

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Church and Revolution

Review Author: M. D. Litonjua

Philippine Studies vol. 21, no. 3 (1973): 401–403

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

could match the futility of the life of a devoted lieutenant in the field, responsive to the realities of frontier life, but directed by an imperious and unimaginative superior in a faraway capital who in turn was directed by another superior in faraway Spain with little or no understanding of the complexities of colonial life. One such lieutenant was Governor Manuel Salcedo of Texas who gave his life for God, King and country.

This well-documented volume is unique in many ways. First, the author treats of the troubled era of Hispanic Texas, a rich area of study, but unfortunately glossed over or viewed from a different perspective by scholars; second, he dared to assess Manuel Salcedo differently from other authoritative scholars; and third, he viewed the events from a Spanish vantage point.

Readers looking for an exciting historical work like W. L. Schurz's *The Manila Galleon* would be disappointed with this book. Like the Texan wasteland, it is dry in most parts, and it is so detailed that, most likely, only someone of the same calling would appreciate the "long hours" which the author had spent in digging up and piecing the details together to produce this bit of tragic borderland history.

Francisco Mallari, S.J.

THE CHURCH AND REVOLUTION. By Francois Houtart and Andre Rousseau. New York: Orbis Books, 1971. 371 pages.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus quoting Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet of the poor and the oppressed, announced that he was anointed to preach the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and to announce the year when the Lord would save his people. As Latin American Christians emphasize today, Christ is the liberator. His message: liberation from sin, both personal and social.

The Church is the prolongation of Christ in space and time. Its message, therefore, is nothing less than that of Christ, of liberation; its mission, Christ's mission of liberating mankind from the forces of oppression, individual and institutional. But at a time and in the light of the liberation movements in many parts of the world which are attempting to set a new course of freedom and of fuller humanity for their peoples, how has the Church measured up to its mission?

"It is impossible," Francois Houtart, the noted sociologist of Louvain, states, "to live in today's world without being aware of the tremendous underlying thrust of social and cultural change of which the revolutionary movements are a sign. It is impossible for a Christian not to see the relation between the Christian message and the work of liberating mankind. At the

same time it is impossible not to be distressingly aware of the paradoxical conflict between the two."

The paradoxical conflict gives rise to disturbing questions. "Why is it that Christianity, a proclamation of man's total liberation, historically finds itself in opposition to the movements which attempt to give concrete expression to this liberation and almost always identifies itself with the forces of oppression? Is Christianity itself and, perhaps, every transcendental vision of life, to be blamed for this as so many social reformers have taught? Is it the way in which Christianity has been institutionalized that is to blame? Is there a necessary link between radical social reform and the rejection of religion?"

These were the basic questions which led Francois Houtart and Andre Rousseau to undertake a sociological study of the role of the Church in seven revolutionary movements of contemporary history. By Church was principally meant the Roman Catholic Church, understood not only in its ecclesiastical hierarchy but as a whole community with its different stratifications. The revolutionary movements analyzed were the French Revolution of 1789, the French Worker Movement, the Cuban Revolution, the War in Vietnam, the Revolutionary Movements in Latin America, the Revolutionary Movements in Southern Africa and the Paris Riots of 1968.

Some of the more significant conclusions may be noted.

1. The hierarchical Church has been habitually opposed to revolutions, and revolutions in turn have considered institutionalized religion, the Catholic Church in particular, as an obstacle to social change. The opposition is more acute when the stratifications in the ecclesiastical institution and in elite society are parallel if not identical, and when the relationship between religious institution and civil government is mutually beneficial and of reciprocal guarantee. Religion then becomes, following Peter Berger, the most effective instrument of legitimation of the status quo. It links the social establishment to an absolute reality.

2. The higher an individual ranks in the internal organization of the ecclesiastical institution, the more chances there are of his being opposed to social change, and conversely. Thus, in the seven revolutionary movements analyzed, the Christians who sided with the reformers and the revolutionaries were at the periphery of Church power and influence. This gave rise to conflicts and struggles within the Church community and to departures from Church institutions of the more socially aware members.

3. The opposition of the institutional Church to radical social change is rooted in its incapacity to grasp the changing dynamics of history and of the world. Still immersed in the sacralized world of a bygone age, it continues to believe that the social order is "given" only for the Church to explain and define, not an autonomous reality for man to transform and build. Thus, ecclesiastical authorities are not in a position to take a stand of critical opposition to existing regimes except on the level of secondary norms. What is worse, uncritical acceptance of a social system distorts the moral judgment, as is clear in the condemnation of revolutionary violence but the blindness to, and silence on, institutionalized violence.

4. Coupled with this historical and cultural incapacity is the lack of a

socio-political analysis of concrete events and situations. Condemnatory statements against oppressive abuses of economic and political power abound. Clarion calls to justice in social and political institutions are not wanting. But since these are on the level of general principles removed from a socio-political critique, they remain ineffective and meaningless abstractions. Worse, these theoretical condemnations and affirmations are reduced to appeals for patience on the part of the poor and for a change of heart on the part of the rich. In practice this means upholding the position of the oppressor and maintaining the status quo.

5. A list is given of other reasons. The absence of a theology of political involvement rooted in the dichotomy between supernatural and temporal and between spirit and body which has characterized Western thought. The concern to adopt a conciliating posture between contradictory attitudes towards social change which in practice favors the advantaged against the disadvantaged. The fear for the survival of ecclesiastical institutions which depend on the generosity of the affluent. (Moreover judgment on socio-political affairs necessarily leads to self-examination and criticism of the Church establishment.) The horror before the ambiguity of revolutionary changes and the violence it almost always entails.

The authors, however, end with a hopeful note. The hope lies in some contemporary theological trends, notably the political theology of Johannes Metz, which have arisen from the realization that the Church must equip itself with a theology of political involvement, with both theory and praxis, and a methodology of scientific socio-political analysis. Secularization theology and the theology of hope initiated by a number of Protestant scholars, and the theology of liberation now being elaborated in Latin America point in the same direction.

This sociological study of a non-liberating Church nonetheless does not give much hope that the struggle for man's liberation can be waged from within the center of the institutional Church.

M. D. Litonjua