

PONTIFICIA UNIVERSITAS LATERANENSIS

ACADEMIA ALFONSIANA

INSTITUTUM SUPERIUS THEOLOGIAE MORALIS

STUDIA MORALIA

VII

1969

CONTRIBUTIONES AD PROBLEMA SPEI

DESLÉE & SOCII - EDITORES PONTIFICII

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HOPE: ITS REVOLUTIONARY ASPECT IN PATRISTIC THOUGHT

SUMMARIUM

Auctor breviter adumbrat quinam aspectus doctrinae hodiernae de obiecto spei christianae, individuales et communitarii, in scriptis patrum inveniantur. Christiani generatim persuasione eschatologica freti magis spe et patientia quam actuali in rerum terrestrium mutationes interventu movebantur. Non intendebant conatibus resistendi potestatibus politicis constitutis, attamen novum ordinem societatis expetebant, sperantes promissa Christi de adventu regni in terris aliquando obtactura, Domino operante potius quam hominibus.

In parte orientali ecclesiae imperatores byzantini, quamvis talibus opinionibus de Christi Pantokratore imbuti, tamen activitate sua tam civilia quam ecclesiastica ordinare sategerunt. Quorum regimini absoluto episcopi et monaci resistebant, dum spem fundatam in Christi qui resurrexit praesentiam eiusque promissis divinisationis finalis insistebant.

In occidente rectores ecclesiae aliquando imperatorum auxilium contra haereses expetebant, aliquando vero resistebant malis ordinis socialis et politici existentis. Praecipue tamen studebant novae civilisationi iustitiae et caritatis fundamento innixae extruendae.

Opinio, quod ecclesia praedicando submissionem potestatibus existentibus populos imbecillos reddidit, nulla evidentia sustinetur in aetate patristica. Sciebant enim auctores christiani, mutationes politicas esse impossibiles, quin tamen destiterint episcopi mala societatis non verbo tantum sed et opere emendare. Theologiam de vita societatis, temporum conditionibus impediti, non elaboraverunt. Nec etiam de usu violentiae in bello unanimiter iudicabant.

Quamvis doctrina spei christianae fere unice ad resurrectionem et vitam aeternam dirigeret, factis ecclesia christiana bonum terrenum promovere non destitit.

In quacumque periodo christiani sensum mysteriorum unionis finalis cum Deo et resurrectionis Christi totiusque generis humani exquirere

debent, respicientes formam culturae in qua vivunt. Sic etiam fundamenta spei vitae aeternae et desideria actionesque pro efficienda iustitia sociali et promovendo amore proximi secundum nostri temporis exigentias hodie componenda sunt.

The revolutionary aspects of the Christian gospel have been neglected in traditional exegesis and theological speculation. Pauline political thought as expressed in Romans 13 and echoed in 1 Peter, called for respect and obedience to the civil authorities who wielded God's power, and were charged as his ministers « to execute wrath on him who does evil » (Rom. 13:5; Pet. 2:14). Even the book of Revelations, despite its sharply detailed confrontation of the « kings, and merchants, and mariners » who would be confounded in the destruction of Babylon (ch. 18), does not encourage the primitive Christians to contest the injustice of the demoniac-dominated, political, and economic system thus explicitly described and condemned.

Nevertheless, there was a strong, even angry reaction to the exploitation of the poor, and the misuse of worldly power in the words and deeds attributed to Christ in the gospels. He is quoted as saying that he had come to « Cast fire on the earth; and what will I but that it be enkindled! » (Lc. 12:49). This pericope has generally been viewed in relation to the statement, « The kingdom of God suffers violence; and the violent will carry it off », (Mt. 11:12). But both quotations have been interpreted in the sense of a man's doing violence to his lower nature and passions, in order to gain the Kingdom of Heaven.

There is no direct reference to these texts in the earliest patristic writings. Nor, generally speaking, is there evidence of a Christian attempt to oppose or overthrow the imperial government. Quite the opposite is the case. When the Jews rose against the Roman hegemony in Jerusalem under Titus and Vespasian, the Christians left the city. And under the earlier persecutions, the Christian apologists maintained that, despite the injustices to which they were subject, faithful Christians were conscientious citizens who prayed constantly for the Emperor and the good of the empire¹.

¹ Cf. F. MURPHY, *Politics and the Early Christian* (Rome, Desclée, 1967) 69ff.

Nevertheless the early Christians did oppose the structures of the society in which they lived; and while there is no direct evidence of a concerted effort or plot, they were accused by their pagan neighbors of anarchic and seditious tendencies. The cause of the persecutions of the Christians were summed up by Tacitus in the accusation that they were guilty of *odium humani generis* — a hatred for the human race. This certainly implied that they refused to accept the civic structures of the Empire in its religious aspects — a most important factor in ancient political life. And much of the early Christian apologetic is taken up with proving that, as in the *Letter to Diognetus*, they were in all things like their fellow citizens, evil-doing alone excepted. They did not form a 'third race' — viz. they were either Romans or barbarians. and not a people apart like the Jews. But their function was to enlighten the society in which they lived: « as the soul is to the body, so are Christians to the world »².

Much earlier, as witnessed by the *Letter of Ps. Barnabas*, the Christians had broken the structure of the Jewish Temple society. And this had been a deliberate move. One consequence of this confrontation with the traditional religion whence they came, was the violent reaction of the Jews against them, that contributed to the suspicion under which the Christians were gradually viewed by the Roman authorities. As the anti-Christian publicist, Celsus, pointed out, though a people apart, the Jews had no difficulty in accepting the Emperor as king, or the worldly hegemony of the Roman empire; and in their synagogues and temples they prayed explicitly for the caesar. The Christians by contrast had no Caesar but Christ — and it was this, and not the traditional belief in the despotism and evil mindedness of the 'bad emperors' that occasioned the persecutions. To the Romans, the Christians posed a problem not unlike the fear-engendered reaction to the spread of communism today, however this comparison may shock the Christian integrist³.

² Cf. H.I. MARROU, *A Diognète* (Paris, Sourc. chrét. 33, 1951) Introduction and notes.

³ Cf. J. MOREAU, *La Persécution du Christianisme dans l'empire romain* (Paris, 1956).

The Christians did call for a reordering of society; and their tendency was to boycott civil functions and public enterprises in which they felt the basic Christian attitude toward God and the world was compromised. It is true that in the *Letter of Clement of Rome* (a.d. 97) attention is drawn to the need for law and order in society; and in emphasizing the obedience to be given by subjects to their superiors in the church, a comparison is drawn between the hierarchical regularity established by God in the cosmos, as well as the discipline of the Roman army. While Clement rebukes the younger generation for challenging the governance of their elders, he does cite the fact that in the past, pagan societies, the leader of a community was considered a hero if, rather than occasion revolution, he withdrew⁴.

While there is no indication in the primitive documents from the *Didache* to the *Shepherd of Hermas* of an attempt to challenge the social or economic structures of the Roman Empire as such — and in fact attention is called to obedience to the civil authority — still the Christians did preach a moral doctrine of social justice. They called the attention of their audience to this fact, as the *Letter to Diognetus* and the early apologists attest. Justin Martyr even cautioned the Roman authorities against being double-crossed by the demons who were no longer capable of affecting the Christians. And he maintains that were the empire to submit itself to the Law of Christ, it could achieve the peace it was obviously seeking. He thus demands a fundamental change of ideology as well as structure. And he evidently had some hope that this could come about. In much of this apologetic literature there is an evident conviction on the part of the Christians that Christ's promises regarding the coming of the kingdom — the source of their hope — would be fulfilled here on earth. In the end, not unconscious of the example of Socrates, who had attempted to liberate the society of his day from the dishonesty and injustice inspired by the demons (*Apol.* 5:31; 2 *Apol.* 7:3), Justin witnessed to his own confrontation with the empire by his death as a martyr⁵.

⁴ Cf. A. ZIEGLER, « Auswanderung », *Neue Studien zum ersten Klemensbrief* (Munich, 1958), 95-101.

⁵ Cf. A. EHRHARDT, *Politische Metzaphysik*, II (Tübingen, Mohr, 1959), 57-90.

It was in this vein that the true Christian protest against the injustice and exploitation of the empire was demonstrated. In actual fact it was the Stoics, much more than the Christians, who had fought for the emancipation of the slaves, a curious fact that is only explicable in the light of the eschatological conviction that underlay the whole Christian consciousness. St Paul had declared that in Christ, there was neither slave nor freeman, neither Greek or Barbarian. And the conviction spread that once a man had been engrafted in Christ through faith and baptism, he had achieved the true freedom of the sons of God. This conviction, in turn, was heightened by the necessity of « obeying God rather than men ». It became the determination of the martyrs, and is reflected in the stimulating literature provided by such Christian champions as Tertullian and Origen in their respective « Exhortations to Martyrdom »⁶.

The Christian considered himself a freeman under the aegis of God, in his kingdom. Hence while he opposed the religious dictation of the Empire, and attempted to convert the Emperor, he was convinced that this would be accomplished in God's good time. Meanwhile he had the guarantee of the resurrection and restoration of all things in Christ, as the foundation stone for his hope in working out his worldly existence amid the obstacles of secular opposition.

Actually there is an ambivalence in the early Christian approach to this problem. For both Tertullian and Origen produced essays on *Patience* in which, taking their argument from Christ's passion, they set the tradition of Christian forbearance before the inevitable sufferings of this world. This notion, in turn, became the foundation for the theological tendency preserved particularly in the Orthodox communions that considered themselves the church of the « last days ». They concentrated « eschatologically » on the consummation of Christ's mission. In this conception, Christ is the Pantocrator, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, already victorious over the forces of darkness, who invited the faithful to enter

⁶ Cf. W.H. FREND, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, (New York, Anchor, 1967).

into his presence with joy and contentment, despite the sufferings of the present time of trial.

There is an inkling of this conviction present in the early documents such as the *Didache* and the *Ps. Barnabas*, and more particularly in the Antiochene theology that concentrated on the Resurrection as the symbol and proof of man's eventual deification. It was likewise adopted by the Byzantine rulers, beginning in particular with Anastasius I (d. 518) and Justinian (527-565) who surrounded their court ceremonial with the splendor associated with oriental kingship, and encouraged the building of great churches and their adornment with striking mosaics depicting the magnificence of Christ as ruler of the world⁷.

This did not prevent the Emperors from attempting to solve the immensely difficult economic and military problems to which the later Roman Empire fell heir, in repelling the barbarian invasions from the north, and in attempting to conquer the oriental satrapies from Persia to the great Moslem empire. Nor did it cut down their zest for missionary enterprises in the establishment of Christian rule in all the world. But it did color their thinking in governing their own peoples to whom they considered themselves given by God as his consecrated representative⁸.

Likewise in dealing directly with the Church, the Byzantine emperors felt they had inherited the Constantinian heritage of being an *Isapostolus* — equal to an apostle — hence commissioned by God to govern the church along with the patriarchs and the bishops. And the people generally accepted this concept, for it gave them a sensation of the presence of the sacred that was later transferred to their ikons and holy shrines. It did not, however, prevent the bishops or the monks from contesting the decisions of the rulers in religious matters; nor did it prevent occasional riots in the cities such as at Antioch in the time of John Chrysostom (a.d. 397) or the *Nike* uprising under Justinian (532).

It was the monastic movement that almost from the start served as a focal point of revolutionary protest against the totalitarian tendencies of the early Christian Emperors and the Byzan-

⁷ Cf. L. CERFAUX et J. TONDBIAU, *Le culte des souverains* (Tournai, 1957).

⁸ Cf. E. STEIN, *Histoire du Bas Empire*, (Paris, 1949).

tine government. Mainly as monophysites, addicted to an intense devotion to the divinity of Christ, and a mystically oriented spirituality, the monks supported the bishops, and particularly the patriarchs, who opposed the dictatorial settlement of theological issues that were not infrequently influenced by dynastic and economic considerations, from the decision at Ephesus in 430 and the Chalcedonian definition (451), to the Iconoclastic terrors of the eighth century. The monks had the respect and support of the ordinary people down through the centuries. They preached a spirituality of great hope based upon Christ's presence among them, and on his guarantees of their final divinisation that was exemplified in his own resurrection and triumph over the powers of evil.

In the west, the church also played an ambivalent part in dealing with the government and society. The conversion of Constantine (313) was at first welcomed with enthusiasm. But Tertullian's prophecy that even should the Roman Emperors all become christian, there could be no compromise between the things of Caesar and those of God, prevailed over the earlier hopes of a Justin Martyr. Constantine was hailed as the « new Moses », beginning a new era, by Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, and for a short while, by Athanasius of Alexandria. But the emperors' influence in the church was soon resented and then repudiated by Athanasius himself, exiled in the west, and by Hilary of Poitiers dealing with the sons of Constantine.

While a Leo I (440-461) did not hesitate to utilize imperial assistance in the suppression of heresy, and the promotion of his ecclesiastical policies, his successors found themselves at continual odds with the Emperors in Constantinople, and with the new barbarian kings in northern Europe. And the great Celtic saints from Columba to Columbanus had no hesitation in attacking the social as well as the moral evils they encountered among the emerging nations. Their motivation was a mixed set of ideals. While they were almost fanatically set on achieving the kingdom of heaven in the world beyond, and in theory counted the things of this world as nought, in fact they worked and fought strenuously to bring order and justice and charity into the dealings of men with one another. They founded monasteries and churches, and exhausted themselves preaching the gospel to the barbarians,

as well as to their own people. In so doing they created a new civilization whose foundation was the Christian hope in man's perfectability.

The claim that the church has been an enervating factor in preaching subservience and submission in the face of totalitarian governments and debasing societal structures is simply not clear from the patristic evidence. In its own public policy, the early church favored the rule of law and order; and generally speaking, it encouraged the people to put up with exploitation and injustice in a spirit of Christian long suffering based on Christ's passion, only because it seemed that nothing positive could be done to emend or destroy the political structures under which it was operating. There is the fact that it did put much more stress on man's spiritual destiny than on his immediate worldly welfare. But this attitude was totally within the context of the society of which it was part. Actually when the nerve centers of the Church's beliefs were touched, it reacted violently.

In the social sphere, the testimony of early churchmen such as Basil, and Ambrose, and John Chrysostom rings down through the ages protesting against the abuse of riches and the exploitation of the poor. And popes like Virgilius (d. 555), Gregory the Great (590-604) and their successors, all during the early Middle Ages, were gravely concerned with the economic and social problems of Rome and Italy, in as far as they could remedy them. They took over the provisionment of the Roman campagna when the grain ships from Egypt and the south were cut off. Earlier, despite their pessimism in regard to terrestrial affairs, Cyprian of Carthage and even Augustine, had been engaged in great charitable and social works, that became one of the church's main functions all during the Middle Ages.

What must be realized in attempting to make value judgments in regard to their temporal activities is that they were living in a culture almost totally different from the modern world. In his early years as bishop, Augustine had great scruples regarding the use of the civil power in suppressing heresy. It was only when he was confronted by the destructive action of the Circumcellions — not far removed in mentality from the modern Students for a Democratic Society, in that they tried to overturn the economic

and social structures of their day in literal pursuit of the Biblical *deposuerunt sedentes de sede et exaltaverunt humiles* (cfr Luc 1,52) — that Augustine began to change his mind on the subject.

Had the early churchmen been confronted with modern conditions, there is every possibility that they would have worked out a social theology in which violence might possibly have been considered justifiable. The primary difficulty in this sphere is the fact that when Crist said, « A man should lay down his life for his neighbor, » he did not add that in so doing, he had the right to deprive an enemy of his life. In fact, he instructed his followers to love their enemies. It is unhappily true that traditional Christianity has never taken this latter counsel too seriously; and that text books of moral theology have always justified the waging of war in the final protection of one's just rights. Even Vatican Council II hesitated before an out and out condemnation of defensive warfare⁹.

Again the attitude of the early Christians is not clear or consistent in this regard, For the most part, their objection to performing military service was based on the fact that the ceremonial functions of the Roman army were religious rites directed to false gods. Origen attempted to refute the accusations of Celsus that Christians, in refusing to take posts in the army and the civil administration, did not perform their civic duties. He maintained that they prayed for the Emperor and the state, and thus did a much greater service. But there always were Christians in the Roman and barbarian armies. Bishop Ossius of Cordoba apparently formed part of Constantine's council even before his conversion; and the final persecution under Diocletian in 305 broke out from a fear on the Emperor's part that the increasing number of Christians in the military and administrative services forbode ill for the Empire.

It is true that the early Christian's hope was directed almost singularly to the resurrection and the promises of eternal life. As a consequence, he tended to accept the sufferings of this life in a spirit of resignation. If he opposed them, it was much more in a

⁹ 2nd Vatican Council, *Pastoral constitution « Gaudium et Spes »*, n. 79. Cf. F. MURPHY, « The Moral Theologian and the Problem of Peace », *Studia Moralia* IV (1966) 373-383.

pacifistic tendency toward withdrawal, as in the early desert fathers, and the monastic movement in general. But almost from the beginning, it proved impossible for a force such as monasticism to stay clear of worldly involvement and entanglement. The church itself, though its final objective was directed toward the achievement of the Kingdom of God in a spiritual atmosphere, could not refrain from earthly engagement.

In a famous exhortation to the christians of his day, Tertulian (d. ca. 220) towards the close of a vigorous condemnation of the theatre and circus in his *De Spectaculis*, advised his contemporaries that they had a much greater and more magnificent spectacle in the contemplation of the last days of this world as announced by Christ in St. Matthew's gospel, with the preparation for the triumphal, second coming of the Savior. It was there that hope should be concentrated, and not on the things of this world. But it was actually an unrealistic consideration; and had evidently no practical consequence. It was in keeping with the millenaristic tendencies that the early church had quickly condemned. While convinced it was « in, but not of this world », the early church allowed neither a despising of earthly existence, nor its apotheosis.

The christian hope is anchored in the promise of man's final union with God. Its encouragement is contained in St. Paul's vivid references to Christ's, and all mankind's resurrection. Christians in each age have had to interpret the significance of these mysteries in accord with the cultural pattern in which they found themselves. Hence the reordination of modern theological thinking on the resurrection is fully in keeping with a sound Christian tradition. It is likewise the result of an ever-renewing sense of hope within the church. For the church is suspended between faith and charity, explicitly on the conviction that as Christ lived among us as a man — who died and rose again from the dead — so we are to live on as men with 'hope'. The consequences of this conviction have to be reviewed in each era and refashioned with each new age. For as Benedetto Croce recognized, each age is equidistant from eternity.

Motivated by the hope engendered in the promise of the resurrection, the contemporary Christian has to work out his solution to the problems of abuse and exploitation in the social

order, they now confront the church. The modern state for the most part is not demanding an act of worship of Caesar as such, although there are ideologists who have attempted to create a mystical body of the state in contradiction to the mystical body of Christ that is the church. If called upon to oppose the imperialism of wealth, possibly through the exercise of violence, the christian must include in his passion for justice, and his love for his fellow man, the realization that Christ assured him: « I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall not taste death foverer ». Thus should the christian find it necessary to lay down his life for his friend, or an enemy, his attachment to the virtue of hope will not be built upon an empty dream. It has substance, and it is accompanied by the guarantee that only the man who is willing to lose his life will save it. These are the *logoi* or sayings of Christ that were uppermost in the mind of the patristic age, when christians were frequently faced with martyrdom. They must become foremost in contemporary thinking, if this epoch is to go down in history as a new Age of the Fathers.

Rome, Academia Alfonsiana.