

Faith, Politics, and the New Left

A Theology for Radical Politics, by Michael Novak. Herder and Herder. 128 pp. \$1.75.

by Dennis Hale

Whenever "weighty" questions come up, whenever I—an inveterate Sunday school and church goer as a youngster—have to pick up the thread of my own beliefs and follow where it leads, I'm troubled to discover that there is nothing attached to the end of the string. There *ought* to be something there after all; somewhere there has to be some first principle that justifies the rest. At such moments it occurs to me that somewhere in my education I missed something important. And Michael Novak's attempt to discover a theology for radical politics hasn't filled the gap.

Novak argues that the time has come to fulfill the goals of the American Revolution—liberty and equality and justice for all. To do this requires that we stop asking only utilitarian questions ("How can we do this and so?") and start asking "theological" questions ("Should we do this and so?"), thereby giving rise to the need for a "theology of radical politics." The revolution that Novak envisions is both political and personal; it is non-violent, but it is tumultuous. It never ends.

A revolution is a long-term affair. Miracles are not often granted, dreams are smashed, the ghosts of repression sweep broodingly across the land. . . . A revolution consists in struggling to be free . . . learning how to understand; beginning to hear—really to hear—the voices of others; breaking the grip of one's own perceptual and imaginative structure; . . . resisting the daily seduction to treat oneself and others as machines, as means, as parts of the whole tick-

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ing, ticking apparatus of a wrist-watch-driven nightmare of pure, abstract efficiency. . . .

A new theology is needed to support and civilize this revolution; the old theology has been corrupted beyond use by the churches, whose own failures have been amply publicized. And Novak sees the beginning of this new theology in the philosophy of the New Left.

For Novak, the important themes of the New Left are those of identity and community, the search for self-understanding and the search for brothers. It is the emphasis on these concerns that makes the Movement at least potentially religious, in that questions of "value" are placed above questions of "technique." It is this also that makes the New Left "new," because it was the fatal error of the "old" Left to forget the primacy of "ends" and place all of its faith in "means."

"The question of identity arises," Novak says, "as soon as one steps out of the customary habits and routines of one's life, and can no longer believe what other people have told one that one is." Or should be. "Who am I?" is a perennial adolescent question. What makes it new (and Novak seems to understand this very well) is that many people have finally decided to take it seriously, rather than store it in the trunk with so many other adolescent concerns. People nowadays talk about going through "changes," and by that they mean no one change in particular, but rather the discovery that it is in fact possible for a person to change his life, to become something different from what others want him to become, to be free.

What Novak seems to miss is that this discovery carries with it its own ambivalence; being free is not always (or ever) enough. "Freedom's just another word for

nothing left to lose," says the song, and holding dialogues with oneself about Identity quickly becomes a more elaborate form of loneliness. For no matter how many "changes" a person manages to go through, no matter how "together" he manages to come, the answer to "Who am I?" has to be: "I am nothing at all, an outrageously insignificant speck in the universe, for whom even God must have only scant concern." "Community" is not so much a separate "theme" of Movement philosophy as it is an answer to the question of identity. The answer to "Who am I?" has to be "I am who I am loyal to." Thus communes, collectives, extended families: all attempt to capture (or recapture?) a sense that one belongs to something small enough to touch.

All love is exclusive, and the "community" of the radical young excludes many unfairly; conservative Americans, sensing and resenting that exclusion, react with a terrified bitterness that used to be reserved for blacks, Indians, and other minorities, and that has finally, inevitably, produced a *bona fide* massacre of white students.

Books like Novak's may go far toward clearing the air—if they are read by the right people, which is doubtful; but most of the damage, I'm afraid, has already been done. The philosophy of the New Left will probably remain as incomprehensibly alien to most of the public as the principles of Zoroaster. The mass media's habit of packaging ideas and wrapping them in cellophane is not calculated to convey much understanding or insight, and as a result the Movement's philosophy — and, what is more important, its emotional tone—comes across as an AI Capp caricature of the truth. Moreover, the media seems to have an implicit faith in the Newness of All Things, so that public

events are offered up with the same hoopla as the latest "improved" soap. Novak tends to make a similar error about the Movement, which is why he thinks we need a "new" theology: for what is not generally understood about the New Left is that in many important ways it is very old-fashioned.

Perhaps this can best be explained in negative terms: What does the New Left *not* believe in? It doesn't believe in History, and this alone would set it apart as an antique doctrine. Most Americans are now convinced that the twentieth century is an improvement on the nineteenth, and that the twenty-first century will be a great advance on the twentieth, and on and on and on. This gets harder to believe as time goes by, and as the world drifts farther from any credible model of what a world should be.

The New Left doesn't believe in Science. Listen sometime to laymen discussing science: the discussion will be about what "they" know and what "they" haven't discovered yet. Certainly most Americans believe that science can solve any problem imaginable, and that it will, given time (since science, like everything else, gets better every year). But against this view the New Left has ventured the heresy that science cannot solve all problems, and that there are some problems science should not even *try* to solve.

The New Left doesn't much like the Modern World, or any of its much-touted wonders like instant food, super-cities, and moonshots. Here is where understanding the emotional tone of the Movement is as important as knowing its "philosophy"; you really must learn to hate the little things, like frozen breakfasts, before the whole makes any sense. If you are willing to put up with the miniature horrors of modern living because "that's the price we pay for progress," then you are truly a modern man. If, on the other hand, you have ever wondered whether

the whole thing was going the wrong way, then you've let the fatal heresy creep in, and you may yet be saved.

What it comes down to is rejecting the booster mentality we usually associate with the Chamber of Commerce but which is actually more widespread than that. Chesterton described the opponents of the Populists as standing for the "triumph of the nineteenth century . . . for a firm faith in the profit and progress of its great and growing cities, its division of labor, its industrial science, and its evolutionary reform." That comes so close to being a description of the American philosophy of 1970 that we can almost measure our "progress" by how widespread the faith of William McKinley has now become. Novak says that students have discovered "pragmatism" to be an ideology like any other, and he is right; but we are far from winning any important battles with that ideology. Industrial efficiency is still America's most unquestioned standard, and we cling to it like a blind man to his cane.

We are on less certain ground when trying to discover what the New Left believes *in*. Community is important, as Novak understands; but what community means, most of all, is an insistence on the simple joys of friendship that are so hard to maintain in "modern" America. Novak sees this when he says, "Let as many as can, work together in the night, an ecumenical movement of those who hope to diminish by a little the number of stunted lives." At some moment in the past, people discovered, with a little help from their friends, that they didn't have to become what the world wished them to become, that in hanging together, freedom was possible.

Kurt Vonnegut recently said that the problem with the human being is that no one will allow him "to live in ways that are comfortable for him. And it's touching that what he wants so much is a family. And a large one too. And

he can't have that because the 'housing' won't allow this and because he's supposed to chase from job to job." And family is certainly a very old-fashioned idea. No sensation there for *Time* to wrap up and peddle like toothpaste.

Another old-fashioned idea is justice. Liberals profess to be amazed that certain people can be so "unreasonable" in their demands, forgetting that justice can sometimes be a very cruel and frightening thing. There is room to doubt the wisdom of burning down the Bank of America, but I don't think there's any doubt that the institution richly deserved it. Nor is there any room for doubt about what Bobby Seale should have done when Judge Hoffman refused to let him have his own lawyer. The claims of justice have priority over those of decorum and procedure; we have let ourselves forget that in this country. "Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! . . . the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light." So says Amos. So say the Black Panthers.

There is a fable about children rejecting their fathers and embracing their grandfathers, and it is lent credence by the truth that the New Left resembles the Populists more than the New Deal liberals, or even the Socialists. And if this is true, perhaps it is not the Movement that needs a theology, but the church. And if Novak wants to reunite faith and politics, perhaps he should stop trying to invent a "new" theology. Perhaps he should turn to liberal clergymen and tell them to put away their rock liturgies and begin addressing their congregations, especially their suburban congregations, in the language of Amos: "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion. . . . I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell your holy days. . . . Take thou away from me the noise of thy song, for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."