

The Prophetic Stance In The Modern World



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The Axes of Liberation

There is a growing disillusionment on the part of many Christians with the systems of prophetic interpretation most visible in the literature of the predominant evangelical and fundamentalist presses. This is only to be expected. We are a people in the fluxes of an earthshaking and powerful transition of history. There has been an overturning of the foundations in all spheres of contemporary thought, experience and existence. It is an age of revolution, this modern age. Any system of thought and belief unable to satisfactorily account for and adequately withstand these overwhelming surges of change must necessarily be left behind.

The phenomenon of revolution has been likened to a fire burning in the minds of men. This expression is certainly apt. In the thinking of many, the appearance of these flames signals an approaching new world filled with justice and peace. The possession of a revolutionary spirit is regarded as a certificate of citizenship in the coming great society and as a harbinger of destruction for the tyrants of the status quo.

It is a common technique on the part of the privileged members of society to picture these revolutionary manifestations as so many noisome and violent plagues of senseless nihilism on the body politic of our western culture. It would be a mistake however, to naively accept such an analysis without further investigation. An accurate and prophetic assessment of the facts will detail an even more ominous outline, if such is possible.

In reality, these 'true believers' of the revolution represent the epitome of goal-oriented activity. They are in fact seriously affecting the future developments of our total world systems. They are catalysts in a massive social reaction; the front edge of a mental groundswell breaking over the collective consciousness of all mankind. For the vast majority of our fellow men there will be simply no other way to proceed except by means of this new

wave.

It is critical to note the increasing influence of religion in the shaping of these events. In retrospect, this consequence seems to have taken on shades of inevitability. God, religion, and theology, (that is, thinking about God and religion) have become important and dynamic tools in the theory and practice of revolution. The present burgeoning of the theologies of liberation is one of the primary results of this remarkable attention.

One of these notable revolutionaries, Fidel Castro, in 1971 observed relative to the convergence of the forces of religion and revolution that it was no longer enough to simply co-exist. Rather, both Christians and revolutionaries must now strive for the best possible and productive relationship. The priests and religious of the Latin American Church came under special consideration by Castro in light of their places of leadership in the growing revolutionary movements in the Latin American countries.¹

Another legendary Latin American revolutionary, Che Guevara, back in 1967 stated that Christians must definitively decide for the revolution, and when they did, the revolution in Latin America would become invincible. It is clear that there is a certain reaching out here for a common ground.²

What was once a trickle has since become a flood of the voices of the revolutionary priests, theologians and others like the raging of a mighty third world sea, not only in Latin America but in Africa, Asia and the Philippines. These once deadly, or seemingly so, enemies, religion and revolution are now the intimate partners in a marriage of convenience, hoping to give birth to a new man in the new world. The coming new world, it is said, of the kingdom of God which will be built by the new man around the axes of faith and political action.

The Second Vatican Council

In this context, the employment of Marxist-like social philosophies in the papal encyclicals and instructions in addition to the reports of certain synods of the bishops is especially revealing. Their impact on the theologies of liberation centered in the Roman Catholic Church may mark an irreversible step towards a one-world church in a yet to be transformed global community of nations. If this is in fact the case, it will be the omega point in the institutional development of the Church of Rome.

This concentration of purpose may be traced like rays of light back to the prism of the Second Vatican Council. "The Council now beginning," said Pope John XXIII in his opening address to the assembled bishops of the Council, "rises in the church like daybreak, a forerunner of the most splendid light. It is now only dawn."³

That splendid light is, without doubt, the presence of that new world to come. It is the time of the full unity, not only of all Catholics, but of all Christians, and even more, of all humanity. This is the ultimate vision of Vatican II. This greatly desired development depends to a great degree on the hard work and faithfulness of the laity, the people of God. For as the

crowning work of the Council, the document on the Church in the Modern World proclaims:

... the more unified the world becomes, the more plainly do the offices of men extend beyond particular groups and spread by degrees to the whole world. But this development cannot occur unless individual men and their associations cultivate in themselves the moral and social virtues, and promote them in society; thus with the needed help of divine grace men who are truly new and artisans of a new humanity can be forthcoming.⁴

A study of this statement along with others in this document reveal a shift in emphasis, or even loyalty, of the Catholic Church to the disestablishment of the status quo. Though subtly worded, and hedged in by many truly wonderful safeguards, the Council's dissertations on the modern world have given a solid boost to the revolutionary vanguards of all types. The vision is similar and compatible:

The Church recognizes that worthy elements are found in today's social movements, especially an evolution-toward unity, a process of wholesome socialization and of association in civic and economic realms. The promotion of unity belongs to the innermost nature of the Church, for she is, 'thanks to her relationship with Christ, a sacramental sign and an instrument of intimate union with God, and of the unity of the whole human Race.'⁵

The obvious assumption by the Council and the [Catholic] Church is that the world is undergoing an evolutionary process of social change. This evolution is in fundamental accord with the Church's central dynamic and consequently must be supported and advanced.

The question still remains of what exactly the Church's role in this monumental task will be. The Council adjures us to take to heart these words which it has spoken:

Since humanity today increasingly moves toward civil; economic and social unity, it is more than ever necessary that priests, with joint concern and energy, and under the guidance of the bishops and the supreme pontiff, erase every cause of division so that the whole human race may be led to the unity of God's family (underlining added).⁶

Certainly we should ponder these words carefully.

The Second Vatican Council signaled a great change in the Roman Catholic Church, but not a change of fundamental identity. No, it is more of a developmental change. Here is the metamorphosis of the old church; soon the new will be spreading her wings. The maturation of this fascinating creature would be the occasion of the greatest polarization the human race has ever known or experienced, and perhaps the final one of this age.

The Prophetic Imperative

An elaboration and defense of this observation is one of the major themes of these essays. In fact, it is one of the great tasks facing Christians in the

twentieth century. The importance of a completed ecumenism embodied in a one-world church has been recognized by many streams of Christianity with varying degrees of favor or disapproval. What has remained unacknowledged in most of modern scholarship is the necessity of a biblical apparatus penetrating enough to discern the meaning, identity, and nature of such a global assembly.

It is at this point that I wish to introduce the prophetic element in this investigation. This is done in contradistinction to the normal expositions of much of contemporary Protestantism. These modern Protestant churches, for the most part deviating from the prophetic vision of their forefathers of the Reformation, have dissipated their once marvelous energies in futile social and theological experiments. In particular, the eschatological views of their theologians have placed the church of today in a kind of contextual vacuum, prophetically unrelated to the unfolding of historical events in this age.

It is as if we were lost in some trackless wasteland, surrounded and beset by numerous, unseen enemies. We know how to gather firewood and put up our tents; but to escape this dangerous and barren desert we know not how to begin. Yet we must begin to formulate our response to the present course of events. Does the gospel truly summon us to take our part in the proposed transformation of the world? Does the extremity of the poor in various sectors of the earth obligate Christians of the western industrial nations to participate in the destructuring of their present social, economic, and political institutions? These are becoming the burning issues of today. What does it all mean? The church must make its position known. More than this, the failure to stand and walk, let alone run, must result in the eventual enervation (weakening) of our powers of will and discernment. One must wonder if there is still time to recoup our spiritual strength and mental fortitude.

Political and Social Issues

A brief notice of certain contingencies is relevant. The United States may be relatively free of large scale revolutionary warfare for the time being, perhaps for many years to come. However, we have become the target of an increasing number of terrorists incidents whose sources seem to be linked to the unified activities of an international alliance of hidden proportions and motivated by an iron revolutionary determination. All the more reason to consider the implications of liberation theology and its related social and political movements, especially in Latin America. It is crucial that our biblical and theological analyses be confirmed before the fevers of political confrontation sweep over us once again.

These future political confrontations could make the furor over the Vietnam war look like a schoolboy debate. It is not as if we were not warned about these things. AS far back as 1968, a revolutionary priest of the Maryknoll order, a missionary arm of the Roman Catholic Church, wrote in a syndicated article in the Washington Post that the United States was on the wrong side in Central America. If they continued on, their self destructive course, the writer Blase Bonpane wrote, "five, six, seven, eight new Vietnams" would erupt in Latin America.⁷ This would certainly be the end of the United States Bonpane believes because "we would find that our boys wouldn't go."⁸ Although

Bonpane was ostracized by the Maryknoll hierarchy during this period it was only for a short time. Anyone familiar with the activities of the Maryknoll organization since then, is well aware that these ideas have become an integral part of their gospel. In fact, a sizable percentage of their missionary priests are located in the United States, preaching the message of a socialistic Latin America.

This is not the only form of religious revolutionary activity in the United States. It is only the tip of the iceberg. I want to address this subject more fully in a later essay. Let it suffice for the moment to say that one of the epiphenomenon (secondary phenomenon) of revolutionary activity is the evocation of an actual state of war in the social consciousness. In the proverbial 'hotbed of revolution,' the critical faculties of the great mass of men will be superseded by the emotional responses of hatred and fear. Let us draw deep from the fountain of the Word of God, that we may be able to "withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."⁹ We must prepare ourselves for the quickly approaching future.

As the liberation theologians number the prophets of Scripture as witnesses in support of their activities, so we must answer their challenge, presenting the evidence of our hope, "warning every man with all gentleness and meekness."

Transforming the World

Indeed, the prophetic issue is at the heart of our debate. Liberation theologians are characterized by a singular prophetic urgency in all they do or say. The valleys must be raised and the mountains be brought down. In our modern world, they say, God is to be found in the process of liberating the poor and the oppressed from the chains of the rich and powerful. The first step of their theology, then, must be an active commitment on behalf of justice against the exploitation inhering in the social, economic, and political structures of domination, primarily found in the so-called first world countries.

According to such theologians as Gustavo Gutierrez, modern man has begun to discover the deep causes of the terrible crises in which he finds himself. This marks the beginning of his maturity. With such new and powerful tools as those developed in the fields of sociology and psychology, amongst others, he has begun to define the economic and socio-cultural determinants of the situation. Therefore, "He realizes that to attack these deep causes is the indispensable prerequisite for radical change."¹⁰ It is precisely this understanding which accounts for the growing radicalization found in the third world countries. This new understanding has made the religious revolutionaries realize that the reformation of the existing structures of authority are no longer adequate. Halfway measures of this type only serve to make the existing structures more tyrannical by rendering its evil injustices cosmetically invisible, and consequently less subject to control. The solutions of the liberation theologians are much more radical, as Gutierrez writes:

To support the social revolution means to abolish the present status quo and

to attempt to replace it with a qualitatively different one; it means to build a just society based on new relationships of production; it means to attempt to put an end to the domination of some countries by others, of some social classes by others, of some people by others. The liberation of these countries, social classes and people undermines the very foundation of the present order; it is the greatest challenge of our time.”¹¹

In other words, this active commitment to liberation, to the destruction of the present order and the subsequent building up of a just society provides Christians with a blueprint for social action.

And it is in this social praxis, i.e. action, that is becoming the sphere in which the Christian life must be worked out. It is “participation in the process of liberation” which is becoming an obligation and privilege for every Christian.¹²

It is at this point that a propensity to violence emerges as a threatening factor in the dynamics of liberation theology. One cannot after all, turn the river back upon itself without creating a chaos of whirlpools and waves. Let the powers that be take notice of these things. Also let the well-minded liberal in America be warned of the inevitable outcome of their ‘peaceful’ actions. The justification of violence and the boundaries of its permissible application supply one of the more hidden agendas of this movement. According to [Blase Bonpane](#), the revolutionary guerrilla is not the fanatic or ruffian which many have pictured him to be. No, he is an educated, dedicated and rational person who has realized that the situation of injustice in the Third World countries can only be successfully transformed by the use of violence. Often, Bonpane claims, he comes to this position by means of Christianity. “The development of the Christian mystique in the armed movement in Latin America may be the catalytic agent that will bring about revolution in these countries more rapidly than we had imagined.”¹³

The subsequent events of twenty years, (these words were written by Bonpane in 1967 in the Washington Post) threaten to fully confirm the truth of this statement. I will investigate more fully into the dynamics of these events in a later essay.

The Prophetic Stance

The moral imperative behind these strategies and developments is, of course, the very transformation of the world. This transformation embodies the central prophetic vision of the theologians of liberation. In the prophet’s role, they are making a universal claim against the conscience of both the church and the people of the world. If, it is said, in our critical analyses of the world we discover its present structures and organizations to be sinful, we are required by the demands of the gospel to take part in their removal and replacement.

I believe we must resist this line of reasoning at all times with all possible rigor. To do so is to take a prophetic stance based, as I hope to demonstrate in the course of these essays, on the Biblical revelation. On the other hand, we must not deny or attempt to justify the oppression and

injustice of our social structures where these things undeniably exist, much to our sorrow and shame. The theological is never to be handmaiden to the political and economic spheres. To forget this prudent warning, as we so often do, in both our personal and public lives, is to fall prey to the temptation of relegating our spiritual problems to the expediences of a this worldly resolution; that is, to confuse the penultimate (next to last) for the ultimate.

These essays therefore, are inquiries into the prophetic viewpoint of the church, especially as it relates to the momentous historical events of our modern world. On a broader scale, the question ever before us concerns the delineation of the fundamental connections between history and prophecy; that is, the science of prophetic interpretation. More narrowly, we hope to reach an understanding of the great social and religious movements of today from the perspective of Bible prophecy.

NOTES

1. Blase Bonpane, Guerrillas of Peace, South End Press, Boston; p.6
2. Ibid. p.18
3. Robert Kress, Vatican II's Gift, St. Anthony's Messenger, July, 1985, p.24
4. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II, compiled by Rev. J.L. Gonzalez, S.S.P. and the Daughters of St. Paul, p.541
5. Ibid. p.553
6. Ibid. p.557
7. Bonpane, Guerrillas, p.68
8. Ibid. p.68
9. Ephesians 6:13
10. Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, Orbis Bks. Maryknoll, New York, p.48
11. Ibid. p.48
12. Ibid. p.49
13. Bonpane, Guerrillas, p.67