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The Role of Conservatives In An Age of Revolution

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TRADITIONALLY MOST CHRISTIANS have been conservative in their outlook and practice. Lutherans, in particular, with their solid confessional heritage and insistence upon subordination to established authority are reputed to be cautious and reluctant to embrace rapid change. Stability and continuity—respect for law and order—have been among the foremost values cherished by the spiritual descendents of Martin Luther, the professor of theology who feared nothing more than anarchy. The villain of the Reformation in Lutheran interpretations has been Thomas Muentzer who dared to denounce the princes and lead the peasants in open revolt. Accordingly, when C. F. W. Walther and Wilhelm Sihler were compelled to cope with the slavery issue in pre-Civil War America they castigated the abolitionists as *Schwaermer* (enthusiasts) akin to Muentzer, the revolutionary spiritualist. During the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement most conservative-minded Christians remained dubious, if not outright critical, of the confrontation tactics devised by Martin Luther King. Anything which even bordered on civil disobedience was considered inflammatory and blameworthy.

Certainly thoughtful and responsible forms of conservatism have their commendable aspects. Appreciation for the good qualities of long enduring institutions and ideals which have served us well is important. Why destroy what can be retained for the benefit of humanity? Why “go through the wringer” in a drastic upheaval if a few revisions will suffice to meet basic needs? A conservative mentality can carefully scrutinize future planning with a sharp eye for weaknesses and defects. Conservatives can help guard against impetuosity and ill-conceived schemes for social betterment.

Whether we like it or not, however, revolution is the inescapable reality of our time. Almost every newspaper headline and TV newscast reminds us that the world is in convulsion. “Wars of liberation” are allegedly being fought in Vietnam and elsewhere. The Arab-Israel dispute is unresolved. Violence threatens to erupt throughout Latin America. The reverberations from the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in 1964 have not ceased to shock administrators and trustees. Unprecedented demands by students who clamor to share in the decision making process at schools of higher learning continue to disrupt academic life. At Columbia University a pitched battle was fought between disgruntled students and angry police. In Paris, Rome, and Berlin students have taken to the streets and casualties have been recorded. The discontent of youth has become a worldwide phenomenon.

Student uprisings are coupled with the Negro revolt in this country and the emergence of the "Third World" in Africa, Asia, and South America. Earlier riots in Watts and Harlem have been followed by "long hot summers" in Detroit and Newark. Dire predictions are heard about the sense of frustration and desperation which persists in our urban ghettos. While Negro soldiers trained in guerilla warfare return from Vietnam, frightened white suburbanites purchase their own supply of weapons and engage in rifle-shooting practice.

Meanwhile, apartheid in South Africa and white supremacy in Rhodesia continue to sow the seeds of hatred and vengeance. The rumblings of dissatisfaction may be momentarily suppressed, but there is every indication that they will eventually explode in fury and violence. Unless we can find alternatives to military force and police power as the means for restraining the "have-nots" of the earth, we can anticipate an inevitable retaliation. The victims of exploitation have learned to strike back. No longer can the white man kill and oppress with impunity. It is undeniable that we stand under the judgment of God.

Thus, we are compelled to face up to the prospect of ongoing revolution at home and abroad. Whoever can discern the "sign of the times" knows that the turmoil is not about to cease. No amount of wishful thinking will cause it to disappear. Nostalgia recollections of some glorious (unreal?) past are futile. No one can turn the clock back. The dynamic of history under the providence of God pushes inexorably forward.

What will be the Christian response to the social crises of the 60s and the years ahead? Must the people of God shun all contact with revolutionary currents or can they make constructive contributions to the newly emerging order? Is the Christian vocation to categorically condemn all forms of radicalism and form alliances with the forces of reaction? (Cp. the church as the morale booster for the Establishment.) Or is it preferable for the avowed followers of Christ to preserve their own purity with a pious withdrawal (strategic retreat?) from the arena of dispute and conflict? (Cp. the church as a haven of rest from the stress and strain of the external world.) Or is another alternative possible: Can there be a responsible involvement—a direct confrontation with the vital issues of the day?

If such inquiries are sincerely expressed by the agonized Christian seeking some answer to the baffling dilemmas which overwhelm him it may be crucial to re-examine the Biblical sources for guidance and direction. The purposes of God for humanity, it should become immediately evident, cannot be identified with the claims and counter-claims of liberals, conservatives or radicals. Every ideology, every socio-economic philosophy, must be scrutinized in the light of prophetic admonitions. The witness of the Old and New Covenants would suggest, nonetheless, that movement and progress in history

are closely bound up with the unfolding of the Creator's "master plan." Christians are called upon to embrace the future with both a joyful anticipation and a cautious appraisal of evolving structures and ideas. There are both radical and conservative aspects to the Christian posture. We dare not obstruct changes for good which appear to be in accord with human advancement, even if they strike at the roots of prevailing assumptions and diminish our own prosperity. We may simultaneously reject destructive fanaticism or weird and over-simplified schemes for social salvation.

The May 1968 issue of *Inner City* argues that world revolution implies a corresponding church revolution:

In a time when rapid transition, flexibility and mobility characterize the lives of men and institutions, a church which is unwilling to radically alter its pattern of life will be unable to comprehend, address or penetrate the world in revolution. Given these inabilities a church will withdraw into its ecclesiastical shell. It will be concerned with serving its own interest for survival rather than serving the world's needs for a fuller life. A self-serving church will die. But a revolutionary church, patterned after the model of its servant-Lord, will become that body within society who spends its life without counting the cost in order to lead the world to the new humanness come into being. For too long the church has been becalmed in the backwater of a dying age, frightened by the swift currents of the new age . . . The church has too long structured its life for survival rather than mission. . . .

Central to the Christian faith is the prospect of overcoming the old way of life with a new birth in Baptism. Our old self with its weaknesses and failures was crucified with Christ. Sharing in the power of His Resurrection we have an immense potential as part of a new creation. "Behold I make all things new" is the promise of the Lamb upon the throne in the vision of the Apocalypse.

Yet, to maintain the proper balance in our perspective we have to listen to the realistic (or cynical?) view of Ecclesiastes: "There is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us." Therefore, it may be the vocation of conservatives to dispute the current cliché, "traditional concepts are no longer relevant to the contemporary situation." As Kenneth Hamilton so poignantly refutes "the noisy slogan-shouting of self-appointed prophets":

(the new man of our 'unprecedented' times) whether he is off to the moon or to the local love-in . . . gives no evidence of being about to prove Ecclesiastes wrong . . . The past goes with us every step of the way, and the more resolutely we seek the new future, the more we become aware of the present power of the

old past . . . Every generation thinks of itself as the vanguard of a new humanity freed from the guilt and shame of the past; and, if it fails to keep its vision, it loses its nerve and collapses into cynical apathy.

Beyond exercising the kind of critical common sense which can puncture the illusions of romantic revolutionaries and can compel enthusiasts to separate the authentic-new from the pseudo-new, conservative Christians can be helpful in insisting upon the retention of the dimension of the sacred in juxtaposition or tension with the secular. Sympathy with revolutionary objectives such as a thorough restructuring of socio-economic institutions does not demand the negation of hope which cannot be measured in spatio-temporal terms. While other worldly escapism has often been used as a deterrent to revolutionary impulses, a firm conviction about an eternal destiny under God can also become a potent stimulant to more persistent action and sacrifice in achieving mundane goals because we know that "in the Lord our labor is not in vain." To pursue our role in secular society to the utmost of our ability, to celebrate the secular city as a gift of God, to seek the liberation of oppressed people need not imply the abandonment of historic Christian affirmations.

Paradoxical and incredible as it may seem to the superficial interpreter there is no absolute contradiction between conservatism and participation in the positive features of revolutionary change.