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Reel
52

Box
16

Folder
953

Is There a Revolution in America?, 1970.

Is There A Revolution In America?

Daniel Jeremy Silver

November 8, 1970

We are prone to find the thought of revolution an attractive thought. There is something of a cult of a revolution abroad and it is not limited to the small circle against of radical fanatics who plant explosives and light dynamite the office buildings and against the walls of synagogues. Our world is an impatient world, ^{we} ~~who~~ believe in change. We assume, therefore, that the greater the rate of change the greater the rate of progress. We tend to tick off reform, deliberate legislative change, change within a system, as a compromise, as ineffective, as a bandaid. We tend to look on the affairs of our world with a great deal not only of impatience, but a great deal of messianic fervor. We want Utopia now. ' We are impatient with all that stands in our way. We tend to use an excessive vocabulary defining the problems of our nations and its ills and the solutions and their possibilities. You may have read as I did a week or so ago in our paper an interview with the sometime lawyer and sometime theologian, William Stringfellow, a man who hid out Father Daniel Berrigan in his Long Island estate, in which he spoke of this nation as morally bankrupt; in which he defied all programs of reform, of renewal, of rehabilitation, as frivolous; in which he spoke of the only attitude a moral man could take in our age was one of defiance, let him accept death and stand directly before his society and try to overthrow it. Now there's a great deal of conventional wisdom which fails to voice the thoughts as directly as does Mr. Stringfellow which, nevertheless, assumes that there is something positive, something intrinsically ~~in~~valuable, something necessarily beneficial in revolution and that revolution is the only way to solve the problems of our day. As a matter of fact, it is only through revolution that a man cleanses himself, purifies himself, ignobles himself, washes away the ~~dress~~ of compromise and the

everyday and finds the ^{True} ~~core~~ of nobility of his spirit. Most of us deplore, all of us deplore the bombings, ~~but~~ most of us tch tch quite a bit when it comes to the stories of the Stringfellows of our world and their excessive vocabulary, But deep down in our souls we're simply lapsed revolutionists, lapsed devotees for we, too, are impatient with the slow path of change. We, too, are desirous of solving the problems of the world. We, too, are children who want a better world and who want it now and who when we cannot see how that world will be engineered and architected give our thoughts over to the drama, to the excitement, to the possibility of tearing the house of bricks down and starting all over again. We have a way of looking at change and accentuating that change, of calling it a revolution, because somehow when we do so we ignore it. So we have a great deal of change in our society and it's always revolutionary. We're going through an economic revolution. We're going through a moral revolution. We're going through a technological revolution. We're going through a sexual revolution. We're going through a revolution in women's rights. We're going through a racial revolution. Every change that we have in our society we describe to ourselves as a revolution. Why? Because in so doing we somehow justify it, legitimize it, avoid thinking about it, avoid recognizing that change is gray, not necessarily white, not necessarily black. It depends on ^{the} ~~which~~ change, the rate of change, what is being changed and why. Revolution - strange, wondrous word. How we romanticize revolution. We think of revolution as 1776. We think of revolution as 1789. We think of revolution as 1917. We associate revolution with freedom from colonial rule. We associate revolution with liberty, equality and fraternity. We associate revolution with the overthrow of the Czar and the establishment of the rights of the proletariat and we utterly fail to recognize to ourselves,

to admit to ourselves the black revolutions of the 1920's and the 1930's, the revolutions of Mussolini and of Hitler and of Franco and they were revolutions in the classic sense of the word, national socialist revolutions, revolutions of the proletariat, revolutions of the hired hand if you will. We take from revolution what we want to our romantic history and we deliberately overlook ^{and neglect} that which we don't want, that which does not immediately signify progress, that which is beneficial, that which is wanted to us. I think it's high time that when we discuss revolution in our country ^{its} ~~the~~ possibility, when we recognize that there are many who are not only preaching revolution but seeking to foment it, that we recognize within ourselves that we, too, are frustrated by the slow pace of change. We, too, feel oppressed by the problems which surround us. We, too, would like to break out into a fresh security which we somehow have lost. It's time to take a good hard cold critical look at this word revolution and discover what it implies, what it means, and what it does not imply and what it does not mean.

Etymologically revolution comes from the Latin; the prefix rev means back; *verb volu* means to turn or roll. ^{Hence,} ~~the~~ revolution to turn back, to roll back. Revolution is circular. It is not linear. It is a return to where one was. It is not progress as such. It is movement and not necessarily progress. The moon revolves around the earth. The earth has a revolution around the sun. That which has been is that which shall be, that which has been done is that which shall be done, ~~that~~ there is new nothing under the sun. That is revolution. Now we prefer to think of revolution as progress, as change that is beneficial, and we're surprised when as acid a commentator and ^{as} critic ~~that~~ George Bernard Shaw will say that revolution

never lightens the burden of tyranny, it only shifts it from one shoulder to another. But how true that is in so many ways.

In 1917 and 18 and 19 we had the Bolshevik Revolution and it destroyed the oppressive rule of the Czars and all of the nobility, all of the privileged, were driven out of power and killed or driven into exile, and the peasants, the simple peasants, supposedly came into power. And one destroyed forever the myth of the divine right of the pope Caesar, of the Czar, to rule as he willed and to call it divine. But what will we substitute in its place? The ^urole again of the few. Not of the Czar and his party, but of the Communist party itself, and we established not the divine right of the Czar to rule as he will, but the historical right of a party to rule as they will^u and here we are more than fifty years after that revolution and writers in Russia are still being trotted off into Siberia because they dare to write that which is deviationist, that which is heretical, that which the state, the privileged, the tyranny, the power, will not accept. Revolution - that which has been is that which shall be, that which has been done is that which shall be done, there is nothing new under the sun. A revolutionary does not by the ~~action~~ of revolution become a noble character. Despite the *Frank Finkel* of our world there is nothing sacred, consecrating, ignobling in violence. Stalin was a revolutionary and he was not a saintly man. Hitler was a revolutionary. Revolution is the act of gaining power by those who do not yet have the power and having the power they now become the powerful and there are still those who do not have power. Revolution does not change the order of society. It does not change human nature. Yes, it can bring basic changes into a social order, but it does not revolutionize that order. There is no reason to assume that because

we overthrow that which is, we have Paradise, Utopia, when we only have a shambles. There is no reason to believe that because we destroy we improve when we only have destroyed. Revolution is not a panacea. It simply is, and it is one of the ways in which poorly organized societies transfer power. Sometimes the results of the revolution are hopeful and beneficial and sometimes they are ^{baneful and} malignant and rarely do they live up to the expectations of the revolutionary. Our great American revolution - what did it accomplish? It threw off the yoke of King George, but the average colonist had no vote in 1780 or 1785. He was still under a feudal oligarchy, the rule of the few, of the landed. There ^{was} ~~were~~ to be many another peaceful revolution along the way of American democracy before we had a democracy. 1789 - liberty, equality, ^{fraternity} ~~security~~, what did it bring? The barricade. The guillotine. What did it bring? Liberty, and the equality, fraternity? Robespierre ~~error~~. And Napoleon and it took France another hundred years and more before the beginnings of a stable democratic form of government was established after the communes of 1870 and only then did we begin to get a semblance of liberty, equality and fraternity, and what was the Third Republic and not the first.

organize the

Revolution - it's one of the ways in which human societies exchange of power which is sometimes necessary. It always is. It is a fact. One cannot blink it away, but let's not be romantic about it. Let's not dream wonderful dreams of the glorious days after the revolution or the noble post-revolutionary man - he remains man. I try to ask myself where all this cant about revolution comes from. Why all the romance suddenly evolving in America among some of our most verbal, some of our most intellectual, some of our most creative people, and I think I understand part of the answer. I think that the cult of revolution in America particularly grows out

of the death of the gospel of Christianity. It is a transferred gospel. Christian world was born in apocalypse, in a teaching of good tidings. Repent ye for the kingdom of God is at hand. Christianity has always believed that the time continuum in which we live will come to an end and beyond that end there is a new beginning, glorious and noble and blessed and like Paradise, and it is for that coming that the Christian prays, the long world, our world, with its incompleteness, with its inconsistency, with our inability to define ^{in it} what progress really is, with its lack of certain goals and certain measures of that which is beneficial, that which is good, that which is blessed for a society, that world was ~~to be~~ decreed to be at an end. God had willed its ~~then~~ ^{end} and soon there would be a new beginning. In a twinkling of an eye ^{Paul said} we shall be changed. But people no longer believe that the Messiah, the Christ, will bring that change, and they still need to believe. The long home, this world is coming to an end, and that beyond the end there is a new and better, more wondrous life. Christianity is an apocalypse. It deals with time and the end of time and that which is beyond that end, and it promises the believer that beyond that end that the time which ends is soon; so close your businesses, leave your wives and your children, go out into the wilderness and repent. Prepare ye for the kingdom of God which is nigh. That's the gospel. That's the message of good tidings. Revolt ye for the kingdom of good is at hand. That's the secular version of this Christian theology. The long world in which we live is at an end. Man no longer needs to be prisoner of the establishment. He needs no longer to be prisoner of institutions. He need no longer be a prisoner of compromise, of the humdrum. There's something rotten in this world, but this world is coming to an end and in the better world all

men will be free, all men will be sensitive, all men will be brothers, all societies^{ies} will be true communities and there will be peace and justice for all, and brothers, it is near. And that's the secular, the revolutionary version of this western theme, this Christian theme, which is so basic, so dominant, such a major chord in the symphony of western history.

People need to believe that they will leave to their children a world better than the world^{to} which they were born. People want to believe that their children will be spared the anguish, the bruising, the heartache[■], which has been the accompaniment of their daily lives. And we dream and we want and we pray and we feel that we have been promised that there is the day of God, that there is the coming of the Christ, of the Savior, that there is ^{the} a moment of the revolution which marks an end to the world as we know it and then a new human being will emerge in a new society. He will not be competitive. He will not be greedy. He will not be grasping. He will not be aggressive. He will not be belligerent. He will be sweet, docile, sensitive and kindly and loving and in that new world all the old aches and pains will dissolve. A new man will emerge.

The war between the Pharisees and the early Christians was not over motivation, love. It was over the meaning of history. Yes, we Jews had a long vision of an end of time: ["]they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; ["]yes, we had a vision of some glorious moments[■] way out there when a little child would be able to lead them, but it was never now, today, tomorrow, in our lifetime. It was when God willed it in his time. In the meantime, ["]yours not to complete the work, but neither can you desist from it. ["]The Pharisees were

pragmatic people. We are, we will be, our children will live in the same world as we do; they will have many of the same frustrations we do; their lives must be consecrated of concern, but let's not delude ourselves as to the nature of our world.

It remains this world and not another. So the books of the apocalypse became books that you shelved, that you put away. They were dangerous books because they misled people into reading a timetable of revolutionary change into our world which simply would not come into being. Which did our world prefer? We ~~choose~~ ^{Jews are} a few.

The Christians are many. The world prefers to be reassured that the end is here, nigh, soon. We don't want to be told ^{your} children, ^{your} grandchildren will live with the same aches and pains and worries and anxieties which you have suffered under.

We do not want that. But can we in all honesty say anything else? Jews refuse to preach the near coming. We preached the long term. We preached righteousness, loving of peace, concern, passion, commitment, all of these virtues. We said don't expect miracles; don't expect a sudden change in Jews. So, we come now to our own world. The old theological visions are no longer believed in, but man has transformed these old theological affirmations into new secular ideologies which are psychologically one and the same, woven of the same stuff and I find myself, as a rabbi, doing what Hillel and Akiba did two thousand years ago as rabbis did in their day, saying again and again and again, Alivai, but it simply isn't so. It's not going to be. There are ^{not} these sudden reversals in human history. Men are men. Human nature is human nature. We can't make ourselves over. What I preach, as you well know, is not a religion of quietism, of pacifism, of a folding of one's hands. I have never encouraged you to compromise with the ills and the

injustices of our society. Far from it. But what I insist with all the power that is within me is that none of us delude himself as to the time table of change; that none of us be the child dreaming of a sudden transformation, of the miracle of Father suddenly intervening in the squabble in the back yard, that none of us suddenly, innocently, dream of a world which cannot and will not be. This society of ours has ills aplenty and any one of us who is not active in the war against poverty, in the war against racial injustice, in the war against international piracy, in the war against all that is belligerent in our world, any of us who is not active commits a sin. But let us not expect the reward for what we do ^{to} be quick in coming or to be complete. Let us not expect that the world which we leave to our children, God willing that we can leave them a world, let's not expect that world to be a beautiful green Paradise. It's going to be the asphalt of the crowded city. It's going to be a world of smog and a world of dirt. It's going to be a world of some decent people and some violent people and most people a mixture of all kinds of competing instincts and feelings. It's ^{going to} ~~been~~ a world with as many problems if not more than the world we now suffer in.

But must we be children, buoyed up by a false hope in order to survive this world? Haven't we got the strength, the maturity, the courage, to accept life for what it is without having to dream of a life which can never be, without putting our hopes in strategies and tactics which cannot of themselves guarantee us a better, more wholesome kind of existence? It may be that our nation will come to the time when a revolution is necessary to drive out those who have tyrannized and destroyed our rights. That time is not now. Now is the time to increase social justice in the

nation. Now is the time is to build the legislation which will destroy the archaic systems of welfare. Now is the time to insist upon a kind and quality of government which we have not developed heretofore. Now is the time to be active, to be assertive, to be aggressive, to be concerned with that which is righteous, not to dream idle dreams.

What's a good society? It's a society with people who can help other people. It's a society of schools, it's a society of churches and synagogues, it's a society of libraries, it's a society of hospitals, it's a society of parks, it's a society of all those things which make for wholeness in human beings. You bomb a church and tear down a library. You ~~find~~^{burn} an institution, you create the revolution, and what do you have? Rubble, shambles. Yes, our institutions need to be shaken. Yes, our institutions need to be reformed. Yes, many of them are out of date, but why must we tear them down and open them to the howling winds? Where would we be without those who have learned even though they may have learned inadequately? Where would we be, those who know how to heal ~~even~~ though their mission may not be as complete as it ought to be? Let's not be impulsive, childish, in our hopes or in our actions. ~~The~~^{Our} world is complex enough without losing our balance. In the synagogues throughout our world today we read the chapter from Genesis which tells ~~of~~^{the} commission of Abraham. Abraham is sent out on his way. Leave the past. Leave where you are now. Leave your world of idolatry and compromise, of the humdrum. Do something. Be vigorous. Where was Abraham to go? It wasn't specified. What was Abraham to do? He wasn't given a neat little ideology, a book of party platforms. He was simply told, go, do, and whatever you do along the way be a blessing. Do good for others. Help them. Help yourself. Live in community.

Now Abraham did not create Judaism. Judaism *is a product of* 4,000

years of growth and of attention and it's a beginning. He did not pronounce the final truth or teach us the final way. We're still in search of truth and the way. But he left. He did. And he was a blessing. We must be active. We must do. We must be blessed. Revolution? In the last resort, perhaps. We're a long way from that day. Reform, renewal, change, urgency, ^{by} all ^{means} ~~these~~, but beware the idle dreams. Beware those who promise ^{you in} change for your allegiance, Dreams, your dreams, come wholly true. The fate of man is to live in a world of incompleteness. It's to live in a world where he can dream, where his eyes always will tell him the world is not the world of his dreams, not yet a Paradise, but enough.



Kaddish

Friday

Nov 6

Sunday

8

Those who passed away this week

MAE BLOCH
LOUIS KUX

HELEN RASCHER
RACHEL MINDLIN
LOUIS ZELDMAN
PAUL KLEIN

MOLLIE WEINER
EDWARD BEECHLER

Yahrzeits

RABBI MOSES J. GRIES
EDITH G. ZEMAN
MAX PAUL MEYER
HARRY D. KOBLITZ
JULIUS GOLD
BERTHA HAYS EISENMAN
MAURICE E. KESSLER
LILLY BASSETT
GEORGE H. COHEN
NATHAN R. CORNSWEET
VORA STERN LOEB
THERESA SENOR
DORA CHAVINSON
EMMA REISZ
JOSEPH EDWARD STONE
DORA HENKIN
MORRIS LEVIN
PROFESSOR MAX MORRIS
LEWIS A. KOHN
MINNIE DEMSEY
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Z.A. MOSS
RICHARD D. ZIPP
EDWARD SCHAGRIN
JOANNE RAPPAPORT HOLTZER
ROSE B. LICHTIG
DORA ELSNER
BESS MANDELKORN FULDAUER
LOUIS E. GRUBER
~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~
HENRY H. WEISKOPF
MOLLIE BASS
PHIL LEEDS
ESTHER GESCHWIND
LOUIS LUX
MEYER CHESSIN
SADIE W. SOLOMON
MRS. MARTIN A. MARKS
LILY T. SPITZ
KIM NEWMAN
ANNA SPRAGER SPERLING

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