

Peacemaking Amid Political Revolution

By John Howard Yoder



One of the reasons our society has so much trouble understanding itself--understanding between groups, between generations, and classes--and understanding the Bible is that our awareness of the meaning of words is so shallow. We study too little language, too little culture. We assume a word is a word; like a pebble, or like a photograph, it only has one shape. Any old fool knows what that means. It has no hidden assumptions and no depth. In fact, the language and every word in a language is a set of prejudices. Every language is the product of a culture. Every language is the product of a religious experience. And the language itself tells one how he may or may not think. So we have to unpack our words before we can use them.

One such word, political, appears in my title. It has numerous meanings of which I can pull apart at least three quite distinct ones. One of the meanings is the one which politicians use when they accuse other politicians of being politically motivated. We're sometimes told that Christians should stop thinking that politics is a dirty business. There is a point to that admonition, but the people who gave us that impression were the politicians who accused other politicians of being politically motivated. What did Richard Nixon say when Carswell was defeated? He said the people who voted against him had political motivations. Now what kind of an accusation is that to direct the Senate? In that case the word means selfishly partisan, looking after the power interest of a party as over against the wider interests of the common welfare. So it is the claim of the politician who used this word in this way that what he is doing most of the time is not politically motivated in that sense, even though he is a full-time statesman.

Another much wider meaning has to do with those societies, like our own, which are rare in world history and even in the present world, where the population or part of the population has an opportunity to share in the decision-making process in formal ways--like voting, running for office, being elected to office, and participating in the legislature. There are many societies where that doesn't happen; in our society it can. So it is possible to think of that involvement in the decision-making process or the electoral process as political. And then we feel we can divide rather clearly between those who are in this process. For that, we usually use the word involved, versus uninvolved. The argument usually assumes that one can be completely involved, or completely uninvolved. Some people say to be a-political is good, and there are some who say to be a-political is bad. But with this definition of the word, they both agree that one can be a-political, simply by not being active in any way in the process of running for office, voting, or the other ways in which the structure operates.

Still another meaning would be the one the ancient Greeks had in mind when they said that man is, by definition, a political being. The word political is an adjective which comes from the Greek noun which simply means society, city, the organized living together of people in community. There is no human being who is not in community somehow. Once in a while there are legends that say that it happened, that an infant was brought up by wolves or monkeys. But such a person doesn't turn out to be a human being. One isn't human if he isn't in the polis, if he isn't political, if he isn't in a set of relationships where some people have authority and others are subject to them, where there is a sharing of economic interdependence. To be human is to be political. There is no such thing as an a-political person. An individual in society has a certain weight. If he doesn't speak, that's a vote on the side of the present system.

(for dirty); politics sub-R(for responsibility in the democratic process); and politics sub-H(for being human) and therefore political. But this simple dictionary operation isn't enough to get at our problem. It may classify our questions but it does not answer them.

What is the other realm? If we were to choose not to be political, or to be out of the political struggle, what would we then be doing? One of the words for this is personal. Here again it has many meanings. But they do not go back to Aristotle. The idea of person in the modern sense is a modern product. It is a few centuries old at the most. Since the Renaissance there has been the idea that man is most clearly man in his selfhood, in his individuality. And this has been more and more narrowly defined in cultural developments since the Renaissance. It takes secular form in the various kinds of humanism, in psychiatry. It takes religious forms in pietism and existentialism.

In this modern view of person, we define all meaning in terms of "the self." When we say, "What does it mean," we really mean, "What does it mean to me?" Increasingly in our culture becoming the center of morality. We don't ask, "Is it right, is it wrong?" but "Is it right for me?" There is so much concern for inauthenticity and alienation, doing something that might be right for someone else but not for me. Our culture seems to assume that the self is also the measure of right and wrong.

In the Western world we have been brainwashed by this assumption which dominated our culture in the last centuries. I doubt whether I can even pry open a crack in the self identity which that assumption has for most of us. But if we are ever going to get our brains untangled so we can read the Bible straight, we must at least note for further study my report, which I give as a report of factual history, that the autonomy of self as the center of meaning does not exist in the Bible. Jesus and Paul never went to school in the Renaissance.

When man became the center of all things this included religion. Just as beauty after the Renaissance can be boiled down to the self-experiencing beauty as romanticism, reality boils down to the self's experiencing reality as empiricism. Religion boils down to the self's religiousness, and we have mysticism as the founding expression of piety. In the late Middle Ages, we have spiritualism as the extreme left wing of the Reformation, and we have pietism as the major movement of renewal in European Protestantism since then.

A Palestinian teacher inaugurated a new order, which He taught and preached Jesus is the lover of my soul. God, instead of being sovereign and creator, is a friend Who walks with me and talks with me. Instead of my will bending to His will, Jesus comes into my heart. I seek to be reassured about my eternal destiny rather than to be enrolled in His eternal and temporal mission.

Now once we are in this cultural box of modern and Western humanistic personalism, how in the world can we talk about politics which by definition does not have anything to do with the independent self. It has to do with relationships with power, with pressure. Well the easiest way and the normal way to begin to get hold of the problem, since we have this self in this box is to make another box right beside it. Put politics in there and then draw a bridge from one to another. That is a normal, natural, legitimate way to deal with the problem. Then we talk about the bridge. We say both--and. Most of what we have to talk about can probably be handled that way. We say both forgiveness and holiness, both justification which makes us acceptable before God and sanctification which makes us usable before God, both accepting Jesus as savior and recognizing Him as Lord, both personal religion and social expression, both being subject to the powers that be and changing the world.

sions. But it has some short comings. One of them is that it leaves unchallenged the split between the two. When we say both, and we assume that those two realities are really to start with separate, that means that we accept the idolatry of the individual self. This is idolatry to assume that the self can be self-authenticating, self-justifying, self-defying, and that idolatry is the basic sickness of our world. Now it challenges the split by saying both-and instead of either-or. But to say both-and we have first accepted the either-or definitions. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is that when we have accepted the both-and in that way, it often doesn't tell us what to do on the other side. We say, for instance, a Christian will be first of all personally renewed in his individual faith in his response to salvation and then when he is a changed person, he will behave differently. That's true, but how will he behave differently? Will he be a segregationist or an integrationist? Will he join the establishment or fight it? And to concentrate our concern on the both-and point doesn't give us any help in knowing what to do on the and side where we affirm there will be something to do. This is one of the abiding problems of protestant social ethics. It says that whether it be in the Lutheran or Reformed shapes it comes out a little differently, but we need not look at that in detail. It says that the renewed person will help change the world, but it is very unclear about how he will help change the world, where he will get his criterion. The New Testament speaks not first of the person (and then how he goes out and does differently) but rather of the thing God has done differently which enables us to be persons.

We know how the writings of Paul, especially Ephesians and Colossians, are hard to read grammatically. So I'll just dive into the middle of Ephesians 3 where there is one of these very difficult sentences:

"For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given for me to you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation as I have written briefly, when you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ which was not made known to the sons of men of other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that is how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the same promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel."

This word, mystery, is another word which our modern usage has fouled up. Mystery is a category of paperback book which has to do with trying to find out some facts which are objectively clear and true, unchanging but which are somehow hard to get at. This mystery is not spooky.

Sunday morning television ran an interview with some of these neo-Buddhists. They were saying that one experiences the universe all the time and he can use certain techniques and certain chemicals to help experience more of the universe all the time. That kind of mystery is not what is being talked about here.

It is much clearer when we compare it to a secret battle plan. There was a crack-down on narcotics wholesalers recently, and we were told that this was planned for months. That plan, until it was instituted, was a mystery. It was a strategy, clear in the minds of the people who were developing it but not open for everybody to see. It hadn't been made manifest.

There are some who say that the plan first to effect a change of government in Phnom Penh and then to have the American army and the South Vietnamese army invade Cambodia existed in the Pentagon and the CIA at least three years ago. But only in April and May was it put into execution, only then was it made manifest.

Well this is the meaning that Paul had here: God had a purpose. He had a

purpose from way back, but people didn't know what it was. And now in Christ they know what it is and I, Paul, specifically by revelation, know clearly what the hidden purpose of God is. There is a new people, chosen Gentiles in the same body.

Now we'll back up to Chapter 2. Here he talks about what he calls the new man. "You were at that time separated from Christ, alienated to the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenant of promise having no hope. But now you in Christ Jesus, who were once far off were brought near in the blood of Christ, for He is our peace who has made us both one." Us who? Jews and Gentiles. And He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in His flesh both His laws and ordinances that He may create in Himself one new man which takes the place of the two. He reconciles us both to God in one body through the cross thereby brings our hostility to an end. Now we are no longer strangers and sojourners but fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief corner stone.

What is this one new man? Doesn't that sound like a person? Well, it does in some translations, but this one new man is made up of two kinds of people, and the singular noun anthropus, which is translated man, means in this particular grammatical construction, humanity. God purposed before the ages to bring into being through Christ not a new personhood but a new humanity, a new peoplehood made up of two kinds of people; people of more than one race to find themselves sharing together; people with contradictory views of the law because the wall which was dividing them is set aside. This new peoplehood is the work of God which enables also the renewal of interpersonal relations and interpersonal dynamics.

Now what effect does this have? Chapter 4 goes on to say that this new people will have a new approach to problems of structure. It will have many kinds of leaders instead of just a hierarchy of leaders or just one leader. When Christ ascended, He gave gifts to all men and therefore each of us has a gift--no more priesthood, no more centralizing of holiness of a few individuals. Everyone has a place. Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up to Him who is the head; or earlier mature manhood is in the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that is not talking about mature human personality in the modern sense--that is talking about the unity of the body. That is talking about multiple ministry. This new community has a new approach to leadership and power.

Chapter five tells us that this new community has a new approach to the problems of leadership and powers in the existing social institutions. Children and parents, man and wife, master and slave--these relationships are also to be changed because of what has been done in this new humanity.

Chapter 6 talks about the powers of history. We are not contending against flesh and blood but against the principalities, powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. That language is not easy for modern man to interpret, but it is clear that we have something to do with forces at work within history, with various kinds of idolatry which compete in society and in history with the true God and Lord for our loyalty. The combat is against the power of idolatry in the course of history. The alternative is the building of this new body to withstand, in a negative sense. That particular paragraph concludes with asking for prayer that the body will form a more courageous and uninhibited proclaimer of the mystery.

What does this have to do with politics? Jesus did not follow the Zealots who had a counter-culture going in Palestine which was going to seek to destroy the Roman domination. The Zealots were the National Liberation Front of Palestine. Jesus was enough like the Zealots in the depth of his rejection of the existing situation that He could be exchanged for Barabbas who was a Zealot. But He differed from Barabbas in that the new thing that He was bringing was not simply a new team of more righteous people to use military power and other kinds of destructive force in order to make things come out right. But He created a team with a new kind of force. Jesus rejected the way of Barabbas, not because it was revolutionary, but because it wasn't revolutionary enough. The Zealots were just like the Romans at the point of their reliance on the sword.

That wasn't new enough for Jesus. What Jesus taught and said was not simply that instead of changing the world we can have a new heart; that isn't enough. Often people who say that they have a new heart don't help change the world. Jesus started a new humanity, a new people, a kingdom. Now this kingdom doesn't happen without the personal conversion of every individual who accepts being drawn along in it. But it's much more than that personal acceptance if it is to be God's kingdom.

Let us consider the different views on war and violence. There is the holy war. We fight a war, not for the sake of creating peace or setting things right, but because God wants this war--whether it be the holy wars in the age of Joshua or the Christian crusade in the Middle Ages.

There is the just war which is a rather complicated and careful way of thinking which denies that prior definition which says God doesn't want war in general; God wants as little war as possible. The justifiable war is the one that meets certain tests. It's fought by the good guys against the bad guys for a good cause by good means. And when we spell out what that implies, we have the theology of the just wars. Although it has been abused in the past, it has the intent of limiting the use of violence to justify the causes. Of course, from our contemporary orientation we know that it is that kind of thought that leads people to reject the Vietnam war. Not all war is wrong, but this one is wrong because it is fought by the wrong people or for the wrong cause or by the use of the wrong weapons. There is the state of fascism in which the state is its own master where we don't ask about God wanting a war or the righteousness of the war. The state decides.

The last alternative is to say that all war is wrong. Now let's use these handles a little and see what we can discover about the morality and change for control in political struggle. Some writers seem to be saying that change is always good, we ought always to change, and once we get one change then we can get another change. This is said most pointedly by Roland Smith who doesn't say how he would use any criteria for discriminating. It's just got to change. He uses the distinction between revolution and rebellion. For him rebellion is inadequate because it wants change at once and when we have had it, we have a good order and can keep it. He wants to change all the time, so he uses the term rebellion, but he doesn't use any discrimination for the results. Since we know ahead of time that after the change we are working for, we'll go to another change, it means we never have to prove the change was for the good. He appeals to the apocalyptic language of the New Testament to undercut and remove responsibility for thinking about what change he wants. He refuses to accept the just war questions. Who will bring it about? Who has the right to bring it about? How will he bring it about? By what means will it be proper? He doesn't ask those questions. He just wants change. But what if the change you get is Hitler or George Wallace? What if the change is for the worse? He has

Just not thought about that possibility.

In the world since Darwin, we assume that change is for the better. Our culture assumes that things are getting better. Now this itself is changing, but only very recently. In the past we never thought of the possibility that change might make things worse. So Smith, if I understand him right, is taking the rebel position that the power that makes things change is its own justification. It doesn't answer to God. It doesn't answer to its own criteria. It simply ought to be.

There are a few recognitions in the book of logical shortcomings of this approach. This is an extreme form of the way in which thinking about the tension between old and new hides the tension between right and wrong. Things ought to change. That is a biblical view. But that any change is a good act is not a biblical view. This is said by Richard Shaw commenting on Bultman. He says that we have to be reminded that movement is not necessarily forward. A theology of hope doesn't deal with the fact that realistically and biblically the future is going to be worse.

Although this approach advocates radical change, it is not judgmental about the past. It doesn't say as the Anabaptists did that what had happened to Christianity in the Middle Ages was apostate. It really seems to accept the past for Smith is very affirmative about the American revolution and the days of the Pilgrims, the Manifest Destiny, and the taking over of the North America. He does not seem to be bothered about the American Indians. There is no repentance for the past and no humility for the future in this kind of concept of revolution. The effect of this is either Machiavellian or crusading.

We have elements of crusade in this type of language. One of the signs of the crusade is that one doesn't ask if it is going to be successful in the short run. It has that in common with pacifism, the New Testament kind of pacifism. Another part of the crusade is that martyrdom is meaningful. If we look especially at the literature rising out of contemporary Latin American talk about this, we will see the extent to which Che Guevara is a martyr. Even Christian language is used about him. He is still alive on the walls of Cuba. There is even a doctrine of resurrection. This death for a cause is a crusading mentality. Their position can be refuted by failure.

But how does it differ from the cross-bearing readiness of the New Testament church? Well, somebody else really ought to do the suffering. It's that we export the revolution cause, and someone else is to take it up. I would like to call this the Huguenot type of crusade. The Huguenots were people in France who got orders from Calvin in Geneva that they should have a revolution against the French government. Now it is Latin American refugees and former missionaries who write that the Christians in Latin America should have a revolution.

If we were to test the deep assumption behind the approach that any change is for the better, we would find that it doesn't stand to any kind of a test. There is not reason to believe this except the mood of our culture which has in recent generations assumed that every change is for the better. Even if we accept this, it gives no guidance for ethics about the change we want. Should we be integrationist or segregationist?

There is in literature a more responsible strand of writers represented probably best by professor Bultman. These people talk in a way which would be like the just war language. They ask about limits and meaning. They warn that some means may be defeating, that revolution is not self-justifying, that it

has to prove that it can avoid becoming a crusade. They recognize that most revolution does become a new tyranny. But even here they don't apply carefully the just war type of language to a revolution. How many people do we have a right to expel, to exile, to kill, or to put into prison? These people who are talking about sober, measured, limited testing of the justifiable use of force in a revolution still haven't come to terms with Jesus and with what the New Testament says as to whether it is our business to make history come out right.

In modern lingo, the just war theory is thinking more carefully about the use of power on the part of people who reject all feeling. One of the questions it has to answer is who has the right to use this and who are the good guys? It is not simply knowing which general is a little less corrupt than another general or whether someone fighting back in the jungle with a bunch of peasants is more righteous than somebody fighting in the city with the wealthy.

Richard Shaw proposes that "we must rediscover the meaning of our sectarian heritage. Those that are in, but not of, the established order will be the agents of revolution in our advanced technological society." This means the development of the sect, the encouragement of the dissenter, the reaffirmation of heresy. By heresy he simply means a minority position. He himself doesn't derive a new ethic. He wants to use the just war ethic, but he recognizes the need for a new community to be the focus of the new sense of direction.

Richardson discerns something new in the work of Martin Luther King. King's concern to win the white man, the oppressor, was not simply a guess about the best educational technique or a shrewd calculation of about the only thing an underdog could do when he has no weapons. Rather, he had faith in a vision of the invisible unity that makes the white and black man one in love. But this realm of unity is seen only by faith. The man who returns good for evil is the man that lives by faith. The Christian is somebody who knows, even though the facts are otherwise, that there is no difference between Jew and Greek, and he lives that way. King was somebody who knew there was no difference in God's purposes, differences but no ultimate separation, no breach of communion between black and white. By living that way he created the nuclei of a new humanity.

This is said more fully by the Tucker paper which draws the line from early Quakerism to present concerns. He does it very functionally. The real revolution is of a different group. It takes a group so that we can abandon the security of the old world and the coercive powers by which the old society was kept in line. And we can't do that on our own, at least most people can't. We can do it if there is a group to support us and to take care of the wife and children when we are gone.

Last, the Vincent Harding paper says that the people who will be able to find a new way are the ones that have known brokenness. There are in the book phrases of the more fundamental, more revolutionary approach and it focuses each time on the new integration of men into God's new peoplehood. Most of the papers pay no attention to the ethics we can use. They are just means which can also be part of the just war language. They use no innovative means here. They assume that if they favor change instead of stability, that's new; but they use the same tools in favor of change as people were using for stability, namely the army and the police. Those who assume this are not at all original and don't even notice it as a problem.

But there is novelty in Martin Luther King as interpreted by Richardson. He uses the concept of asymmetry. We throw the situation off balance when we respond to violence with unexpected nonviolence. To oppose violence with vio-

lence in the name of justice really strengthens the evil. We agree with the other party that his weapons are right and thereby really lose our right to tell him that what he is doing is wrong. How can we tell people killing is wrong if we kill people?

There is novelty about ethics in the Barth article. The word of reconciliation is the problem. We cannot proclaim reconciliation to men through violence. Professor Barth is not being sticky about the Sermon on the Mount. He is not being legalistic about the Ten Commandments. He is not being an isolationist about involvement in society. No, he is just being consistent about the meaning of proclamation. He is a Lutheran, and Lutherans have to say everything from the proclamation of the Word of God. And that is where his pacifism comes from. We cannot proclaim a message of reconciliation to someone whose life we take. So we can't take anyone's life. That is a new approach to ethics which really does something to revolutionize our attitude toward the power struggle.

Again in the Tucker article, there is no revolution at all unless we live differently, unless this new community creates a new epoch. If the new people--the people on the side of the new movement have the same philosophy, the same techniques, the same willingness to coerce and the same attitude toward authority as the bad guys--then it is not worth changing palace guards. This is my unfitting conclusion.