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# The Theology of Development: Can It Lead Us Astray?

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Both the Second Vatican Council and the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches have put development high on the agenda of theology. Our kind of theology has the amazing capacity constantly to create new slogans and catchwords around which to weave its web. In the last four decades we have passed through several such phases of theology, from all of which, I hope, we have learned something—the theology of crisis, the theology of rapid social change, the theology of secularization; today there are two contending catchwords—development and revolution.

Clearly there is difference in ethos between these two approaches, between the theology of development and the theology of revolution. The power-structures in the churches prefer the former, for it is less threatening and more suited to their bourgeois temperament. The power-structures in the theological establishment, on the other hand, are aware that they have at least to *talk* about the theology of revolution, sometimes secretly hoping that the spectre of revolution will do a vanishing trick if you simply chant its name a given number of times.

At a deeper level, one finds that the 'theology' of development could be more faithful both to reality and to the Christian vision than the more one-sided 'theology' of revolution. I am therefore all for a theology of development, provided, of course, that the very notion of revolution is at heart of the 'theology' of development. I do not intend here to give the outline of a theology of development. I have tried to do so in an article published last year in *Study Encounter* and *Ekumenische Rundschau* entitled *Humanization as World Problem*.

Here my purpose is simply to point out that in developing a theology of development, one has to keep three different points in mind where such a theology is in danger of going astray. These three points are not meant to discourage a theology of development, but rather to make it more profound and balanced.

## 1. *Theology and Christian Reflection—A Problem Methodology*

It is high time that we became more sober and more modest about the use of the term 'theology'. I want to make a distinction between theology and Christian reflection. The term 'theology'

should be restored to its original meaning in the tradition of the undivided Christian Church. It is only by an arrogant presumption originating in medieval Europe that this impious pseudo-science, this horrible cacophony of academic mumbo jumbo which we today call theology, has arisen—the presumption that man is able to construct a system of comprehensive scientific knowledge starting from the data of revelation. In the ancient tradition, the title Theologos is given only to two people—St. John the Evangelist and St. Gregory Nazianzen. The Byzantine Church gave the name ‘New Theologian’ to St. Symeon, but that was already after the medieval distortion had begun. Neither the Fourth Evangelist nor the Nazianzen were systematic theologians in our sense of the word. They were called theologians because they both affirmed the *Theos*-ness of the *Logos*. The Evangelist had said the two fundamental things about incarnation in the fewest possible words—always a characteristic of good theology: *Theos en ho logos*; *ho logos sarx egeneto*. The Logos was God. The Logos became flesh. In those two statements are concealed two matters which cannot be conceptually comprehended—(a) that God is neither one nor many but Trinity—three in one and one in three, and (b) that the Second Person of the Trinity became a historical human being. Theology proper has only these two loci. Neither of them can be reduced to the categories of our logic. Both the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the incarnation conceal antinomies of logic.

Logical minds trying to develop theology out of the scripture are always led into heresy. This happened both to Origen and to the logicians of Arianism, the major misleaders of Christian thought from the academy of Alexandria. It was against similar logical theologians that St. John wrote the fourth Gospel at the turn of the first century and the Cappodocian fathers formulated the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation in the fourth century. The Cappodocians were convinced of the truth of the formula ‘Scripture plus logic equals heresy’. Who could have been more scriptural and more logical than Aetius and Eunomius, the archheretics, the grand syllogists of Arianism?

Let me make this clear—theology proper, i.e. reverent and worshipful discourse on the two great trans-logical mysteries of our faith—the Trinity and the incarnation—should be distinguished from Christian reflection on the issues confronting our world today. This reflection is to be done in the light of God’s purposes made manifest to us in Christ. But theology proper cannot be derived by the application of a scientific hermeneutic to the Scriptures. It has to be reverently received, faithfully proclaimed, and worshipfully celebrated. This is why St. Gregory Nazianzen had the following words to say in his first theological oration on the methodology of theology proper:

‘Not to everyone, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God; not to everyone; the subject is not so

cheap and low ; and I will add, not before every audience, nor at all times, nor on all points ; but on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits.'

That applies to theology proper. And the worshipful apprehension of this mystery is the proper basis of Christian reflection on any subject. The theology of development belongs to the category of Christian reflection rather than to theology proper, but even there the methodology of a so-called scientific hermeneutic will simply not do.

Christian reflection is a demand imposed upon man, in different measures, at certain times of history more urgently than in others, to reflect on his past, on the meaning of his vocation as man, and to project the future in the freedom of love and wisdom. Here, too, a scientific hermeneutic of the Scriptures is practically useless. It is the pressure of history that forces the reflection upon us, and it is a reading of the signs of the times that indicates to us the lines along which we ought to be moving. We discern with the sum-total of our knowledge the duties and tasks to which God sets us. It may be a call to existential decision when the Church grows flabby and institutionally heavy-laden ; it could be a call to mission, when there is a weariness and boredom about life at home ; it may be a call to social action, when a disengaged individual piety allows the world to go to the dogs ; it may even be a call to revolution when it becomes clear that society is so rotten that revolution cannot be avoided. But in all cases, it is a matter of Christian reflection on what God calls us to do—which is not what *Theologia* means.

Develop a theology of development we perhaps should, especially since the Pope, the W.C.C. and even U Thant privately are asking us to do so. But let us not take that stuff too seriously. There will be many flaws in our systematic thought, which only time and reflection may reveal. Certain problems, however, can be anticipated, and it is to these that I would like to give attention at this time. The positive direction has been indicated by Teilhard de Chardin. His views have been sharply criticized by many, but few of his critics seem to have understood the nature of his effort, which belongs to the area of Christian reflection, rather than of science properly so-called. One eminent biologist, Jacques Monod, has viciously characterized Fr. Teilhard's thought as belonging to the class of 'transcendental interpretations, distant cousins of primitive animism'.<sup>1</sup> Science should also have the courage to admit that our present scientific method has not yet broken through beyond the confines of time and space, and is incapable of providing a non-transcendental theory of either the origin of the universe or its teleonomic emergence.

Christian reflection can use science and its methods only to a certain limit. Going beyond that limit demands that we become

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Monod, *From Biology to Ethics*, The Salk Institute Occasional Papers No. 1, San Diego, Oct. 1969, p. 6.

capable of deeper philosophical reflection on the nature of the limitations of our present scientific method which still leaves a vast amount of phenomena unexplained. The tentative character of Christian reflection is based primarily on this unstable element in both the content and method of science. Tomorrow a fresh break-through in the sciences, and, I fervently hope, in the scientific method itself, will demand from us fresh reflection. That is what makes life interesting.

Who is man? What is his destiny? What is the universe? What is man's relation to it? What is man's task in it? How may he fulfil that task? These are the questions to which science can provide only partial answers. But the questions cannot be evaded by sensitive and intelligent men, nor can they wait indefinitely until science provides the answer.

Intuitive reflection, utilizing as much as possible of the sum-total of human knowledge and experience, is the only way open to us. We may be wrong; nay, we are bound to be wrong at least in part; but we must take the risk of trying to be as right as we can be. Not to take the risk of being partially wrong is to prefer the risk of being totally wrong in that man would have failed in facing his destiny and task.

The Eastern fathers of the fourth century, who are among the few Christians who have dared to speculate substantially on these questions, set certain limits to such speculation, mostly about the kind of Christians who could reflect on such matters. They should have two qualifications:

- (a) a spiritual and personal formation by the life in the community of the spirit, shaped by the life of worship and obedience and by the Scriptures;
- (b) a comprehensive acquaintance with the sum-total of human experience and knowledge.

The first qualification has become so rare today. Père Teilhard was one of the few in our generation who had such a spiritual formation combined with competence in several so-called secular fields.

The second qualification became impossible already several centuries ago. No one can hope to be an Aristotle or a St. Basil—men who had mastered practically all the knowledge available in their time. In our time only a community of people can possess such comprehensive knowledge. Therefore no one man, however spiritually mature or well-informed, can hope to develop an adequate understanding of human development on his own. Christian reflection on development demands a dialoguing community; a community in which Christians and non-Christians are delivered from the paranoid inhibition about stepping outside one's own field of specialization. Scientists need to learn from each other, not all the details of the other's discipline, but the pertinent facts therein that may have a bearing on the direction of human development.

Such informed group speculation should not falsely claim to be scientific. It will always remain a prophetic venture ; it must be open to scientific criticism at those points where it is patently wrong ; but it should not be criticized for going beyond where science itself is able to go. For that is precisely its purpose—a going beyond in wise freedom. It involves scientists themselves saying ‘no’ to the totalitarian claims of science, in order that man may not be shut up in a world of space and time.

The main point so far is that there is a difference between Christian theology, properly so-called, and informed Christian reflection. Both are transcendental disciplines. The first anti-nomic, translogical, brimming with mystery, irreducible to logical discourse or conceptual comprehension. The second is also a transcendental task, but much more provisional, and seeks fully to utilize our scientific knowledge, but is careful not to claim that it is a scientific discipline.

## 2. *Tension between History and Transcendence*

The second tension which the Christian must bear in mind in reflecting on human development is closely related to the first distinction. It appears in its simplistic form as the tension between a gospel of personal salvation and what is caricatured by its opponents as the social gospel.

This is the point at which many perceptive men are genuinely apprehensive about the line taken by the churches. The most articulate, though by no means the best informed or the least biased, is the British journalist, Malcolm Muggeridge. He came to Uppsala. Like many of us who were there, he was murderously bored. Clearly the churches seemed to be getting on to the band-wagon of secular society, adding their own meddlesome cacophony to the meaningless chatter of a bewildered world marching in total disarray to a destiny of chaos and confusion. He has, with characteristic rashness, condemned organized Christianity to extinction in the next decade or so if it keeps going as of now. His own line, which cannot be written off as fundamentalist, but may very well be escapist, is explained in his justly controversial *Jesus Rediscovered*.

Personal union with Jesus-Christ the God-man in the community of the spirit belongs at the centre of the Christian faith. This is neither pietism nor mysticism. It is the most potent force that has ever entered humanity. One who is genuinely united to Christ alone can taste freedom in all its joy. This is not available to secular man until he participates in the mystery of the spirit in the community of faith. Few who are formally members of that community, however, have experienced the heights of this freedom and joy. This makes the community inauthentic and repelling most of the time. There is less freedom and joy in the Church today than outside it. Substitute communities shaped by secular

men are beginning to show more authentic marks of the Church than the Church herself.

But none of these can detract from the fact that there is a basic difference between life in the Church and life not in the Church. To be engrafted by the spirit on to the Body of Christ is a significant matter, even if it is not the indispensable means of salvation. The historical and trans-historical fact of Jesus Christ, his incarnation, life and teaching, death, resurrection and ascension, as well as the coming of the spirit, have together constituted the historical and trans-historical fact of the Church. Despite all its innumerable failures, still new life for the world comes out of this community.

A theology of development, that speaks about the growth of humanity to its full potential without speaking also about the facts of the Church and of the incarnation, cannot be authentically Christian. Theologians will need to shed their inhibitions about breaking out of the prison of secular-historical existence and deal honestly with the realities which are the foundation of the Christian Faith.

I will call this the tension between historicism and transcendence. Is all human achievement to be within history? Does man attain to the fullness of his potential within history? Do we agree with the Marxists that history is the sum-total of reality for man and that his liberation has to be achieved entirely within the confines of history? Do we live today and die tomorrow, in order that a future generation will reap the benefits of our work? Are all the preceding generations merely stepping-stones for that generation which finally emerges into the freedom of the classless society?

Some of our theologians, with their theologies of hope and their scientific futurologies, seem to be of this persuasion. It would have been amusing, were it not so pathetic, to find Christian theologians following a path that is being abandoned by more perceptive Marxists.

We cannot escape the fact of death. It is the most pervasive fact in life as lived today. It is so pervasive that we have a hang-up about it. We suppress the painful fact of death, as the Victorians repressed their sex instincts. What significance can there be to life, if it is always to be life toward death? If that is the case, then life is absurd, and all we can do is to live with that absurdity, as honest secular men like Camus have asked us to do.

The Christian tradition also teaches us that history itself is subject to death. There is to be a day of reckoning, when the very earth of our daily experience must be reduced to smoke and ashes. Here we have no continuing city. We are foreigners in this world, exiles, pilgrims, travellers. The earth is not the ultimate home of man.

Death, whether *seriatim* of each individual or of all humanity together in the final holocaust, is the point at which transcendence

should make sense in a theology of development. To reduce transcendence to the receding horizon of an open future is to substitute one error for another. In the old days, transcendence was essentially spatial, at least in school theology. God was way 'up there' on the top floor of the universe, or 'out there' beyond the boundaries of the universe. Now we move from these spatial categories to time-categories and make transcendence related to time-categories. But it does not take us beyond the prison of history or to the other side of death.

A theology of development, which does not adequately take into account this demand that man find his rootage in the transcendent so that he can stand and move and work in freedom and dignity in history, may turn out to be just as dehumanizing as our previous theological pronouncements unrelated to the world of history.

But this transcendence cannot be grasped in concepts, for concepts belong only to the logical world of a time-space existence.

This is why some of us would insist that a theology of development has to be based in a proper ecclesiology and in a deeper understanding and experience of the Eucharist. For the Church is a transcendent community. It has the ground of its being, and not merely of its hope, in the risen Christ. Death is thus an enemy that has been overcome on the cross, and can now be welcomed as a door that opens out of history into the transcendent.

In the Eucharist we already experience this transcendent. We are caught up beyond history into the transcendent, and the transcendent breaks into history through the communion with the risen Christ.

All this may not be readily intelligible to modern man. Nor is it very clear to many Christian men, including a large number of theologians. But behind that incomprehension lies a problem of spirituality—a Christian nurture that has gone fundamentally wrong and therefore makes authentic Christian reflection on human development practically impossible.

Theologians who do not experience or apprehend the mystery of transcendence in the mystery of the Eucharist, in the transcendent community of the Spirit, can hardly do any authentic Christian reflection on development. The tension at this point is not between a gospel of personal salvation and a so-called social gospel, nor is it between the Church and the world. It is between historian and transcendence. It is between the Gospel of the risen Christ and the secular humanism created by Marxism and historicism.

### 3. *Revolution and Utopia*

Here I come to the third of the tensions within which a theology of development will have to operate. I will call it the tension between revolution and Utopia—what is involved here is a transvaluation of values.



Those who prefer reform to revolution usually assume that Western civilization is fundamentally on the right track, except that it has developed a few problems like the racial issue, the Vietnam war and the ecological crisis, which we can 'lick', given goodwill, money and organization.

An increasing number of young people, on the contrary, are convinced that this is simply impossible. Perceptive thinkers have begun to suggest that the fundamental values that motivate our society are in themselves wrong, and therefore that no amount of problem-solving and reform will be able to deal with the basic malaise of dehumanization.

What are those basic values that are today called in question? There are as many analyses of contemporary society as there are analysts; we shall refer only to two of these.

Herbert Marcuse, for example, bases his total repudiation of contemporary society on the argument that Western civilization is built on the repression of fundamental human instincts. Freud would have said that all culture arises from repression. Marcuse insists that a non-repressive culture is possible. It is only a repressive culture that ensues in imperialism and colonialism, exploitation and war, according to Marcuse. The repression of the pleasure principle, or the passive, feminine element in man, by the reality principle, the aggressive, domineering male element in man, is the cause of the trouble according to him.

Marcuse's Utopia would thus be a non-repressive society, in which repression would be replaced by expression, work will become play, structure will give place to spontaneity and men and women will live together in peace and concord. Marcuse's French work is entitled *The End of Utopia*; he thinks that the liberal-socialist Utopia or the urban-technological paradise is no longer valid as a basis for the hope and aspiration of man. Marcuse finds our present urban-technological society, or consumer society, inescapably dependent on the twin principles of acquisitiveness and aggression. Even the socialist Utopia cannot be free from these two monsters.

Practically, the same analysis is provided by the revolting students of the West. Society as now constituted is irreformable, according to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the leader of the French student uprising of May 1968. But he adds a third major enemy of man, in addition to acquisitiveness and aggression, namely technocracy, or an organized bureaucracy that governs the use of technological power in an impersonal and dehumanized manner. Managerial organization treats human beings as pawns to be manipulated—what is euphemistically called 'human engineering'. Even the trade union movement which once was in the vanguard of the advance of mankind is now controlled by bureaucracy for the sake of vested interests. The university also has been taken over by a managerial bureaucracy which simply panders to the interests of the established classes.

Whether we agree with the analyses of Marcuse or Cohn-Bendit in detail is not important. The basic issue is: *Is society as presently constituted reformable?* On this, opinions are bound to differ, whether in the Church or outside. And any Christian understanding of development we build will have to take into account this fundamental difference of opinion. This is why a generally acceptable Christian theorizing on development seems hardly possible.

But even among those who hold that the present society is fundamentally irreformable, and that the classes and forces now in control of society have to be forcibly overthrown, new questions arise as to the methods to be used. For Christians, as well as for others we hope, those methods have to satisfy two basic requirements. They must be effective to achieve their purpose and, at the same time, be morally justifiable in the circumstances in which the particular methods are used.

To discuss the issue purely in terms of reform versus revolution, or violence versus non-violence, can distort the basic issue. There are two questions:

(a) In the light of God's demand for righteousness in society and person, can present society be reformed in order to lead towards a just society in which all men can live and work in peace with dignity? Or, do we have to unseat the powers and classes that now control society and seize power by force in order to build a new type of society from the foundations up?

(b) In either case, the question comes up—what legitimate and effective means are available to achieve such reform or revolution?

The reformists would suggest that we work through the legitimate channels of a democratic constitutional machinery to achieve new legislation conducive to greater justice and better production-consumption. We could also mobilize the masses by organizing them in village or urban communities to achieve their own social, economic and political goals by their own initiative and effort, with the assistance and encouragement of the government. This is the method which the world's largest democracy, India, has chosen, and it would be inaccurate to say that the effort is totally ineffective. It is a fact, however, that injustice continues to thrive and grow. The increase in production has not been equitably distributed. People remain basically acquisitive and aggressive. Managerial bureaucracy controls governments, political parties, industry and even church organizations in a basically dehumanizing way. Wealthy industrialists who can buy up any decision in their favour, demagogues who can appeal to the base emotions of the masses to promote communalism and regionalism in the interests of their own self-aggrandisement and government bureaucrats who have little awareness of the national goals hold the power in their hands and use it to protect their

own interests. Can reform set these matters right? What does genuine human development mean in these circumstances?

Those who argue for revolution hold that only a total overhaul of society, with a revolutionary re-education of the masses to understand their rights and interests and to struggle for these rights, can bring justice with dignity and create the new man who is more socially and peacefully oriented. Only in a revolutionary society can acquisitiveness and aggressiveness be overcome and each person work with dignity in order to contribute to the supply of the needs of all. Unselfish and unacquisitive production alone can do away with the anti-social egoism of man and thereby lead to peace with justice, they argue. And, finally, when the State itself has withered away, man will become free from the fetters of bureaucracy, in order to be more spontaneously organized with less danger of dehumanization.

In theory this latter set of social goals are more in conformity with the demands of the gospel than those of the reformists who would work mainly for better production and more equitable distribution, with all the democratic freedoms preserved without seeking to deal with the radical problems of human egoism, acquisitiveness, aggression and dehumanizing structures.

But if we were to evaluate societies in terms of the relation between ideology and achievement, the analysis becomes much more complex and difficult.

European communist societies have not really succeeded in eradicating personal egoism and acquisitiveness. They have also been aggressive, though not quite in the same measure as the capitalist societies. Their bureaucracy seems infinitely more dehumanizing than the Western bureaucracies. It is also true that higher productivity has been achieved in many capitalist or socialist democratic countries like Sweden than in East European communist countries.

But this is not to say that capitalist societies are not just as rotten as the communist societies. There is a fundamental uneasiness in both capitalist and communist societies, and everywhere perceptive and sensitive human beings have begun to aspire for a radically new world and a new man with more freedom and dignity, justice and peace.

We know very little about the course of development in Chinese society. There is every reason to believe that entrenched personal and group egoism is a major source of conflict in that great country. But there is also reason to believe that China has made significant progress in the revolutionary re-education of the masses. Personal or group egoism is gradually being replaced by more social attitudes towards production. There is a high cost—both in terms of personal freedom and of knowledge of what is going on in the world. The value of the achievement is to be measured not in terms of economic production alone; the more adequate measuring-stick is that of the social attitudes of human beings.

Be that as it may, a theology of development has to deal with a basic conflict between the ideologies of Utopia and revolution. Even if we accept the new conception of Utopia, where civilization is expressive rather than repressive, where work is play, where acquisitiveness and aggressiveness have been overcome, where social organization has been depoliticized and debureaucratized, it is clear that such a Utopia has to be struggled for. It will not come by mere spontaneous, wishful, playful and unorganized expression of our thoughts.

Political means are necessary to achieve this apolitical Utopia. Repression of the classes in power seems necessary to abolish the repressive society and to create an expressive civilization. In order to build peace with justice, the revolutionaries are prepared to disturb the peace of established classes and deny them justice. In order to create a society of love, they want to hate the oppressor and destroy him.

This radical conflict between the principles of Utopia and the principles of revolution which is to achieve Utopia seems to this writer the crux of the theology of development.

Any effective and morally justified means used to achieve a new society will have to be a decision arrived at by groups of people in the light of their understanding of their own situation, and as a choice between various viable alternative methods to achieve the social goals chosen.

The Christian Church may render its greatest service neither by giving a blanket approval of any revolutionary methods, nor by siding with the establishment through its undue emphasis on law and order over and against the claims of justice. The best clarification that Christian theology can now offer may lie precisely at the point of interpreting the conflict between the principles of Utopia and the principles of revolution. If one is committed to God's righteousness, this is a commitment to some form of Utopia which has to be brought about at least in part by human effort. The nature of that effort will inevitably raise the question of the forcible overthrow of the established powers.

At this point the Christian should not try to escape by the arguments that Utopia is always beyond history and that it is God who ushers in the kingdom and not human effort. All that is true as far as the Biblical perspective on history is concerned. But the same Bible does not allow us to keep quiet saying 'Lord, Lord' and doing none of the things which the Lord says we should do.

Christ is being repudiated today by many young people in the West for his being a 'sissy' who refused to use political power against the exploiting and oppressive Roman Empire. Christians cannot today simply jump into the arena of political action, assuming that political action is going to usher in Utopia. We have to take into account Christ's method of developing a 'spiritual' power which defied death and finally overthrew the mighty Roman Empire and brought the values of dignity, freedom and community into universal civilization.

## CONCLUSION

We have to develop a more sophisticated approach to the theology of development.

In the first place, we must recognize ahead of time that whatever we produce now in the heat of our struggle for justice, it would not be a 'theology' proper. It would be Christian reflection in the light of the gospel, about the most desirable course of action in the circumstances in which God has placed us.

Secondly, it must not too easily immanentize the gospel and reduce the Christian message to a pure secular word with relevance only to historical existence. Man and mankind are both mortal. Death and resurrection are the way both for persons and for mankind in general to come to the final fulfilment. The aspects of the gospel which relate to this transcendent dimension have a definite bearing on historical existence, but their significance is not exhausted in this life.

Thirdly, the Church must move ahead from the debate about revolution and violence. The question is that of righteousness—of justice with peace and dignity for all. If the alternative to revolution is silent support of an unjust order from which we benefit, we Christians are mere hypocrites when we preach about God's demand for righteousness. Our first and greatest contribution shall be, in making the cause of justice with peace and dignity, an inescapably urgent issue for all mankind. Our second great contribution shall lie in clarifying the dialectic—the inescapable dialectic—between revolution and Utopia, and to help Christians and others to make the right decisions about the most effective and most morally justifiable means to achieve a just society with peace and dignity for all. The word dignity is shorthand for the glory of God in man who is made in the image of God. It means man's achievement of his full potential of love, power and wisdom in freedom and community. This means both joy and love. Nothing less can be the ultimate objective of development.

Our third contribution may lie in what the Old Testament regards as *preparatory righteousness*. John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord. And he prepared it by asking for social justice (Luke 3:3-14). He cites especially the passage from Isaiah (40:3-5) which demands righteousness from society before Yahweh comes. The mountains and hills (economic and social) have to be brought low, and the valleys have to be filled. The crooked and the corrupt have to be made straight. The rough ways of human dealings with each other have to be made smooth. And then 'all flesh (all humanity) shall see the salvation of the Lord'.

The Church must produce pioneering communities which embody the values of the kingdom in small experimental Utopias, and from these small communes God may bring forth a force which finally mobilizes the whole of humanity for a world order with justice and peace.