrine of "materialism," and (2) the question of the use of revolutionary violence. The Christian appraisal does not deny that there are material causes of unhappiness and enslavement, but it tends to stress the spiritual or internal causes. These must be addressed first and are not necessarily materially determined but perhaps are independent in origin. How one attacks the material/economic/political situation is not specified. It may be as Mother Teresa works, simply caring for the suffering individually. A political/material program may also be proposed, except not as required of all by reason of Christian belief.

The universalism and uniformity of doctrine generally so demanded by Marxism/Leninism as a condition for success simply do not hold in Christian terms. Some church groups have attempted to impose uniformity of doctrine, but there is no evidence that any one interpretation can be required of all Christians except insofar as one is a member of a particular group. Uniformity of action on a "Christian" basis is excluded from the beginning, all of which does not bode well for a "Christian" revolutionary program. Certainly it makes the use of violence to achieve "liberation" a matter of debate.

III. THE ORIGINS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

As is well known, Gustavo Gutierrez first brought liberation theology to wide attention.[2] Just as the situation of black people in America may be special, so it is clear that the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America is different than in most parts of the world. Still, our concern is not the Church's socio-historical context but how the origins of liberation theology relate to the use of violence. Gutierrez begins by equating "liberation" with "salvation."[3] This notion is crucial, since most Christians are

[2] G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973).
[3] Ibid. 2.

familiar with the idea of "salvation" but perhaps not with its link to the notion of "liberation."

Gutierrez argues that theology changes and that theology "as a critical reflection on praxis" (action)[4] has recently become more accepted. From a Protestant perspective one could say that others have long argued Christianity's commitment to change, but Gutierrez is speaking from a Roman Catholic-Latin perspective, as he says. Marxism wants to transform the world,[5] but the issue is: By what means? From the beginning we need to recognize that Gutierrez speaks almost entirely in terms of "the Church," as no Protestant really can.

"Liberation," Gutierrez recognizes, involves radical change. "Salvation" as a more traditional term does too, but it is not necessarily socially and politically oriented. Gutierrez does view the historical process as "the gradual liberation of man,"[6] but this involves a progressive, evolutionary perspective that may be hard to justify. If as he says Christ is presented "as the one who brings liberation,"[7] much will depend on accepting the shift from "salvation" to the slightly broader notion of "liberation" and the question of what this involves. Gutierrez recognizes this, but on an evolutionary basis he argues that now "human reason has become political reason."[8] This may be difficult to accept without also accepting his assumption that there is "social evolution."

Gutierrez asks the question: Should the Church actually lend support "to a dictatorial and oppressive government" by remaining friendly or silent?[9] This again assumes an essentially Roman meaning of "the Church," and it still leaves unsettled what action the Church, or any religious person, should engage in. But as for Latin America he feels that the revolutionary process "ought to embrace the whole continent,"[10] although he does not provide any specifics about how this is to be done or how far it is authorized to go. He also seems to assume some kind of purity of intent on the part of those who oppose current dictatorial government. But Reinhold Niebuhr might be right: There may be no one right side but only a choice of lesser evils.

As Gutierrez says, "the coming of the Kingdom implies the building of a just society."[11] Clearly that is involved, but the issue is: How, when, and by what means? No Christian needs to refrain from social action, but there is a question of whether our own actions can claim to accomplish this fully or whether its full achievement is reserved for God's final action and the end of time. Gutierrez urges the Church to "prophetic denunciations" of social injustice. That of course is an ancient tradition within

[4] Ibid. 6.
[5] Ibid. 9.
[6] Ibid. 29.
[7] Ibid. 37.
[8] Ibid. 47.
[9] Ibid. 65.
[10] Ibid. 89.
[11] Ibid. 110.

both Judaism and Christianity. The question is whether one can move, on a religious basis, beyond this to violent revolution.

Speaking for Latin America, Gutierrez wants the Church to "place itself squarely within the process of revolution, amid the violence which is present in different ways."[12] Of course Christians should not flee and have not fled in the face of violence. Those involved in any struggle must still be ministered to, and their human needs may be even greater when violence breaks out. But can the Church, or any person claiming the support of Christianity, actively promote the process and engage in violence too? The Church might put its weight behind social changes, as he argues, but does that endorse any particular program or plan of action? Gutierrez treats "salvation" as something "other worldly,"[13] but there is no reason to do so. He wants a new chosen people, and obviously a Messiah, who will be more a political liberator than Jesus was in fact.

Gutierrez paints a moving picture of Christian commitment to alleviate suffering and of the new world it looks for. Yet on the whole he skirts the question of whether violence may be necessary. Perhaps he comes closest to the issue when he states: "To love one's enemies presupposes recognizing and accepting that one has class enemies and that it is necessary to combat them."[14] Yes, but by what means? And does this include the elimination of opposing parties by violence if necessary? Gutierrez wants us to participate in the class struggle, but does that mean to seek the elimination of certain existing classes?

He argues for a "solidarity with the poor and a protest against poverty."[15] But is this protest to remain mainly verbal? In all his analysis Gutierrez has not faced the Marxist challenge that the bonds that suppress us are material and therefore require radical action, even revolutionary violence, if we are to break, eliminate and eradicate the social/political structures of our present world. Is this true? If so, violence is necessary and our present order cannot remain. That is a possible theory, and it could be true. Gutierrez has only urged action without specifying the limits allowed, which is the issue at the heart of the matter and the origin of the surrounding controversy.

By way of assessment, review and summary, let us consider briefly a similar book by Oscar Cullmann.[16] As is well known, Cullmann argues that Jesus could have joined the revolutionary movements of his time but that he did not. In fact, he "cannot be simply viewed as belonging to any of the principal movements prevailing in his time."[17] If this is true, it is a hard fact for any advocate of revolution to accept. If you want to enlist Christian backing for specific causes, it seems clear that Jesus joined none in his time and remained an enigma to his disciples because of this.

[12] Ibid. 138.
[13] Ibid. 151.
[14] Ibid. 276.
[15] Ibid. 301.
[16] O. Cullmann, *Jesus and Revolutionaries* (New York: Harper, 1976).
[17] Ibid. vii.

In Jesus' time the zealots were the group advocating a political program. Yet Jesus did not join them. The Romans convicted Jesus of the crime of trying to establish a political kingdom. Yet we know the irony of his crucifixion is that he preached the coming of the kingdom from within. Jesus and the zealots both proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand, and Jesus was condemned as a zealot agitator. Yet we know he advocated nonviolence and viewed the zealots as a diabolical temptation to be shunned. Still, Jesus' expectation of a coming kingdom is undeniable—although its initiative is to be from God, no matter what our role.

Most important, Jesus did not hate his enemies, a tendency we see in some liberation theologies. In fact his attitude toward Samaritans and Gentiles probably shocked the zealots, "whose hate for the Gentiles was the most extreme."[18] So we need to ask: Can violent revolution be advocated without a basis in hatred? If not, this a block for most Christians. The forgiving of our enemies is difficult for a revolutionary program, and certainly it eliminates violence as an acceptable path. Jesus turns to the poor and to the rich. He shows no class distinctions in spite of his compassion for those who suffer.

Even his disciples could not understand the conception of the kingdom of God that Jesus preached, so disparate was it from the current political options. He was a strange "Messiah." Jesus dismissed the zealot political concept of the Messiah as a satanic temptation. It is not easy to understand what kind of "kingdom" Jesus wanted to inaugurate, but certainly it was not a political-economic one. Jesus compromised on the issue of political/religious allegiance, as we noted earlier, since not to pay one's taxes was considered by the zealots as a test of faithfulness. Ironically Jesus was condemned as a zealot, and yet he was no zealot.

In summary, then, I have argued that any individual Christian can resort to violence and destruction if he or she wishes to take on his/her shoulders the responsibility for using such means. The Marxist/Leninist can undoubtedly find clear doctrine to support using violence to break the prevailing social/political/economic/class structures that they assert prevent liberation. A Christian, on the other hand, may offer an individual reading of "Christianity" that authorizes the use of violence, but neither in the life and work or Jesus nor in the NT nor in most major theological interpretations can one find justification for the use of violent means or any advocating of destruction of societies.

Certainly it is clear that no unanimity of all Christians will ever center on an acceptance of the use of violence, so antithetical is it to most Christian traditions. Yet we must face the Marxist/Leninist challenge, that the structures that bind us cannot be broken other than by the use of violent means. Furthermore, whatever any Christian may feel authorized to do, the transformation of the world's basic structure depends at least in part on God's intervening power, even if it can be said that divinity

[18] Ibid. 23.

interferes partially and subtly now. Still, the day of full and final release is not yet here, and unfortunately we cannot be sure that the use of violence and terror will hasten its coming.

IV. THE SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA

If one lives in the United States it may be easy enough to pursue a nonviolent revolution. Martin Luther King, Jr., could be a Christian pacifist, follow Jesus and Gandhi, and still achieve a "revolution" in race relations. Gandhi inspired King because he achieved the independence of India while preaching nonviolence, even if violence did follow as a result of his work. Gandhi was dealing with a cultivated British democracy, even if as part of an empire, and King had United States constitutional appeals open to him. Although situations vary it is hard to point to a single situation in South/Central America where military force is not the rule, and civil liberties are anything but sacred.

When you face openly ruthless military power and autocratic political rule, where any protest might cause you to disappear from society, it can easily be argued that nothing but force could accomplish change. Those who do not hold power under constitutions, or accept democratic elections, know that only repression can keep them in power. Such rulers have everything to fear from protest and revolution and little to lose from ruthless oppression, particularly if it is astutely and cleverly applied. In such situations, to talk of "liberation" without a willingness to resort to force and violence may be to doom all such talk to either frustration or insignificance. "The Church" often has both wealth and political influence. Why should this not be used to achieve a change otherwise doomed to failure?

Given such a context, what I have been saying about the questionable nature of any appeal to violence on a Christian basis would seem to doom religion to ineffectiveness. The problem is not so much finding a way to change or revise Christianity's traditional posture as to wonder how political interests, no matter how just their cause, could have thought of turning to Christianity, or to any of its churches, to support a change that demands violence if the project is not to fail. Why not argue for change and for any means necessary to achieve it on a secular basis as Marx does? Of course, a monolithic Church in Latin America can be a powerful instrument, whereas churches in the United States split their power among a variety of institutions, most loosely organized.

In North America one can appeal to organized religion for spiritual or moral support and often raise powerful forces. But any hint of violence would at best divide support and perhaps even doom the movement to failure. In Latin America, violence may be necessary for success. And the Roman Church stands out as one of the few institutions explicitly committed to the good of the people, whatever its past actual record of accommodation to political repression may be. In some situations one may be forced to consider the Church as its ally or find little organized

support. Odd, then, that violence appears on the horizon of Christianity (as it has in the past, although often as a means to repress dissent from within) as an alternative to potential revolutionary failure. What we must ask, however, is whether any association with violence may tear apart Christian effectiveness rather than secure an otherwise unobtainable political change.

Listening to the rhetoric of recent liberation theologians, one detects two trends that have been dangerous in Christianity's past and may be potentially divisive again, especially when unity of action is desperately needed. These are (1) a tendency to pit one group against another rather than to unite factions in harmony, and (2) the stress on preaching the realization of the kingdom of God now.

(1) Insofar as Latin American liberation theology incites hate against North American economic "oppressors," or even against local political oppressions, it draws its strength from the stormy emotions of hate and retaliation, whereas Christianity has preached the love of enemies. Can any movement be accredited as "Christian" that in any way capitalizes on hate for an enemy rather than love? Furthermore, as often happens whenever hatred of any group or class is preached, any such appeal will divide Christians rather than unite them, even if some do rally to the call.

(2) Where Christian tradition is concerned, the preaching of the imminent kingdom may pose the most difficult problem. Jesus' followers expected success in their time, and Jesus was crucified amid disappointed hopes. The traditional expectation of the second coming seems to say that no realization of the Christian hope can come in any full or exact sense until that time. In this case, whatever Christians do in the interim to redress wrongs (which they are enjoined to do), any final resolution awaits God's action. If so, violence to achieve our goals becomes less justifiable. Violence, if it is to be appealed to, can hardly be engaged in claiming the authorization of Christian doctrine. It must be an individual action.