

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF REVOLUTION

By GERARD J. HUGHES

AS PROFESSOR JAMES BARR once pointed out with his customary verve, it is dangerous to try to make etymology do the theologian's work for him.¹ The quickness of the tongue can so easily deceive the mind. Yet a little theological word-spinning is as diverting a pastime as most, once one is prepared to enter into the spirit of the thing. Take, for example, the familiar saying in the gospels, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand'. We have all learnt that the english word 'repentance' does not quite succeed in capturing all the overtones of the greek *metanoia* which it is used to translate. We may also have learnt that the corresponding greek verb is often used to translate the hebrew verb *sub*, which literally means 'to turn round'. The repentance called for by Jesus is a total turning of oneself towards God – something much deeper than any mere self-criticism or remorse. But here we can play around a little with words. We have several ways in which we can speak of turning in this kind of context. We can, for instance, suggest that the gospel asks us to turn over a new leaf. *There's* a thought to comfort the vicarage tea-party, for turning over a new leaf has a homely, manageable ring to it. Unfortunately, though, we can also speak of conversion, and the call of the gospel at once begins to take on rather more disturbing and demanding overtones. A shadow falls across the tea-table. But there is worse to come. For surely one obvious way to speak of a 'turning' in english is to call it a revolution. Should we not, after all, be preaching in season and out of season, 'Revolt, for the kingdom of God is at hand'? Did not Jesus himself say that the axe had been laid to the very roots of the tree – and what could be more radical than a revolution? The vision of the Apocalypse was not simply of a new leaf, but of a whole new heaven and a whole new earth, in which tea, party, and vicarage will have been swept away by the revolutionary power of the kingdom.

¹ *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London, 1961).

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have come not to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household.²

Theology is no mere parlour-game; and for many christians in our own time revolution is no mere word to bring a pleasurable flutter to the ladies at the vicarage. It is ever-present as one possible solution to a heart-rending dilemma. Men sunk in degradation and wretchedness, broken by injustice and hopelessness, are in no mood to smile. Those south american bishops who publicly affirmed that fidelity to the gospel might sometimes demand that christians support a revolution were not playing games with theological language. The idea of revolution has seemed to many millions of men to provide the only gleam of hope in a world where there is nothing but the interminable prospect of starvation, suffering, injustice and fear. How else, one might ask, can one realistically hope to achieve basic rights long and systematically denied, as they have been in the Americas, in South Africa and Rhodesia, in Northern Ireland and Eastern Europe? Is the kind of man who knowingly deprives his fellow man of basic rights really likely to listen to pious christian appeals for *metanoia*? Has not history amply demonstrated that such men yield only to the threat of violence, if even then? Is it not abundantly clear that christians sometimes have a duty, in the interests of basic humanity and the kingdom of God, to call upon men to revolt and, like Gideon, to take up the sword for the Lord's sake?³

The dominant strain in christian tradition has always maintained that there are situations in which only violence will suffice to safeguard basic rights, and that in such situations christians may legitimately use it. Not that this view has gone altogether unchallenged, or that its upholders have always felt entirely comfortable in their position; but apart from the centuries before Augustine, it is fair to say that some version of the just war theory held the field with little serious opposition.⁴ St Augustine himself may even have thought that the right to use violence in self-defence was so obvious as not to require explicit argument, since the criteria he developed for deciding whether or not a war was justified were developed in

² Mt 10, 34-36.

³ Jg 7, 20.

⁴ For the early history of the just war theory, see Tooke, Joan D.: *The Just War in Aquinas and Grotius* (London, 1965), ch 1.

the context of an offensive war. In comparison with later writers, especially those writing since the reformation, Augustine's theory is somewhat undeveloped. He stipulates only that any use of violence in war should take place under the authority of the prince, for a just cause, and with the intention of showing christian mercy to the vanquished. Subsequent theologians have been concerned largely with further restricting the conditions in which a war can be considered justified. It has been made explicit that recourse to war must be a last resort, and that it must hold out a reasonable prospect of success. As the gradually increasing sophistication of weapons brought with it the ability to inflict ever greater damage on one's opponents, theologians sought to proscribe the more efficient or indiscriminate methods of waging war. The Second Council of the Lateran condemned the use of the crossbow; and in our own day controversy has raged over the legitimacy of such weapons as gas, napalm, and the various kinds of atomic weapon. Again, with the advent of weapons with vastly destructive powers, a growing need has been felt to make some kind of distinction, however difficult it may prove to formulate, between combatants and non-combatants. In recent times, too, the popes have looked hopefully at the United Nations and similar bodies, despite their relative impotence, and longed for the day when arbitration at an international level would obviate the need for nations to take up arms in their own defence.

Christian theologians have been less enthusiastic in their endorsement of revolution. Perhaps they have been only too keenly aware of the political consequences for the Church if it seemed too easily to allow such action against those on whom it depended for support and protection, and with whom it was often all too closely associated. But there were also more respectable arguments in favour of caution. As Aquinas pointed out, revolution raises the added problems inherent in a civil war as distinct from a fight against the common enemy – the destruction of the peace, unity and stability of a nation.⁵ Despite these additional difficulties, however, Aquinas seems to apply the same criteria to revolutions as he does to wars against external enemies. Moreover, he points out that it is not always fair to say that it is the revolutionaries who disrupt the peace and order of a nation. The real violator of law and order may well be the tyrant himself, who is guilty of sedition by failing

⁵ *Summa Theologica* II-IIae, 42, 1.

to rule with justice as he is bound to do. Here we have in germ the same approach as is advanced in contemporary writers who insist on the reality of institutionalized violence, and give this as the justification for considering the unjust government as an aggressor against its own subjects. And there is support, albeit with some hesitations, for this position in Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (31), where the pope speaks of the possibility of revolution when there is 'manifest and long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country'. With some measure of reluctance, then, christian tradition has been willing to admit that revolutions are a legitimate means, in extreme circumstances, of attaining one's rights, and it has defended this position on the same grounds and with the same restrictions as it has used to argue the legitimacy of war.

Since I shall argue presently that the traditional theory of the just war is insufficiently restrictive to be altogether satisfying to the christian conscience, in all fairness I should first spend some time in pointing out just how restrictive the traditional theory in fact is. Certainly it affords no easy arguments with which to urge on the trigger-happy militarist, no quick answer for the eager revolutionary to hurl at his more reluctant critics. For the very logic on which the just war theory rests demands that violence be used only as a last resort in a just cause. It is worth examining these two requirements rather closely in connection with one another.

One of the ideas which ought to be closest to the heart of civilized man is the impartiality of the law. The law provides a workable and flexible alternative to the use of violence as a means of settling disputes: flexible in that a judge is able to display considerably more sensitivity to the subtleties and complexities of a many-faceted human problem. He is not compelled, as is the thug, to pretend that such issues can be resolved at one fell stroke. Not, of course, that any civilized man with the least trace of realism in him would wish to maintain that even the best judicial system infallibly arrives at the right answer to all the problems which are brought before it. It is enough for him to know that he cannot devise any method which, in the long run, will reach more satisfactory solutions. In return for this long term benefit he is willing to accept that there will be the occasional miscarriage of justice which, despite man's best efforts, will slip through the safety nets of the Courts of Equity and Appeal. By and large, we ought to be prepared to admit that a man has a just cause if an impartial judge decides that he

has, and that one's cause is ill-founded if the decision of the court goes against one.⁶ The justice of one's cause is not, therefore, unconnected with the need to have recourse to arbitration rather than to violence as a means of redress. Given the impartiality of the court (or of whatever body is appealed to for arbitration), it is not easy to see how one could have great confidence in the justice of a cause whose merits had failed to impress a judge to whom both sides had had the opportunity of presenting their case fully and fairly. Recourse to violence rather than to arbitration pre-empts the decision about the justice of one's cause; one is setting oneself up as a plaintiff, judge and executioner in one's own case.

Many, indeed most, christian theologians have been unwilling to admit that an individual even in self-defence may deliberately set out to kill his attacker, on the grounds that his death as such was never absolutely necessary to put an end to his aggression. I am not here concerned to discuss the merits or demerits of this position. But what is worthy of note is that those same theologians were perfectly willing to concede that the proper authorities in the State could deliberately set out to kill someone, whether he be a duly convicted criminal or the soldier of a hostile army. Two considerations seem to have led them to this conclusion. First, they argued that the state derived the authority from God. Secondly, and perhaps more convincingly, it might be argued that the state is less likely than the individual to be swayed by the passions of the moment, and hence is more to be trusted with a decision involving the lives and deaths of men. The christian moralists seem to have believed that a good government contained within itself sufficient checks and balances to make sure that such decisions were not taken in the heat of passion or as a result of personal bias. To us, as we recall the horrors of Dachau and My Lai and Siberia, such confidence may appear naïvely optimistic. Governments are possibly more calculating and less impulsive than individuals when it comes to killing, but they are no less capable of perpetrating inhuman obscenities of violence. And when they do, they are capable of doing so on a massive scale.

The point is particularly relevant to the kind of revolutionary situation in which it might occur to the christian to use violence, or to the christian in power to crush the insurgents by force. In a

⁶ I am not here considering cases in which the laws within which courts must give their decisions themselves stand in need of reform: I am assuming that means exist for persuading the legislature to change such laws.

revolution, where the violence is on one's own doorstep, where one's wife and children and home are much more immediately at stake than in a war against an alien power, where one's whole pattern of living is at issue, it is even less likely that either party is capable of the impartial objectivity required to apply the criteria of the just war theory. The need for arbitration is all the more pressing. Not merely should it be a first resort before there is any question of bombing or looting or open insurrection; and as I have argued above, it is normally essential if one is to have any confidence that one's cause *is* just and not merely cloaked with the spurious justice of revolutionary rhetoric or government propaganda. It is most unfortunate that disputes such as the present one in Northern Ireland are not submitted to arbitration, say by the United Nations, and that christian leaders in all the countries involved do not follow the papal encyclicals in urging such a course more forcefully than they do. The fact that it is an 'internal' question is not an argument against a course of action, but, I suggest, one of the strongest reasons in its favour, because the arbitrators are less likely to approach their tasks with their own political interests in mind. If both sides are as confident as they say they are that right is on their side, what have they to fear from arbitration?

Of course it is often felt, and with good reason, that an impartial arbitrator cannot easily be found. Still more frequently, one of the parties in the dispute will simply not be willing to accept an impartial decision given against them, as in the cases of Rhodesia or South West Africa. In such cases the use of force becomes all the more attractive, and there is perhaps a presumption that those who refuse arbitration are indeed in the wrong. Yet even in such cases the traditional theory seeks to place further restrictions on the legitimacy of a resort to violence. It insists that there be good grounds for believing that violence, once unleashed, can be contained, and that it will lead to justice. These conditions are not easily satisfied. A key factor in the military success of a revolution is often the skill with which the revolutionaries can be urged on and their morale strengthened; and this in turn often can be achieved only by accentuating the divisions in society which the revolution should hope to heal. Even if the successful revolutionaries resist the temptation to take bloody revenge, as some have done in Bangladesh, it may still be very hard for them to rule all their subjects with justice. Those who paid the piper with their blood

may seek to call the tune; those who take up the sword of revolution may refuse to sheathe it afterwards. Moreover, many are the agonizing situations in which even violence in a just cause stands little chance of success even in the military sense. All too predictably, the partisans were mown down by russian tanks in the streets of Budapest in 1956; and it is hard to see how the black peoples of South Africa today could hope for a much kinder fate. The just war theory would lead to the conclusion that they should seek some other solution, if such there be.

The traditional theory, then, applied to wars or to revolutions, is much more restrictive than is commonly supposed. Certainly, it is much more restrictive than one would be given to suppose if one considered only the judgments of theologians on wars in which their own countries were engaged. Seldom indeed have the christian churches united to condemn the actions of their own governments, even in the clearest cases where those governments engaged in external aggression or in institutional violence within their own borders. Notwithstanding all this, to many christian marxists and revolutionaries of our own day, the traditional theory has seemed all too restrictive. There is a tendency to argue that if a revolution offers the only chance, however slender, of attaining a just society, then to participate in a revolution is not merely legitimate, but is a christian duty.

To use the language of the revivalists, we have to 'decide for' the revolution now. To opt out is to opt out of serious christian concern. But we have also to see that such an option will involve us in areas outside those of traditional christian concern. Christianity has already been compromised by its historical association with the dominant powers and with the political 'right'. Our place now is with the political agitators; with strikers for better industrial conditions, with demonstrators against war in Vietnam . . . in fact our language now and for the foreseeable future, is not that of *aggiornamento*, but of 'politics'.⁷

In statements of this kind, most of the carefully outlined restrictions of the traditional theory simply disappear. The dedicated revolutionary cannot afford to examine too closely his prospects of success for fear that realism may temper his enthusiasm. He has to persuade himself that no cost in terms of lives or suffering is too great provided that he is fighting in a just cause. He assumes that

⁷ Middleton, Neil: *The Language of Christian Revolution* (London, 1968), p 179.

once justice is achieved, there will be no problem about maintaining it in the bitter aftermath of revolution, or that such problems need not affect any decision he has to make now. Such a position seems to me to be dangerously over-simplified. Nevertheless, I shall not argue against such views in detail, for I am concerned to show that, far from being too restrictive, the traditional theory of the just war and the just revolution are not restrictive enough to satisfy the christian conscience. If this can be shown, then the more extreme radical position can be shown to be even more unsatisfactory.

As a first step, I should like to point out that the traditional theory of the just war, though occasionally bolstered up with references to the holy war of the Old Testament,⁸ and to New Testament texts in Luke and Romans,⁹ in fact does not really rest on specifically christian grounds at all. The pivot of the argument lies in the assumption that some rights are so basic that even violence and killing may legitimately be used (albeit in restricted circumstances) to safeguard those rights. No specifically christian argument is required to establish this premise, which rests rather on the enduring natural law tradition in christian moral theology.¹⁰ I have already argued elsewhere that this is just as it should be;¹¹ and it is no part of my brief here to criticize the general outlines of the traditional theory. I know of no alternative view which seems to me intellectually more defensible. But it must be admitted that, as a matter of historical fact, christians who relied on the just war theory seem to have become progressively more callous and less rigorous in its application. Thus Suarez required only a probable opinion on the justice of one's cause; Molina suggests that an individual is normally justified in accepting the word of his government that his country's cause is just; and this, in turn, led to the position which still found some adherents at Vatican II, that the individual was never justified in refusing on conscientious grounds to do military service. We have been in danger of losing sight of the fact that even war-

⁸ Deut 2 and 7; Jos 6; 1 Sam 15.

⁹ Lk 22, 35-38; 3, 14; Rom 13.

¹⁰ I am not here concerned with other difficulties which such a position raises. For instance, there seems to be here a clear example of 'the end justifying the means' in christian tradition, despite the restriction that such justification depends on the authority of God in the state. Whether such a brake on a thorough-going utilitarianism can be effective is open to serious doubt. On the other hand, it might also be argued that more modern versions of utilitarianism would avoid such a difficulty, or that alternative moral theories could cope with this case without seriously threatening other traditional christian views.

¹¹ In 'The Basis of Christian Ethics', in *Heythrop Journal*, 13 (1972), pp 27-43.

mongers, tyrants and oppressors have rights simply as human beings which they do not forfeit simply by violating the rights of others. We have grown accustomed to alter our ideas about legitimate means of waging war to keep pace with the advanced technology of destruction. Lateran II's scruples about the crossbow might have raised a wan smile at Vatican II. We have, I am afraid, come a long way since then.

What, then, is the place of christian repentance in all this? It is surely part of our christian belief that our human psychology is the psychology of a race of sinners, that even our best efforts to think morally, such as the theory of the just war, run the risk of being clouded by ignorance and warped by our own selfishness. I would suggest as a general theological truth (which is not itself an ethical rule, but a theological statement *about* our ethical rules) that the christian, above all others, can never with a good conscience rest content with the moral principles he has so far been able to formulate. This divine discontent, so to speak, is all the more insistent for us when we are confronted with what seems to be a very explicit saying of Jesus on the use of violence:

You have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles . . . You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.¹²

Few christians have had the courage to take these words of Jesus literally, and still fewer exegetes have been willing to say that they express a binding precept. Yet all through the ages in which the just war theory was developed these sayings of Jesus have given christians pause; and we all surely have to come to terms with them one way or another. Even if it is true that they are best interpreted as a statement of the highest christian ideal, perhaps as an outline of the moral dimension of the kingdom of God rather than as precepts binding in a world in which the kingdom is present only in germ, christians have a duty to ensure that their ideals really do have some influence on their lives, to ensure that the seeds of the

¹² Mt 5, 38-45.

kingdom fall on fertile ground. How is this to be done?

I suggest that we should question both our current attitudes and our current theory. First, our attitudes. Is it not time that we recognized that, far from moving in the direction of the ideals in the Sermon on the Mount, we christians through the centuries have gradually diverged further and further from those ideals? Have we not persuaded ourselves too easily to acquiesce in the sinfulness of a violent world? Are we not coming to accept war and revolution for the sake of the kingdom because we have been afraid to preach the demands of conversion? Have we not allowed ourselves to pretend that the morality of a sinful world is an adequate reflection of the morality of the kingdom of God with which the christian conscience can rest content? Secondly, our theory, too, needs questioning. I am not suggesting that the ideals of the kingdom can simply be transplanted into this world and interpreted as precepts. Nor does it seem to me that we have any way of knowing *how* to translate those ideals into practical terms other than that same process of ethical reflection which has led to the just war theory. For that process of reflection neither the text of the gospels nor anything else provides any substitute. Yet, as christians, we must recognize the possibilities of dishonesty and self-deception at the heart not merely of our practice but of our reflection itself. We must re-examine our current theory with these possibilities in mind. Once we do this, it will be evident that there are several points in the theory where we could easily have been misled. How have we interpreted 'war (or revolution) as a last resort'? What about the proportion between the evils of war and the good we hope to attain? What of our estimates of the hope of success? Have we realistically asked what we can expect to achieve through violence? Might it not be that we have rashly canonized some traditional interpretations of these phrases, from the crossbow to the machine-gun, from the crusades to Suez and Vietnam? As things stand, it seems to me that both of our theory and of our attitudes it could well be asked, 'Do not even the pagans do this'?

As christians, we are called upon to give witness to the kingdom for which we hope to act as a leaven in our society. Our moral principles must, I believe, remain static so long as the world in which we live itself remains untransformed. But the transforming power of the gospel must not be underestimated; and if we can transform the world, we can also provide good reasons for transforming our moral principles as well. But I do not see how the

world is to be transformed at all, so far as the use of violence is concerned, unless we are prepared to live at least according to the strictest interpretation of the just war theory – and, indeed, unless we are at times prepared to approximate more closely to the ideals of pacifism than we could at present justify as a strict obligation. At any rate, those christians who do not have the immediate responsibilities of family and children should be willing to practise non-violence as a matter of course. But more generally, too, I believe that we have never given a more pacifist pattern of life a fair chance. Had the Church preached non-violence with the fervour it has devoted to preaching other moral ideals, the horrible escalation of violence in western society might have been controlled. Instead of preaching pacifism as an ideal, we have preached the just war theory as a norm, thus abdicating our christian responsibilities and ensuring that even the norm goes by the board. Yet if once we succeed in inculcating pacifism as an ideal to be striven for, it may well be that there will be less need, and therefore less justification, for war and revolution. In such a world, our just war theory might well be very different.

One final comment must be made. As a matter of tactics, quite apart from any more ethical considerations, we cannot honestly preach non-violence as an ideal unless we simultaneously work to right the wrongs which violence is now invoked to remove. To put it mildly, the Church has not always been seen by the victims of oppression as standing unequivocally on their side in the name of justice and the rights of man. Even today, the teaching of the social encyclicals does not form a very prominent part of the ordinary catholic's moral furniture. As a body, we do not have a hunger and thirst for justice in this world as a basis from which to preach our hopes for the world to come. Priests are very rarely suspended for failing to insist that their people practise the teaching of *these* encyclicals. Only when we are seen to be working ceaselessly to eliminate the oppression and violence inherent in our social and economic structures, can we expect to be listened to when we urge non-violence as an ideal response in the face of such violence as will still, in a sinful world, be inevitable.

Christian repentance is the very reverse of revolution in its violent forms. But let us not underestimate the depth of the conversion which it does demand of us. We are called to further by our word and our example a world in which war and revolution can be seen for the barbarisms that they really are.