

## The Original Revolution

by John Howard Yoder

(The author of this essay, a Mennonite theologian who lived from 1927-1997, simply and eloquently reminds us of the "mission" Jesus came to this earth to fulfill; one which the average "Christian" little understands.)

In the whole body of Jewish and Christian liturgy, only a very few texts might be more widely known -- and more vainly repeated -- than the two songs from the beginning of Luke's Gospel.

One of these songs is found on the lips of the maiden Mary. Catholic tradition knows it by its opening word Magnificat, "My soul doth magnify the LORD." But what it says is the language, not of sweet maidens, but of Maccabees: it speaks of dethroning the mighty and exalting the lowly, of filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty. Mary's praise to God is a revolutionary battle cry.

That simple observation should suffice to locate our topic. The fad word not long ago of both Protestant and Catholic social thought was "revolution." From the black ghettos of the U.S. to the 1968 World Council of Churches Assembly in Uppsala, from the archbishop's residence in Recife to the Ivy League seminaries of the American Protestant establishment, from Peking to the Sorbonne, the slogans are the same. The system is rotten. Those whom it oppresses should submit to its tyranny no longer. It deserves nothing other than to collapse in upon itself, a collapse we will engineer.

It would be worthwhile sometime to dwell at more length on the way in which the term "revolution" confirms the intellectual relevance of Gresham's law, according to which the coinage with the least substance, value, and character will get the most circulation. The word "revolution" has passed through so many hands, over so many tongues and pens, that most of its meaning has worn off. Shaving cream is revolutionary if they put lime perfume in the can with the soap...But the fact that a word can be prostituted or violated does not take its real meaning off our serious agenda.

The old word, the technical term, for the change Mary was rejoicing in is "gospel"; but "gospel" has become a tired old word. For some, it means the invitation to an individual to accept the forgiveness of sins, so that to preach the gospel, to "evangelize" is to spread the message of this invitation. For others, it means correct teaching about the work of Christ, so that "evangelicals" are those who hold to traditional doctrines. Elsewhere "evangelical" simply is the current word for "Protestant." For still others "gospel" represents a particular kind of country music.

If we are ever to rescue God's good news from all the justifiable but secondary meanings it has taken on, perhaps the best way to do it is to say that the root meaning of the term evangelion would today best be translated "revolution." Originally it is not a religious or a personal term at all, but a secular one: "good news." But



evangelion is not just any welcome piece of information, it is news which impinges upon the fate of the community. "Good news" is the report brought by a runner to a Greek city, that a distant battle has been won, preserving their freedom; or that a son has been born to the king, assuring a generation of political stability. "Gospel" is good news having seriously to do with the people's welfare. Today we might speak of the end of the Viet Nam war in this sense; not merely an event that makes some of us happy, but one which shapes our common lives for the better. This is not only true of the meaning of the word we translate "gospel," in its ordinary secular usage outside the New Testament; it is true as well of the story which the New Testament calls by this name. Mary's outburst of social enthusiasm in the Magnificat is only one sample; but the response of her kinsman Zechariah to the birth of his son is to sing that God has now come:

...age after age he proclaimed by the lips of his holy prophets, that he would deliver us from our enemies, out of the hands of all who hate us...(Luke 1:69-71)

When this son, John, began his own preaching, Luke describes it as "evangelizing the people" with predictions:

Already the axe is laid to the roots of the trees, and every tree that fails to produce good fruit is cut down and thrown on the fire. (Luke 3:9)

To those who asked him, "What shall we do?" he answered:

The man with two shirts must share with him who has none, and anyone who has food must do the same. (Luke 3:11)

Once again, whatever it is that God is about to do, it will be good news for the poor, bad news for the proud and the rich; it will be change, including changed economic and social relations.

This was the expectation that Jesus himself picked up, when in terms almost identical to John's he announced that the "kingdom of heaven is near" and then more precisely:

The spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor. (Luke 4:18,19)

The year of the LORD's favor of his "acceptable year" is the Jubilee, the periodic economic leveling-off provided for by the Mosaic law. Such a change is what Jesus says is now coming into view in his beginning ministry. It will involve attitudes, so it can be called "repentance," metanoia, "turning-the-mind-around." But it also involves social practices, "fruits worthy of repentance," new ways of using possessions and power. The promised coming change involves social and personal dimensions inseparably, with none of our modern speculative tendency to dodge the direct claim on us by debating whether the chicken or the egg comes first.



This was John's agenda, and Jesus'; but it is also ours. „Between their time and ours, there have been other ages when men were more concerned with other questions, other priority agenda. There were centuries when men were especially aware of the fragility of life and its brevity; they wanted a word from God that would speak to their fear of death and the hereafter. Man's basic need was seen as his mortality. In this context it is no surprise that Christian preaching and poetry dealt with mortality and that the good news we needed was spoken in terms of eternal life.

In other societies and cultures, people are plagued by anxiety, guilt, fear of judgment. In this context the good news is stated in terms of forgiveness, acceptance by God, and acceptance by other men. Today some rephrase it as self-acceptance. In still other ages, other cultures, man thinks of his need as primarily for help in getting a job or in facing sickness or poverty. To this as well the Christian message can speak. People are still asking these questions, and Christian preachers are still proclaiming good news in all these ways; why should they not?

But for Jesus in his time, and for increasing numbers of us in our time, the basic human problem is seen in less individualistic terms. The priority agenda for Jesus, and for many of us, is not mortality or anxiety, but unrighteousness, injustice. The need is not for consolation or acceptance but for a new order in which men may live together in love. In his time, therefore, as in ours, the question of revolution, the judgment of God upon the present order and the imminent promise of another one, is the language in which the gospel must speak. What most people mean by "revolution, the answer they want, is not the gospel; but the gospel, if it be authentic, must so speak as to answer the question of revolution. This Jesus did.