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Is Revolution Always Contrary to Morals?

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Notes and Comments

Is Revolution Always Contrary to Morals?

GERALD W. HEALY, S.J.

The *Daily Express*, during the past year published an article three times in substantially the same form. The second and third appearances were only five days apart, 18 June and 23 June 1979. By repeating the article on the editorial page the editor proved that he considered the article of great moment, even urgent. The subject matter of the article is the currently explosive question of the morality of recourse to violence against a supposedly oppressive government. Romulo P. Untalan, Judge, CFI, Legaspi City, is the author.

To prevent misunderstanding Judge Untalan clearly spells out his purpose in writing: "With the pronouncement that certain religious groups are boosting the communist movement, it is timely and worthwhile to recall some fundamental principles in ethics and moral theology taught by those who not only share in the sacred ministry, but also are moral philosophers and theologians of renown, with the hope that their profound insights . . . will direct the footsteps of the parties above alluded to unerringly through the labyrinthine maze of darkness back to the sunlight of truth."¹ (How these religious groups who are "boosting the communist movement" are to be impressed by citing authors who all reject communism is a problem the judge does not face.)

Leading Catholic ethicists and moralists are cited by the judge with their own internal citations from St. Paul and the immortal

1. *Daily Express*, 18 June 1979.

St. Thomas Aquinas. Pope John XXIII is also quoted, as well as a local writer, C. Henry Peschke, S.V.D., professor of moral theology at the Divine Word Seminary in Tagaytay, and "the great, if not the greatest moral theologian of modern times," the German Redemptorist, Bernard Haring.

The selection of experts made by the judge is impeccable. However, the manner in which these renowned authors are cited is almost a classic example of tailoring the sources to fit a preconceived thesis. By selective or incomplete quotation, unnuanced and/or out of context, the experts are made to say what the good judge wants them to say.

If the authors cited really said what the judge affirms, then the Philippine Revolution against Spain in 1898 was immoral and should never have taken place. The selection from Thomas J. Higgins, S.J. is absolute: "Rebellion which is sedition or the attempt to overthrow a legitimate government is always and everywhere wrong."² St. Thomas Aquinas is cited to the effect that sedition "is a special sin" and since "the power to rule comes from God, and as long as government retains that power, an attempt to overthrow it is defiance of divine authority."

There seems to be no way out. From the very statements of the judge the people of the Philippines acted immorally when they revolted against Spain. Likewise those who revolted against Hitler in Germany and Idi Amin in Uganda were morally wrong. The cruelty and oppression of the ruler is not to be considered, according to the selections of the judge. Once in power a government must be obeyed. "Small abuses of power are occurring constantly and serious ones occasionally in every state, because rulers are only human and fallible. Such causes cannot justify rebellion."³ Also "a government may abuse its power to rule and still retain a right to the loyalty of its subjects. If every abuse of authority gave citizens a right to destroy the government, civil order would be at an end."⁴

The selections of the judge prove too much. Something is wrong. What do the leading Catholic writers *really* say about this

2. Thomas J. Higgins, S.J., *Man as Man*, rev. ed. (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1958), p. 468.

3. Austin Fagothy, S.J., *Right and Reason*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Mosby, 1967), p. 346.

4. Higgins, *Man as Man*, p. 468.

admittedly explosive question?

If we use the same authors cited by Judge Untalan, a completely different thesis emerges.

C. Henry Peschke, S.V.D., for example, clearly states:

Obedience to legitimate authority is not an unconditional duty. It has its limits in natural and divine law. Where state authority becomes unjust and contradicts the law of God, the citizens are no longer bound to obey.⁵

Governments do not become illegitimate because of occasional cases of unjust laws or slow solution of national problems. But they become illegitimate through continuous misuse of their power contrary to the common welfare. In such instances citizens are entitled to remove and to replace it.⁶

Peschke then goes on to discuss the means of resisting an unjust and oppressive government. First, the legally available means must be employed. If there are no legally available means, then passive resistance may be used: non-violent refusal to obey the law, since "citizens are not bound to obey unjust laws and orders of their government. They have the right and not seldom even the obligation to defend themselves by public opposition in word and writing and by refusal of obedience."⁷

Peschke acknowledges that "traditional Christian eithics has always held that, apart from very special circumstances, non-violent resistance is the only permissible means to defend the citizens' right against unjust, despotic state authority. Civil war is mostly a greater misfortune for the common good than the abuse of power by state authority." Still there has been a shift away from this position as Peschke notes.⁸ Due to "the experiences with recent tyrannies of nazist and communist nature, theologians of the present are more inclined to grant an oppressed people the right of violent resistance, not excluding the killing of the tyrant himself, than were the theologians of the past."⁹

Among the theologians cited by Peschke as favoring this modern approach to violent resistance when all other efforts are in vain, is no other than Bernard Häring, the German Redemptorist

5. C. Henry Peschke, S.V.D., *Christian Ethics*, vol. 2, (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1975), p. 290.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

praised by Judge Untalan as "the great, if not the greatest moral theologian of modern times."

What does Bernard Häring say, writing as a German who lived through the worst years of Hitler and personally witnessed the horrors of a Nazi prison camp? Häring states clearly that a "legitimately established regime can lose its rightful authority through misuse of its power contrary to the common welfare: through suppression of religion and morality, of justice and right, in a word through perversion of the end and meaning of authority. And once it is established that such a regime has lost its right to govern through gross misuse of its power, then by that very fact the people attain the right to find means to protect their own interest against injustice."¹⁰ The only problem is the choice of the means to be used by the citizens against the oppressive ruler.

Häring answers the question of means by citing the modern authors who allow active resistance against a regime "which is openly an enemy of the people and which violates the common good permanently and in the grossest manner". He then spells out the conditions required for lawful "revolution." The conditions enumerated are very much like those moralists postulate to justify recourse to war, with the many nuances demanded by the gravity of the decision:

1. Active resistance can be justified only in instances of gross abuse of civil authority.
Examples of such gross abuse: Suppression of the most essential freedoms, the complete substitution of might for justice and right, direction of the economy entirely to parties or groups rather than to the common good.
2. Active resistance is permitted only when all peaceful measures have been exhausted.
3. There must be a well founded hope and prospect that the active resistance actually will prove successful and that the evil conditions will not worsen rather than improve because of it.
4. The use of force must not exceed the measure essential for

10. Bernhard Häring, *The Law of Christ*, vol. 3, trans. Edward G. Kaiser (New York: Paulist Press), p. 150.

removal of the evil. Håring adds here a wise caution, citing another author: "For safety sake it is better to exert greater force than is necessary rather than too little."¹¹

CONCLUSION

No tyrant, no dictator can hope to prop up his regime or deprive his victims of a defense by appealing to Catholic moral teaching. Similarly not every revolutionary can justify an attempt to overthrow the government by citing these authorities. The Catholic position is a very balanced one, stressing the extreme caution that must be used in applying the principles to a particular nation. Since the common good is at issue and the lives of many thousands could be endangered, much thought and much consultation would be required before reaching a decision. One man or even one group could not be trusted to make such a frightening choice as armed revolt in the modern world. It would seem that only some kind of a broad consensus of the people would suffice to justify exposing them to the horrors of modern civil war such as we read about in Southeast Asia and in Central America, and Africa.

Given such a consensus, and the other conditions being fulfilled, the Catholic moralists could be cited as approving armed revolt against a regime whose abuses have become unbearable. Those who might be tempted to think of armed revolt, especially the educated clergy, will not be frightened away by someone misquoting the opinion of the leading moralists. An honest presentation of their opinions might make any intelligent person hesitate, awed by the awesome gravity of the decision with all its frightful consequences. At least the need to exhaust the search for alternatives to violence might be pursued more thoroughly.

A quotation from a New York newspaper, the *Daily News*, 22 April 1979 in an article on violence in northern Ireland, provides an historical insight that should help us all to crystallize our thinking on this problem. The author is Kevin Cahill, M.D., special assistant to the governor of New York state on policy matters relating to northern Ireland where violence has become almost a way of life. Doctor Cahill states:

11. Håring, *The Law of Christ*, pp. 151-52.

For if history holds one clear lesson for us it is that, when political leaders refuse to use constitutional means to achieve justice, revolutionaries will use violent means.

And conversely, if men of peace are allowed to pursue their goals, the men of violence would be given no quarter.

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