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*A few years ago J. L. Segundo, discussing signs of the alienation of theology in Latin America, could point with some reason to the fact that the theme of violence was entirely absent from theological work. Since then, a significant number of contributions have been made to the discussion, but a systematic survey has still to be made. What we offer here are some disconnected points for reflection, which are intended to put the issue in theological perspective.*

#### Critical reflection on our use of violence

Theological discussion on the theme of violence often gives the impression of being conceived as an abstract discussion on the basis of which the Christian will decide whether or not to accept violence and whether or not to take part in it. The fallacy of such a starting point is apparent to the most superficial observer. What is this neutral standpoint, detached from the interplay of different kinds of violence, from which such discussion could begin? Both the biblical idea of man (which always regards him as involved in 'the world') and daily experience show us clearly that such a standpoint does not exist. Whether Christians or not, we are always actively involved in violence — repressive, subversive, systemic, insurrectional, open, or hidden. I say actively involved because our militancy or lack of it, our daily use of the machinery of the society in which we live, our ethical decisions or our refusal to make decisions make us actors in this drama.

What then is the significance of theological reflection? Simply put, it is our willingness to become aware of our participation in the process, to submit it to the critical verdict of the Word of God and to accept it as part of our obedience in faith. To put it in very simple terms, there is no ethical decision, no personal or collective human plan, which does not involve the Christian in a choice between obedience to the divine will and purpose, or infidelity. Consequently we never start from a neutral standpoint, but always from some definite event — in this case the inter-

play of different kinds of violence — which we submit to critical scrutiny. Normally we do so through 'discernment', which includes drawing on our memory of biblical teaching and tradition, seeking the sense of what is of Christ, which the New Testament attributes to the work of the Spirit, and using all the human means — technical and ideological — at our disposal. The function of the theologian is to make explicit the elements of this discernment, not to substitute his own judgment for it or prescribe the decision.

It should scarcely be necessary to point out that in a continent where thousands die every day as victims of various forms of violence, no neutral standpoint exists. My violence is direct or indirect, institutional or revolutionary, conscious or unconscious. But it is violence. Accordingly, the discussion of the theme is not, for the Christian, a luxury or a fashionable fad. It is a test of the authenticity of his faith. My violence is either obedience to or betrayal of Jesus Christ.

#### Two starting points

I have the impression that theological talk about violence at the present time starts from two general perspectives of the Christian concept of man and the world and the ethical thinking that results. One is built on the principle of the rationality of the universe, the conviction that a universal order pervades everything. Heaven and earth, nature and society, moral and spiritual life, seek the balance that corresponds to their rational place in the order of things. The preservation of this order is the supreme good. What disturbs it is, as the tango says, 'an offence against reason'. In its crudest form this belief amounts simply and solely to a defence of the status quo, which is identified with cosmic reason. Violence is then conceived in relation to that order, and because it disturbs it, is regarded as irrational and bad. Therefore it must be stopped by a rational use of force. This undoubtedly false logic nevertheless appears frequently in 'Christian' right-wing rhetoric. The will of God is identified with order, which in turn is identified with the prevailing, though threatened, order of things. To resist the threat is to obey God.

The argument is not however restricted to its false forms. It is possible to link it with a more usual view which does not identify the rational order with the existing social structure, and which therefore leaves room for the possibility of change and even of a rational use of

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force in the service of change. This kind of violence may, in fact, be 'subversive' of the existing order, but it is systemic or repressive in relation to what is regarded as the rational order. The problem here is to discern what is the rational order. Perhaps the most complete expression of this view has been the idea of natural law put forward in Aristotelian-Thomist ethics, and which has been subsequently refurbished in various ways. It is impossible to pursue the discussion of this problem here. But it is necessary to point out how easily such views become prisoners of a past historical model or of an ideological conception which sacralizes itself as a rational and eternal order.

The other perspective sees man as a process for liberation in the constant struggle against existing limitations in nature, history, society and religion. Man is creative, and creation in any medium is violence exercised over things as they are, the affirmation of the new against 'what exists', an eruption which can only succeed by destroying the existing systems of integration. In this schema, violence plays a creative role; it acts as a midwife (although I do not think Marx's famous phrase can be interpreted entirely in this sense). This view can also be taken to its extreme by presenting violence as the ultimate creative principle, intrinsically valid because it destroys every existing limitation. Only by the destruction of what limits me — nature, social order, divinity, ethical norm — do I find my freedom, that is to say, my humanity. The exaltation of creative irrationality is a well-known phenomenon in human history. But it is not necessary to follow this argument in its extreme form; history may be conceived as a dialectic in which the overthrowing of the old to make possible the new always involves a certain amount of violence.

As theological positions, both perspectives are based on biblical and ecclesiastical tradition. Frequently they are identified with the priestly and prophetic traditions respectively. It would not be difficult to trace both currents in the history of Christian theology. Although both represent significant aspects of Christian thought, I am convinced that neither of them corresponds to the starting point of biblical thought, either in approach or content. As regards approach, both rationality and liberty are abstract concepts — speculative constructions very remote from the specific modes of thought and situations in which the biblical message comes to us. As regards content, it seems obvious to me that the biblical conception does not regard man in terms of reason or liberty but in

terms of the actual historical relationships in which the man-objects-God equation is always defined. The word of scripture is always an announcement-commandment referring to a particular human situation that needs to be corrected and transformed in accordance with the word.

If we ask for the criteria by which these transformations are to be carried through, we encounter a curious situation. On the one hand, notions like justice (*tsedaka*, *nishpat*, etc.), mercy, fidelity, truth (*hesed*, *emuna*) and peace (*shalom*) are presented as characteristic of the way Yahweh works, and at the same time as requisites of human life (material, social, religious). If, however, we seek to define the content of these terms, we find only specific narratives or commands; the definitions are contained in the action announced by God or called for from His people in this or that situation. This does not mean that the notions in question are empty labels covering any number of heterogeneous or capricious actions. It does mean, however, and this seems very important, that the ethical criteria are not defined in a non-temporal or abstract form but in relation to the actual conditions of people's lives in a given historical situation. These facts taken together constitute the direction, the Kingdom of God, which enables us to speak of conditions or actions as 'worthy' or 'unworthy' of the Kingdom. But this direction cannot be translated into a universal principle — reason, order, liberty — or into an anthropological statement; it always has to be linked with the concrete 'words' of God.

Against this background, violence appears repeatedly in the Bible, not as a general form of human conduct that ought to be accepted or rejected, but as an element of the announcement-commandment of God, as concrete acts that have to be executed or avoided in view of a result, a relationship, or a project indicated in the announcement-commandment. Thus the Law proscribes certain forms of violence towards persons and things, and authorizes and even orders others. Some wars are commanded — even against Israel — while others are forbidden — even in favour of Israel. If one tries to find a pattern in these events, a first and very simple interpretation is that the call to exercise or renounce violence always seems to lead to an 'opening up' in which human beings (stranger, widow, orphan, nation, family) can exist on the earth and be what corresponds to their particular humanity. A more precise definition would involve us in a detailed study which is beyond the scope of these reflections. In general terms, however, the Bible shows us a breaking down of the restrictions (slavery, revenge, whim, absence of defence or

protection, usurpation, etc.) which leave a man, a group or a people in a state of weakness and inferiority. They are freed to be and to act as responsible (the typical instance being 'as a partner in a pact') before God, other persons and things.

Since this is the general direction of the biblical announcement-commandment, it is not surprising that, in simple terms, peace is preferable to hostility, generosity to revenge, preservation of life to its destruction, production to destruction, trust and tranquility to threats and fear. This is where the idea of order and rationality has its subordinate but meaningful place in a Christian ethics. At the same time, given the conditions in which, according to the same biblical testimony, human life is lived, it is not surprising that God's announcement-commandment almost always takes the form of a call to create a new situation, to transform and correct present conditions — a summons to conversion and justice. This is the undoubted truth of the interpretation of the action of God in terms of 'liberation'. Liberation and order are not, however, key concepts for a philosophy of history; they are elements which guide our reflection on the Word of God in a given situation. Nor are we dealing with two symmetrical elements. The biblical vision — centred in the person and work of Jesus Christ and its eschatological axis — always includes the dimension of order, rationality and conservation within the dynamic of transformation, not vice versa. Consequently, the actual human reality which we have pointed to as the locus of Christian ethics is not simply man as he exists in his immediate circumstances, but man in the dynamics of the new man, the new humanity given in Christ as part of the announcement-mandate. In other words, neither the prophetic nor the priestly interpretations are general principles; they are modes of action relative to man in his concrete reality. And as such they are not balanced in a static equilibrium, or swinging like a pendulum; the priority belongs to the prophetic, with a full integration of the priestly task.

#### Consequences

If the picture suggested by a critical reflection on our practice of violence is acceptable in principle, it seems to me that we should continue in certain directions.

1. It can only be a reflection on the violence and violent conditions of our actual situation in Latin America. It has to do with who

practices and suffers from violence here today, and for what purpose and how the various forms of violence are used (or not!). We must avoid the substantialization of violence, so frequent in recent discussions, or dissertations on the nature of violence as such. The discussion of violence can only be adjectival — incidental to something else.

2. Incidental to what? We would have to expound a whole standpoint in regard to present-day Latin American reality, a standpoint conceived as a discernment of the Word of God, as concrete obedience, for that is the substance to which violence can be added as an adjective. The growing consensus in Christian interpretation indicates liberation as the content of this announcement-commandment for us today. It is important to make it clear at this point that I am not thinking of reintroducing a principle of liberation except into the political, economic, cultural and religious situations of Latin American society that deprive men of human space and are therefore so clearly contrary to the biblical announcement-commandment that no complicated exegesis or hermeneutics are necessary to perceive it. The context in which we must discuss violence is the one defined by the search for liberation.

3. This choice, which seems to me incontestable for the Christian in Latin America today, does not exclude but must incorporate the dimensions of order, rationality, conservation — which might also be expressed as strategy, planning, technology, theory — and respect for objective reality, natural and human. This analysis prevents any enthusiasm for violence that would sacralize it or directly identify it with liberation.

4. Following from this, there is another restriction on the relation between liberation and violence, which emerges from consideration of human values, both personal and communal. This restriction has to do with very important aspects of a revolutionary process: the human cost of the revolution, and regard for the enemy. There is surely no place here for the shallow sentimentality which passes for Christian ethics in these matters, hiding reactionary attitudes under basic theological categories like reconciliation, forgiveness or peace, which in the long run are most costly in human lives and suffering and less respectful of the human person. But this fact must not hide the real problem for which the Christian has a particular responsibility, namely, the loss of feeling for what is human, the elevation of hatred and reprisal into an ultimate

ethical category, the non-dialectical annihilation of the enemy — all of which repeatedly occur in liberation processes, and the risk of which increases the more violence has to be used.

5. Seen in this perspective, the question of nonviolence (so much discussed by many Christians) assumes a different meaning. It ceases to be a question of 'personal purity'. Strictly speaking, it is not a question of nonviolence but of the kinds, forms and limits of violence present in a conflict involving oppression and liberation. The Christian legitimately asks how it may be possible to humanize this struggle as much as possible. Here again, Christian participation should avoid absolutising abstract principles (liberation, revolution, order, etc.) which tend first to subordinate and then to sacrifice the concrete human condition, idealizing the struggle for liberation so that it is transformed into a dialectic of terms rather than the liberation of man.

These observations will certainly prompt some to ask whether we have not given the struggle for liberation too relative a character. Isn't a firmer ideological perspective needed to give meaning to the struggle? This is a theme that merits discussion with our non-Christian companions in the fight for liberation. In principle, as subject for discussion, I would dare to say that the eschatological perspective of the Gospel — the confidence in the Kingdom that God brings and which comes 'at its hour' permits the Christian to take part in the present struggle (and even in specific activities directed by a particular ideology) without absolutizing an ideology and submitting to it as a prescriptive code. Ultimately one might say that the substantialization of ideology is the temptation to idolatry which Christians must fight in every revolutionary process. Idols always destroy men. Perhaps that is the most important insight that the Christian has to offer — especially as self-criticism — in regard to violence.

DECLARATION OF THE  
ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE  
ON THE  
OCCASION OF THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES<sup>1</sup>

I

1. The Lord 'who came to save us' accomplishes His redemptive work at 'sundry times and in divers manners'. He constantly accompanies His people and through the grace of the Comforter, He builds and fosters the life of the Church, at every moment giving Her new vision, new ways of life and new activity, in order that His will may in all things be done and His kingdom be extended on earth.

2. The 20th century has offered to the Christian churches a possibility of seeing and experiencing this reality. The ecumenical movement which has long been a living reality, and the World Council of Churches which for twenty-five years has existed as a coherent expression and organized form of this movement, constitute one of the ways chosen by the Lord to make mankind more aware of His 'new commandment' of love, and His Church more obedient to His teachings of reconciliation, peace and concord.

3. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is most happy to share in the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the World Council of Churches, and attaches the highest significance to this occasion.

This period of a quarter of a century is an irrefutable witness of the churches' precious experience of their common march towards mutual acceptance and understanding, of their common activities in favour of reunion, and of their desire to walk in dialogue and in mutual love and fellowship so as 'not to hinder the Gospel of Christ' (1 Cor. 9 : 12), and in order 'that the world may know the only true God and Jesus Christ' (John 17 : 3), as God and Saviour.

4. On this significant day the Apostolic Church of Constantinople ascribes praise and glory to God for everything achieved up to the present in the ecumenical field, and prays that the efforts for the coming together and final reunion of all that are jointly undertaken by the member churches of the World Council of Churches, may advance and be continu-

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