

A CALL TO ACTION:

A comparative analysis of

Rosemary Reuther's TO CHANGE THE WORLD

and

Cornel West's PROPHECY DELIVERANCE!

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Cornel West and Rosemary Reuther have taken their courage in hand and dared not only to address some of the most profound issues confronting humanity today, but also to paint a vision of a future that could hold new historical possibility other than the human destruction which is the natural end of present trends. Their titles suggest the magnificence and radicality of the task they set before us: Prophecy Deliverance! and, spoken more simply, secularly and comprehensively, To Change the World.

Rosemary Reuther develops a christology out of liberation theology that spells out her hope for incarnational action that might deliver us into a new framework of human and environmental inter-relationships. I believe inherent to this christology are her concepts of sin and the Kingdom (within which I would include the concept of new humanity and, in a sense, Jubilee conversion). Tillich's explanation of sin as profound separation and alienation is expanded to incorporate the state of and responsibility for Reinhold Niebuhr's immoral society. She says, "Sin means not only alienation from God and personal brokenness of life, but also the structural evils of war, racism, sexism and economic exploitation which allow some people to dehumanize others." (pg. 19) The kingdom has to do with God's will being done on earth -- structurally dealing with societal evils so that humanity might live free of oppression and able to be reconciled one to another, within self, to God, nation to nation, and group to group. This christology is based on the deeds of the historical Jesus, which reveal his meaning and which save from sin and usher in the kingdom. Jesus is the exemplar of incarnational action called for from us all. Jesus identified with the victims of oppression, he ministered to those whom the structures of society left uncared for. We who would be his followers can only do so by ministering to the current contradiction in history, with humility born of knowing that we too, as were the apostles, tend to be betrayers, but with power and leadership used on behalf of empowering the dispossessed to bring about justice, peace and mutuality. This is not a mystic or other-worldly christology; it is a dealing over and over again with the historically necessary deed, discovered out of identification with those who have been betrayed by societal structures, and using critical intelligence to discover in the current context what re-incarnation requires.

This christological statement has evolved out of insights gained by grappling with the issues of liberation, sectarianism, sexism and ecology. In terms of liberation, the fact must first be realized that the church has perpetuated the betrayal of Jesus by using his name and cross as a means of power and dominion over other people. She says, "The Jesus who made himself one of the poor, one of the outcasts, and, finally, one of the dead, in order to witness to the true conditions for entering God's reign, witnesses against this betrayal of his name." (pg. 18) The liberation theology of Latin America reveals that the primary point for incarnation is in the unending struggle of good and evil; it is in maintaining the edge of appropriate action, acting even unto death to enable liberation, or, on the other hand, restraining the movement when it is tempted to absolutize its own victory and truth. The church must involve itself; it cannot keep

its hands clean; it must be the conscience of change. In Jewish-Christian relations the thrust is a new solidarity built upon cleansing ourselves of the practice of using Jesus' name to deny the validity of other people's experience of God. The commonness of messianic understanding of the two religions, anticipatory and proleptic, not finished, but awaited, is another basis for this stance of cooperation and affirmation. The question of feminism brings the explication of the Christ as the representative of a new humanity of service and mutuality of empowerment. As Jesus related to women he demonstrated this way of life that is tied to neither sex. He cared for and responded to the most oppressed. Women were and are the oppressed of the oppressed. Jesus did not separate himself from or ignore them. He lifted up a new humanity of suffering servanthood through his relations with them. The issue of human survival or the abuse of the resources of the earth is revealed at core to be the question of the affluent minority owning and controlling the resources to the exclusion of the majority who are poor and powerless. This requires the creation of "a new society of justice, in which nature can be dominated without social domination." (pg. 65)

Cornel West puts forward his revolutionary Christian perspective and praxis built out of an examination of the Black American situation, an expose of racism, a critique of Black responses to racism, and a study of the relationship between Afro-American Christian thought and Progressive Marxism. He proposes that the oppression of the Afro-American, which is centuries old, fed by many dynamics of current society, and continuing to intensify rather than to reverse, still has the possibility of transformation into a situation of human freedom. The keys to this are participation in decision-making in a system that encourages the spontaneity and creativity of the individual while honoring the unique heritage and culture out of which the person has come, with a focus on the class struggle that accesses economic opportunity.

The threads to this fabric of revolutionary Christianity are interwoven in strands which West clearly defines and separates from weaker, inadequate, usually currently predominant ones which he explicitly denounces. The elements which he uses are: 1) the radical egalitarian idea from prophetic Christianity that every individual should have the opportunity to fulfill him or herself, in the context of community; 2) the African value of human life that sustained the Afro-American in an alien environment and a religious cosmology that has given meaning to their human existence; 3) "a promotion of an individuality strengthened by an honest encounter with the Afro-American past and the expansion of democratic control over the major institutions that regulate lives in America and abroad" (pg. 90), a concept derived from the humanist response to racism; and 4) the stance of Marxism that is staunchly anticapital, anti-imperialist, antiracist and antisexist at the same time that it is positive in its "commitment to the dialectical method for understanding social reality, viewing class struggle as a central dynamic of the historical process, and affirming socialism as a desirable social arrangement." (pg. 134)

The vision which both authors have is a very practical one. West talks of a time when the poor and working classes of whatever color or background unite in order to facilitate a new era in economy and government that might include such things as federalized policy for unemployment and health care. He says that his primary aim in harnessing progressive Marxism with Christianity is "to change the world, not each other's faith; to put both groups on the offensive for structural social change, not put black Christians on the defensive; and to enhance the quality of life of the dispossessed, not expose the empty Marxist meaning of death." (pg. 107) As Reuther discusses her proposal of Jubilee conversion she says that there are certain ingredients of a just and liveable society. "These include the human scale of habitats and communities; an ability of people to participate in the decisions that govern their lives; work in which everyone is able to integrate intelligence and creativity with manual labour; a certain just sharing of the profits and benefits of production; a balance of leisure and work, rural and urban environment." (pg. 68)

In their concern with the depth issues of the day and with the sense of urgency they have to see the needed change precipitated, Reuther and West call the church to account for its stance and role. In regard to the questions of human justice and survival Rosemary Reuther says, "If indeed christology is a part of the problem, if the paradigms of christology perpetuate political detachment, religious bigotry, sexism and negation of nature, then we have to ask serious questions about the saving content of christology." (pg. 4) She continues her discussion to say that intrinsic to her understanding of christology is the necessity for the church to be inclusive, caring and courageous, ridding itself of its own forms of oppression, and calling and enabling other structures of society to do likewise. West describes his hope for the church: "If there is any test for the 'truth' of particular Christian descriptions, it is their capacity to facilitate the existential appropriation of Jesus Christ. This means that any 'true' Christian description makes the reality of Jesus Christ available, that it encourages the putting of oneself on the line in the negation of what is and the transformation of prevailing realities, of going to the edge of life's abyss and finding out whether the reality of Jesus Christ -- yields life sustenance, self-formation, self-maturation, and societal amelioration." (pg. 98)

Besides the major offering of essential proposal given by each of these theologians, there are other contributions as well. In terms of particular articulation, Reuther describes resurrection in a way that is at once gratitude-producing and touching with its simplicity. It reminds me of a story of a fellow seminarian who told of a martyr in Korea whose death is being commemorated Sunday November 13th as protest against Reagan's Korean visit, then he said: "He is resurrected in me." Reuther says, "In risking suffering and even death on behalf of a new society, we also awaken hope. The poor learn not to be afraid of those in power and to begin to take their destiny into their own hands. Even when the prophet is killed, the struggle goes on. Indeed, their very death becomes a rallying point for new energy. In their name people now organize themselves to renew the

work of liberation. The memory of their lives becomes stronger than the powers of death and gives people hope that the powers of death can be broken. This is the real meaning of redemptive suffering." (pg. 28) From West an especially appealing argument was the one he used pertaining to beauty. What I appreciated was the calling into question of prevailing criteria and acknowledged qualities of beauty to say there might appropriately be others. It is not only that there is authentic beauty in peoples other than white with Greek features; but beauty needs a definition that is more inclusive than just stylized attributes. It seems to me that some persons who have lived with suffering, perhaps through physical deformity such as hunchback or body warts or leprosy, have incredible beauty that is not confined to spirit, but manifests itself in the lines of their faces, the look of their eyes, the way of their smile, etc. But to so many people this beauty is indiscernible because our culture has published norms that exclude this quality. It is in the context of Afro-America that West raises this question, but it opens, on behalf of the whole of humanity, a traditionally closed issue. West also offers an intellectually brilliant statement of the situation of Afro-American people, a clarification of the impotency of liberalism and Leninism, and a clear outline of the contributions of black theology. Rosemary Reuther, in an affirmational style that explains past contributions useful to the present while objectively discarding that which is inadequate or actually demonic, clarifies Judaism and Christian bigotry, offers a concise summation of liberation theology, contextualizes feminism, and expands the demand for personal Christian action to the most comprehensive scope -- the whole globe and the totality of history.

These two theologians are exciting to read and are deeply significant to the church today. Each offers a disciplined articulation of the realities of church and society. Reuther deals with the church as historic reality and describes with dispassion and precision the critical task that confronts it. West deals with that segment of the church wherein he stands and describes the thrust it needs to make and the action required in this nation to deal with what is probably our most heinously structured oppression. They both write prescriptions. Reuther's statement is more inclusive, more objective, more succinct, more readable. She has a way of pushing beyond the obvious to the root problem or depth meaning. This book is for me a foundation stone for the future. Both for pastors and theologians it offers a hope for a church alive, for a church sensitive to real suffering, strong enough to rid itself of liabilities from the past, sensible in terms of practical possibilities, and prophetic in pointing unequivocally to that which is necessary both to be faithful to the truth of Christian heritage and to address the current contradiction and create a new possibility for human life. West's statement is difficult to read, it is permeated with negative aspersions that serve to emphasize the radicality of his objections yet which seem to exaggerate the negative, and he does not stand within a global context, but clearly and intentionally stands as a Black using his own perspective to make a clarion call for change. In the midst of this West offers a valuable compendium of historical movements related to this moment of the church's life, their values

and their inter-relationships; and he offers a bold move beyond what is, into the ambiguity of what-is-not-yet, to state the means whereby his vision may be accomplished.

There are four questions I would ask. Of West: Why have you not more fully appropriated the passion and emotion, the understanding of suffering in everyday life that is a part of the Black religious tradition, as exemplified in spirituals, for use in your revolutionary Christianity? Mention is made, but the power is lacking. Secondly, I would like to know why you do not perceive Martin Luther King, Jr. to be a strong ally, but seem to see his effort as having been emasculated because of what you see to be a dependence on liberalism? It seems to me that great gains were made under his leadership, and that his influence is still beckoning forth activity that lends itself to the very direction you desire.

The other two questions I would ask of Rosemary Reuther. What would the Pope, as a symbol of church ecclesiastical authority, say to this book, especially to your statement regarding Judaism, and how do you feel or respond to this? (It seems to me that it takes a great deal of courage to speak forthrightly, and that it is in the interest of integrity and historical necessity that such a message can be rendered.) Then, who, or what structure, would provide leadership for the periodic Jubilee conversions? Would these happen by nation or on a global scale, or progressively one to the other?