PART II. JESUS THE NONRESISTANT*

A. PROPONENTS

After having seen in the first part of this article that, contrary to the thesis of the revolutionists, Jesus was not a political activist, or in other words that he did not advocate violence and much less use it, we will now examine as it were the reverse side of the coin.

But here we encounter an initial difficulty. For, whereas the pro-violence stand is sharply defined and presents clear ideological contours, the opposite stand does not exhibit any really unified configuration. For indeed, the rejection of violence admits of degrees, and the spectrum of opinions forms an almost homogeneous continuum between two extremes.

The purest form of this rejection of violence consists in non-resistance to any evil whatever. This is how R. Cassidy defines nonresistance:

Adherents of nonresistance not only reject actions that would involve them in doing physical violence to others, but they also refrain from directly confronting those responsible for existing evils. Instead, they seek solidarity with those who are suffering from these evils, offering no defense if they themselves are subjected to violence by those who have power. Their hope is that their own commitment and example will eventually inspire changes in the attitudes and actions of others.\footnote{The first part of this article appeared in LANDAS 1 (1987) 5-38. 104. Cf. Politics, 40.}
This definition makes it clear that nonresistance not only rejects violence, but also shuns confrontation in favor of mere solidarity. Actually many adherents of nonresistance have historically lived out this avoidance of confrontation by simply withdrawing from political life and sometimes from social intercourse with those not belonging to their brand of Christianity. For them, Christ and Christianity are essentially apolitical.

This is indeed an extreme position, as testified by the rather limited number of its adherents. Among these one could mention in modern times the Anabaptists, the Mennonites, the Quakers, and a few isolated individuals such as the Russian novelist and social reformer Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the Swiss pastor and university professor Leonhard Ragaz (1868-1945) and others. The classic statement of the nonresistant position is found in Guy F. Hershberger’s book, War, Peace, and Nonresistance. In more recent years nonresistance has been defended by William Keeney and others.

In the opinion of the nonresistant, Jesus not only condemned any form of social activism with its concomitant confrontations, but he was wholly apolitical. This thesis is based on a number of scriptural texts, which of course are not used by all nonresistants nor interpreted uniformly by those who use them. But, by and large, these texts are often connected with nonresistance in one way or another. Here we shall examine a sample of these texts, again following the order in which they appear in the Gospels.

B. TEXTS

1. Nonresistance to one who is evil. In Mt 5:39a we read this saying of Jesus: “Do not resist one who is evil.” This clear interdiction of Jesus, according to the nonresistants, flatly prohibits any kind of political activism, whether violent or nonviolent. It precludes the use of any form of economic and political pressure to oppose evil persons or evil structures.

Such an interpretation of Mt 5:39a is questionable on two counts. First, Jesus’ own behavior contradicted a literal understanding of this teaching. As we shall see at length in the third

part of this essay, Jesus constantly opposed evil persons, customs, beliefs, structures, practices, etc. To mention only his forthright condemnation of the Pharisees (Mt 23:13-36) and his cleaning of the Temple (Mk 11:15-18 par.), he certainly in many nonviolent ways opposed a strong resistance to the evil he encountered.¹⁰⁷

Secondly, the preceding context of this logion provides the key to its true meaning. And this meaning is that Jesus prohibits vindictiveness under the form of retaliation or vengeance, but he does not prescribe absolute nonresistance. He is teaching that evil cannot be resisted by a further evil. This is borne out by the literary structure of the section containing this verse, as well as by the vocabulary.

Mt 5:39 is situated in a series of 6 antitheses extending from v. 21 to v. 48. Verses 38-42 form the fifth antithesis in the series. Each antithesis is introduced by a formula of contrast in which some belief or practice traditionally accepted in Israel is opposed by a contrary teaching of Jesus. This literary structure is identical in all the antitheses, without any exception. It is extremely helpful to take into account such a structure for the understanding of Jesus' teaching, since the first part of each antithesis is the focus of attention: Jesus rejects precisely what is stated in that first part. Now in the fifth antithesis, what is opposed is retaliation: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for (in Greek: ἄντι) an eye and a tooth for (in Greek: ἄντι) a tooth'" (v. 38). From this we can immediately conclude that the counterpart which follows ("But I say to you . . .") will necessarily deal with retaliation and not with something else.

This is confirmed by an analysis of the vocabulary used. In v. 38 we meet twice with the preposition ἄντι: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. And this is precisely what Jesus condemns here. He says: "Do not ἈΝΤΙστῆναι one who is evil." The verb ἄνθιστημι in the Middle Voice¹⁰⁸ means: to oppose oneself. And so, the repetition of the preposition ἄντι in both verses (in v. 38 as an independent word, and in v. 39 as a prefix in composition with the root ἵστημι) suggests that the disciple of Jesus must not oppose himself to an evil person in the way indicated in v. 38,

¹⁰⁸. Actually here the ἄντιστῆναι is in the Active Voice, but "the forms occurring in our literature have the Middle sense" (cf. Arndt-Gingrich, Lexicon 66).
which was the traditional way — i.e. by exacting equal damages for injury suffered. This saying, therefore, does not condemn resistance to evil in general, but personal revenge, giving back blow for blow, "getting even."

2. Turning the other cheek. The text of Mt analyzed just now continues in this fashion: "If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Mt 5:39b-41). The same idea is expressed in slightly different terms in Lk: "Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again" (Lk 6:30). This teaching of Jesus, in the opinion of the nonresistants, enjoins a radical acceptance of violence inflicted on oneself, and this in total renunciation to any form of resistance.

Again, a comprehensive exegesis of this saying of Jesus does not favor such a literal interpretation of his words. After all, the most authoritative source for understanding an author correctly is that author himself. Now Jesus himself did not take literally his injunction to turn the other cheek. When an officer struck him on the cheek during the hearing before the high priest Annas, he did not turn the other cheek, but voiced a protest (Jn 18:22-23). Nor did Paul turn the other cheek in a similar occurrence, but protested vehemently (Acts 23:3). Likewise, patristic exegetes, such as Origen and Augustin, agreed that this paradoxical utterance of Jesus was not to be taken literally.110

3. The tribute to Caesar. When pressed about what attitude one should adopt concerning the tribute to Caesar, a burning political issue at that time, Jesus enjoins payment of the tribute, thus advocating an attitude of political submission to the realities of the hour. While this does not mean that he approves of the Roman occupation of his country, it nevertheless shows that he does not recommend any form of resistance to it. So runs the interpretation given by the nonresistants to this logion.

It is true that Jesus does recommend payment of the tribute,

however he does not by the same token advocate a principle of absolute nonresistance to the power of the State. On the contrary, as we have seen, he clearly sets a limit to that power by referring it to that of God: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." This implicitly contains a disapproval of absolute nonresistance, at least of nonresistance understood as passive acceptance: when Caesar demands what is God's, then Caesar must be resisted. This is how the first generations of Christians understood those words: they faithfully paid their taxes, but refused military service as encroaching on their duty to obey God's command to promote life and not to destroy it, just as they rejected the idolatrous cult of the emperors. 111 But more will be said on the tribute logion in the third part of this essay.

4. Jesus and the first Christians did not practice civil disobedience. In this argument the nonresistants, instead of focusing on a specific text of the Gospels, draw a general principle based on an over-all examination of Jesus' and of the first Christians' behavior. They conclude from their examination that neither Jesus nor the apostolic Church engaged in economic boycotts or civil disobedience to challenge and correct social injustice in the Roman empire. This means, according to them, that modern Christians should follow suit and abstain from any kind of collective resistance to the State or to social structures.

Three objections can be raised against the preceding opinion. First, the nonresistants seem to identify too easily political or social resistance with two very specific and limited forms of this resistance, namely economic boycott and civil disobedience (by which they probably mean: refusal of tax payment, refusal of military service, etc.). But there are many more ways than these two of practicing socio-political resistance. And, as we shall see more in detail in Part Three of this study, Jesus did actually practice several forms of socio-political resistance, depending on the circumstances in which he found himself. Hence, it is a serious distortion of the evidence to present him as a nonresistant. (This should become abundantly clear in the last section of this essay.)

Secondly, the particular forms of socio-political resistance referred to by the nonresistants, namely economic boycott or civil

disobedience, require a fair number of participants in order to have an impact. Furthermore, they can be effective (e.g. bring about legislative reforms) inasmuch as the economic or political forces against which this resistance is directed recognize certain basic "human rights." Now we must remember the severe limitations which Jesus and the primitive Church faced. During the first generations of its existence the Church was an infinitely small group in comparison with the enormous might of the Roman empire, which furthermore had very little regard for what we call today "human rights." Due to its numerical insignificance the Church had practically no hope of influencing the policies of the emperors. Its protest activities had to remain at a more private level, at least initially; and that is probably why we find instances of such protest activities only at a somewhat later date (e.g. in the Second Century), either when circumstances forced the Church to take a public stand, or when it became clear that she had become a social force capable of making herself felt. All this is rather conjectural of course, but then so also is the reconstruction of the nonresistants.

Thirdly, even in the face of such overwhelming odds, Jesus and his disciples were never content to submit passively to the whims of tyrants. We have seen Jesus' protest against police brutality (Jn 18:22-23). Later on, his followers would refuse military service in the Roman armies, as well as the idolatrous cult of the emperors.112

5. Jesus was completely apolitical. This is the last argument of the nonresistants to be treated here. It finds its natural place at the conclusion of this section because it is based on a text found toward the end of John's Gospel and, furthermore, because it conveniently encapsulates the basic orientation of the nonresistant view.

During his trial before Pilate Jesus said: "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36). By these words, according to the nonresistants, he indicated that he refused to become involved in politics and that all those belonging to his kingdom should also be apolitical. This means that Jesus concentrated all his efforts on changing the hearts of men, rather than on changing the structures of society. His mission was a spiritual one. And so, any attempt at

112. Sider, Christ, 61.
changing the structures of society is to be considered a deviation from his goal. Society will be changed when hearts become changed. In the meantime, a true disciple of Jesus will humbly submit to whatever political forces are at play in his milieu, suffering persecution if need be, choosing to be in solidarity with the persecuted, but always remaining disentangled from the intrigues and compromises of politics.\textsuperscript{113}

The preceding opinion is objectionable for two reasons. \textit{First}, its interpretation of Jn 18:36 is not convincing. Jesus does not say that his kingdom is not \textit{in} this world or that it has nothing to do with this world. With most commentators we should understand Jesus' words in the light of his parallel statements concerning his disciples: they too are not \textit{of} this world (i.e. their values, their methods, their aims, etc. are not those of the world), yet they are \textit{in} this world (Jn 17:11.16). In other words, Jesus' Kingdom does not have its origin or receive its inspiration from this world order, yet it is meant to manifest its dynamic action in this world, like a leaven in the flour.\textsuperscript{114}

\textit{Secondly}, the statement "Jesus was apolitical" is simply not true, if it is made in the absolute. For indeed, the following considerations relativize it to a great extent:

a) The God of the Old Testament is consistently presented as intervening in history, and particularly in the political world. The prophets, speaking in his name, constantly address the politicians

113. Here are a few quotations from authors espousing similar views:

"The emphasis of contemporary Christian interpretation of the Gospels is to see an activist, Humanist Christ, whose message involved his followers in social transformation. A reading of the Gospels less indebted to present values, however, will reveal the true Christ of history in the spiritual depiction of a man who directed others to turn away from the preoccupations of human society" (Edward Norman, \textit{Christianity and the World Order. The B.B.C. Reith Lectures, 1978} [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979] 78).

"Christ voluntarily manifested himself as the 'suffering servant' infinitely above all politics" (M.J. Le Guillou, "Théologie des Béatitudes," \textit{La table ronde} 251-2 [1968-69] 15).

"(Christ) chose to be strictly apolitical, in the sense that he considered himself above politics at all times" (René Coste, \textit{Evangelio y política} [Madrid: Edicusa, 1969] 11).


of their time about their political involvement with the Egyptians, the Assyrians or the Babylonians. It would then be most unlikely that, coming afterwards, Jesus as the living Word of God would have been utterly apolitical. This would presuppose a radical rupture between the God of the Old Testament and that of the New.

b) Jesus never suggests that his message concerns only a specifically religious sphere. On the contrary, many of his sayings reject any dichotomy between religion and everyday life. If his disciple is to love God “with all his heart, soul, mind, strength” and his neighbor as himself (Mk 12:29-31), surely this love must include all aspects of his life, even the most mundane. Now, in order to be effective, love must often express itself through the mediation of political structures. To take only one contemporary example, if Christians are to cope with starvation in the Third World countries, they must get involved in some form of political action.

c) It is true that Jesus was apolitical in the sense that he did not identify himself with any of the political groups of Palestine. It is also true that his teaching does not address itself to the organizational level of politics, as we have seen. Yet, Jesus confronted all the political parties and the political figures of his time, and finally died at their hands.115

d) The relative non-involvement of Jesus in politics at the organizational level cannot, however, be the norm for his followers, for Jesus’ role was unique: he alone received from the Father the mission of being the Savior of the world, and because of this he had to stand alone, aloof from direct involvement in contemporary politics. But the Christian’s vocation in the world is not identical with that of Jesus. Here, as in many things, the imitation of Jesus must not be literal: not all Christians are to become carpenters, as Jesus was!

We have examined a few of the basic texts commonly appealed to by the proponents of nonresistance in defence of their views. There are no doubt several other such texts, but the ones surveyed here are probably the most basic ones. And, in this respect, it is highly significant that the Gospel passages most often invoked for justifying nonresistance are taken from the Sermon on the Mount.

Of course that in itself is not objectionable, since we do find in the Sermon on the Mount an exceptionally lofty and forceful expression of Jesus' thought. However, one can question on exegetical grounds any such selective approach: can a mere handful of Jesus' utterances, or even the whole of the Sermon on the Mount for all its beauty and permanent appeal, offer an adequate basis on which to erect a whole philosophy of life such as nonresistance? This doubt is further strengthened by the particular type of exegesis to which the proponents of nonresistance submit the Sermon on the Mount. Here a few brief remarks seem to be in order before we pass on to the third and final part of this study.

1. There is no doubt that Jesus meant to be taken seriously, when he uttered (on several different occasions and in varying circumstances) the many logia which were later compiled by Matthew to form the Sermon on the Mount: his language is perceptive throughout, his demands must have an obligatory character at least equal to that of the Law if they are to modify it effectively, the conclusion (Mt 7:21-27) insists on actual practice, etc. And herein lies the element of truth in the position advocating nonresistance. It too takes the words of Jesus seriously, and it rightly perceives their obligatory force. However, and this is its fatal weakness, it fails to understand the real intention of Jesus by taking his words literally. This is an egregious mistake, for in the present case it leads to absurd conclusions.

2. That Jesus never meant to be taken literally is shown by the fact that he himself in many instances did not apply his own demands literally. Thus, in Mk 3:5 (and also, probably, if only implicitly, in Mt 21:12-13; 23:13-36; Mk 8:34; etc.) he is pictured as giving in to anger, in this way contradicting his own precept of Mt 5:22. Likewise, in Mt 23:17 he calls the Pharisees "fools," thus acting contrary to his command of Mt 5:22b. While enjoining prayer in private (Mt 6:6), he himself often prays in public (Mt 11:25-27; 14:19; 15:36; Jn 11:41-42). As we have seen, in Jn 18:22-23 he does not obey his own precept of turning the other cheek (Mt 5:39).

3. The literary devices used by Jesus (the hyperbole, the paradox, the metaphor, etc.) do not allow a literal interpretation of his words: a log in the eye (Mt 7:3-5), a hand not knowing the action of the other hand (6:3), the fasting accompanied by perfume (6:17), the pearls thrown to swine (7:6), the scandalizing eye
plucked out or the scandalizing hand cut off (5:29-30) — how can only one eye scandalize?

4. We must, in all these cases, distinguish the general principles contained in the Sermon (especially in the antitheses of 5:21-48) from the concrete examples illustrating these principles. If the examples were taken as absolute principles applicable as such in all circumstances, we would not only produce absurd situations, but we would often aggravate the very social wrongs which Jesus aims at correcting.

Now the Old Testament prescriptions, however imperfect they were, sought to promote the welfare of man, specifically a more just and fraternal society. In this respect, even the often criticized Lex Talionis ("an eye for an eye") already represented a considerable progress over the traditional use of unrestricted retaliation. And so, if Jesus intends to "bring to perfection" πληροῖν and even transcend (Mt 5:17) the Mosaic Law, it has to be in the same fundamental direction, to wit man's welfare. We must conclude from this that any interpretation of his words which would ultimately lead to oppression, alienation of human rights or debasement of human dignity, would betray his intention.

In other words, the intention of Jesus was that we obey his words (his language is imperative), but not literally (his language is paradoxical). A code of law is to be taken literally. But it is not written in paradoxes, hyperboles, extreme and impossible metaphors. Furthermore, it prescribes a minimum, whereas Jesus prescribes the maximum. Jesus is not giving directives, he is giving a direction in which "the sky is the limit" (= to be perfect like the heavenly Father). He is not drafting a modern constitution couched in legal terms, he is preaching to an Oriental crowd of the First Century, in the only literary idiom that such a crowd can understand easily.

In conclusion to this second part, we can safely assert that the position of the proponents of nonresistance is on the whole unconvincing. It rests on a much too slender scriptural basis (in practice, only the Sermon on the Mount), and furthermore its exegesis of the Sermon does not give sufficient weight to matters of style and literary genre. And this results in a serious distortion of Jesus' thought.
PART III. JESUS THE PEACEFUL REVOLUTIONARY

In the first two parts of this study we have seen two diametrically opposed views regarding Jesus' stance on politics and violence. We have seen that the revolutionists paint him as a rebel leader bent on freeing his people from Roman oppression, while the non-resistants picture him as an apolitical preacher of the spiritual Kingdom which is not of this world. How these two groups of scholars can reach such contrary conclusions concerning Jesus is not too surprising: they simply ignore the Gospel passages which would damage their thesis — or they disqualify them as unhistorical. Among many other authors Oscar Cullmann\textsuperscript{116} has rightly stigmatized as being fundamentally simplistic this one-sidedness in the choice of proof-texts.

This third part of our study will try to avoid the pitfall of naive simplification by combining the two preceding views in a dynamic tension, thus preserving the element of truth contained in each one. This will consist in presenting Jesus as \textit{both} a revolutionary and a peacemaker. This double feature of Jesus' stance is expressed by some people in the formula "active nonviolence." This formula is certainly acceptable, as we shall see when we examine the available data of the Gospels. However, it might not be perfectly adequate, in the sense that the term "nonviolence," albeit qualified by the term "active," would seem to be too negative to convey the positive force and creative newness embodied in Jesus' message and personality. That is why I prefer the expression "peaceful revolutionary," an expression in which both terms are positive and dynamic. However, there is little point in quibbling over this nuance of terminology.

In all that follows we will build on the foundation previously laid by our critique of the two positions surveyed until now. True, our assessment of those positions has been largely negative. Nevertheless, as we went along we made several significant concessions to the viewpoints we were criticizing. These will now be taken up anew, but more systematically, along with other Gospel passages, which are usually neglected by the revolutionists as well as by the nonresistants, and which will prove a great help in reaching a correct understanding of Jesus' stance on politics and violence.

Our examination of the Gospel evidence will proceed in two steps. First, we will succinctly review the various passages showing Jesus as a promoter of peace both in his teaching and in his actions. Then we will see that this in no way prevents him from adopting a critical stance on socio-political issues, to such an extent that he may truly be said to be revolutionary in his approach to these issues.

A. JESUS, THE MAN OF PEACE

Admittedly, some of the sayings and actions of Jesus have been construed as advocating violence. We have seen what use the revolutionists have made of these instances to validate their thesis. I hope that I have shown convincingly that the passages adduced to this purpose simply cannot support their contention. Nevertheless, we can scarcely rest content with such a negative approach. More data, but of a positive nature this time, are needed to substantiate the claim that Jesus was basically a man of peace.

Already, some of the passages invoked by the nonresistants could be quoted in this respect. Although the nonresistants make too much of these texts by a literal interpretation which transform paradoxical or hyperbolical examples into absolute and all-inclusive principles of behavior (something they were never meant to be), still these various sayings of Jesus do express in a rhetorical key his resolute stand in favor of nonviolence. And other, less equivocal, texts are far from lacking.

Here we have dozens of examples to choose from. A mere sampling of quotations, strung together without the benefit of commentary, will give an idea of the abundance of the data. The following are taken at random:

— "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. For if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Mt 5:38-41).

— "Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again" (Lk 6:30).

— "Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . those who mourn . . . the meek . . . those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . the
merciful . . . the pure of heart . . . the peacemakers’’ (Mt 5:3-9).
— “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16).
— “You shall love the Lord your God . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mt 12:30-31).
— “Whatever you wish that men do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets” (Mt 7:12).
— “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven’” (Mt 18:21-22).
— “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Mt 7:1).
— “You know the commandments: ‘Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother’” (Mk 10:19).
— “Every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:22).
— “All who take the sword shall perish by the sword” (Mt 26:52).
— “When his disciples James and John saw this (= the refusal of the Samaritans to welcome Jesus), they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?’ But he turned and rebuked them’” (Lk 9:54-55).
— “Be merciful, even as your father is merciful” (Lk 6:36).

All these sayings strongly condemn any form of hatred, of retaliation, of violence. They aim at instilling forgiveness, compassion, understanding among men. However, they do not enjoin a systematic avoidance of conflict as such. On the contrary, they may even produce conflict, for they might quite easily bring about, in a society geared to violence and lust for power, a reaction of opposition against what so manifestly contradicts established patterns of behavior — such as happened in the case of Jesus himself. For indeed, as we shall see, Jesus never hesitated to stir conflict when his mission required it. But, ultimately, his teaching and actions were aimed at bringing peace to the world, although not the kind
of peace favored by the world (Jn 14:27), that is a peace resulting all too often from a "law and order" sanctioning injustice and oppression.

We also saw that Jesus never, in word or deed, suggested any countenance or approval of political rebellion. Instead, he firmly and consistently rejected the temptation of leading a movement of revolt as "king" of the Jews (Jn 6:15). He advocated payment of the tribute to Caesar. What he preached was God's kingdom — which was not conceived as something to be snatched at or achieved through violence, but something to be received as a gift (Lk 13:32). The Kingdom's coming required repentance and conversion, not armed conflict with the Romans (Mk 1:15 par.). It required a childlike spirit (Mk 10:15 par.), not machiavellian tactics.

Jesus dedicated his whole life and energy to preaching this kind of Kingdom, thus preparing men to accept the will and way of God; and he did this, not through coercion but through persuasion. His parables, for example, are not pieces of demagogic speechifying; they are rational invitations to reflect and take a free decision. Likewise, in the episode of the temptation (Mt 4:1-11 par.), he rejected world rule because this, according to the prevailing views of the time, could be insured and preserved only through military power. Similarly, we have seen that the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem was basically a peaceful gesture. And, finally, Jesus submitted to arrest and execution without opposing the use of force — a decision stemming from his own free choice (Mt 26:53). He died with words of forgiveness on his lips (Lk 23:34). In all this, Jesus truly showed himself to be the promised "Prince of peace" announced by Isaiah (Is 9:5).

B. JESUS, THE REVOLUTIONARY

As we have already seen, many Christians hold that Jesus was completely apolitical. They point to the fact that he left no body of teaching on political matters which could be remotely comparable to Plato's Republic or Aristotle's Politics, nor did he advocate any program of political reform. This is quite true. But it does not follow that Jesus' teaching and actions had no bearing on politics. All depends on what one means by "politics." If the term is restricted to partisan politics (a specific platform) or to organizational politics (systems and forms of government), then indeed we could
say that Jesus was apolitical in that sense. But this would be limiting the term “politics” far too much. For politics is much more than that. As the Greek root of the word suggests, it concerns all the various aspects of life within the *polis* (= city). It embraces, aside from lawmaking and law enforcement, the cultural, the social as well as the economic dimensions of a given community. And, in this respect, Jesus’ actions and teaching were eminently “political,” for they were meant to usher in nothing less than an entirely new social order. In this sense, nothing is more “political” than the Gospel.

That Jesus was deeply involved in politics is attested by the manner of his death. He was executed on *political* charges. Whether these charges had any grounds or not is beside the point: his Jewish enemies judged him to be so dangerous that they had to eliminate him. No doubt Jesus’ clashes with the socio-political powers of his day were largely brought about by the critical stance he took on the *religious* institutions and parties of Palestine. But, in the social systems of the First Century, and especially in Palestine, religion and politics were so intimately interconnected that any criticism of religion became political criticism as well.

There is no need here to depict at great length the many occasions when Jesus engaged in conflicts with the Jewish leaders. All this is already well known and warrants only a brief recall.

Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God was destined not primarily to the pious and the faithful observers of the Law, but to the poor (Mt 11:5; Lk 6:20), the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the sick and the theologically uneducated *am-haaretz* (Mt 11:5; Lk 6:20). Thus, in his programmatic address in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:18-19) Jesus made it clear that his coming was equivalent to a permanent Jubilee Year. This meant that the time had come when social inequalities and economic oppression had to be completely wiped out. His appearance therefore required sweeping reforms in all spheres of life: redistribution of property, emancipation of slaves, liberation of the oppressed. He was announcing nothing less than the new regime described in Is 61:1-2, “a visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, achieved by his intervention in the person of Jesus, as the one Anointed and endued with the Spirit.”

117. Yoder, Politics, 39.
thermore, Jesus stated that these blessings of the New Age would be available to all, including hated foreigners and enemies (Lk 4: 24-27). All this was most shocking for Jesus’ contemporaries.

But Jesus provoked the ire of the Jewish leaders in many other ways. He consorted and took his meals with the “enemies of the people,” the abhorred tax-collectors, as well as with prostitutes and public sinners. He drastically reinterpreted the Law and the Tradition of the Elders on such matters as legal purity, the sabbath, divorce, etc. He rejected the accepted norms of retaliation against non-Jews and publicly favored the “popular enemy,” the Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37; 17:1-1-19). He assured some individuals that their sins had been forgiven (Mk 2:5; Lk 7:48). He openly refuted the Sadducee doctrine against the resurrection of the dead (Mt 22:23-33). He scathingly denounced the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Mt 23:1-36). He attacked the chief priests in his parable of the Wicked Tenants and implied that they were nothing but unreliable and murderous stewards of the nation (Lk 20:9-19). He forecast the destruction of the Temple. He forcibly expelled from the Temple precincts merchants authorized by the chief priests to ply their trade there, thus challenging the economic practices of the Temple officials. He constantly laid claim to unprecedented authority, going as far as placing himself above the Torah (Mt 5:21-48) and the Temple (Mt 12:6), while refusing to answer an official challenge to his authority by the chief priests and elders (Lk 20:1-8). It is no wonder that Jesus was eventually to be convicted of blasphemy by the high priest himself (Mk 14:61-64).

Naturally all this had clear political implications, since the religious authorities were charged by the Romans to maintain “law and order” — and Jesus was subverting both in his actions and teaching. In this respect the accusations of the Sanhedrin to Pilate were an adequate translation in political terms of the religious upheaval created by Jesus.118 As he himself stated, he had come to bring fire and was impatient for it to kindle (Lk 12:49).

However, Jesus did not address only what we would nowadays call “religious” issues (and which, as was said, were actually politically loaded in the context of First Century Palestine), he was also concerned about larger socio-economic issues. For instance,

118. Cf. the illuminating article of A. Vargas-Machuca, “Por qué condenaron a muerte a Jesús de Nazaret?”, EstE 54 (1979) 441-70.
more than once he adopted a critical attitude toward the rich and the powerful (Mt 6:24; 11:8; Lk 6:24-26; 18:24), qualifying money as "unjust wealth" (Lk 16:9.11). When we remember that, traditionally, wealth was seen as an earthly reward for righteousness, we can measure how revolutionary his message was. And, in fact, it was thoroughly revolutionary, otherwise it would be impossible to understand why the lower classes came to him in such great crowds, as also why he aroused, first the suspicion, and then the antagonism, of the authorities.

It was inevitable that a man who proved to be so popular with the masses should appear politically threatening in the eyes of King Herod who, according to Josephus (Ant., XVIII, 5, 2), had had John the Baptist executed precisely because he feared that John might bank on his popularity to foment an insurrection. At one point in Jesus' ministry news was brought to him to the effect that Herod wanted to kill him too (Lk 13:31-33). The reason for this enmity is not given, but we may surmise that Herod became alarmed not only by the increasing fame of Jesus, but also by the latter's socio-political doctrine — a doctrine which was producing divisions among households (Lk 12:51-53), which was promoting the social equality of women (Jesus had healed many women and had accepted women as his friends and disciples — something unheard of on the part of a rabbi), a doctrine which was advocating a sharing of surplus possessions (Mk 10:21; Mt 6:19-21; Lk 12:33), and which was favoring the lower classes to the detriment of the higher ones (Lk 6:20-26).

It is worthwhile to pause a moment and weigh the political significance of this incident. Upon learning that Herod wants to kill him, Jesus replies: "Go and tell that fox . . ." (Lk 13:32a). These words are already quite remarkable in themselves. In biblical and other ancient literature the fox is considered both a destructive animal and a creature of secondary rank, not equal to the lion.\(^{119}\) This shows that Jesus understands Herod to be both destructive and without great political standing — quite a bold criticism when we remember that Jesus is presently in Herod's territory and that he is in such a fashion deprecatingly referring to the political ruler who has direct jurisdiction over him. Then Jesus goes on to say

that, whatever the plans of Herod, he himself does not intend modifying his own course of action: he will continue to “cast out demons and perform cures” until he completes the task he set out to do. It is clear that, in this as in other instances, Jesus does nothing to placate Herod or work out some form of political compromise which would enable him to continue his ministry without interference on Herod’s part. Far from deferring to Galilee’s supreme political figure, he ignores him and even treats him with a certain scorn. He does hint, however, that his stay in Galilee will be brief; but he also insists that, if he means to leave shortly for Jerusalem, it is not because of Herod’s threats, but because “a prophet must not perish outside of Jerusalem.” In other words, if he is to die a violent death, it will not be in the hands of Herod. When, in fact, Jesus will eventually come face to face with Herod in the capital, it will be as Pilate’s prisoner. And then Jesus’ scorn for Herod will take the form of silence (Lk 23:9). To the murderer of John the Baptist he will refuse to address a single word of acknowledgment — the ultimate contempt.

In all this, let us notice that Jesus never questions the legitimacy of Herod’s authority over him — something which, after all, we might expect of someone who claims to be in a unique relationship to God himself. Even less does he attempt in any way to overthrow this authority. He merely manifests that he refuses to grovel under it. If he submits to it, he does so in absolute freedom. And this inner freedom enables him to see through the shallow shabbiness of Herod’s postures. He denounces the evil ruler for what he is: a fox, a maleficent, second-rate kinglet who is unworthy of the power he wields. Jesus’ words and actions constitute in the circumstances a vigorous protest against the manner in which this man uses his authority. It is a peaceful protest, but it is one which, like thunder, still reverberates through history.

Similarly, during his trial before Pilate, Jesus will manifest the same kind of sovereign freedom towards the representative of Roman might. Then too he will recognize the Procurator’s authority over himself, but he will at the same time remind Pilate that whatever authority he has comes from God: “You would have no authority at all over me, if it had not been granted you from above” (Jn 19:11–NEB). Again Jesus protests against political power’s claim to absolutism. Even when it is legitimate, political power is still subject to an even greater power which sets proper limits to
all earthly powers, be they religious or secular. Here again, let us notice that Jesus frames his protest in quite critical circumstances: it is precisely while standing trial that he so sternly admonishes his judge. His submission to legitimate authority is in no way servile. Even at the risk of antagonizing the only person who can now save his life, he fearlessly contradicts the arrogant claims of the despot facing him.

Not only is power to be exercised solely in subordination to God’s all-encompassing sovereignty, but it is to be exercised as a service, not as a tyranny. Such is Jesus’ teaching on political power. “Among pagans it is the kings who lord it over them, and those who have authority over them are given the title Benefactor. This must not happen with you. No; the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves” (Lk 22:25-26).

Three observations seem in order concerning this major text. First, the new social order inaugurated by Jesus is marked by a distinctive type of leadership, quite at variance with accepted patterns of leadership in the political realm. Implicitly, this view of Jesus amounted to a strong challenge to the rulers of the day, as well as an alternative to the traditional concept of political power understood as coercive domination. For Jesus, political power must be a form of service, nothing less and nothing more. Secondly, in Luke’s Gospel we find this teaching of Jesus given in pel we read a report of the washing of the feet (Jn 13:4-14). Here again, Jesus opposes his view of power to that of his contemporaries: genuine authority lies in the giving up of all the trappings and status symbols of worldly power in favor of humble service. The follower of Jesus is free from the spirit of domination. Authentic power is the power which renounces itself as self-serving coercion and chooses to serve others disinterestedly. Thirdly, in the choice of the word “Benefactor,” which Jesus uses here sarcastically, we may see a disguised reference to the emperor (a unique instance in the four Gospels), for the Roman emperors applied the title to themselves. This criticism implies that, in Jesus’ eyes, kings and emperors are quite the contrary of “Benefactors.” For them to become truly such would entail radical

120. Cf. G. Bertram, art. ἐθέργετης, TDNT, 2:654.
changes in the whole fabric of their political praxis. Once more Jesus' approach is critical and, ultimately, revolutionary.

After having surveyed, however briefly, some passages of the Gospels where Jesus takes a stance having an explicitly political nature, perhaps we are now in a better position to appreciate the significance of the episode about the tribute to Caesar (Mk 12:13-17 par.). In our earlier discussion about it we had already reached two conclusions as to its interpretation. First, against the contrary view of some revolutionists, it is certain that Jesus upheld payment of the tribute; any other interpretation does violence to the text. Secondly, this time against the dissenting opinion of the nonresistants, the stance of Jesus can in no way be equated with a passive acceptance of the status quo, allegedly because he would have been "above politics" (M.J. Le Guillou, R. Coste) or "indifferent to social problems" (R. Mehl). On the contrary, as was stated clearly when we treated this passage, Jesus took a distinctly critical stance on political power: he firmly set limits to the power of the State by referring it to that of God: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." As expressed by Lord Acton, who was himself a politician and could therefore appreciate the political significance of Jesus' words, these words "gave the civil power under the protection of conscience a sacredness it had never enjoyed and bounds it had never acknowledged: and they were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom." 121

These two conclusions, if they are accepted, are of great consequence. And yet, if we take into account everything we have just seen on "Jesus, the revolutionary," perhaps we can take a further step in our analysis of the logsion on the tribute.

For indeed this saying of Jesus is often misunderstood in either one of two directions. Some Christians understand it along the lines of Luther's "two-kingdom theory" and believe that Jesus is here laying the foundation of what in modern terms we would call "the doctrine of the separation of Church and State." In other words, according to them Jesus would be opposing two spheres of reality, the religious and the political, and would thus be predicated the radical autonomy of both. Such a view is untenable for two reasons. First, because the religious and the political were inextricably interwoven in Antiquity, and any attempt to dissociate

121. This is a quotation found in Richardson, Political, 47.
them would have been not only misunderstood but wholly un-thinkable. Secondly, because such a dichotomy would amount to making an absolute of politics, whereas in Jesus’ mind politics could surely never have been deemed an absolute entity, independent of God. Caesar and God could never be posited as two equal kings (albeit reigning over different realms) in the eyes of one who preached the absolute sovereignty of God over all things.

A second direction in which this logion has been interpreted is that of subordination of the political to the religious. Surely this view is much more acceptable than the previous one. However, it is often understood in this weak sense: politics and religion are not on the same level and, normally, do not clash. If, however, it does happen on rare occasions that the demands of Caesar interfere with those of God, then of course those of God should prevail. Thus the impression is given that, on the whole, the political and the religious realms rarely intersect. Now is this really the case?

Without taking into account the existence of those totalitarian States where Caesar is everyting and God nothing, could it not be said that even in a democratic State all political issues, when analyzed in depth, turn out ultimately to have an ethical-religious dimension? To mention only a few examples, could it be said that politics and religion do not intersect on the questions of abortion, disarmament, sexual or racial discrimination, freedom of the press, equality of rights, death penalty, conscientious objection, etc.? That is why the "subordination" view of Jesus’ stance should not be unduly weakened, which it often is. Jesus is saying more than just: let Caesar be autonomous except when in conflict with God. In reality, the two realms are potentially always in conflict for, as has just been said, very few political issues, if any, are without some built-in religious implications. And so, in order to take this phenomenon into account and at the same time respect the intention of Jesus, one should understand his words as meaning something like this: precisely because the things of Caesar and the things of God are so entangled, always overlapping and often competing, it is essential for a person to give his first loyalty to God on all issues and to judge all issues from the vantage point of God’s will on man and the world; this is the surest way to arrive at sound political decisions, namely decisions which will at once ensure the good of the State and the good of those whom the State is meant to serve. In other words, by placing God at the very center of all
things, Caesar will also receive whatever he may reasonably demand of his subjects.

Of course this does not mean that such an interpretation of the tribute logion necessarily leads to the constitution of a theocracy. The Gospel, as I said repeatedly, does not address the organizational level of politics, but rather its inspirational level. (Philosophers would say that its object is transcendent, not categorical.) A theocracy is generated by a confusion between these two levels. What happens then is that specific political structures and programs are guaranteed to represent the will of God. This robs politics of its natural function of regulating the common good in temporal matters through duly elected representatives of the people, and according to prudential judgments about which opinions may legitimately differ. It is not the function of the Gospel to dictate the concrete decisions of politics. Its role is to inspire all its decisions by infusing them with respect for the dignity of man, compassion for the defenseless, justice for all.

CONCLUSION

For many people, peace means the continuance of what was before, the preservation of the familiar order of things, the absence of conflict, the maintenance of the status quo. Yet, we have seen that Jesus, the Prince of peace, came to turn the world upside down — precisely what the first Christians were accused of doing by their being faithful to Jesus: "These men . . . have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). For other people, revolution means violence. Yet, the revolutionary Jesus rejected violence. His revolution was a peaceful one, a revolution whose only weapons were truth, the unmasking of hypocrisy, protest against tyranny, love of the enemy.

That is why Jesus’ revolution remains the most radical of all revolutions. He wanted to change the world utterly by changing the heart of man. Yet, his revolution was not meant to be merely "spiritual" or individualistically "pietist" — something purely religious or other-worldly. For, by attempting to make humans more fraternal and loving, he was undertaking a task which was, among other things, essentially political.

The difficulty for his followers through the centuries is to be faithful to all that Jesus was: a man of peace and, at the same time,
a revolutionary. To pursue justice without being willing to pay the price of revolutionary change is to betray him. To seek revolution with means other than peaceful ones is also to betray him.

As usual, Jesus is paradoxical. Just as his cross is the ultimate paradox, so also faithfulness to him nails us to the contradictory beams of peace and revolution — a most uncomfortable posture! But then, “a disciple is not above his teacher” (Mt 10:24). By taking upon ourselves the task of changing the world by peaceful revolution, we are merely following in the footsteps of our Teacher. And we know that he leads us towards “abundant life” (Jn 10:10).