

The Role of the Christian in the World

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No-one will deny that our global condition calls for profound, if not revolutionary change. Even conservative politicians now resort to slogans like the ‘green revolution’, the ‘education revolution’, the ‘energy revolution’. Such rhetoric sounds as if the transformation we need has already begun. To be sure, people live in an atmosphere of constant movement as technology and even social forms undergo frequent change. However, to think that we are moving is an illusion because the fundamentals by which the world works are not changing at all.

Against this backdrop, I shall argue that only Christians can be true revolutionaries provided they take the Fall and God’s Kingdom seriously.

Today, the human condition confronts us globally more than ever. The further we go along the path of history, the more we realize that, while we may have gained a measure of control of the world in a rational sense, we are unable to control the consequences of our actions. In fact, all human attempts to solve the problems of the world only increase the difficulties.

Faced with this impasse we are tempted to intensify our efforts, but misgivings remain: the outcome is beyond our control. Similarly, we are unable to compare our age with previous ages. Who is to say that in thirteenth century Europe when one out of every three died of the plague, people were not as troubled by anxieties and apocalyptic forebodings as we are? This brings me to my main point. For Christians, life is not historic but apocalyptic. Let me explain what I mean.

Only the Christian is aware of two revelation truths: we live in a fallen world and one day God will set things to rights because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Only the Christian can hold such a vision, knowing that in that day “all things” will be confronted by judgment and mercy. In other words, the Christian lives even now as if every day were “his last” although, historically speaking, this is not the end of the world. What matters is not “the end of the world” but life, which in turn justifies the desire of our contemporaries for a true revolution (although it is unattainable by human means).

At this point, the role of the Christian is decisive and truly revolutionary. Under God, Christians share in preserving the world. As “salt and light”, they are linked through the life-giving Spirit to the inexhaustible revolutionary force of hope at work in the midst of the world.

Christians are commanded not to be conformed to this world, for conformity to its history leads to disaster—in our time to the death of millions, possibly eliminating the human race.

When I say the role of the Christian is revolutionary, I do not mean that we are to solve the problem of climate change or find ways of abolishing the bomb. Rather, that we must never lose sight of the revolutionary character of the Christian faith.

Our revolutionary position does not depend on us but on the Holy Spirit. After all, we are not Christians for self-chosen reasons. Christ chose us that we might be “salt and light” for the good of the world. As long as Christ is acting in the Church, we are revolutionaries by definition.

This position has serious implications. First, we must remain in a perpetual state of revolution towards the world. Unless we are the ferment of change through the gospel, the world will continue its suicidal course for it cannot save itself. Second, we are not to change such mechanisms as a government or an economy, but challenge the foundation of civilization itself. Let me illustrate.

Right now, military experts in Australia are debating what fighter bomber we ought to buy. In this discussion the need for fighter bombers is taken as “fact”, to which the military establishment, politicians and most of the public, pay homage. Blinded by the “prince of this world”, they do not realize that they are bowing to an idol.

Only Christians can see through this deception. Only Christians can ask the more radical question of whether an alternative civilization is possible—one founded on love and compassion rather than on state-sanctioned violence. Only a church that moves in the power of the Holy Spirit can take such a prophetic stance and warn the world that its present path leads to suicide. Only such a church will also be ready to live with the consequences of challenging an ever-violent Caesar.

Christians are equally aware that no human effort will usher in the Kingdom of God. While they belong to this Kingdom already, they are also citizens of a nation, members of families; they must earn money like other people with whom they live and share their condition. They know they must not neglect their duties and be involved in the life of the community like everyone else.

All this they do “in the world”, but they cannot belong to it, for they follow another “Master” whose ambassadors they are. Under his direction, they may be sent out as proclaimers of the gospel. Or they may be sent to spy out the conditions of the world and so prepare the way in certain places for the Kingdom to come with power through their intercession.

Moreover, Christians also know that the world and the Kingdom can never coincide. Therefore, they cannot abandon one or the other. Instead, they have to suffer the tension of this dualism, called as they are to be “salt and light” at the intersection of the two.

Because the world is under judgment, they must, for the sake of the world, plunge themselves into the concrete realities of the temporary social, political and economic spheres of life. This is not in order to lessen the opposition between the world and the Kingdom, nor to usher in the Kingdom of God, but to so change the conditions of the world that the world may hear the gospel. This task calls for the preservation of an order that is open to the claims of God.

However, because the world always tends towards disorder, this task involves the Christian in permanent revolution. No matter how much they achieve in reforming the

world, Christians can never rest, for the demands of God are as infinite as his compassion, mercy and forgiveness.