On Living with the Extremes and the Extremists

OLIVER READ WHITLEY

NQUESTIONABLY, extremism presents certain problems to us if we are concerned about the viability of the society in which we live. Undoubtedly, too, it is threatening and anxiety-producing for us when we have to live and work with its exponents. This is especially true when we consider that an important norm for the evaluation of our work as ministers is the degree to which we succeed in being mediators of grace and agents of reconciliation in the world and in the church. Yet, insofar as we have been able to arrive at insights into the real nature of extremism, we have by that much put ourselves into a better position for coping with the problems it raises for us. If I may use an analogy here, how often have we said, or heard it said by others, that when confronted with an illness of some sort, it would help if we could get an accurate diagnosis. When we say this, we do not presume that a proper diagnosis by itself cures the illness - for it may be incurable — but we do have the feeling that we are in a better position to cope with that illness if we are clear on the question of just what we are up against. I think that the situation with which we are concerned is something like that just described for an illness. Knowing what we are dealing with does not remove extremism from our midst. Indeed, if our theory of social systems is correct, there may be reason to argue that it probably cannot be removed completely. Yet having a relevant way of thinking about extremism, of getting the handle on it, is by itself a very important first step in devising means to cope with it.

To indicate why this is so, I think it will be useful for us to review briefly the

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angles of vision from which it has been suggested we might view extremism, pointing up in connection with each some of the implications in the light of what has been said, respectively, about the extremism of the right and the left. Extremism, seen in terms of the theory of social movements, is something for which, however unfortunate we may think it is, there is a considerable "market" in contemporary society. Extremist movements cannot get under way, and they certainly cannot continue in existence, unless there is present in the population a sufficient amount of susceptibility to their appeals. To put this in economic terms, producers of extremist merchandise cannot stay in business unless there is an adequate number of consumers "buying" the product in large enough amounts to make continued production profitable. Our society has become sufficiently complex to insure a steady supply of people who are bewitched, bothered, and bewildered to the extent that they are susceptible to a variety of extremist appeals. We cannot, then, count upon its disappearance. Extremism, apparently, will ebb and flow, and while it may be more in evidence at one time in our history than at another, it will not just go away, never to return. Extremism will, to put it another way, appear at such times, and in such places, as the presence of the underlying factors that produce susceptibility to its appeals dictates. In this respect it is perhaps a little like death, taxes, sex, and sin.

The approach to extremism from the angle of the theory of social systems has, I hope, suggested a number of points for consideration. For instance, by now it should be clear that approaching extremism in terms of looking simply at individual extremists and trying to determine what quirks of personality have made them this way is inadequate. To point to the **deviator** part from the con-

text in which he acts out his deviation is not just intellectually inadequate. More than this, such a procedure tempts us to search for scapegoats or devils, instead of trying to understand the situation in all its complexity. It may be comforting to believe that if we could get rid of Stokeley Carmichael, or Robert Welch, or Fred Schwarz, or Billy James Hargis, or the "troublemakers" on the campus at Berkeley, we could eliminate extremism, but it is not very realistic. The consumers of conspiracy and radicalism would simply buy their merchandise in somebody else's store.

There is a further implication to be derived from the theory of social systems. I have argued that all social systems produce deviant behavior of some sort. It must be remembered that there may be great variety in the sources and expressions of deviance. Deviant behavior is not, simply because it is deviant, correctly described as extremist, and some of the kinds of deviance currently being acted out in our society seem to have little, if any, political relevance whatever. In fact, some of the attitudes, stances, and behavior patterns of people who are associated with the new left are. if anything, apolitical. What this says to us is that we should perhaps apply the label of extremism to individuals or groups with great care. This point can be brought home rather quickly by asking the question, was Jesus of Nazareth correctly viewed, in his day, as an extremist? Clearly, a yes or no answer to this question depends upon the context in which it is asked, and answered. In our own day, we have a similar problem with a man like Martin Luther King. (I am not here trying to make any sort of Christ figure out of Dr. King, but simply indicating the need to be responsible in the use of labels like extremist.) One man's extremist is another man's prophet, and our values come quickly out into the open in making judgments of this kind.

In the course of the previous lectures, I have not made extensive reference to the typology of political positions taken

from the work of Clinton Rossiter, but I have contented myself with occasional references along the way to the relevance of this angle of vision. This typology can. I believe, be of great help to us at the point of evaluating the proposals of various groups concerning the solutions for the problems they identify in the society. Here again, however, we must take great care in the use of the language involved. Certainly, two important points must be kept in mind at all times. For one thing, each of the positions on the spectrum of political shades into the one next to it; sharp, clear lines are almost impossible to draw in matters of this kind. Leaving aside the question of whether in certain respects the extremes of revolutionary reaction and revolutionary radicalism meet because they display a similar stance toward the world, it can be said that the extremes can be easily distinguished. We have real difficulty, however, in drawing a sharp line between liberalism and radicalism, or between conservatism and standpattism. This is why a second point is very important, namely, that the terms used in referring to these various positions on the spectrum must not be used pejoratively, as cusswords, but always descriptively and objectively. It think we are uniquely in a position to understand the importance of this point. Anyone who has spent any amount of time in the habitat of the theologians, and has listened to the way in which labels like conservative, liberal, neo-liberal, oldfashioned liberal, or neo-orthodox are used as weapons, should recognize immediately the need, when dealing with extremists, to avoid uttering words like "leftist" or "right-winger" with a sneering tone of voice, especially when the terms are preceded with certain kinds of adjectives. Both a regard for the truth, and the norms of democracy and the Judeo-Christian faith, suggest the importance of this consideration. I am not particularly confident that we can ever succeed in describing other people's political views with as much precision as

would certainly be desirable, but I think that if we keep in mind the caveats just indicated the typology of political positions can help us to sort out many aspects of extremist behavior that would otherwise be confusing. This typology may also help us to get a clearer idea of why extremism makes most of us, at best uneasy about it, and at worst positively fearful of it.

If we are uneasy or fearful about extremism, I hope it is not because we are operating from a set of doctrinaire ideas concerning the nature of social conflict and its presence in society. At this point, sociological theory can help us. group," as Lewis Coser has reminded us in his study of The Functions of Social Conflict, "can be entirely harmonious, for it would then be devoid of process and structure. Groups require disharmony as well as harmony, dissociation as well as association, and conflicts within them are by no means altogether disruptive factors . . . Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life."1 Conflict has, in other words, "group-binding functions," and discord, divergence, and controversy are involved with the very things that hold a group together. In line with this principle, our fear of extremism needs to be based on grounds other than the fact that it leads to, or expresses, conflict in our society. If it is true that every social system produces strains and tensions, the damning up of these tensions will only lead to increasing rigidity of the system and thus to the possibility explosive, of even greater, potentially conflict. A certain amount of conflict. then, does clear the air. But it must be added that if the tension-releasing conflict does not really change the situation, as that produced by extremist activities often does not, one can expect a new building up of tensions. A distinction can be made between realistic and nonrealis-

tic conflict. "Conflicts which arise from frustration of specific demands . . . and from estimates of gains of the participants, and which are directed at the presumed frustrating object, can be called realistic conflicts, insofar as they are means toward a specific result. Nonrealistic conflicts . . . are not occasioned by the rival ends of the antagonists, but by the need for tension release of at least one of them."2 Much of the activity of the extremists is, in this light, the kind that involves them in nonrealistic conflict, but it is not for that reason to be ignored or condemned out of hand. My point is not that conflict is to be encouraged or fostered, but simply that it is to be expected. The problem that extremists create in our society is not that what they do involves conflict, but that what they do often makes it impossible for that conflict to have any kind of salutory outcome. If I may speak metaphorically, the extermists want to play football without the rule-book and the officials.

Up to this point, I have attempted to remain largely at the descriptive and analytic level. Now I want to turn to the question of evaluation, of what sort of critique has been made of the extremism of right and left. As I write this lecture, the issue of how to look at the New Left has been discussed in the Denver Post. A news story of August 8th reports on a lecture given at the University of Colorado by Professor Drachkovitch of Stanford University's Institution on War, Revolution and Peace. Said Drachkovitch, the New Left groups "are not reformist in nature, but are a total denigration of U.S. Society. They are in the form of extreme utopianism." The New Left did originate independently of the Communist movement, but its activities make the Communists very happy, because they help their cause. The movements associated with the New Left are a threat to the country, Drachkovitch argued, since they support terrorism. Adherents of the New Left are probably

¹ Coser, Lewis, The Functions of Social Conflict (New York, Free Press of Glencoe, 1956), p. 31.

² Ibid, p. 49.

sincere, he acknowledged, but what we must worry about is "their arrogance, the total rejection of all that this society has produced." A few days later, a letter to the editor of the Post expressed agreement with the notion that the New Left threatens the structure of the society, but took a very different view of the matter. "The New Left members threaten to alter this country's present structure drastically by returning it . . . to civilian rule, under the U.S. Consitution; forcing the government to begin paying more attention to the needs of human beings than to the needs of weapons manufacturers . . . ; attacking seriously, . . . the causes of starvation and riots: reintroducing truth in government. Probably the most drastic threat the New Left poses is to a cherished notion . . . that the American people will continue to be led like sheep, by a hysterical fear of 'Commies' and 'Com-symps', until the country has been destroyed by wildly irrational policies, foreign and domestic, from which a very few profit very handsomely."3 One perhaps has difficulty realizing that the two statements just quoted deal with the same phenomenon. I suggest that the truth about the New Left lies somewhere in between the views of it indicated by these statements.

On balance, the New Left must, I think, be taken seriously as a protest movement that has managed to point to every area in which the promises of the democratic way of life are being broken, or left unfulfilled, and in that pointing to stick its finger into the eyes of those who dislike being reminded about those prom-"The Movement attracts some of the best young people in the country, contrary to the vulgar popular notion that those who are involved are only 'beats,' 'kooks,' and 'potheads.' It is true that representatives of all those types can be found in The Movement, but its core is made up of those young people most committed to the values of intellectual honesty and social action rooted in

the best American tradition."4 Their repudiation of important segments of the American value system should give us pause, and force us to ask some searching questions about why some of our best young people find the American way of life so distasteful; and their moral earnestness might well lead us to inquire into the depth of our own commitment to the promises of democracy. But just because these things appear to be true, the New Left must be subjected to criticism for its inadequacies and false moves.

As is often the case with the criticisms of the church, the criticisms of the New Left that are the most telling come from those who count themselves as friends. Jack Newfield, for example, says that "the New Radicals, while justified in most of their assaults on the Great Society, have been weak on providing creative alternatives . . . (T)hey are sometimes hopelessly romantic . . . (S)egments of the New Left are anti-intellectual, sometimes even anti-rational."5 In the same vein, Michael Harrington suggests that "the mystical militants," as he calls the new leftists, "sometimes expect the poor to act out the moral values of the middle-class radical who has come to the slum," so that the danger is that "the poor will thus be assigned roles as abstractions in the morality plays of the disenchanted middle class." This danger arises primarily because new leftists do not adequately understand the implications of their unqualified rejection of the establishment. "For if everybody but the poor and outcast are 'them,' then 'we' must inevitably lose, for by definition 'we' are not strong enough to transform a fraud and scandal supported by 60 or 70 percent of the society."6

Probably the most far-reaching criticism of the New Left is that offered by Irving Howe. Howe's sketch of the lifestyle of the new leftist, succeeds in gath-

³ Denver Post, 12 August 1967, Letter signed, E. M. Gilmore.

⁴ Jacobs and Landau, op. cit., pp. 82-83.

⁵ A Prophetic Minority, p. 17. ⁶ Thoughts of the Young Radicals (Harrison-Blaine of New Jersey and The New Republic, 1966), pp. 71-72.

ering up most of the strands of criticism. The new leftist, Howe says, tends to reject "not merely the middle-class ethos but a good many other things he too hastily associates with it: the intellectual heritage of the West, the tradition of liberalism at its most serious . . ." He does not expect really to change the liberalism at its most serious . . ." He givenness of American society, so he concentrates on modes of personal differentiation, searching for a repertoire of sensation and shock. In the process, he discovers that he is trapped in a symbiotic relationship with the very middle class he rejects; he defines himself as over against the class with which he is trying to disaffiliate. The new leftist, when he turns to politics, has "little concern for precise or complex thought," and displays certain characteristic attitudes. such as "an extreme, sometimes unwarranted, hostility toward liberalism, an impatience with the problems that concerned an older generation of radicals, a vicarious indulgence in violence, an unconsidered enmity toward the establishment, an equally unreflective belief in 'the decline of the West,' a crude, unqualified anti-Americanism, an increasing identification with that sector of the 'third world' in which 'radical' nationalism and Communist authoritarianism merge." Some parts of this catalogue of criticism emphasize the failure of the **new leftists** to deal adequately with the issue of Communism. They "do not and will not give adequate or convincing answers to the Communist question. . . To them Communism is an issue raised only by those over thirty, therefore they need not be concerned with it." This is to be taken as an indication, not that new leftists are really Communists, but that they have not experienced the kind of disillusionment with Communism that is recounted by the authors of the chapters in the book edited by Richard Crossman, entitled The God That Failed, or had an encounter with its totalitarian side, and

they are ill-equipped to deal with it ideologically.

I must confess that at times what the new leftists say and do frightens me. At the very least, it makes me uneasy. I am uneasy because some of the things being proposed from this quarter are clearly subject to the interpretation that they express the stance of the revolutionary radical, as described by Clinton Rossiter. "Its attitude toward the social process is simple and savage; it means to disrupt this process as quickly and completely as possible in defiance of all rules of the game, which are, in any case, monstrous cheats."8 But I, like many of you, am over thirty, and I must try to find ways to overcome the biases toward the maintenance of status quo that often beset us old people. To my sense of fear and uneasiness, then, I must add the kind of reminder suggested by Father Joseph L. Walsh, in a discussion of "What the Students Want." "The difference between generations . . . is not just one of intellectual judgment about how extreme or desperate the contemporary situation is. The student activists are challenging their professors, their politicians, their priests, to reexamine fundamental questions about society and their role in it, questions the older generations would like to believe have long since been answered."9 To this reminder, one final thing needs to be added — an appreciation to the new leftists for jarring my middle class complacency. The jarring comes when I read words like those of a young radical to the Harvard psychiatrist who was spending a summer in Mississippi. "What we question is whole assumptions, while I think you get excited about specific injustices. I think that's the way it is because you have a lot going for you inside the system, so you're hung-up on what you know is best for you; or else you're able to be 'philosophical,' which is a middle-class luxury if there ever was one. . . People like you

⁷ in Jacobs and Landau, op. cit., pp. 289, 292-93.

⁸ Rossiter, C., op. cit., p. 11 ⁹ Commonweal (19 November, 1965), p. 207.

have to think twice about what you say or do, and what so-and-so will think about your opinions, and all that. . . We may get shot, but we don't sit up half the night worrying and sweating about whether to sign a petition we believe in, or whether to come out in favor of something we believe, for fear the papers will call it 'radical'." That statement, I think, makes my point, and requires no further comment.

What attitude are we to take toward the extremists of the right? A relevant approach to this is that suggested by attorney and law professor Alan F. Westin. He points out that among the ways of viewing the radical right have been at least the following: that it is "a temporary boil on the body politic, like earlier fringe groups in American history;" that it is "a classic proto-fascist threat;" and that it is "a regrouping of the old McCarthyite forces." He does not think, however, that any of these views really gets at the basic significance of the emergence of the radical right. "What the Birchers and their compatriots really represent," he argues, "is the second great surge of opposition to this nation's bi-partisan policies for resisting Soviet imperialism abroad and Communist ideological penetration within our own nation."11 Westin presents the case for drawing what he calls "the deadly parallel" between the radical left of 1946-48 and the radical right of the 1960's. Both derive from the stream of native fundamentalism, reaching back to the Knownothings, the Populists, and the Coughlinites, all of which shared a common belief in the betrayal of the American dream by conspirators. In the mid-1940's, the radical left saw its hopes for a peaceful world and an economy of abundance shattered, and attributed the rise of world tensions to an internal "fascist conspiracy." The radical right has seen its dream of perfection broken by a Communist conspiracy, perceived everywhere

in the society — in the unions, the churches, and even in business. Westin does not see departures from the national "anti-Communist consensus" as necessarily putting all critics into the radical left or radical right camps. Suggesting a principle that is very useful for evaluation of extremist groups, he says that the most important thing is whether "criticisms are made within the framework of rational discourse and civic responsibility," and whether they "rest on cries of grand hidden conspiracies, allegations of traitorous leadership, and dangerously millenial proposals," or "include bullving tactics in the civic marketplace."12 Westin's considered judgment in regard to extremists, rendered in 1962, is one which I am certain we all devoutly hope can be accepted in the summer of 1967. That judgment is that 'the American political system is too vital to allow these antidemocratic movements to become dominating national political forces in their own right: the traditions of the center are too powerful in our society, and the influences of reformist civic and religious groups too pervasive."13 Yet we cannot rest on this comforting and reassuring thought: the radical right inhibits efforts to develop realistic anti-Communist programs, and its activities often obfuscate the terms on which important public issues are discussed.

Radical right extremists are not, unfortunately, really conservatives. Return for a moment to Rossiter's typology of political positions. The highest kind of conservatism, Rossiter says, "subscribes consciously to principles designed to justify the established order and guard it against careless tinkering and determined reform." This stance has little in common with the conservatism of temperament, which is a product of habit, inertia, fear, and emulation, or the conservatism of possession, which focuses upon defending status, power, reputation, or

¹⁰ Thoughts of the Young Radicals, p. 78. 11 Westin, Alan F., "The Deadly Parallels," Harpers (April 1962), p. 26.

¹² Ibid, p. 30.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rossiter, Clinton, Conservatism in America, p. 9.

property, or with standpattism, which tries to conserve indiscriminately, resisting change in any direction. The true conservative stance is very far from that of reaction, which refuses to accept the present and longs for some golden age when things were as they should be, and even farther from that of revolutionary reaction, which is more than willing to use violence in its assault on the present order. I submit that a substantial part of what radical right groups advocate and practise can be fairly described not as a conservatism of principle, but at best as a conservatism of temperament or possession, or at worst as revolutionary reaction. This is, of course, a controversial assertion, but I think that the worldview, and the habits, of the WACK-ACOBI provide ample justification for it. "The ideology of the right wing in America," as Daniel Bell has pointed out, "threatens to disrupt the 'fragile consensus' that underlies the American political systems. What is uniquely disturbing about the emergence of the radical right of the 1960's is the support it has been able to find among traditional community leaders who have themselves become conditioned, through an indiscriminate anti-Communism that equates any form of liberalism with Communism to judge as respectable a movement which. if successful, can only end the liberties they profess to cherish."15 Political intolerance has not been a stranger in the American way of life, for there have seemingly always been those who want to deny access to the public forum to those whose ideas they disagree with. Groups that support intolerance have fortunately never been powerful enough to upset the normal processes of American democracy completely, but they have certain done short-run damage to the operation of those processes, and they have unquestionably injured innocent people.16

What is to be done about extremists

and extremism? It does not seem likely that the extremists will disappear into the woodwork, so long as the conditions that account for their appearance continue to exist. That being the case, I find certain suggestions made by the Overstreets to be quite relevant and helpful in regard to how we might respond to the presence of the extremists among us. The Overstreets have pointed out that there are at least four important questions to which answers must be found: (1) how can we strengthen the liberalconservative center so that we can afford" extremism? (2) how can we communicate accurate, reliable knowledge about Communism so that our people will not be susceptible to the aims and tactics of the Party line? (3) how can we prevent radical rightists from eroding our liberties and spreading fear and distrust abroad in the land? (4) how can we learn to talk about America, and what we have accomplished here, in quiet factual ways that will call attention to the things in which we can justifiably take pride? I have reworded the Overstreet questions somewhat, but not in any way that distorts what they have in mind.

With regard to the first of these question, I think what is being pointed to is the fact that we need to do everything possible to enable liberal-conservatives and conservative-liberals to be in communication with each other, so that they can find ways to rehearse and celebrate the many things about which they are agreed, and to join issues about the things about which they disagree, in a manner that will not leave the way clea rfor the extremists of the left and right to confuse the situation. Our best protection against extremists is to show that those of us who consider ourselves to represent the consensus at the center of society are quite capable of understanding what the issues and problems of a society trying to be a democracy are, and how they are to be dealt with and solved, without the help of extremist proposals of any sort. If we do not succeed in this, then perhaps we deserve

¹⁵ The Radical Right, pp. 2, 45.

¹⁶ On this point, see Seymour Lipset, in The Radical Right, p. 446.

the extremists we have, and cannot really enter a justified complaint about their presence among us.

As to the second question, I think that, here again, we need to demonstrate that we do not need the help of the WACKA-COBI in acquainting the American people with the strategy and tactics of Communism. I would recommend that many of you might seriously consider the feasibility of developing an adult study program in local churches that might, for example, be based on the reading and careful study of the two excellent volumes written by Harry and Bonaro Overstreet - What We Must Know About Communism, and The Strange Tactics of Extremism. It may be possible, in some such way as this, to make a contribution toward filling the intellectual and ethical and political vacuum we seem to have left for the extremists to fill. If one regards the efforts of fundamentalist politico-religious evangelists like Schwarz. Hargis, and McIntire as irrelevant, silly, if not dangerous - as I certainly do then he should not leave it to such people to do the job. Perhaps it is our fault that intellectual incompetents such as Mr. Hargis are regarded as "authorities." whose counsel is worthy of being included in Air Force Manuals; that an Australian immigrant can find a ready market for conducting schools on Communism in America, a subject for which his medical training hardly prepares him; that a de-frocked clergyman is afforded the opportunity to spread among us a paranoic, sick, and distorted version of the Christian faith. Those of us who stand at the center, away from the extremes, are quite capable of understanding the history and dangers of Communism, and of communicating that understanding to others. But perhaps we have not done so, and have not been zealous enough in our support of responsible efforts in our schools to get this job done. Could this be a case of let Billy (or Fred or Carl) do it?

The question of how to protect ourselves against the radical right tactics is

a difficult one. The Overstreets have indicated some very specific things that can be done, and I think their advice can be very helpful. Listen to what they have to say about this: "Do not wait until an attack has been made on your group before you begin to let other community groups know the nature of your program ... do not angrily dismiss criticism without weighing it for whatever merit it may have . . . keep the line of communication open between your group and the press ... if an attack on your group seems serious enough to bother about, take the discussion of it into the open market places of the mind . . . if your group is attacked by a virtually autonomous unit of a national organization, do not talk as though the whole organization were back of the attack . . . if you recognize that certain individuals have joined your group as infiltrators, give them work to do that will make them acquainted with the complexities of problems that their own groups have been oversimplifying . . . challenge irresponsible methods openly and firmly. Ask the extremists to fill their generalities with specific content; to say what their statistics and percentages mean; to explain their use of quotes so taken out of context as to misrepresent their meaning; to explain their use of loaded implications. And make this whole process of asking as public as possible . . . Require that all charges be put into writing and signed . . . If free speakers are offered to your group, ask for a statement about whom they represent and a brief summary of what they intend to say . . . If your organization handles printed materials have established procedures for the selection of these materials . . . have established procedures . . . for the permitting of announcements and the passing out of materials; for the introduction of resolutions and a vote upon them at a later meeting, not at the same meeting; for the closing of meetings; and for any other matters that experience shows to be necessary in order to avoid

letting trouble-makers take over; and hold to these procedures."17

The fourth question, of how we talk about America, suggests again an area in which we do not need the help of the extremists — especially the radical rightists who consider themselves to be authorities on loyalty, patriotism, and Americanism. One of the curious things I have encountered in preparing these lectures is the fact that the WACKACOBI, who consider it their duty to set the rest of us straight on what Christianity, patriotism, and Americanism are, seem to have little, if any, faith in their fellow citizens, and

in fact so little trust in the American political processes, that they can communicate nothing but the semantics of gloom, doom, and despair. I am led to ask, then, who is it that really believes in America? Surely it is not those who spread fear and suspicion abroad in the land, and who regard those who disagree with them as conspirators and saboteurs! Is it not rather those who understand with John K. Galbraith that "in a competition to develop and reveal the quality of our society . . . our greatest achievements are those that depend on our capacity for economic and social experiment and change, and on the diversity and freedom of our culture."18

¹⁷ Overstreet, Harry and Bonaro, *The Strange Tactics of Extremism* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1964), pp. 291-93.

¹⁸ Galbraith, John K., *The Liberal Hour*, (Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1960), p. 26.



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