

AMERICAN ETHOS AND THE REVOLUTIONARY OPTION

Freedom Beyond Fashion

Richard J. Neuhaus

I confess at the outset that I speak of America and the revolutionary option as one who wishes to be informed by, and faithful to, the biblical tradition. I use "confess" here not as an admission of weakness, but as one who would be a "confessor," clearly positioning himself in terms of the myriad beginning points one might choose for serious personal statement. I am increasingly unhappy with an intensified and highly politicized atmosphere in which one is pressed to distinguish his position by relating it to the prevailing, and usually false, alternatives of political debate. Christians and Jews who take their religious tradition seriously must demonstrate more emphatically the connection between their political posture and the referents in that tradition. For me this means discovering political commitment and style that square with the gospel of the oncoming Kingdom of God, which is what I think the tradition is all about.

You have heard it said that the religious community should be a zone of truth. It has not been said enough, or at least not convincingly enough. More important, it has not been underscored enough by those Christians and Jews who are most vocal and credible in their social witness. We have the unfortunate situation in the churches that those who are most concerned and articulate about the particularism of the biblical tradition are least credible as spokesmen for its social and political significance.

Whenever I speak under CRIA's auspices, I allude to Paul Ramsey of Princeton because he is closely associated with CRIA and has been one of the more vigorous critics of religious social engagement for a decade and more in American life. He aims at the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, at Clergy and Laymen Concerned, and at the sundry individuals involved in these enter-

prises who, says Ramsey, constitute the "liberal curia" of the church's social action. His chief point, as I understand it, is that the social engagements of the churches, while terribly relevant, have not enriched the moral discourse of the larger society. One reason for the failure is that those most engaged have been weak-spirited about finding the referents or, as he says, the "warrants" within the tradition for their statements and actions.

When it comes to conclusions, where Ramsey actually comes out on particular issues, I find myself more often than not in disagreement with him. But the thrust of his criticism is, I think, on target. It is a frightful thing to *use* religion. Using religion is a kind of blasphemy and, carried far enough, it is what the Bible means by idolatry. There is something about religion that insists upon being impractical, untameable, highly irrelevant. A religion totally relevant at any particular moment in history, totally relevant to any particular culture, is a perverted religion. Such a religion is something less than a covenant community committed to One who transcends every political, religious, or cultural configuration. Neither can such a covenant community and the object of its hope be captured in our projections of how the cultural, political and social ferment might be reshaped in the future.

No one has a monopoly on the use, that is the abuse, of religion. Look at what liberal religionists have done on the abortion thing. My purpose here is not to argue for any position on the issue—repeal, liberalization, restriction, or whatever—but to note how the discussion has been carried on. The discussion reveals an outrageous abdication on the part of what seem to be the liberal or progressive groups of their responsibility to alert the society to the larger ethical and theological questions at stake. The arguments of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, for example, insisting that abortion touches upon the nature of human life and the protections society affords to all forms of human life—these arguments are lightly dismissed.

And there you have the problem I mentioned be-

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fore. The Roman Catholic hierarchy is one of the least credible witnesses to social morality in American life. With few exceptions, very few, they seem to be a pretty stuffy and self-seeking lot. My God, when John Sheerin and Victor Reed—and he's a bishop—recently released the names of three thousand priests declaring their public opposition to the war, they couldn't find a Catholic church or other facility in Manhattan in which to hold a press conference. They finally had to accept the hospitality of George McGovern's office in Washington. The point here is that the people who most seem to represent and care for the tradition have the least credentials and least persuasive influence with the people most deeply set upon the changes that justice demands.

This is a dilemma in the whole church, not just among Roman Catholics. All the evidence suggests that the thrust for social relevance, which has especially marked the more liberal and ecumenically minded churches, has turned off large numbers of church goers, the people who think they are, and probably are, the rank and file of American religion. They're the ones who feed the institutional animal that the rest of us flail, sometimes with considerable relish. The strange thing is that they've been turned off not so much because they disagree, or not only because they disagree, with the positions we take on specific issues, but they are turned off because they can't recognize the continuity between our positions and the tradition which presumably warrants them. That's not the whole story of course. We are, in fact, contending against a multitude of inherited religious perversities.

There is, after all, an American version of "throne and altar," the odious collaboration of religion and mindless nationalism. If we're honest about the useful abuses of religion, we will admit that we don't look primarily to the socially engaged religious leadership but rather to the more conventional use of religion to intensify loyalties to things as they are. It's obviously nothing new to note that religion is a legitimizing and conservatizing force in society. Even those who are most upset by religion's conservatizing energy count on its legitimizing role to give added clout to their advocacy of change. But you can't have one without the other. Unrelenting apocalypticism can finally preside only at the ceremonies of dissolution. But I will come back to that.

Among the inherited religious perversities are the privatizing and other-worldly dynamics that still can and do make religion the opiate of the people, and worse. But the answer is not to give up on the piety of the overwhelming majority of American church membership, although there is much there

that might be gladly surrendered. The answer rather is to release, to explode the possibilities that are implicit in even the most conventional religious piety of American church goers. This is much more than a matter of tactics; it has to do with the integrity of our relationship to the religious phenomenon. To explode possibilities means that we take American Christians more seriously than they take themselves, especially that we take more seriously their statements about God's will in the world, about supreme loyalty to God, about a faith covenant that transcends the other social and political and economic covenants that may be convenient to their life styles.

The all too common trend has been that those most socially engaged are considered not only liberal or radical in their political positions but also liberal and radical in the sense of hanging loose from, and perhaps even acting in disdain of, the biblical tradition they presumably are witnessing to the world. We need to reverse this trend.

Jim Pike and Dan Berrigan are two instances that illustrate the point. Bishop Pike, may he rest in peace, was very much the relevant religious leader. In many ways he was lionized by the culture that saw his radicality precisely to the extent that he was loosening himself, liberating himself, from a tradition that seemed to be counter-cultural, that seemed to be abrasive to the prevailing culture. His public posture was one of jettisoning those things in religion that prevented him from being a fulfilled, secular, engaged twentieth-century man. I admit his latter-day interest in spiritism was inconsistent with this posture, but that came long after he had "made it" as the culturally relevant apostle of reasoned modernity.

I don't say this in personal criticism of Pike, for I suspect he had more guts than most of us would ever have the courage to pray for, but in criticism of that style of social engagement. The Pike model is not only questionable in terms of what it says about the biblical tradition, suggesting that the tradition is basically an inhibiting one, but is also questionable in terms of political effectiveness, highly questionable. When religious witness loses credibility as representative of that very tradition from which it presumably emerges and to which it presumably appeals, it becomes a highly individualistic and ineffectual thing. I suggest this axiom for religious social engagement: Witness on social questions is publicly potent in proportion to the venerability of the tradition to which it appeals and plausibly re-

flects. Daniel Berrigan is an excellent example.

I don't intend to discuss here the merits or demerits, the wisdom or lack thereof, of all of Father Berrigan's statements and actions. I mention him only to note the contrast with the style of Jim Pike, at least in the latter's halcyon days. Berrigan's posture is that of a man who takes more seriously than does the overwhelming majority of his coreligionists their common affirmations about the nature of man, history, covenant, and human responsibility. What he does he does because he regards the tradition more, not less. He is not liberated *from* the biblical witness but *by* the biblical witness. They can lock him up, and they have, but devout Catholics must still wrestle with his witness. His faith makes the faithful uneasy. Something like Jesus, as Dan would not be the last to remark.

Freedom beyond fashion is what is needed for the risk of engagement by religious folk. Remember Paul in I Corinthians. He writes at length defending himself against his critics, but he finally concludes: "Now I have acquitted myself as best I can. I hope you judge me more favorably. But it is a small thing that I am judged by you. Indeed, I do not even judge myself. Let no man judge before the time." That's real freedom.

Freedom beyond fashion is what we need to counter the supposedly conservative tide that seems to be overwhelming so many these days. I am distressed by a number of well-known religious thinkers, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish, who a few years ago were promoting the gospel of political radicalism but now profess to believe there's nothing more important than relating to the hard hats and recapturing the American flag for change within the system. Tactics are one thing, but substantive shifts in political perception, casually undertaken, are quite another.

The current talk about a conservative tide is in part self-fulfilling, just as the media's celebration of revolutionary posturing in 1968 and 1969 was at least in part self-fulfilling. Fashions are by definition fickle. When the Leonard Bernsteins, opinion leaders of lofty rank, hosted a party in their New York apartment for the Panthers in early 1970, the expression of radical sympathy was still ultra fashionable. Some of you saw the *New York Magazine* article shortly after that, in which Tom Wolfe dubbed this and other such get-togethers "radical chic." That removed a little of the glitter associated with radicalism, because the solemn play of celebrities displaying their social conscience is peculiarly vulnerable to ridicule.

The bombing of an elegant Greenwich Village

town house, with its incidental killing of several young bomb makers, further weakened the rage for radicalism. The real turning point, though, was the late summer destruction of the Army Mathematics Center at the University of Wisconsin. A graduate student was killed and the mandarins of political fashion felt betrayed: Why, some of these people were not posturing; they were serious about this business of overthrowing the system by any means necessary! And so, with unseemly haste, the important people issued outraged statements of horror and disowned their erstwhile friends from the days when revolution was everyone's favorite parlor game. Apparently what they had expected was confrontation without bitterness, battle without bruises, violent revolution without blood. The guns and bombs made such marvelously dramatic props for posters and news photos. Who would have thought the kids wanted these things to kill people with?

We should be more thoughtful about our politics, not tossed about by every wind of political doctrine. I don't know how many Americans are seriously set upon violent revolution, but I am sure they number in the thousands and I am equally sure that, while further repression may not multiply that number, it will certainly escalate the price their commitment will exact from this society.

We can argue, as I have tried to argue, that America is not now in a pre-revolutionary phase, that violent revolution is a dead-end street, and this line of argument dissuades some. But for many others it only enhances the mystique of violent death in a noble cause. The very hopelessness of the cause magnifies its nobility. We might well hesitate before dismissing their view as sick or crazy, for that view has some troubling points of similarity in the life and teaching of a wandering rabbi in the Middle East who was executed by the forces of law and order and who some of us call God and Lord.

I know it may sound like a liberal cliché, but the only answer to the compelling vision of violent revolution is a more compelling vision. We may dissuade a person from revolution by threats and by appeals to his self-interest, but by permitting himself to be so dissuaded, he may well lose the soul that came alive in restless yearning for a new heaven and a new earth. While we may disagree with the revolutionary viewpoint, it is cheap and unworthy in the long run to join the chorus that dismisses the revolutionaries as crazy. For the sake of the democratic impulse, we must never preclude entirely the revolutionary option. For the sake of credible religious witness, we must pursue more seriously the theological and ethical problems posed by the revolu-

tionary option. For the sake of the Republic's survival, if we care about that, and I do, we must press for alternative means of achieving the truly radical changes that justice demands. And if anyone thinks that such alternative means are readily at hand, he has not begun to understand that conversation in which commitments beyond fashion are formed.

It's not enough to condemn violence: Lyndon Johnson on the riotous night after Dr. King's murder urging Americans to respect Dr. King's teachings and evidence "reverence for life"; Nixon at Kansas State flatly declaring that no cause justifies the use of violence—such statements from such sources are fatuous and contemptible. I have the impression that most people who talk so nervously about the possibility of repression are, when push comes to shove, ready to ignore the actuality of oppression against the American poor and against those who live under the shadow of the American imperial colossus, as they say.

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The people who nervously prattle about non-violence when violence comes close to home must be challenged. Unless he shares the pacifist conviction, one doesn't make a judgment about violence per se. Our view on violence is conditioned by larger political judgments about the world around us, especially about the nature of American power today. Is American power the bulwark of the free world? Or was Martin Luther King right when he declared America to be "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and noted that American violence around the world is always on the side of oppression? Of course there are gradations between these two views, but it seems to me that any politically responsible person has had to wrestle in recent years with the question of which generalization is closer to the truth. Which generalization one may sympathize with may not be in itself a moral issue, but, having made the choice, there are enormous moral nuances which then come to bear upon the tactics one would use and the directions of the future for which he would press.

The revolutionary option touches, of course, upon the very core of the society, what it is that holds America together. Some political thinkers make the case that the American political experiment is held together by means rather than ends. In short, the constituting agreement or contract of American politics is on how we go about making decisions and resolving conflicts, not on the content of those decisions and resolutions. We agree that certain persons elected or appointed or otherwise legitimated

will play specified roles; and from that viewpoint it can be argued that violence has no place, regardless of the worth of the cause, because violence is not among the means we've agreed on.

We all know the weakness of this case. First, as the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence noted, most Americans suffer from an "historical amnesia" that conveniently forgets that violence is, in fact, one of the means by which social policy has been shaped. Second, as a flood of literature spawned by C. Wright Mills and others makes evident, the actual decision-making power in America is not limited to constitutionally legitimated authorities. Indeed, such authorities are, as often as not, subservient to the several power elites that none of us agreed to be ruled by. But I want to focus on a third and much neglected weakness in the conventional argument against domestic violence.

From the very beginning of the American experiment, it was assumed that the social agreement was not self-validating. The founding fathers finally appealed to the "laws of Nature and of Nature's God." There was a prior moral assumption about the historical destiny of American in light of Providence. What is happening today—and this is evident in the statement of Dr. King I mentioned earlier—is that that prior assumption has been thrown into doubt. What finally legitimizes the means on which we have agreed? All the talk of about a decade ago arguing that our era is marked by the "end of ideology" was really a futile effort to rule that question out of order because we didn't have an answer anymore. Maybe in times of "normalcy" the question can be conveniently evaded. But that time is not now.

The prior legitimating assumption was not always articulated—in fact, during the recent reign of the mandarins of secular pragmatism it was avoided as an embarrassment—but it was there. At times in the American experiment it was Perry Miller's "errand into the wilderness," at other times it was the birth of a new Zion liberated from the decadence and corruption of the old world. More recently the assumption has paraded under the banner of democracy and defense of the free world. It doesn't matter whether the mythology corresponded with reality; people believed it. America itself was some kind of covenant community, sealed by the blood of civil war and annointed with the oil of success. Even in the darkest times, in spite of everything, the American knew in his heart, as Mr. Goldwater would say, that his country was somehow different, still the last best hope of the world. We may condescendingly

smile at those who agitated for the words "under God" in the pledge of allegiance, but they are the true believers. And with what would you replace their naïveté? Is America no longer under judgment? And if it is not under judgment, how can it be approved? How then are its legitimating means legitimated? I suggest that the assumption of a prior and approving judgment is a large part of what has held American society together. It is because that assumption has become implausible to most of the country's liveliest and most thoughtful citizens that America shows signs of falling apart.

Of course there are those who approve the course of affairs. They say that it's all quite natural, that America is just growing up, and that part of growing up is the loss of innocence. That may be, but I don't think this line of reasoning recognizes its radical discontinuity with American self-consciousness. When the myth of America being "different" is totally destroyed, when the idea of America being just like all other nations gains popular acceptance, then we will have an authority crisis in American life that will make the present turmoil seem mild indeed. I am afraid that my friends who welcome the loss of innocence are very short-sighted. The loss may do a lot for our feelings of sophistication, but it does little for the prospects of social survival.

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that it is because of the good in man that democracy is possible and it is because of the evil in man that democracy is necessary. In his war against America's messianism and feelings of uniqueness, Niebuhr made politics into a maze of stop-gap measures of complicated compromises. Niebuhr's was a monumental contribution. He provided an antidote to the dangerously uncritical assumption of righteousness. But antidotes are not the stuff of births and new beginnings. Today's revolutionaries believe that the American mother country, as they call it, is in the pains of labor. They are the ones who insist that there must be legitimating authority behind the legitimating means. Whereas others talked about Nature and Nature's God, they speak of authority derived from "the wretched of the earth" and from the dialectic of history. You may think their gods are idols, but idolatry is classically overthrown in the name of the true God, not in the name of a maturity that has outgrown the need for gods. And who today in the mainstream of American politics speaks in a believable way about the judgment and purposes of God? In one time of crisis this country knew Abraham Lincoln's anguished search for divine intent in the pathos of history. The present crisis is every bit as severe, and the American experiment is not likely to

survive without an equally honest examination of the roots of its legitimacy. The blood of violence will be redemptive if it drives us to that examination.

Of course the blood of present and future violence need not be redemptive. It will not be if we refuse to let it pry open the lid and give freedom to the larger questions that the end-of-ideology fellows tried to lock away once and for all. Nor will it be redemptive if it only stimulates us to continue reckoning according to the calculus of violence, by which calculus it becomes reassuringly clear that the revolutionaries don't have a chance. All this does is to invite a prolongation and refinement of all the ways in which, in spite of the odds, the violent ones can interrupt our flow technology and impose the techniques of terrorism upon our common life. Already now, illegal and disruptive actions are the only way many Americans have to participate in decision-making power. This is a fact of daily life among the blacks and Puerto Ricans in the section of Brooklyn where I live and work, in their struggle to participate in public education.

It is the obligation of religious people who believe that all means, no matter how legal and socially approved, are under judgment to push the confrontation beyond the question of violence versus non-violence or the question of who is going to win. We need to make sure that the voice of the disrupters is understood; not so much for their sake as for the sake of the society. Their voice, sometimes accompanied by violence, can press the country to a new self-consciousness that transcends our preoccupation with simple stability, which is not, after all, a very exciting social purpose.

A destiny, a mission, a mandate. These are dangerous but inescapable words. I know full well the inflated self-importance and self-righteousness that have at times distorted American life and power. But for we Americans, peoplehood cannot be taken for granted. We are not self-evidently a people, such as the English or the French may be or somehow have become. We are a people on purpose, a people by purpose. The messianic distortions of a sense of mission cannot be permitted to negate mission itself. Without the ability to say what America is about there is little to stop the drift toward the revolutionary option.

The irony is that what America may be all about in a few years is stopping its own revolution. In such an America, where counter-revolution has become the national purpose, we may all be forced to agree that revolution is not only just but imperative.