



# Political Authority and Revolution

Theodore R. Weber

Political authority is the right to exercise the power of the polis, the political community, over and on behalf of the members of the community. It implies the obligation of the members to obey those who exercise power by right when they act within the limits set by the criteria of authorization. Every political society this side of the eschaton must embody viable relationships of authority and obedience. If not, the society must either be sustained by tyranny, which is arbitrary force and not authoritative power, or else dissolve into anarchy, which surely then will lead to tyranny.

The foundation of every authority system is in myth. It is true, of course, that one can make a rational case, supported by empirical evidence, for the functional necessity of authority-and-obedience relationships in human society. It is also true that the certitude with which the rulers command and the willingness with which the subjects obey are not sustained by myth alone. They are sustained, in addition, by the efficacy of sanctions, by effectiveness of policy, by learned wisdom in commanding and in habits of obeying, by social pressure to conform, by real or imaginary threats from internal and/or external enemies.

Nevertheless, the myth is the foundation of the relationship. It provides the original meaning for, and validation of, the concepts of "right" and "duty," which acquire their form and substance through historical experience. It delineates the criteria which justify and limit both the use of political power and the responses to the use. If the myth disintegrates, the authority relationships are undermined, for thereby they lose both their conceptual orientation and the principal nonforcible element of their operative power.

If the foregoing assertions are true, we can expect political revolutions to engage intimately the problems of both authority and myth. This engagement occurs in three principal dimensions. *First*, the revolution attacks and attempts to destroy the established order. By "established order," however, we do

not mean only or even primarily the regime and the institutional arrangements through which it exercises power. They are the focus of the attack, and the revolutionaries intend to destroy them, but they are only the penultimate objects of revolutionary destruction. Ultimately of greater importance is the authority system which produces, supports and validates the regime and its institutions. This authority system is part of an historically created social reality, rooted in myth, which defines the standards of legitimacy, confirms the rightness of rule, and engenders habits of passive acceptance if not of dutiful obedience. If the peasant revolutionaries do not know by native wisdom, they are instructed by revolutionary intellectuals (from the middle class) that "destruction of the established order" applies to the total social continuity, running from primal myth to the visible apparatus of oppressive power. If the revolutionaries are successful, they eliminate not only the personnel and instruments of the order but also its world of meaning. Between the collapse of the old, mythically structured world of meaning and the installation of the new there is a time of utter confusion when only those who are confirmed in the revolutionary gnosis have a conceptual scheme by which they distinguish right from wrong and link past, present and future.

*Second*, the revolutionary agents must demonstrate the basis of their own authority. It is not sufficient for this purpose to point to the arbitrariness and usurpations of the established order, i.e., to the presumed fact that the order and its representatives have no real authority. The revolutionaries must reveal the source of their own right to exercise power on behalf of others. Who or what made them "competent authorities" to conduct war against the establishment? If they have an awakened mass following they can pass the test merely by indicating that they are in fact being followed by the masses. But some of the most notable revolutionaries of our time—Lenin in Russia, Mao Tse-tung in China, Castro in Cuba, Guevara in Bolivia—began their revolutionary action with practically no popular support. Obviously, therefore, the committed revolutionary is not going to rest his case for authorization on widespread support for his cause or his leadership.

---

THEODORE R. WEBER, professor of social ethics at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, is author of *Foreign Policy Is Your Business*.

The primary literature of revolution and the case studies of revolutionaries suggest two principal ways of resolving this important point of justification. One way is to dodge the question of authority altogether and subsume all questions of justification, including this one, under the single criterion which is certain—namely, that of just cause. If the cause is just (and we are certain of that) we need not hesitate because we lack evidence of further authorization. The other way is to appeal to authorizing myths which are part of the revolutionary ideology and which therefore can be understood and applied only by those who have already joined the revolution. That the masses have not yet given their confirmation is of no consequence. They remain bound by the myths of the old order, and they will be unable to give their authorizing consent until the power of that view of reality is broken and their minds and wills are set free.

Thus the possession of revolutionary gnosis confirms the revolutionary in his right to use power. He is not accountable to moral criteria resident in the ethos of the old order, and he cannot expect the suffering masses, burdened as they are by the distortions of a "false consciousness," to provide him with support. When he succeeds in breaking the distorted and distorting power of the old myths, the masses, thus awakened, will move swiftly enough to confer legitimacy on his action. But that legitimation will merely seal his authority; it will not generate it. His authority to use power is coeval with his own awakening to revolutionary consciousness.

*Third*, if the revolutionary movement is successful in its efforts to seize power and control the society, it must create a new world of meaning based on its own preferred myths and attempts to recreate the society as an expression of this particular view of reality. In order to justify the hell of revolutionary turmoil and catastrophe it is not enough to establish another government with different personnel. The intention which helped to justify resort to revolution must be elaborated in terms of concrete possibilities for fashioning a different and better life for the people.

In current theological (and some nontheological) literature on the subject of revolution it is faddish to speak of this elaboration as a work of "humanization"—of making the form and substance of society more "truly human." But the use of such terms begs the question unless they are given content, for the meaning of "human" is not self-evident, and when one attempts to provide content for it he draws on a mythic source of meaning. Therefore, the constructive phase of the revolution cannot be myth-free, any more than the other phases could be.

But what myths shall the revolutionary use, and how can he distinguish good myths from bad myths except by reference to other myths beyond which there is no appeal? In other words, how can he avoid

saying arbitrarily, "The concept of 'good society' which I and my colleagues shall seek to realize here is what we choose to call 'good'?" Perhaps he can avoid the charge of arbitrariness if he draws broad and genuine consent to his concept. But he can gain that kind of consent only at the risk of relativizing his mythic construction of the future and leaving it open to challenge and contradiction. If he achieves consent by creating mass acceptance through control of educational institutions and communications media he will be reconstructing the society with reference to a view of reality which is nonetheless arbitrary (and therefore untested as to justification) in spite of the factor of broad support.

To judge from the writings of many revolutionaries, we would expect a considerable amount of openness in their quest for a design for the new society, for often they express the conviction that the design must arise not out of preconceptions but out of the revolutionary struggle itself. However, to judge from the manner in which they act once they have power in their hands, we must conclude that few of them are willing to admit to the relativity of their myths.

This point must be extended further to cover the question of authority relationships in the new society. What will be the basis of the right to exercise power and command obedience, and how will that right be assigned and limited? What will be the grounds and limits of civil obedience, and under what conditions, if any, may or must the commands of governing authorities be disobeyed? Does the revolutionary myth assume that authority and obligation will be nonissues on the far side of revolutionary victory because the social basis for such relationships will have been eliminated? If so, does it assume that all the liberated people will organize themselves spontaneously to create and sustain the new society, and that the work will entail no distinctions between those who are leaders and those who are led? Is there perhaps a contradiction between revolutionary myth and revolutionary reality, and if so, how is the contradiction to be confronted and worked out? On the other hand, if the projected future assumes the persistence of the social necessities of authority and obligation, how can these relationships be defined so as to express the just intention of the revolution, and how can the definition be institutionalized so as to concretize the justice of the relationships?

One commonly assumes that the academic disciplines appropriate to the study of authority and revolution are political science, history, sociology, economics. They are, of course. But the analysis which we have made thus far suggests that no analysis would be complete that did not also use the methodology of the phenomenology of religion. The evident gnosticism of revolution would be enough to support the claim, and additional docu-

mentation could be drawn from the role of such factors as ritual, belief systems, equivalents of baptism and confirmation, "saints" of the revolution, holy days and places and quasi-canonical writings. It is by no means stretching a point to say that the inclusive study of revolution (with the related problem of political authority) requires some methods appropriate to the study of religion, and that the study of religion includes the study of revolution.

And yet such categories as "study of religion" and "phenomenology of religion" are too abstract and colorless to characterize adequately the concrete metapolitical actuality of revolution. Revolution is theological activity. As symptom and instrument of the collapse of a socially constructed universe of order and meaning it strikes a prophetic stance, calling on the fires of historical forces to consume the idolators of power and their false priests and prophets. As eschatological vanguard it heralds the breaking in of the new social reality and offers its commitment and common life as first fruits of the dawning future of man. As successor to a vanquished and vanished God it creates in the midst of chaos (but not *ex nihilo*) a new universe of order and meaning in conformity with its sovereign will. As a sacrifice laid voluntarily before the demonic principalities and powers it suffers vicariously, and thus prepares the way of salvation.

Doubtless there are many social scientists who would contend that this use of theological analysis and language to characterize political revolution is both unnecessary and contrived. The character of revolution, according to their view, can be construed more justifiably, more clinically, more economically by means of generalizations inferred from the comparative study of the collapse and reconstruction of political systems. I would not deny that such generalizations are useful for analytical purposes, but I would deny that they portray the reality of modern revolutions as graphically and sensitively as does theological language.

Modern revolutions, like other revolutions, are combinations of *metabole* and *stasis*, of social change and uprising against an order, and to that extent they lend themselves to scientific generalization. But above all they are historical events, and as events in history they are not fully intelligible apart from reference to the particular historical orders against which they contend and to the ethos which contributes directly or indirectly to the content and dynamism of their ideology. Although I cannot present here the contrasting arguments, I am convinced that Eric Voegelin and Arend van Leeuwen are closer to the truth than Hannah Arendt in stressing the historical and ideological connection between developments in the history of Christian thought and the emergence and historical character of modern revolutions.<sup>1</sup> These revolutions are messianic in consciousness, they promise redemption and not only justice,

and they are profoundly influenced in their hopes, expectations, promises and authority claims by the cultural experience of the death of God and the disappearance of heaven.

Having arrived at this point in the discussion of political authority, one could proceed in either of two directions. One could study critically the "theologies" of particular revolutionary movements or writers as they pertain to the dimensions of political authority mentioned above. Or one could reexamine the problem of political authority from the standpoint of a given theological tradition, with special attention to the theological challenges arising from modern revolutions and the historical conditions of which they are both symptoms and instruments. I choose the latter in order to consider the alternatives for restating a Christian view of political authority.

In making this choice (or the other one, for that matter) I am under no illusions about the possibility of gaining a hearing with revolutionaries, for I doubt that serious revolutionaries would be inclined to listen to Christian theologians unless the theologians came prepared to go a long way in the direction of becoming ideologues for the revolution. Moreover, I am not sure that many revolutionaries would feel comfortable with efforts to characterize and analyze their work in theological terms. But I would hope to communicate at least with those persons who believe that Christian discipleship must translate into political responsibility and who are not satisfied with currently prominent theological proposals.

The principal questions for a theological restatement of political authority and obligation seem to me to be the perennial ones: Should we obey the governing authorities, and if so, why? If we should obey, are there limits to obedience, and if so, how are they to be determined? If disobedience is either permissible or necessary, must it be passive only or may (or must) it be active also? If active disobedience rightfully is in the picture, may it take the form of force used against the authorities and their supporting order? If so, from what sources do the users of force derive their own authority? Does our theological perception of political reality offer any clues to the manner in which authority relationships should be conceived and organized?

We can attempt to answer these questions, and thus to restate the position on political authority and obligation, by examining the implications of responses to the hermeneutical question, "What is God in the (political) world?" The earliest answer to the question, and the one that has proved most durable and influential, is that God is using organized and institutionalized political power to preserve the world against the impulses to chaos and destruction generated by man's sin. That view, of course, is the traditional theological theory of politics elabo-

rated out of the classical text in Romans 13:1-2: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (RSV).

This theory locates the source of ruling authority in divine appointment. It binds the subject to obey the rulers, not only for prudential reasons, but also "for the sake of conscience," for the ruler is a servant or vicar of God, to execute his will through the administration of political power, and whoever resists the authority of the ruler resists the authority of God himself. It does contain a proviso for disobedience grounded in the recognition that rulers are not divine even if they are divine instruments and surrogates, that because they are human they might issue commands which are contrary to the command of God (the highest authority), and that in such instances Christians are "to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). But this proviso was sharply defined so as to confirm governmental authority and limit opposition. Christians were to disobey the authorities only when their command very evidently was wrong, and their disobedience was to be passive. They were not to disobey commands which might (only) "possibly" involve them in unjust action, and they were not to respond to the clear cases by launching an active campaign for justice against the will and office of the ruler.

This traditional Christian political theory is obviously conservative and autocratic. It recognizes no justification for active disobedience; therefore no right of revolution; and therefore no right of "unauthorized" persons to use political or military power. It recognizes the responsibility of the rulers to maintain and increase justice within their jurisdictions, but it limits responsibility for justice to those who hold office, and it places justice below order in the hierarchy of political values. Moreover, whether in its Augustinian or its Thomistic form (where government is acknowledged to be an element in the original creation), it insists that relationships of superordination and subordination, of command and obedience, will be constant and necessary elements of human society until the final divine transformation of the order of historical existence. Therefore, any theory of politics must give first place to the problem of delineating authority relationships with definite assignments of graded and reciprocal responsibility.

The power of the myths sustaining and informing this view of political authority with its ethic of political duty was such that it was able to control authority and obedience relationships with little significant opposition until the sixteenth century. Since that time this tradition has operated with varying degrees of strength in different Chris-

tian communions and in different countries. But it has shown more durability than any other Christian attitude toward political authority, and it has forced the other attitudes to define themselves in relation to it. Moreover, its influence has reached into our own century and has provided the theological premises for some of the major Christian confrontations with political absolutism. Karl Barth's position in the twenties was an absolute "no" to revolution. In the 1930's he redesigned his theology to give the Church a christological basis for speaking critically to the State, but he recognized nevertheless the divine authority of the State—except in the extreme case of the totalitarian state, which, by its very nature, attempted to usurp the place of God. The letter which Barth wrote to the East German Christians in the 1950's can be summed up in one word. The word is not "revolt"; it is "endure." Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been cast in the image of a revolutionary because of his participation in the plot on Hitler's life. However, he was, in fact, a political conservative who believed that even an autocratic and unjust government bore divine authority and should be obeyed. He joined the plotters only because of his conviction that the ruling power was such a monstrous evil that it exceeded even the most elastic allowance for legitimate government.

Furthermore, we should take note of historical developments which offer evidence that the political theory derived from Romans 13 is not pertinent only to a monarchical, autocratic form of government, but can be synthesized with a different view of the source of governing authority.<sup>2</sup> The elaboration of Calvin's "lesser magistrates" into a theory of constitutional government with limited powers was not considered (by the Calvinists, at least) to be a departure from belief in divine ordination of governing authority. To the contrary, it argued that, inasmuch as authority belonged to the office and not to the holder per se, governing authority resided in the whole system of offices that made up the political institution, and not to one office only. There was no change in the belief that authority came from the sovereign God, that subjects or citizens were bound under God to be subject to legitimate authority, and that only those who held public office could exercise public power authoritatively.

In the late nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic movement known as Christian Democracy faced the problem of reconciling the newer philosophical concept of the people as source of political authority with the older theological concept of God as the source of authority. Some of the major encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII, such as "On Civil Government" (*Diuturnum*, 1881) and "On the Christian Constitution of States" (*Immortale Dei*, 1885) were important, although not fully successful, attempts to bring off this work of reconciliation. The theoretical work was carried forward by Catholic thinkers such as

Luigi Sturzo<sup>3</sup> and Jacques Maritain,<sup>4</sup> and the outcome of the effort can be seen in the statements on political authority in *Pacem in Terris*.

Nevertheless, the very fact that we must reexamine the questions of political authority and obedience in a Christian theological context, and that we must examine them as existential and not merely as academic issues, testifies to the decline, if not the disappearance, of the social efficacy of myths with which Christians have oriented themselves to politics in the past.

The reasons for the weakening of the myths are many and complex. One of them surely is the change in the relationship of the political values of order and justice, which has led to the elevation of the importance of justice and the continuing redefinition of its meaning. Another is the influence of secularization on the problems and prospects of authoritative rule. The process of secularization withdraws the symbols and the power of that which man calls "sacred" from that which he experiences as "world." When it does so, it removes guarantees of authority from the top and from the bottom and threatens the radical reconstitution of authority, if not its destruction. From the bottom it removes the conviction of the subject that he is in subjection because it is the will of God. From the top it removes the divine sanction of command. In a secular world the political leaders are not obeyed as agents of God. With the removal of theological guarantees for the exercise of power, those who rule must either impose their will by a greater show of force, or they must become responsive to their constituencies. If they choose the former, they can expect armed resistance where it becomes possible. If the latter, they must produce, or they lose their justification for ruling. In either case the revolutionary possibility is at hand with revolutionary myths to drive it and no theologically derived antirevolutionary myths to restrain it.

In recent years a group of theologians profoundly sympathetic to revolution and just as profoundly hostile to the "establishment" have given an answer to the hermeneutical question "What is God doing in the world?" which manifests their sharp break with the tradition of Romans 13. Their answer is that God is performing the messianic work of tearing down old, oppressive structures and building new, liberating structures for the purpose of *humanizing* the world. Some of the early and influential voices in this development were Paul Lehmann, Richard Shaull, J.B. Metz and Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>5</sup> These theologians have in common at least the following points which pertain to the question of political authority and obedience:

1. They place justice above order in the hierarchy of political values.
2. They agree that secularization and the Enlightenment have banished the aura of divinity from

human institutions and greatly diminished the role of the Church in society.

3. They never mention government as an instrument of preservation (i.e., in a positive sense; on the other hand they do say a great deal about its role as an instrument of preservation for wealth and privilege).

4. They perceive governmental authority primarily as a limit to freedom and not as a social necessity.

5. They seldom mention Romans 13, and when they do they treat it critically.

6. They say a great deal about the justice of the revolutionary cause, but nothing about the authority of the revolutionary élite to assume its role of leadership.

7. They characterize the "new society" with the ideals that it ought to embody, but they make no systematic effort to discuss the problems of authority relationships in the "new society."

8. They make extensive use of Marxist categories of economic and historical analysis, but they attempt to maintain an identity primarily as "Christians" rather than as "Marxists" (e.g., in the context of "Marxist-Christian dialogue").

9. They are caught in the dilemma of wanting to have an optimistic view of the historical future and of speaking often as though the future were cause for optimism, but of recognizing that man is not merely a victim of oppressive structures, but also a sinner who always manages to corrupt his futures.

It is more than mildly difficult to engage this group critically on their views of political authority and obligation, because none of them—to my knowledge—has worked through the issues in systematic fashion. Probably Moltmann has touched on these problems more than the others, but the problem is that he has in fact merely "touched" on them, and his efforts are marked by contradictions and naïveté in both political and theological analysis.<sup>5</sup>

The group as a whole has dealt with the problem of political authority primarily by focusing on what they take to be the inauthenticity of the authority claims of regimes. They have not answered the question why Christians should obey governments at all—even those that win a revolutionary victory. They have not dealt with the question of how one discerns the authority of a few persons to incite and intimidate others to oppose the established order. They have provided no helpful guidance with regard to the problem of authority relationships in a reconstituted society.

It may not be unfair to explain these failures by

<sup>5</sup>The various recent "theologies of liberation"—black, women's, Third World—belong in this group also, but they embody too much particularity to risk including them comfortably in the generalization. However, it would be worthwhile to study them, using the nine "points in common" as hypotheses.

reference to the possibility that these men have been captured by the revolution and have, to greater or lesser extent, become its theological ideologues. They cannot afford to deal with questions—such as the role of government as a divine instrument of preservation against chaos, or the authority of revolutionary élites—which might prove helpful to the establishment and embarrassing to the revolutionaries.

Central to the difficulty is the hermeneutic of divine historical work which they have selected: the messianic tearing down and building up of structures. That hermeneutical principle is antiauthority (and not only antiauthoritarian), however it may be carried through in development and application. If the proponents hold to the Christian view of human nature and historical expectation, they surely must know (as in fact they do) that the new society will be only proportionately better and not absolutely better. It will not be without its component of structural as well as occasional injustice. Therefore the messianic work will have to continue into the new society in order to attack its injustices. Will it then be revolutionary, or merely reformist? The answer to that question is great with implications for authority and obedience.

On the other hand, if the proponents surrender the Christian view of the historical problematic for a Marxist view of salvation by structural change, they will expect the authority problem to dissolve in the emergence of the classless society. In that case, the only possible locus for considering relationships of authority and obedience will be the interim between the revolutionary seizure of power and the realization of the classless society, during which time the vanguard of the proletariat will maintain its dictatorship for the purpose of purging the elements of the old order and directing the people in the building up of the new. This "interim ethic" brings into full view the interrelationships of myth, authority and revolution. Its implementation expresses the brutalizing tendencies inherent in efforts to achieve historical salvation by forcible means.

**B**efore proceeding to the political exposition of the third answer to the hermeneutical question, I want to set forth some theses which state the minimum conditions for any viable theological restatement of the problem of authority and obligation.

*First*, neither the right to exercise power nor the demand for obedience can be firmly grounded without a supporting myth which transcends the pragmatic social justification of authority. Moltmann's contention that political authority, now stripped of its theological covering, can be purely functional because man has become the lord and master of his own destiny, simply indicates the superficiality of his analysis.<sup>6</sup> The "man" to which he refers is a mythic construct that corresponds directly to nothing

in reality. "Man" does not exercise authority in society; particular men and women do, and the power that they wield often commands, and not infrequently compels, obedience from those who dissent from the policy which the power supports. If anything confirms the authority of the wielders of power in the eyes of the dissenters, it is the myth and not the function. If they obey, it is because they believe in the right and not in the rightness of the exercise of power. Another way of putting the matter is to say that myth is necessary to the functional efficacy of authority.

*Second*, the exercise of political power will draw majesty to itself and create sustaining myths. Therefore, the supposition that it is possible to develop and administer authority on a purely "secular," non-mythic basis is a dangerous delusion which encourages the idolatry of power.

*Third*, secularization destroys the aura of divinity which covers particular political orders and confirms their authority, but it does not affect the theologically grounded mandate to obey governing authorities. Christians are admonished to obey the authorities, not because they or their institutions are divine, but because God is believed to be acting through them to fulfill his purposes in human society. Secularization may undercut the power which religious-political myths have over public consciousness, but that is a sociological change and not a theological one. Changes in Christian convictions concerning authority and obedience are contingent upon changes in the internal structure of theology itself, or upon abandonment of belief in God.

*Fourth*, there is no biblical warrant for claiming, as Moltmann does, that obedience to Christ puts an end to obedience to the State.<sup>7</sup> Paul certainly knew that Christ had brought the law to an end, yet he admonished the Christians in Rome to be in subjection to an emperor who was not a Christian and who governed an empire whose soldiers had crucified his Lord. The writer of I Peter urged Christians who were "aliens and exiles"—presumably exposed to persecution for their faith—to "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right" ( Peter 2:13, 14). Moreover, they should "Honor the emperor" (2:17). They are to be subject, it should be noted, to institutions frankly recognized as "human."

*Fifth*, whatever other functions a government may have, it must be an instrument of preservation. It must protect the domestic order against internal disruption and the society against external enemies. The tradition of Romans 13 clearly was right in recognizing the necessity of this function of government, even if it did err in overemphasizing the function at the expense of justice. Theological statements on politics which disregard or repudiate this function

cannot be taken seriously as systematic theologies of politics. They ought to be taken seriously as examples of what happens to theology when it becomes an ideological instrument of political movements.

*Sixth*, the emphasis on order, which is excessive when contrasted with the attention given to justice, may have been pragmatically tenable at a time when the Roman Empire was attempting to unify and control diverse and competing peoples, but it was never theologically tenable, and it has ceased to be pragmatically sound. The New Testament passages used to construct and validate the conservative Christian tradition concerning political authority were intended by their writers merely as counsel to Christians on how to act conscientiously and to endure in a hostile world that was soon to pass away. Had the writers of those passages intended to found a political tradition or to delineate the basis for a Christian theology of politics, they very likely would have taken as their starting point love for the neighbor or the reconciling work of God in history, and not the duty to obey the emperor. They probably would have incorporated elements of the political theology of Romans 13, but without making them fundamental.

Any theologically tenable theory of politics which we might develop today must give priority to the "justice of the order" and not to the "order of justice." The same must be said of purely pragmatic considerations of political organization, for the demand for justice now is so active in the consciousness of oppressed groups that states and regimes cannot maintain order with authority if they overlook or attempt to repudiate the dynamics of that demand. Either they must actively and constructively promote justice in the societies under their jurisdiction, or else they must impose order on the dynamism generated by disaffected members of the societies. In the former case they enhance their authority. In the latter case they demonstrate their lack of authority.

*Seventh*, there is no way for a private person to claim authorization for initiating a revolutionary struggle without relying on special gnostic myth. Recognition of this fact is implicit in Christian statements (including those of John of Salisbury and Calvin) which admit the possibility of justifiable tyrannicide. These statements warn the tyrant that "God will raise up his servant" to kill him if he does not mend his ways, but they offer no criteria which would enable one to determine whether he was the servant chosen of God for this task at this particular time. When Thomas Müntzer responded to the leading of the Spirit, and when some Calvinist "saints" acted against rulers on the grounds that they (i.e., the "saints") were the "elect of God," they were appealing for justification to criteria that could not be validated by anyone else.

*Eighth*, the other side of the revolution will not bring *iustitia civitas dei*; it will bring only another

historical form of *iustitia civitas terrena*. That form, one hopes, will be proportionately more just than the form which preceded it, but a revolutionary seizure of power is no guarantee that that will be the case. And even if it is better, it will not eliminate the fundamental source of injustice, which is in the will of man, who creates unjust structures or creates just structures and then corrupts them. Armed with that anthropology, one will be able to forecast that life in the new society will require the exercise of power by some members of the society over others, that the right to exercise power and the obligation to obey must be grounded in a viable concept of authority, and that the relationships of command and obedience must be institutionalized in ways that avoid the injustice of such relationships in the old society.

With these theses as a guiding and limiting framework, we move now to the third answer to the hermeneutical question "What is God doing in the world?" The answer is that God is working at every point in his fallen creation to move it to wholeness. The terms "reconciliation" and "renewal" may be helpful in characterizing this work if they are not used or understood in a manner that misconstrues or overlooks the implications of historicity. "Reconciliation" in this usage does not imply avoidance of conflict or repudiation of power. "Renewal" does not mean simple restoration to *status quo ante*.

The divine work of moving the broken creation toward wholeness is immanent in all human relationships, including the institution of government. Interpreted in the light of the divine work, the political organization of society has the task of creating the conditions of communal existence that will enable individuals and groups to accept and fulfill their own responsibility for responding to the work of God. Because the world is fallen, the political organization must provide conditions of internal and external security. In this respect it incorporates the traditional intention of an "order of preservation." Because political responsibility is corporate, the political organization must direct the society in the achievement of those goals defined concretely as "common good." Because historical reality confronts us with differentials of access to the necessities and opportunities of life, the political organization must operate with equality as a regulative principle of justice to provide special support for those members of the society who do not have sufficient power, material support, or intellectual and physical capacity to provide for themselves or participate effectively in common tasks.

Because historically developed differentials often are arbitrarily restrictive—either accidentally or by design—the political organization must operate with liberty as a regulative principle of justice to establish

the full freedom of the members of the society.<sup>o</sup> Because the work of God implies the repudiation of ethnocentrism and tribalism, the political organization must conduct its relations with other political societies in such manner as to facilitate the emergence of a secure and just international community.

What does this theology of political society imply for the problems of authority and obligations? *First*, the authority of the State is derived, not original, and it is functional within the context of the divine purpose. Political authority rises or falls in relation to the honesty and efficacy of the institution and its personnel in fulfilling their roles in that purpose. Insofar as the State or particular officials are arbitrary, abusive, oppressive, insensitive, they forfeit their claim to exercise power with authority.

*Second*, the Christian is to obey governing authorities, not because they are believed to be serving his interests, but because they are supposed to be fulfilling the tasks appointed to them in the economy of the divine historical work. Obedience to the authorities is an implication of obedience to God. What this means, however, is that the Christian is responding to the divine work as it is carried forth through political institutions and acts. He is responding to God acting through political organization, and that is why he obeys the authorities. He does not obey them because they are "divinely appointed" or "divinely ordained."

*Third*, the Christian response to God in the context of political institutions implies obligation of two kinds. One is to support the State in its preservative work of providing security. The other is to support the State in its remedial and constructive work of promoting justice. Although the Christian is bound to recognize differences of office and responsibility in the society, he is not to fulfill these obligations in a merely passive fashion. Precisely because the primary form of his political action is response to the work of God and not obedience to the authorities, he assumes initiative both to make the State more secure and to make it more just.

*Fourth*, the Christian is a social self and a member of a political society which is a civil society and not the Church. He is responsible to other members of the society. Moreover, his responsibility to them is an implication of his responsibility to God, because he encounters God in his relationships with these other persons. This social dimension is important for several reasons, two of which will be mentioned briefly here. One is that it helps to explain why he makes sacrifices for the society where his own interest is not immediately and obviously involved. The other is that it requires him to interact with others

not of his theological persuasion in supporting or opposing actions of the government, and it prohibits him from attempting to impose "Christian" political solutions in his political response to the work of God.

*Fifth*, both civil disobedience and revolution are conceivable as justifiable forms of political action for Christians. As a general rule, participation in revolution is much less likely to be justifiable than civil disobedience, because it is a fundamental challenge to the order which requires the theological reformulation referred to earlier, and because it carries a far higher risk of extensive and disproportionate damage. In particular instances, however, civil disobedience may be less responsible than revolution, because it offers no hope of success and merely invites vindictive reprisal in the context of a system that is hopelessly corrupt and oppressive. In either case, the decision must be justified in accordance with strict criteria of moral reasoning, and the justification must cover both the resort to the action and the means employed.

*Sixth*, the implications stated thus far pertain to Christian behavior under any type of political system. However, constructive engagement with concrete possibilities for responding to the work of God should move in the direction of incorporating an historically optimum combination of liberty and equality into the authority relationships of the society.

This third proposal on the problem of authority and obedience, which is my own view at the present time, certainly is not myth-free. But it is offered in the conviction that there is *reality* which judges the adequacy of our mythic *views of reality*. It attempts to take up into a more comprehensive synthesis the elements of truth distilled from the conservative and revolutionary views of authority and revolution, and thereby to witness to the fullness of the work of God without limiting the freedom of the work of God in the (political) world.

---

#### NOTES

1. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952); Arendt Th. van Leeuwen, *Christianity and World History* (New York, 1964); Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1963).

2. For an extended discussion of this point, see Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, Vol. II: Politics (Philadelphia, 1969), pp. 7-70.

3. See especially "Authority and Democracy," *Dublin Review* (January, 1942); *The Inner Laws of Society*, tr. B.B. Carter (New York, 1944).

4. *Scholasticism and Politics* (New York, 1940), Chapter IV; *Man and the State* (Chicago, 1951).

5. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future* (New York, 1969); "Political Theology," *Theology Today* (April, 1971); "Racism and the Right to Resist," *Study Encounter* (November 1, 1972).

6. *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, p. 135.

7. "Political Theology," pp. 15ff.

---

<sup>o</sup>The formulation is Reinhold Niebuhr's: liberty and equality are regulative principles of justice.