

would label "creeping permissiveness" up to a point beyond which further damage to the Soviet image is considered unacceptable.

The USSR has obviously made enormous scientific and technological progress in the last two decades, since lip service to dialectical materialism is no longer required of Russian scientists. This is an encouraging sign of growing intellectual honesty and maturity, and if the trend is extended to the humanities, the USSR may yet come of age and take its rightful

place among the truly civilized powers in the society of nations. Now that the Soviets have demonstrated that they are no longer "backward" in science and technology, they may seek to match the West in the liberal arts and humanities. A first step in this direction would be to show enough self-confidence in their much-vaunted "new Soviet society" to permit the free development of a literature of social protest. Obviously the present Soviet leadership lacks this self-confidence.

The Bible Becomes Politically Dangerous

Toward a Theology of Human Hope by Rubem A. Alves. Corpus Books. 195 pp. \$5.95

by **Monika Hellwig**

Discussions at CRIA seminars and in these pages, while concerned with religion and international affairs, frequently assume the legitimacy of the status quo and of the operational political criteria by which public decisions are generally made. This seems to falsify the claim that the Western, biblically based religions are real partners in the dialogue, for the commitment implied in biblical faith challenges the values of any status quo in the political arena. Further, it tends to limit discussion to questions of the accuracy or adequacy of facts and the practical feasibility of policies.

This, of course, is not a special CRIA problem, but a more widespread problem of our society; we have taken the political teeth out of biblical faith. Charles C. West, in *Ethics, Violence and Revolution* (CRIA Special Study No. 208), has given a penetrating analysis of the reason. On the one

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hand, he says, our culture has appropriated the language of revolution for the Establishment, and the language of the sacred for contingent events in our past history. In consequence, we lack the conceptual or symbolic leverage that would allow us to make a radical critique of the *status quo* in the light of an absolute demand. On the other hand, we in North America who theorize and discuss these matters have no true experience of social alienation from which to articulate this radical critique. We lack empathy for those who are the living negation of all the good things of the ordered society.

These two aspects of the problem are not unconnected. Our language formulates our experience, but it also shapes and screens the experiences we can have. If we speak of the American Revolution and of American democracy in more or less sacred terms—assuming that it was the great Exodus and that the oppressor has been left on the other side of the Atlantic while here, among us, American democracy assures forever the inevitable progress toward the best of all possible worlds—that surely is so because we are formulating our own experience. Our privileged economic position

leaves us convinced that God's in His (eternally unchanging) heaven and all's right with the (basically unchanging) world. On the other hand, precisely because we make this type of formulation, which equates relative progress achieved in the past with the ultimate and definitive goal, we set up a framework of expectations that effectively screens out of our experience that which lies behind the voices of radical alienation.

Every theology is written out of the concrete historical experience of its author, as Rubem Alves notes in introducing his book, *Toward a Theology of Human Hope*. In the wealthy capitalist "first" world, theologies are written with a sense of comfort, accepting a neat separation of religion (which we see as individual and private and concerned with what ought to be) and politics (which is social and public and limits itself to what is feasible in terms of vested interests). Alves dismisses this dichotomy with the unshakable assurance of his own life experience as a spokesman for the "third" world. He rediscovers the *political* and *public* immediacy of the biblical message for our time. In his reflections, the Bible becomes politically dangerous, as indeed it was intended to be—a

germ of massive social and economic revolutions.

In *Human Hope*, Alves begins by an attempt to analyze the sinfulness of the present world in terms of the emerging consciousness of alienation of the new proletariat. From the realization that they are poor in a world of abundant wealth and luxury, deprived peoples everywhere are coming to the understanding that they were *made* poor. "Colonialism came to be seen as a relationship in which those who are dominated are not allowed to become the creators of their own history." Decisions concerning the development of their natural and human resources were being made with reference to someone else's profit or welfare. Alves points out further that it is precisely because the consciousness moved from one of material deprivation to one of being made impotent before history that a new generation of students all over the world has come to identify so massively and so desperately with the cause of the black and the poor and the third world nations. Mass media have made available enough information about who pulls the political strings in the "free" world, where the campaign funds come from, which lobbies are powerful, who is really "protected" by the law, what swings votes and so forth, that the young feel that our kind of representative democracy has been unmasked as a fraud. Almost everybody seems to be manipulated for the interests of an economic power structure.

Alves explains that this situation is by no means new in the world, but that this pattern has usually been able to produce, through a process of slow and inevitable conditioning, an oppressed consciousness. "An oppressed consciousness" is that which is domesticated by the situation of oppression in which it finds itself. It is a consciousness which really became reflexive, unable to be subject, deprived of a sense of direction and of his-

torical vocation." Anyone who finds Alves' language extravagant or out of place in a book about theology should sit down and re-read Exodus, chapters 2-6. The point that Alves is making about our pious vocabulary vis-à-vis redemption is that it is not concerned with a real revolution in the world, one that is basically a deep change in consciousness, a liberation of consciousness, which is effected publicly and socially in the political, economic and cultural arena.

impotent before history

Alves identifies the false messiah of our time as technology. We of the affluent first world are constantly trying to redeem the alienated by extending our technology to them, not seeming to realize that, far from changing the relationship which establishes their impotence, this merely consolidates it. "In the technological societies the same oppressed consciousness is again created but now for a different reason: because the future is no longer necessary." Here men are enslaved not so much by pain as by certain rather shallow pleasures and satisfactions that can mask a very deep dissatisfaction because there is no future to hope for.

Alves describes free men as those who can create their lives and their world, in a setting where everything is not already finished and predetermined as if for robots to ticker-tape their way through life, from birth to death. In this, and in his basic understanding of that essential revolution which is at stake in the theology of redemption, Alves follows very closely the "theologians of hope," Moltmann and Pannenberg. Although he at-

tempts to distinguish himself from them as he explores the "positive resources that the historical experience of the community of faith could offer for the task of historical human liberation," I find a great similarity.

But the main task envisaged in this book is that of creating a new theological language which can really serve "humanization," that is, the liberation of the oppressed consciousness in the best tradition of Exodus and of the Pascal Mystery of the New Testament. Chapter 3—a remarkable one, and one which perhaps could only have been written by a spokesman of the third world—distinguishes two ways in which men have attempted to transform the visions of freedom into historical reality.

The *first* of these is in the language that Alves designates "humanistic messianism." Here, humanization is seen as a task accepted in a spirit of historical optimism. "It takes the risk of making all its hopes for a new future for man depend on man's freedom to make history free." The problem with this is not difficult to see: it is precisely the oppressed consciousness that has drawn from its own experience the unshakable conviction that man is not free to make his history free; that, on the contrary, the powers of oppression have an iron grip on everything and cannot be effectively opposed.

The *alternate* way is that of "messianic humanism," the language of the community of faith. In this mode of thought, "the politics for a new tomorrow cannot be assessed by a simple statistical or quantitative evaluation of the human resources and of the power of resistance of the existing structure of domination. It holds that the politics for a new tomorrow is the business of a power which, being free from history, and therefore not being exhausted by the statistical-quantitative possibilities that history displays, is

'free for' history and therefore creates possibilities which could not be dreamed of by means of calculation."

Basing this proposal on the Bible and the Christian tradition, Alves is not able to resolve the paradox any more than were the biblical authors or, as a matter of fact, the Marxist humanists who have attempted to use, upside down, the same proposal. The paradox inevitably remains: We assert more than "the statistical-quantitative possibilities that history displays," but we make the assertion on the basis of the faith community's experience which yields the utter certainty that the "more" is surely forthcoming if we reach towards the freedom. Alves shows how the God-talk of the Hebrew Scriptures is mainly concerned with the "more" that emerges as promise for the future out of the freedom-making events of the political and social past. It is one of the best portions of the book, and it serves to illustrate one of the slogans of the theologians of hope: Theology is, or should be, itself an historical initiative.

'free for' history

Like the theologians of hope, Alves realizes that there is a history of unfreedom to be discerned as well as a history of freedom, and that the difference between them is largely a matter of the choice to *determine oneself for oneself alone* or to *determine oneself for others*—the former being shaped by fear of the future rather than by freedom for the future. But unlike the theologians of hope, Alves is vividly aware that his language of freedom and hope must provide adequate motivation for his fellow Brazilians and many others to face death, torture, exile,

prison, and the constant harassment of fear in order to bring about for others that "more," that radically new freedom which they themselves will not be around to enjoy. That one man should die for the people seems so right—unless you happen to be the one man, or his wife or parent, or his close friend.

It is within this distinction that Alves considers the issue of violence. For one who determines himself for himself and fears the future and who is, therefore, aligned with structures that preserve the status quo, violence is whatever threatens those structures, whether or not the structures crush people. Thus (though Alves does not give this example himself), even the destruction of draft records would be properly defined as violence precisely because it attacks the structures themselves, while napalm bombing of people would not be properly defined as violence because it is done by proper authority to preserve the structures that preserve the status quo.

From the viewpoint of the man who is free for the future, violence is what closes man's consciousness to the "more" of the future, what subsumes a man's freedom under the project of another, thus denying him a share even in the creation of his own future. In this perspective (though Alves does not give this particular example either), all structures that assume that war or poverty is unavoidable are violent.

It is *because* of violence that seeks to forestall the future that a messianic humanism can only be projected in terms of a theology of creative and redemptive suffering. It is not accidental that the Hebrew Scriptures carry the theme of the Suffering Servant Songs about the people of Israel. Nor is it accidental that Christianity proclaims the Lordship of Jesus from the moment of the Cross. For a radical revolution in human affairs, men have to be free for the future by being ut-

terly free for others in the face of utter violence on behalf of the status quo.

Yet it must be said that, having raised fundamental and far-reaching questions, this really important book falls somewhat short of sketching the necessary answers with reference to violence and death. Because social and political structures are, in fact, never attacked without some sort of attack on persons—whether directly or indirectly—the question as to how far and under what conditions violence against persons may serve the true revolution and the common good should really have been discussed. Berdyaev's reflections on the Russian Revolution, Gandhi's on his successful South African and Indian campaigns, and Martin Luther King's in response to the Black Power advocates, would have been helpful. As to the question of death, the book seems to fail to offer the substance for a hope that would lead men to sustain a heroic death on behalf of others.

Alves does, however, offer constructive criteria for a current political theology. It must, he states, use a totally historical language drawn from an ongoing politics of freedom, one expressing for the community of faith an historical experience in which no present is final and which acknowledges itself as a language of imagination that is not, strictly speaking, descriptive. It is clear that this language, by which theology can be an historical initiative, does not presently exist—though Alves is curiously unaware of the efforts of Roman Catholic theologians in this direction, notably those of J. B. Metz. The creation of such language is a task that theologians should not and cannot accomplish in isolation but must attempt in dialogue with the voices of the Establishment and the voices of alienation and protest. Such dialogue is surely the purpose of CRIA's work and is clearly possible with the resources it offers.