

The Gospel as Power:

Explorations in a Theology of Social Change

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The criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being.

Karl Marx.

Jesus opened the book and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Luke 4:17-19

IN THIS essay I hope to lay the foundations for a constructive re-interpretation of the doctrine of God. Two principal concerns will characterize this effort. First, I will seek to articulate what I take to be the reality of God within the context of contemporary struggles—especially among students and the black poor—for a more humane social order. What I have to say about God forms an integral part of a theology that self-consciously seeks to serve and to facilitate human efforts to "change the world." Whatever may be said generally about the value and significance of social change, the Christian Gospel will have become illusory, self-deceptive, and hollow if its workings are not now manifest in the elemental conflicts which thrust upon contemporary man the necessity of a basic reor-

dering of human society. If the rich legacy of much recent Protestant theology currently seems irrelevant or even meaningless, it is because the contexts and emphasis that once gave that theology its vitality are relatively remote from the whirl of events which presently promise to affect most decisively the future quality of human life either for good or for ill. My aim is to uncover the workings of the Gospel in these events, and in the process to attest the presence of God in human history. The realization of this aim finally requires a more thorough-going theological interpretation of social processes than has up to the present time been achieved. In the spirit of Marx, it involves a type of theological reflection that emerges out of concrete practice, particularly practice consciously directed toward effecting a reordering of human society. Equally important, it involves disciplined and systematic analysis of social reality with a view to discovering the social bases of human suffering and the conditions under which the removal of these bases of suffering becomes a realistic possibility.

The second principal concern, which is integrally related to the first, is to attend more carefully to the task of identifying and describing the kinds of situations and experiences that most appropriately give rise to a notion of God. This task includes a consideration of how these situations and experiences, together with their theological illumination, actually function in the social process. My intent is to avoid moving too quickly to the logical problems of a doctrine of God without first having a clear perception of the experiential data which make the resolution

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of those problems humanly significant. The limitation of this procedure is that it tends to omit from consideration many elements that legitimately belong to a more fully developed understanding.

My focus will be on experiences and understandings which I take to be positive and creative. That is to say, I will not attend to situations and understandings that result in conceptions of God which function as "excuses" either to flee from concrete, earthly, social responsibility, or to defend with moral fervor an unjust social order. The analysis of such conceptions is also an important part of the doctrine of God, for it concerns the "unmasking of idols," primarily through a form of "ideology criticism." Even so, my own emphasis will be on the positive, constructive task. To be more specific, language about God will be linked to concrete happenings within the social process which in incalculable ways release creative new energy in men by which they are enabled to transcend the destructive limits of their old situation and enter into the realization of new possibilities of human fulfillment. In keeping with this accent, the primary category for expressing the divine reality is "creative power," a category which gains concreteness in relation to the problems of power present in social and political processes. Such a perspective dramatizes the connection of God with contingent events, especially those which constitute new thrusts, new directions, in the human pilgrimage. Correspondingly, God's role in the continuities and regularities of process, in patterns of "law," are inadequately assessed. Yet it is through the singular, the "miraculous," that the relation of God to the general and the "ordinary" can most adequately be perceived and interpreted. The attempt to speak of God in terms of creative emergents in human society risks what the Marxists call the "mystification" of experience. "Mystification" in this context means obscuring man's

rigorous, clear-headed perception of his material situation by resort to the vague and misleading expressions of religious existence. My aim is to avoid such "mystification," primarily by unfolding a view of God in the context of a rigorous analysis of social processes. At the same time, I do not want to overlook the mystery which is genuinely there. Indeed, attentiveness to this mystery may even sensitize man to crucial elements in his situation which more prosaic, "objective" type analyses overlook, a fact which keeps me struggling with the doctrine of God.

My paper falls into three main sections: (1) a brief description of the efforts of blacks and radical students to bring about basic changes within contemporary American society; (2) an interpretation of the radical import of the ministry of Jesus Christ; and (3) suggestions about the nature of God's activity in contemporary life and the appropriate human response to that activity. The first part is an attempt to specify the context within theological questions, including the question of God, can most appropriately be explored. The second part unfolds the traditions about Jesus and offers some basic christological formulations as a means of clarifying the theological content of significant movements in contemporary society. The final section brings these two emphases together explicitly in a discussion of Christian responsibility in relation to the working of God in human history.

Christian theology must always be "practical theology." That is to say, as a work of disciplined and critical reflection, it is not concerned with achieving an intellectually satisfying interpretation of experience, but with attesting, serving, and facilitating the promise of human fulfillment in the midst of man's concrete, worldly existence. While the architectonic perfection of a logical and coherent system of thought may in itself awaken deep aesthetic appreciation,

man cannot live in such a system of thought, at least not without the repression of his fleshly being. He lives as a bodied self with basic physiological needs and drives in a material environment that in decisive ways is constituted by specific patterns of social interaction among men and by the values and meanings which guide and legitimate that interaction. It is within this concrete, worldly existence — with its conflicts, its burdens, and its terrors, but also with its satisfactions, its possibilities, and its promises — that man must find fulfillment if such fulfillment is to embrace the totality of his being. Because theology is a practical discipline the proper context for its reflective activity is this concrete world of men, not some relatively autonomous intellectual or spiritual milieu. Likewise, the decisive test of its adequacy is whether it in fact illumines and furthers creative human struggle in this world for a situation that broadens and deepens the possibilities of human fulfillment. Canons of rational clarity, of consistency and coherence, apply most certainly to the theology as to any systematic discipline, not, however, as intrinsic values, but as the preconditions of thought that is fruitful in illumining and guiding meaningful human activity.

The most important consequence of this understanding is that the theologian cannot choose his own agenda — certainly not on the basis of personal preferences, but also not simply in terms of problems residing in the theological tradition as such. Christian theology continually receives its agenda from the world, from the pressures, the thrusts, and the collisions of worldly developments, for it is only in relation to those developments that it can express and serve the Christian promise to men. The relevant developments are by no means always or even characteristically focused in the life and activity of the self-conscious community of faith. Instead of being the vehicle of God's redeeming

presence in human history, the church continually finds itself overtaken by events which expose its insensitivity to the explosive import of the Gospel it is charged with bearing to men. Indeed, the church is often allied with forces which seek to frustrate or even to destroy the liberating thrust of the work of God in Jesus Christ — all in the name of Jesus Christ! While this fact repeatedly confronts the church with the necessity for repentance, it should not in itself lead to despair about the possibility of faith. In the nature of the case, no actually existing human community can contain nor even adequately serve the creative, transforming energy which the reality of Jesus Christ has released and continues to release in the midst of human history. Since Jesus Christ is "eschatological occurrence," that concrete historical reality which bears and presses incessantly toward the end-goal of the world process, only a community which in its own historically conditioned concreteness embodies the same primal push toward the final fruition of existence can be a faithful witness to his work in the world. Yet precisely this eschatological vocation repeatedly surpasses the capacities of any actually existing individual or community.. Every historical community inevitably seeks to domesticate the reality of Jesus Christ, to neutralize his nihilating power, in order that it might secure the continuity of its own existence on the basis of levels of fulfillment already achieved or of interests already realized. It withdraws from its vocation in the face of that death to the old which opens the way to the creation of new life. Even so, the final test of the church's faithfulness is not that it always be in the forefront of every creative new thrust in human history, but that it ever learn anew to read the "signs of the times," to discern "what God is doing in the world and to join in his work."

I.

At the present time in American society, two principal developments embody most significantly the creative, forward push of the historical process and hence, the liberating power attested in the Christian promise: (1) the struggle of blacks for dignity and self-determination as men; and (2) the struggle of students, primarily within and through the university system, for new priorities, for new procedures of decision-making and control, for new value orientations in the constitution of American society and in the unfolding of America's role in world affairs. Both of these movements began as protests against specific wrongs in American society and culture, wrongs which blacks and students experienced at a particularly deep level, but which did not in themselves undermine an essentially positive assessment of American life. For blacks the problem was widespread denial of the full rights of citizenship. For students the issues were more diverse — ranging from the university's neglect of its teaching function to attempted regulation of student participation in activities of social protest. The movement of radical students gained its cutting edge, however, in opposition to the Vietnam war. Here America's military commitments, which themselves lacked justification, profoundly threatened the vital interests of students, sensitizing large numbers of students to issues which had earlier been of concern only to an "*avant garde*."

Yet as the protest activities of blacks and students unfolded, even achieving some specific victories, the full depth of the problems which initially provoked them began to manifest itself. No longer could these problems be understood as a limited number of secondary dislocations or maladjustments in a social system which generally facilitates human fulfillment; instead they showed

themselves as indicators that the prevailing value orientations and the controlling institutional arrangements of the society as a whole present increasing dangers to the well being of man. As a result, the legitimacy of the social system itself in its fundamental operations has come into question.

For black radicals this discovery basically reflects a heightened consciousness of an old problem — white racism. Progress in the achievement of civil rights has simply disclosed more pointedly the degree to which assumptions of white superiority continue to permeate American society and culture, providing a certain "legitimacy" to the disadvantages constantly imposed upon blacks. With the possible exception of the American Indians no group coming to this land has been so brutalized. Not only were blacks subjected to cruel physical abuse as they were captured and brought to America for sale as slaves; they were also ruthlessly deprived of any opportunity to preserve their African cultural heritage. Since persons from different tribes were judiciously mixed together, the only common language and common set of cultural patterns readily available to them in their new prison-home was the white man's culture, which in this case defined blacks as suitable only to be slaves. Indeed, for all practical purposes, blacks were forced to appropriate into their own personality structures the racist ideology of the white man as a precondition for survival itself! Despite this brutal necessity, blacks managed to develop subtle styles of resistance and some patterns of cultural expression which enabled them to retain a measure of their dignity as men. Moreover, on a number of celebrated occasions they found the means to revolt against their master, even though such an act meant almost certain death. Even after the Civil War brought an end to slavery, no serious attempts were made to compensate blacks for the violence

done them. On the contrary, after a few gestures made during the reconstruction period in the direction of offering full citizenship to liberated slaves, systematic steps both quasi-legal and illegal were taken to perpetuate the servile role of blacks in the society. Only recently have these patterns been challenged with any degree of success, and then largely in a purely formal, legal sense.

As the pace of urbanization and industrialization accelerated in the early decades of the twentieth century, the white racist ideology made blacks very suitable candidates for what Marx called the "industrial reserve army" — i.e. a surplus of workers who could be utilized during full productivity, but laid off with impunity when productivity was low. Such a group could also be used to keep wages down and to frustrate the unionization of workers. Since advances in automation and recent successes in regulating the business cycle have reduced the importance of such "industrial reserves," the economic exploitation of blacks may no longer be as significant for the American social system as it once was. In this respect conditions such as those which prevail in the urban ghettos may be advantageous only for fairly restricted groups of special interests which themselves do not play a vital role in the society as a whole. Still, there are powerful interests which are fully prepared to accept the continued degradation of blacks, at least by doing little or nothing to alter the present situation, in order that the resources of the society might be allocated in other, more immediately profitable ways.

The racist ideology which once legitimated slavery now serves to justify this cynical disregard of human life. Because white racism is so pervasive, blacks in seeking to fulfill their aspirations as men cannot trust the channels which other Americans normally use to improve their situation or to obtain re-

dress of their grievances. The channels themselves — in spite of their idealized interpretations — have proved to be instrumentalities which sustain and reinforce the very features of American society which black people must overcome. Given this situation, blacks can no longer simply work for a gradual movement into the mainstream of American society as it is presently constituted, particularly when this movement is individualistically understood. Since such a movement entails adaptation to the dominant culture, it not only isolates blacks once again from the creativity and humanity of their own unique experiences as black men, but it also continues in more subtle forms the old status of inferiority. Besides, even this movement is a realistic possibility only for the privileged within the black community, leaving untouched the overwhelming majority of the black poor. Consequently, for black people to affirm their dignity as men means to labor for a basic reordering of society. The society as a whole must be purged of racial definitions of human worth with their insidious legitimization of injustice. It must in general be made more responsive to vital human needs, a fact which makes the black struggle positively significant for all men. Yet the necessary measures for achieving such a transformation appear to many to be drastic indeed. Negatively, they involve attempts to subvert the effective functioning of the most important institutions of contemporary American society, both passively through the withdrawal of support and actively through disruptive thrusts into the operations of the society. Positively, they involve the parallel development of alternative patterns of social organization and the creation of new cultural forms not so deeply implicated in the racism which has characterized the American experience. Among certain groups, especially within the urban ghetto, these efforts have now reached a stage which can

appropriately be called pre-revolutionary if not revolutionary in their implications for American society. They gain added import in the fact that there is a growing awareness among blacks that they share a common cause with revolutionary movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where the poor also suffer in varying degrees under the arrogance of American power.

In a different frame of reference the student movement has been approaching a similar position. Led essentially by privileged young people raised in liberal, democratic homes, it too has come to question the basic legitimacy of the systems of action through which decisions are made, priorities established, and resources committed in contemporary American society. It is itself closely linked to the emergent black revolution, directly in black student caucuses, indirectly in the sympathy and support white radical students give to blacks in their struggle. Even so, the student movement has distinctive dimensions of its own. While the black struggle is directed chiefly against some unfinished business in American Society — albeit in new forms resulting from such factors as increased technological unemployment, the large-scale migration of blacks to urban areas and the consequent flight of whites to the suburbs — the student struggle is focused on the issues raised by distinctively new developments in American life. In this we include specifically the emergency of a permanent and powerful military establishment, but more generally, the growing tendency for the instrumentalities of decision-making and control to be concentrated in the hands of a "power elite." The problem is not simply that social and political power is concentrated in this fashion. It is also that the decision-making process itself has become uncritical from the standpoint of basic value commitments. The general drift of the dominant tendencies in the technological development

of the society is being allowed to continue without conscious reflection on the implications it has for the future quality of human life.

Radical students have up to now confronted problems of contemporary American society primarily as they are refracted through the university system. This concentration reflects the fact that the university is itself an increasingly important determinant of the commitments and priorities of contemporary American society and is, therefore, increasingly answerable for the human quality of that society. In some respects this power is largely derivative, a result of the fact that the university has made itself a handmaiden of political, economic, and military interests — especially the latter — as a means of sharing in their affluence. At another level, however, it is clear that the technological sophistication of modern society has made the university a new kind of power factor in its own right simply because it has at its disposal many of the skills which have become indispensable to that society. Yet the problem is that the university — in spite of its rhetoric about free critical inquiry and the dispassionate pursuit of truth — has not assumed responsibility for that power. It too has largely followed the drift of technological development, participating in the creation of mindless technicians and bureaucrats who allow themselves to be exploited by a system that is no longer responsive to the vital interests of men. Radical students are not more willing than blacks to be integrated into that society, to equip themselves to carry out efficiently and contentedly the roles it considers important and necessary. If the war in Vietnam and penetration of the university by military interests assume special significance for students, it is because they reveal in a particularly crude fashion the way in which the instrumentalities of modern industrial society are being utilized for projects that

are essentially destructive of man's well being, both for those who participate in the social system and for those who are more directly victimized by it. As a result, radical students have also come to question the legitimacy of the contemporary American social system.

At this point, the interests of radical students and blacks come together, merging as well with the aspirations of oppressed peoples in the "third world." In all cases, the question is how modern industrial society can be made responsive to basic human values, of how its instrumentalities can become channels of human fulfillment rather than vehicles of exploitation and domination. In all cases, there is a serious exploration of revolutionary-type strategies—in some instances, an unrelenting commitment to revolutionary action—as at least provisionally necessary in order to bring into being conditions sufficiently open to allow for the creation of new patterns of social organization, new forms of cultural expression, and new value orientations which can serve the realization of the human promise contained in the technological developments of contemporary society.

II.

It is not possible to give an adequate account of these developments within the limits of the present paper. My aim is rather to indicate the sense in which they pose concretely within contemporary American society the central issues of the Christian Gospel and, by means of this interpretation, to identify those features in the historical process which most appropriately give rise to an understanding of God. In order to carry out this aim it is necessary to consider some of the "revolutionary" dimensions of Jesus' own ministry, particularly as they find expression in the synoptic traditions. On the one hand, the attempt to relate responsibly to the struggles of the black poor and radical students sensitizes one to elements in

the New Testament portrayal of Jesus that are often overlooked. On the other hand, a fresh consideration of the import of Jesus' ministry sheds light on the significance of the promise contained in these struggles. In this respect, the whole complex of events associated with the name Jesus the Christ continues to function as the decisive paradigm for theological understanding even though that understanding must continually be developed within the context of a critical quest to share in the creative, liberating movements of a given time and place.

Jesus' citation of Isaiah in reference to his own activity provides an appropriate starting point for our reflections since Jesus used Isaiah's words of promise to articulate a kind of platform for his total ministry: good news for the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty for the oppressed. The people in the synagogue at Nazareth were initially quite impressed with what Jesus had to say, especially in view of reports about his activities in other Galilean cities. Yet Jesus brutally rejected the easy praise of his fellow countrymen, emphasizing instead that few people even in a hungry time are open to receive the gift of life and health. What began as a happy homecoming ended as an angry confrontation. Either from experience or in anticipation of what was to come, Jesus seemed to realize that the talk of freedom became a profound threat both for the oppressed and the oppressors when it ceased to consist of beautiful abstractions and began to express itself in terms of the social realities which in a given situation bind and violate the being of man.

The concrete meaning of Jesus' announcement of release to the captives, as it worked itself out in his specific first century Palestinian setting, is highlighted most clearly in his clash with the Sabbath laws and with laws related to ritual purification. In this class Jesus

was in no sense merely challenging a few "blue" laws, which at worst were little more than a petty inconvenience. He was exposing a curious inversion of the legal tradition itself, which, on the one hand, claimed to embody the will of God and the basis of human fulfillment, but which, on the other hand, actually functioned both to obscure the thrust of God's intent and to oppress and cripple the spirit of man. To use Marxist terminology, the legal tradition had become an ideology which masked a social reality quite different from that which it allegedly expressed and made possible. Jesus' word about the Sabbath laws speak directly to the point: the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Jesus was not saying, as any good Pharisee might say: "the law must be obeyed because it is the instrument God has provided for man's well being." He was rather asserting that at least in some of its expressions the law was functioning in a way that worked **against**, not for, man. Nor was Jesus content merely to raise the theological questions about the law, perhaps as the basis for an academic discussion. Quite bluntly, he refused to obey these laws and encouraged his disciples to follow his example, an action which served concretely to subvert the authority of the legal tradition within the Jewish community.

Jesus' relation to the law was complex. He was certainly no simple anti-nomian. At times he seemed to radicalize the law by taking it to its logical conclusions, a process which itself had the effect of exposing the moral pretensions of the legal tradition (Cf. especially Mt. 5:21-48). At times he sought to peer behind the law in order to grasp its primary (human) intent (Cf. his discussion of divorce). At times he attempted to differentiate levels of authority within the law, pressing to the essential kernel embodied in the two great commandments. Throughout, the problem was to clarify the **human measure** of the

law, to uncover its patterns of order in their functions as vehicles of human fulfillment, as channels which give direction for the creative investment of human energy. Insofar as the law failed to function in this way, insofar as it bound or repressed or enslaved the being of man, it had no claim to authority. Yet even these matters were never explored in a purely theoretical fashion, but always in the context of concrete efforts to undermine the destructive use of the legal tradition in first century Palestine.

It is important to see that Jesus' assault on the legal tradition did not simply call into question the dominant value orientations of that society. It also challenged the patterns of social organization which were legitimated by that tradition—the role definitions of the society: the existing distribution of prestige, privilege, and authority within the society; the basic class structure of the society. By his words and deeds Jesus exposed the "authority" of those who were reputed to be something as a bogus authority. The Pharisees and Sadducees understood this fact quite well, as a result they soon found themselves in a deadly conflict with Jesus. If Jesus were to succeed in following through on the central thrust of his ministry, their very place in the society would be undermined. For the sake of their own survival and the survival of the order which provided them with their security and prestige, Jesus had to be silenced or removed from the scene!

It must be emphasized that when Jesus charged the Pharisees and Sadducees with hypocrisy, he was not simply questioning the sincerity or earnestness of these men. Doubtless his opponents could credibly claim both of these virtues and in a higher degree than many of the "people of the land" with whom Jesus identified so closely. Jesus was calling into question the basic legitimacy of the **roles** these men played in the society and with it the

traditions which gave those roles their significance. To overcome hypocrisy in such a case involved nothing less than a recasting of the basic roles of the society in a manner more relevant to the liberation and healing of men. For the defenders of tradition on the other hand, Jesus' activity most surely appeared as chaotic as activity calculated to open the floodgates of order to violent passions that would inevitably inundate the whole society.

Jesus himself had no illusions about the shortcomings of the "people of the land." Many were demoralized people who had come to accept society's definition of their lives as sinful, degraded, and unclean. Since they experienced the standards of worth and righteousness expressed in the law as unattainable, at least for men who shared their situation, and since they knew no alternative routes to human dignity, they had little choice but to concede and to internalize in their own self-understanding the assessment of their lives which was normative for the society. Being forced to bear the label of worthlessness, many naturally yielded to the law's assault on their dignity by falling deeper into degradation either through their own will or through the lack of will. Jesus addressed these people by calling them to repentance. And yet it would not suffice to call them from a life of degradation and despair to a strict observance of the authoritative legal tradition. That would simply subject them once again to the traditions and the social system which had crushed their spirits in the first place! Rather, the call to repentance which was addressed to the degraded and the broken had to be tied inseparably to an unrelenting assault on the legal traditions and the patterns of authority which had contributed so decisively to that degradation and brokenness. Only through such a double-pronged attack could a new basis for human dignity, freedom, and health be established.

Since Jesus' ministry bore within it the promise of a qualitatively new order of life, the question of his authority was highly problematic. Who was he that he could both summon sinners to repentance and also assail the structures by which the destructive force of human sin was normally judged and held in check? On what basis could he challenge the representatives of the order "God" had established among men and at the same time claim to be a teacher of righteousness? Even though his followers later saw him as the fulfillment of the central impulse of both the law and the prophets, Jesus could not appeal directly to these traditions as the basis of his authority, for his opponents were already acknowledged to be their authoritative interpreters. The only possibility was to let the creative force of his own ministry, its power to heal and to liberate, establish its own authority. In this respect, Jesus was a classic example of what Max Weber calls a "charismatic" leader. In keeping with this fact, a response to what Jesus was doing characteristically took the form of a response to his person. The issue was whether one would be loyal to Jesus, whether one would follow him faithfully in his words and deeds. Only through such loyalty could the basis of a new order of freedom be established.

As a general rule it can be said that no genuinely creative breakthrough in any realm of life—whether religion, politics, science, or art—can be established on the basis of previously existing canons of authority. Precisely because of its novelty, it brings into being new canons, new standards, new principles for evaluating human activity and for ordering and channeling the energies of men. It is the very nature of such creativity to have something of a charismatic quality. This charisma moreover, is itself usually ambiguous. It invariably discloses inadequacies in the established patterns of order. It shows that these patterns in significant ways func-

tion more as barriers which block man's elemental energies than as channels which focus and direct those energies. In transcending these patterns, it introduces relative chaos into the processes of life as the precondition for creating new, more fruitful forms of organization. Yet in its chaotic power it may prove to be more destructive than liberating, bringing into being forms of order more limiting than those which it replaced. In this respect it is always legitimate to suspect charismatic figures and movements of being demonic. In fluid situations there is always an overabundance of claimants to leadership, many of whom mislead rather than aid their fellow men. Jesus' own ministry reflects this ambiguity. As a result, the decision to trust him inevitably contained significant elements of risk. Still, it would be false to describe such trust as a blind and essentially irrational "leap of faith." An act of this kind could in one case be a mature, human act. Ideally this trust rested upon a deep experience of healing and liberating processes at work in Jesus' ministry, processes that were profoundly relevant to the suffering which existing forms of life imposed upon men. By trusting him, by remaining loyal to him, his followers were already enabled to participate in some measure in the new reality he attested.

It has often been argued that Jesus' ministry was anything but revolutionary in any concrete, social sense. The principal evidence for such a contention centers in Jesus' apparent acceptance of Roman sovereignty in Palestine. He refused to be pushed into a direct clash with the Roman state and apparently rejected vigorously the aims and activities of the Zealots, the "real" revolutionaries of the period. We cannot reconstruct historically all of the elements which shaped Jesus' response to these issues. They are closely bound up with the question of how Israel's mission to the world was to be understood. Jesus' own

view seemed to be that Israel's world mission presupposed the transformation of Israel herself. Consequently, he repeatedly stressed his prior responsibility to the "household of faith"—though to be sure, not to the synagogue or to the temple within the society, but to all aspects and dimensions of the life of the Jewish people! The point could be put somewhat differently. Without denying the reality of Roman oppression, the more crucial source of bondage and degradation within first century Palestine seemed to have been not the Roman occupation as such, but the forms of social organization and the patterns of value orientation which reigned within the Jewish community itself and on the basis of Israel's own religious traditions! If this is the situation Jesus encountered, then a national liberation movement such as that envisioned by the Zealots would not have touched the basic issues in the suffering of the people—at least not as Jesus understood those issues. It might have replaced Pilate with a Jewish king, but otherwise all would have remained the same.

Contemporary revolutionary thinkers generally believe that movements of national liberation must precede the revolutionary transformation of the internal dynamics of a social order. At this point, they invert what seems to have been the order of Jesus' activity—perhaps because modern forms of imperialism have more substantive implications for the internal structure of colonial societies than was true in the Roman empire, but perhaps because experience has shown that national independence is a prerequisite for meaningful change within a society and vice versa. Still, current experience also shows the inadequacy of a merely nationalist revolution so far as the elemental experience of men in the life of a society is concerned. Such revolutions often mean simply that colonial masters have been replaced by nationals who

themselves share the values, the styles of life, and the interests of their colonial predecessors. Otherwise, the society remains virtually unchanged.

So far as we can see, Jesus was not in any immediate and direct sense a revolutionary with respect to Roman authority. But with respect to the traditions and patterns of social organization which prevailed within his own community, his work was most certainly revolutionary in its thrust. Had he been a purely spiritual preacher about an other—wordly kingdom or about some inward, existential transformation of life without special social consequences, the manner of his death would be largely unintelligible. I submit that the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians knew very well what they were doing when they plotted to kill Jesus! All that they had and all that they valued was at stake in that action.

In large measure Jesus' ministry, understood in these terms, was a failure. Perhaps he must be labeled "naive," a man who refused to face realistically what was and was not possible in his situation. Perhaps he was a desperate man, no longer able to bear the degradation and suffering which had been thrust upon himself and his people. With the urgency and determination which only deep suffering can give, he assailed the structures of death which had for so long lain heavily upon his people until the meaning of these structures was dramatically exposed in his own crucifixion. According to the Synoptics, Jesus anticipated this end. Indeed, his recorded comments are laden with expressions of defeat and frustration, so much so that the only hope which could have had significance for him was one which had the power to encompass death and frustration and to transform them into triumph.

If Jesus' public ministry was not free of ambiguity, his death was even more problematic. The apparent extent of his impact on the Palestinian population,

coupled with the circumstances of his death, meant that large numbers of people could scarcely avoid taking some sort of stance toward him and his activity. The easiest and most natural response would, of course, be to distance oneself from Jesus, to stand over against him, in varying degrees even to condemn him. This response might reflect a more or less sincerely held conviction that Jesus was a menace to Israel, one who threatened to destroy the order God had provided as the means of his peoples' salvation. The leaders who opposed Jesus apparently saw matters that way, even if their view-point also masked an interest in protecting their own privilege within the society. Others might withdraw from Jesus' death not so much because they considered him dangerous as because they considered his case essentially hopeless, because, they believed that nothing significant could be done to change the patterns of social life no matter how oppressive they might be. Jesus' death in this case would simply prove the futility of opposition. Both of these responses meant in practice that man must continue to link his well-being to the existing order of life, even when that order crippled and distorted his spirit.

The alternative response was to identify with Jesus' death, to see it as a disclosure in the sharpest and most dramatic form of the death one already suffered daily under the existing conditions of life. Such an act of identification did not concern a purely subjective choice of a hero of faith, a kind of existential leap into authenticity occasioned by a concrete instance in which one man embraced his own death in sovereign freedom. It concerned a liberating insight into the fact that Jesus' death uncovered a social and spiritual death which all men in that particular setting in fact suffered whether they realized it or not, a death embodied in the oppression and bondage which reigned through the dominant value

system and the patterns of organization of that society. In this connection the issue was no longer merely whether one correctly **perceived** the meaning of these social realities and Jesus' relation to them, but whether one found in the life and death of Jesus the **resources** one needed to lay hold of the new possibilities of life to which they pointed. Failing to find such resources, a man had little choice but to make his peace as best he could with the prevailing order, which necessarily included rejecting the truth Jesus opened up. The paradox is that those who embraced Jesus' death as their own death, who received it as a death "for their sakes," were empowered to participate in the creation of new forms of life which surpassed the destructive limits of the old.

This empowering of the powerless is at the heart of the Easter "miracle," not some spectacular occurrence whose principal significance is to evoke amazement. Actually, there are a number of New Testament traditions which may be variant forms of the same "Easter" phenomenon—traditions concerning the transfiguration of Jesus, the empty tomb, the appearance of the risen Jesus to his disciples, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. All point concretely in the same direction—to the liberating, energizing power of the cross in human life.

The most crucial development to be noted is that at some point, perhaps very shortly after Jesus' death, the import of Jesus' activity burst through the limits of its particular Palestinian setting, taking on world-historical importance. This development rested in part on the fact that the Jewish people by and large "rejected" Jesus. Such rejection may well have reflected the good common sense of the folk, for while Jesus may indeed have borne the truth, that truth probably would have had little chance to come to fruition if its concrete reference to the Palestinian situation had been strictly maintained.

Even if the internal life of the Jewish people had been revolutionized, the Jewish community would inevitably have become a threat to Roman sovereignty, provoking repressive action—as in fact later happened in response to an essentially nationalist revolution. Even though Israel's pilgrimage provided the fertile soil for the concrete emergence of the liberating power present in the activity of Jesus, the promise contained in that power could be realized only if it worked on a much broader front, finally encompassing the Roman empire itself as the widest effective organization of human resources existing in that time and place.

It was precisely in the separation of the cross of Jesus from exclusive attachment to the Palestinian setting that its eschatological import became most visible. This event no longer signified simply the specific issues raised by Jesus with reference to Israel's legal traditions and the social order of which they were a part. It now exposed a conflict in the heart of the world process between every order which oppresses and the vital, energizing forces of life—a conflict manifest in varying ways in all levels of reality and in the most diverse forms of social organization. As a result every conflict has in some measure come to participate in this pivotal conflict, enriching and extending its primal meaning. By the same token, the promise of Jesus' activity was no longer simply the reformulation of Jewish life through the creation of an order relatively more serviceable to the liberation and health of men. It came to bear the promise of that all embracing order which is profoundly adequate to the explosive forces of creativity that comprise the movement of being in all its dimensions. The point is not simply that the cross together with the specific content of Jesus' activity is a particularly illuminating cypher of a universal principle operating in the world process. The cross rather bears in its

central impulse that pattern of being which can overcome the destructive conflicts of life in the kingdom of freedom. Even though it maintains its own concreteness, it can in this sense be said to leap over the various struggles of history to their promised resolution.

Still, this formulation is also misleading. It tends to suggest that the historical process is in principle already completed. The cross of Jesus is then seen as the finished product of that process, a wondrous accomplishment on behalf of all men which needs only to be acknowledged in order to be enjoyed. Yet precisely because the cross of Jesus Christ bears within itself the impulse to that liberating order which embraces all things, it can never be complete in itself. It finds its fulfillment only as all is fulfilled, only as all things themselves participate in its promise. Moreover, such participation does not consist of a passive adaptation to the reality of Jesus Christ. The import of the cross of Jesus is not that everything has been done for man, but that man himself is empowered to labor with all his resources for the realization of the realm of freedom which the cross opens up. Since this participation is active, even originative, the reality of Jesus Christ itself undergoes continual transformation in the historical process as it receives the varying contributions of those who are enabled through its operation to become its co-workers. Jesus Christ is eschatological occurrence not because history is essentially finished in him, but because he constitutes new possibility in the historical process whose creative potential cannot be exhausted short of the full actualization of that order which can adequately awaken, facilitate, and harmonize the vital energies operating in all things.

It is equally important that the inexhaustible potential concretely founded in the cross of Jesus Christ not be understood as an abstract standard of valuation which, as it were, judges history

and lures it ever onward from a distant and ever receding horizon. Such an image too easily removes the import of Jesus Christ from the ambiguity and agony of the historical struggle. While the reality of Jesus Christ inaugurates a movement which presses relentlessly to the end, to the "*telos*" of history, we encounter that reality nowhere else than in the concrete struggles of our world—chiefly in those happenings which break through the limits of oppressive forms of life and open the way to new levels of creativity and freedom in the human pilgrimage.

In foregoing analysis the meaning of God has been identified principally with the explosive power operating in the world process to enable creative growth. Implicit in the discussion is the conviction that this power is operative at all levels of being. Attention has been centered almost exclusively, however, on the relevance of the more general perspective for social and historical processes. In this frame of reference the working of God is most singularly manifest in the dynamics by which oppressive and degrading patterns of life are transcended for the sake of new forms of order better adapted to the task of evoking, channeling, and harmonizing the vital energies of men. The phenomenon of charisma as it is focused both in persons and movements is a crucial part of these dynamics. The point is that at the levels of complexity which characterize human, social existence, only creative subjects can be sufficient to the task of giving shape to new forms and expressions of life.

Insofar as this activity entails breaking with legitimated patterns of authority and venturing to bring into being new bases of authority, the new forms initially require vital and inspiring representation in persons if they are to gain their way among men. Consequently, the working of God in the historical process is at critical times sharply concentrated in charismatic persons.

Such persons are empowered by the working of God to break with the old in order to give birth to the new; they are also mediators of this same possibility for those with whom they interact in a common life situation. As a bearer of charismatic power, Jesus Christ is distinctive for the Christian community essentially in the eschatological import of his activity. That is to say, the creative impulses which have been and continue to be released in the complex of events which make up his being are not exhausted in the particular issues of first century Palestine, but press in ever new ways and by means of ever new struggles toward that all embracing realm of freedom which is the goal of process.

In some respects this understanding stresses one-sided elements of conflict, dynamics, and change at the expense of harmony, order, and stability. It is being asserted that the creative break-through—especially within the social process—constitutes the prototypical experience underlying the reflections on the meaning of God here being offered. Still, creativity and form are not contraries. Creative energy which is in no way focused through significant patterns of organization expends itself without effect. Creative activity requires a framework of order to be fruitful. The most productive periods in human history have not necessarily been the transition periods in which old forms were forced to give way to new ones. Productivity has often been at its highest when more or less established patterns of activity themselves served to elicit an intensive and highly imaginative investment of life. These patterns could elicit that investment because of their success in channeling human energies in directions which made sense for the people living in that setting. Yet such patterns of order eventually exhaust their potential and begin to display repressive features of their own. Under these circumstances, creativity requires new forms in order to gain satisfactory

expression. The terms of a highly abstract formulation, it can be said that the *elan* of the divine activity operative in and through the world process drives relentlessly through innumerable stages and through many failures and side-tracks toward that pattern of order which not only no longer represses the vital energies of being, but elicits their free and creative articulation at the deepest and most intense levels possible.

In trinitarian language, God the Father designates the primal, chaotic energy—somewhat on the analogy of the Aristotelian Matter—which from the beginning lusts after suitable forms for its boundless power. God the Son is the promise of that adequate form, present in the beginning as the indispensable counterpart of the creative potential in the divine chaos, decisively manifest in Jesus of Nazareth as the inexhaustible historical expression of the impulse toward liberating patterns of existence, but fully actual only in the fulfillment of the world process. The Spirit, the dynamic union of chaotic vitality and liberating form, embraces in its actuality the totality of the agony of process as the necessary pilgrimage in the self-actualization of the divine being.

III.

This highly abstract formulation is useful in providing a general orientation for man's concrete engagement with the particular issues of existence he confronts in his own situation. However, where it becomes in itself the central pre-occupation of theological reflection, it tends to become a spectator's interpretation of reality which is compatible with virtually anything that happens. Lacking specific consequences for human behaviour, its most likely function is that of encouraging acceptance of what is already given. For this reason it has been necessary to move toward an understanding of God from a consideration of current happenings in which the pathos of the divine self-actualiza-

tion is operative. It is to these happenings that I must now return.

The thesis of this paper is that Blacks and radical students are raising in a most forceful and thorough-going way the central issues of the Christian gospel. In relation to the concrete realities of contemporary American society, their struggle concerns the themes of the Isaiah passage cited by Jesus: release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, good news to the poor, liberty for the oppressed—and most especially, the announcement that **now** is the acceptable day of the Lord, i.e. the specific time in which these matters have become and must be the main order of business. Moreover, they have sought to raise these issues in ways that have concrete consequences, that have to do with how people act, how the roles of society are organized, what values operate in practice in the daily affairs of the basic institutions of the society.

Blacks are being called from degradation and humiliation, from the moral decay which is often the result of such degradation, to a new awareness of their dignity as men, to self-affirmation, to the responsibility and concern for others which such dignity makes possible. Yet this call to a new life itself gains substance only as it is inseparably linked with an assault in those structures which daily do violence to blacks, distorting, even crushing, the spirits of all but the strong. Indeed, the opportunity to share in the struggle for a new order itself provides the most favorable occasion in which a man can experience and affirm his worth at a new and more profound level. In this frame of reference, the brilliant survival techniques earlier developed by Blacks—especially in religion, music, humor, and story telling — no longer suffice in their old forms to express a vital humanity, for they were originally adapted to the harsh realities of slavery or racial discrimination. Now they too must undergo a transformation in order to sus-

tain the militancy required the bring into being a new order of freedom. The new Black militancy is no simple gospel for Blacks. Whites also suffer—though in different, less obvious ways — under the curse of racism! In the determined challenge to the structures and values by which blacks in particular are victimized, white men as well are addressed with a call to surrender the false bases of worth which distort their perceptions and inhibit their own fulfillment as men. This challenge is not a mere appeal to the white man's conscience, which would scarcely suffice in itself to free them from the restricted views of their own self-interest which hold them captive. It encounters them as total men whose being is rooted in vital material interests. By confronting whites at those points where they are most immediately conscious of their own material interests, blacks give whites a realistic option to accept or even actively to participate in a reordering of the basic institutions of the society in a manner more compatible with the well-being of men. As a result, the gospel is no longer merely verbal, merely a utopian ideal which can in no case find practical application in the "real" world. It takes on flesh. It becomes concrete in specific social and political struggles which present men with the necessity and the possibility of inquiring anew into the true nature of their interests, needs, and hopes as men, which give them an opportunity to develop patterns of social organization that can serve these interests and needs.

Similar dynamics are operative in the student movement. In some respects, radical students represent the first and most whole-heartedly positive white response to the challenge and promise of the black struggle. Having been sensitized to the human meaning of social processes, they have broadened the base of that struggle, exposing other dimensions in the enslavement of the human

spirit that result from the dominant patterns at work in contemporary American society. Students have themselves been awakened from the contented enjoyment of a prolonged adolescence, from an uncritical adaptation in the course of university education to the secure roles the society offers them. They have been summoned to a probing inquiry into the threats and promises of modern industrial civilization. Because they have attained new levels of political sensitivity, they seek to confront the society as a whole with the inhumanity, the unfreedom, and the "bad news" which is present in its established conventions and procedures, hopefully giving it some genuine options to the steady drift toward technocratic captivity, toward the domination of a welfare-warfare state.

Because these movements had to break with the legitimated structures of authority in order to raise the human questions which claimed their attention, charisma has played a prominent role in their development both in leadership patterns and in styles of activity. Indeed, without charisma the kind of break-through that was required to make possible a meaningful treatment of contemporary problems could not have been achieved. Closely connected with this break-through has been the release of enormous amounts of creative energy directed toward the reformation of the society. Indeed, the people attending most urgently and profoundly to the problems of overcoming oppression and of bringing good news to the poor are precisely those who would normally be least equipped to deal with such matters: on the one hand, those most brutalized and degraded by the society, those who are increasingly being excluded from a productive role in the society, those whom we would ordinarily expect to be too demoralized to care or hope; on the other hand, those destined for the most privileged and secure roles in the society, the new

mandarins of the modern, technocratic society. To be sure, blacks and students have had every opportunity to know and to experience the failing of modern society. Yet this awareness is no longer merely the latent fuel for social change. It has been ignited, becoming a burning determination to overcome the failings of the society. The Christian who has been conditioned to expect and hope for the redeeming activity of God in history can only respond to these developments with a sense of wonder and gratitude. In the words of Paul: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (I Cor. 1:27-29). Consequently, the promise contained in these developments confronts Christians in particular with a fresh call to responsibility amid the social and political realities of the contemporary world.

I do not wish to romanticize these movements or to exalt them uncritically. They have serious problems of their own. Indeed, given the circumstances of their emergence, one could scarcely expect it to be otherwise. Some blacks and radical students tend to identify radicality merely with sweeping — even violent — assaults on anything that represents the established order. There is then little concern to guide action by critical insight into the social bases of human suffering and into the dynamics operating within the society which bear realistic possibilities for the overcoming that suffering. Likewise, some participants in these struggles content themselves simply with disrupting or hopefully destroying prevailing social processes. The painstaking task of devising new patterns of social organization which significantly improve the possibilities of human fulfillment is seriously neglected if not disregarded

altogether. There are divisive tendencies within the movements themselves. The factions which see the least of value in existing institutions and the fewest possibilities of continuity in achieving meaningful change, often suspect other, more "conservative," factions of "selling out" or of coming to terms too quickly with the established order. By holding out uncompromisingly for their own radical program, they tend to narrow the base of their appeal so much as to be incapable of any effective action. Their determination to accept nothing less than what they regard as a genuinely radical solution to human problems takes on added pathos when it embraces no clearly articulated social alternatives. Then its significance may be primarily psychological, reflecting the radical's compulsive need to cleanse himself of the evil and corruption in the society — in practice to refuse modern civilization as such. As a result, the achievement of relative social health ceases to be a major concern.

These and similar tendencies have often been cited by critics of these movements, most often, it must be noted, by those seeking to discredit them and undermine the support they have from time to time received from the larger society. The aim of such criticism is basically to render ineffective potential sources of social change and to restore the normalcy which has been called into question. Yet criticism is necessary if the promise of these movements as vehicles of change within the society is to be realized. Indeed, if the tendencies noted above were to become dominant, the current efforts for a new social order would almost certainly be defeated, leaving the sufferers in deeper despair and the defenders of the present order more secure in their judgment that any social disturbance is bad for the society.

In this connection we must make clear that to speak of God's action in

history does not mean to absolutize nor to embrace uncritically developments which are identified as peculiarly significant bearers of his presence. Nor does it mean that such developments are guaranteed certain or immediate success. On the contrary, it means that God himself is involved in the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the questionableness of the historical process. Moreover, this involvement does not simply consist of God's external use of imperfect instruments in a manner that somehow preserves intact his essential perfection. God is implicated in his innermost nature in the distortions and fractures of history in the process of actualizing his own being. The primary significance of identifying particular historical phenomena as crucial expressions of God's activity is to underscore their creative potential for moving processes toward forms of organization more adequate to the vital energy operative in human personal and social existence. Such developments even in their ambiguity and questionableness present man with concrete possibilities of overcoming particular forms of bondage and oppression, of actualizing in specific ways the promise of freedom which the gospel offers him. Far from being the pure and self-sufficient ruler of history from above, God unfolds his being precisely as the concrete dynamic within history that thrusts man toward liberating forms of life, that empowers man to participate in the creation of a new order of freedom.

The stress on God's immersion in process does not rule out the propriety of speaking of the perfection of his righteousness and love. God is "perfectly" righteous and loving, not in the sense that he is completely free of the ambiguities and impurities of history, but in the sense that his activity enables developments in the various stages and circumstances of historical existence which are concretely appropriate to man's liberation and fulfillment. More-

over, his love and righteousness are such that his work is not and will not be finished until all bases of human suffering, bondage, alienation and conflict are overcome. In social terms, this means that movements which expose forms of oppression and bondage in human social existence and which embody a drive to overcome that oppression and bondage cannot finally be put down. The problems which they uncover pre-

sent themselves again and again until suitable steps are taken for their resolution. To have faith in God means to perceive and to participate in these dynamics against the background of what might be called "ontological optimism," the conviction that frustration and defeat are not inescapable laws of life and that the hope of meaningful victories will be vindicated in future experience.

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