

## TWENTY YEARS LATER

John Howard Yoder, published, 1991, as an epilogue added to the Italian translation of *The Politics of Jesus*.

In the decades since The Politics of Jesus was first published, the work of scripture scholars has gone on. To review in full detail what has been said on each of the themes in the book would demand a new book. All that can be offered here is a survey, without erudite annotation, of any light which continuing research adds to the pertinence of the basic thesis. As the reader knows, the objective of the book is to propose a synthesis, a general perspective, not a commentary or compendium.

There continue to be scripture scholars whose concern is to read, behind the documents so to speak, how the Gospels got written; how specific fragments of the account must first have been formulated, then transmitted orally, edited, gathered, in order to produce the texts we have. By the nature of the case, such analysis does not intend to contribute much to clarifying whether the Jesus of the Gospel narrative was a political person.

There are still those who, in order to compare the Gospels with other literature of the time, focus attention on some smaller aspect of his role, as wonder-worker or teacher of wisdom. Nevertheless the number of scholars is increasing for whom it is appropriate to understand that the Gospels intend to describe the public career of a man whose audiences were "hungering and thirsting for justice", i.e. looking for a liberator. Some of them continue (like Brandon, already referred to in my text above) to doubt that in the original setting the nonviolence of Jesus was as clear as I think it was; I disagree with them in that detail, but what matters in this epilogue is that they agree with me that that is a proper question.

An especially striking specimen of the growing readiness of scholars to read the Gospel with social realism is the attention given to the "jubilee" theme first brought seriously into the discussion by Andre' Trocm. I know of three dissertations pursuing further different dimensions of the theme - some more interested in asking "historically" what Jesus said and meant, what "jubilee" signified in first-century Palestine, others pursuing more the pertinence of Jubilee imagery to illuminate the Gospel as a whole.

Those respondents who have taken the book's witness seriously have added some valuable nuances, some superficial, others more basic. A specimen of the superficial: it may well be that the word "zealot" was not used in the time of Jesus; we first find it attested in the narrative of the uprising of Menahem in 66ff. (In any case Jesus did not speak Greek). Yet this does not change at all the fact that the phenomenon of armed insurrection was present, represented by real people

and as a possible social tactic. Thus when Luke uses the word it may be an anachronism linguistically but not historically.

More important: the social vision of the "zealots" in that day was not "progressive": they wanted to restore David Kingship and law-keeping. Therefore it can be argued that Jesus' rejection of their program should not be juxtaposed to the case being made for "revolutionary" violence in our time. To that I have a double response:

a) it is very dubious, in a setting where anti-roman forces had not power at all, and the only way they could hope for success was to believe in miraculous divine assistance, whether the historian can fairly distinguish between visions of the restoration of the reign of David and other visions calling for the poor people of the earth to have a better life. The David and Solomon of history were oppressors; yet the David of the Psalms and the prophetic visions was the rescuer of the widow and orphan.

b) Yet even if that distinction were possible, it is not germane to the question concerning which the Zealot temptation arose in my account. That question was not a choice between backward- and forward- looking visions of liberation, or between bourgeois and socialist understandings of "freedom". The issue was whether violence is justified in principle to serve what one holds to be an imperative social cause. With regard to that issue, Jesus' response to the Zealot temptation as to means is relevant, regardless of the specific content which his contemporaries gave, or which we give, to "freedom". Nothing of what Jesus says about love for enemy or about choosing servanthood rather than lordship indicates a basis for discriminating between bourgeois or fascist enemies and other enemies, or between "progressive" lordship and other kinds of lordship.

More than my original text recognized, there are two contrasting understandings of the editorial slant of Luke. One of them sees him as the apologete, concerned to convince his friend Theophilus that the Christian movement is not a threat to the social order. He retells the same story as Mark in order to support that impression. It then follows that, if after being filtered through this editorial intention, there still remains in the story the picture of a Jesus whose leadership provoked social unrest, that message is likely authentic. There are however other styles of Gospel criticism which look less to how material is shaped and more to how it is chosen. Thus one can say that Luke is more sympathetic to a political vision of Jesus. This is supported by the comparison of the beatitudes common to Luke 6 and Matthew 5. It is supported by the platform sermon which Luke alone reports. In any case these differences do not make the Jesus to whom the Gospels point any less political. Even John, if read with the different tools a different kind of Gospel requires, does not portray an apolitical Jesus.

The portion of the 1972 book which was most offensive to some readers was its recourse to the Pauline writings, in order to demonstrate that the earliest Christians after Jesus (before the writing of the Gospels, in fact) were thinking and living in a way which demonstrated the impact

of Jesus' message. Some scripture scholars, and also some contemporary polemicists, have a stake in separating Jesus from Paul (or more generally from early missionary Jewish Christianity). This has been most weighty where it interfered with the message of the chapter on "Revolutionary Subordination". Superficial liberationist argument is accustomed to agreeing with conservative readings of the message of Paul as having sold out the radicality of Jesus. They agree that Paul is conservative, and then they reject him. They reject my reading of the "subordination" passages not because they have understood it and can show that it interprets the texts wrongly, but because it challenges the grid they have been using to reject the value of the epistles (not only Paul; the same message is in Peter) as witnesses to the Gospel.

The least thorough section of The Politics of Jesus, the least close to particular texts, is its last chapter. It is therefore quite significant to report that the last decades have seen a great increase, among university scripture scholars (non-scholarly readers were always fascinated) in attention to the apocalyptic strands of the New Testament, as well as to the wealth of apocalyptic concern in the non-canonical texts of the same periods.

It is increasingly being acknowledged that the simple pragmatic determinism with which so much recent thinking has considered social and political ethics, as nothing but the calculation of how to bring the most effective institutional power to bear toward the attainment of obvious short- and medium-range goals, represents a truncated and hope-less vision of the human condition. The mechanistic vision of the social process which is presupposed in the moral justification of violence in the interest of "justice" is correlated in a deep cultural way with a world view which has written off both divine agency and human freedom. The world view which writes off divine agency and human freedom is the self-evident world view of those who today are in control. Apocalyptic literature is written by and for the others.

In the preface to this book I used the then-current phrase "biblical realism" to designate the approach to the scriptures which seeks to let the texts speak for themselves, by permitting the message to stand in judgment on the scholars' tools. Since then this approach did not become a "school"; its intention is too modest and its methods too self-critical to enable it to take on momentum like other farther-out scholarly trends. The scholars representing this modest mode (Paul Minear, Marcus Barth) continue to be read with respect, but the label "biblical realism" has been forgotten.

In sum: scholarly criticism of my writing (of which there has been little) and independent scholarly reading of the same themes (of which there has been much) since 1972 has confirmed and clarified the usefulness of the approach of The Politics of Jesus. But beyond the guild of scripture scholars, what else has been going on in the world of social moral discourse that might throw light on the relevance of this vision of Jesus? I must limit myself to one specimen from the surface of the world of state power and one from the depths of the philosophy of culture.

First the depth: Rene' Girard, literary critic turned ethnologist, may be named here as representing important new insights which increase our awareness that the Gospel describes the salvation of the real world. Girard has projected with encyclopedic breadth a vision of the role of violence at the root of social structures. His sources range from classical literature to primitive tribes; the phenomenon of shedding someone's blood so that the power structure of society may be safe is universal. The power of violence is not that of social pragmatism but a mimetic impulse deep in our cultural psyche. When seen in the light of that vision of human structures of domination, the Cross of Jesus transforms the meaning of the power game from the inside, in a way whose importance is all the more striking in the light of the fact that Christendom has not faithfully represented it. Girard is not a believer in any pietistic or doctrinal sense; one need not be, to record the fact that in Jesus' renunciation of Lordship a new resolution to the human dilemma is manifested.

I disavow the scholarly capacity to judge Girard's project as a whole. It is so multidimensional that there may in fact be no place to stand from where one could critique (or validate) it. Nonetheless it represents a powerful verification that a realist reading of the Jesus story is relevant today as some other older readings may no longer be.

Secondly the political: Since the events of 1986 our world has seen a proliferation of movements of liberation through nonviolence, so reading across the globe a message and a method which many previously had thought could apply only when (as with Gandhi) the adversaries were British gentlemen or (as with Martin Luther King Jr.) with the central government on one's side. Dictatorial dictatorships have crumbled all across eastern Europe in the face of discipline nonviolent non-cooperation. Nelson Mandela was freed in South Africa not because of the power of the "armed struggle" which he refused (for negotiating purposes) to renounce formally but because of the moral power of his people's suffering. The intifada claimed a place on the world agenda not because of kids throwing stones but because an increasingly cohesive community of resistance refused to respond to tanks with guns. These "successes" do not mean a new world has begun. These various "victors" have not yet been able to solve the problems their new responsibility has brought them. Eastern Europe is chaotic. The Philipino government did not carry through with social reform; the ANC did not make peace with other black movements; and the Palestinians forfeited their high ground by praising Saddam Hussein. It is all the more significant that the renunciation of violence in favor of cohesive resistance can be more powerful than the machine gun to liberate, even when the situation is not as propitious or the leadership as skilled as in Gandhi's case, and even when the recourse to nonviolence is not the product of a pure and principled philosophical or religious commitment.

A dominant mode of interpretation, bearing its ripest fruit in the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr but with roots reaching back to Augustine, responds critically at this point that "the power of nonviolence" as expressed in the events which I have just reviewed has nothing to do with the cross of Jesus. Jesus' love of enemy, they say, was a moral absolute unconcerned for social impact, whereas "nonviolence" is pragmatic. Jesus gave his life freely, they say, whereas "nonviolence" seeks one's own interests. Jesus called as disciples only those who had counted the

cost, whereas "nonviolence" mobilizes multitudes.

Each of those differences is partly true; Augustine and Niebuhr are partly right in distinguishing between the immediate and the mediate impact of the obedience of the people of God on the course of events. Yet the fundamental neoplatonist dualism which makes those contrasts self-evident to them is false if Jesus was truly human and truly God in our midst. Freely giving one's life is the way to find it again. A life guided by what some call "moral absolutes" (although the term is inadequate) is in fact pragmatically effective. The disciplined commitment of the few ready to bear the cross is the way to mobilize multitudes. The (modest and ephemeral) "successes of nonviolence" do not "prove" that the political approach of Jesus was "right". The slope of the truth claim is tilted the other way. Because God and the human condition are as Jesus manifested them to be, suffering love is in fact effective in social process; not always or right away, but in the long run, and more so than zealot lordship. The events of the last decades have made this more visible.

Between the evident "power of nonviolence" and the deep witness of Girard I could, of course, have reviewed the enormous expansion of attention directed to "liberation" as theological theme since I first wrote. Direct attention to that literature would be worthwhile to clarify the thesis of the above study; but the very existence of that literature suffices to demonstrate my fundamental claim, as clear today as in 1972:

The angel told his mother to break with custom and name her child "JHWH liberates"; no reading of what that child went on to do in God's name can be fair which does not elucidate his mission to liberate in all its glorious and costly realism.