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**Love in the time of violence:
the moral imperative to revolution in the writings of Camilo Torres**

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The writings of the Colombian sociologist, priest, and revolutionary Camilo Torres document his evolving and occasionally conflicting views about the social mission of Christian believers in the world and the complex relationship of Christianity and Marxism. Translated and collected by theologian John Gerassi in *Revolutionary Priest* (1971), they span from 1956 to Torres's premature death in 1966. Torres's work may have helped shape the wave of liberation theology that swept Latin American politics in the 1970s, and to an extent Torres himself may be considered a liberation theologian. But my focus in this paper is limited to his work alone, with particular attention to his opinions on the duty of Christians vis-à-vis revolution, violence, and Marxism.

Section (I) reviews the sociological critiques of Colombian society that informed Torres's early writings from 1960 to 1963. I emphasize two factors: his struggle to reconcile Christian teachings with the need for political violence and his gradual warming up to Marxist methodology and political rhetoric. Section (II) focuses on love, which for Torres underwrites the Christian moral imperative to violent revolution. Though Aristotle's notions of *agape* and *philia* I distinguish between the supernatural love that Christians believe God has for all people and the social love that people ought to show to their neighbors. Section (III) discusses Torres's views from his late writings about the relationship of Christianity and Marxism, which he hoped would be one of mutual assistance and not of opposition. Finally, section (IV) reviews some interpretations of Torres's theology.

Throughout the paper I emphasize two recurring themes. The first is the tenacity with which Torres argued that revolution is *a normative moral duty* that all persons, whether Christians or Marxist, share in the face of injustice: he was an absolutist and a collectivist, shunning political compromise and philosophical individualism, which he believed were the root of the problem to begin with. Second, and related, is Torres's insistence that doctrinal divides ought not to distract Colombians from their goal of helping their neighbors: his sociological training allowed him to understand that the material conditions of people's lives shape their political and religious behaviors, including most importantly how they come to love their fellows. Thus, for Torres, ensuring the justice of Colombian society by liberating the poor from oppression was first of all an act of absolute love.

I. Social change and violence

A Colombian from a wealthy family and a sociologist by training, Torres began his academic writing with sociological analyses of Colombian quality of life and social mobility, with a focus on class analysis. In "The Standard of Living in Bogotá," in 1958, he found that both the salaries and the cost of living of the middle class were less prone to market fluctuations than those of the majority working class (1971: 68-93). In "Building an Authentic Latin-American Sociology," in 1961, he emphasized the importance for Colombian scholars of rooting their sociological work in

the observable empirical facts of Colombian society. To do so is not merely a duty of intellectual honesty as scholars, Torres claimed, but especially a duty as good citizens and human beings:

Just as no science is possible without scientists, no sociology will be authentically Latin-American without authentic Latin-American sociologists. The responsibility of those who are entrusted with the formation of the future Latin-American sociologists is indeed great. We must not deceive ourselves. We run the risk of forming nominalists and not scientists. Or we may concern ourselves and our students with transcendental matters in the guise of objectivity. Or we can fall into an antiscientific demagoguery on the pretext of courage in the practice of our profession. (Torres 1971: 108)

And likewise in a later essay from 1963:

It is not possible to develop a Colombian sociology independent of universal sociology. Yet a Colombian sociology must be developed in two senses: (1) general theory and general methods must be applied to our concrete and specific reality; (2) to that theory and those methods, there must be contributed an analysis of new situations which our reality can suggest. The development of Colombian sociology would be thwarted as much by a lack of empirical research as by a lack of theoretical generalization. (Torres 1971: 190)

The key elements of Torres's thought here are that sociology must be grounded in empirical research (a standard assumption for most sociologists), oriented to action, and invested with social responsibility. While it is certainly useful to theorize about universal categories and abstract concepts, what matters most is how sociologists use their work to positively affect their countries, in this case Colombia. These earlier writings show an emerging social responsibility, one related to Torres's academic training and not to his priestly mission: he will not write extensively about his dual role as priest and scholar until 1962 ("A Priest in the University") or about the social role of Christian theology in Colombia until 1964 ("Revolution: Christian Imperative").

Similarly, he does not explicitly connect social unrest, poverty, and inequality with revolution until "Social Change and Rural Violence in Colombia" in 1963. In this important essay he diagnoses a social malady affecting Colombia's lowest classes and sets precise political requirements for its relief. The lack of social mobility, he argues (1971: 206-8), is an unmistakable symptom of a society where citizens have become oppressed. The opportunity to improve one's material condition and quality of life is an essential requirement of free democratic societies, so the fact that the channels that make these improvements possible are blocked indicates a deep structural problem. Torres contends that most of these social channels—economic, political, military, ecclesiastical—were in fact scarcely available to the Colombian working majorities. The result, he argues, is a marked increase in the frustration of the lower classes and a resulting shift from their "latent aggressiveness" to actual aggression (1971: 234). It is important to notice that at this stage Torres is already not vocally critical of violent means of political change. He does not seem to approve of them, either, as the essays from this period contain no passages reminiscent of his enthusiastic endorsement of the Army of National Liberation slogan ("Liberation or death!") from his very last written communiqué in 1966 (Torres 1971: 427). Rather, in keeping with the generally scientific character of his sociological work, in this transitional period he assesses the Colombian political turmoil (*la violencia*) as the natural intensification of social frustrations channeled through "abnormal instruments of social ascent," namely armed revolt (1971: 234-6).

It is around this time, three years from his death, that Torres also begins to integrate Marxist thinking in his writing. This is partly because of academic interest: it is difficult, in the 1960s as today still, to seriously practice sociology without at least considering Marxist methodology. But

Torres's discussion of class, capital, and revolution become more markedly approving with time. In "On Land Reform" in 1960, he had analyzed land appropriation by the government in terms of class but had hastened to add: "I did not in any way mean to speak from a Marxist view of class struggle: I only wanted to express the sociological reality" (1971: 96). Three years later, again in "Social Change and Rural Violence in Colombia," he equates the "group solidarity" that led to *la violencia* with properly Marxist conceptions of class consciousness (Torres 1971: 198). By 1964, he seems fully comfortable integrating overtly Marxist rhetoric in his revolutionary writings. Not surprisingly, in these years he also provides the most illuminating discussion of the troubled relationship of Marxism and Christianity in the aforementioned "Revolution: Christian imperative."

Torres begins this essay by defining Christian apostolate as the endeavor "to labor for all men (*sic*) to have supernatural life and to have it abundantly" (1971: 262); that is, charity motivated by love for our neighbors, the desire to improve their condition and assist in their attainment of eternal life. Torres's discussion of love is interesting and important, as is the connection between (theological) charity and (political) liberation: I will return to both concepts in the next section. Here, instead, focus on how Torres proposes that Christians should *practice* charity to help their fellow Colombians. His sociological analysis of economic planning concludes that in Latin American "underdeveloped countries, structural changes will not be produced without pressure from the popular class," that is, the poor; and since the rich governing elites lack the necessary cultural and political foresight for changes to happen in a peaceful and ordered manner—i.e., since they will strenuously resist fair structural changes just because they would diminish their social standing—a revolution by violent means "is a quite probable alternative" (Torres 1971: 283). It is important to understand that by "economic planning" Torres means the organization of the political structure of society. To "plan" is to choose to organize society in a certain way, to design and to empower certain institutions instead of others, and to arrange specific distributions of rights, opportunity, and wealth. Revolution is merely one way that this economic planning may take place, and as with most revolutionaries Torres is adamant that if it comes to violence it will be because the oppressive elites have forced the hand of the disenfranchised.

Christians, then, "must adopt toward this process [economic planning] an attitude that will not betray the practice of charity" (1971: 284). They must not shy away from economic planning that will assist the lives of their neighbors merely because the manner of its realization happens to take a violent turn. Instead, they ought to consider it an opportunity to show their love and charity for their neighbors. Indeed, Christians have much to contribute to economic planning geared toward social change: "If Christians assumed leadership in the matter of change and in planning, it is possible that the ultimate ends might be quite compatible with a *more integral humanism* and that the chosen means would be less traumatic, especially in relation to certain spiritual values" (1971: 285, my emphasis). Here is where Marxism becomes especially relevant to Torres's thought. The humanism that Torres is referring to is juxtaposed to Marxist revolutionary ways. In matters of social change, Marxists "are the technical experts" and "have held the first place" (Torres 1971: 286)—but given their often dogmatic allegiance to theory, they "run the risk of pursuing truncated and diminished ends because they are confined within materialistic conceptions. As for the means employed, it is probable that many of them restrain and curb certain human rights" (287). That is to say, Marxists may get it done but may not know when to stop. It is clear from these passages that Torres sees Marxists as capable allies insofar as their views of social justice line up with Christians', but also as in need of stronger humanistic values for the full respect of persons that Christianity can provide.

As concerns the promotion of social justice and revolution, Torres advocates a mild cooperation between Christians and Marxists. Their collaboration should be “established at the level of action where the scope and the doctrinal implications can be limited” (Torres 1971: 289); that is, they should work toward their common goals “as far as [Christian] moral principles will permit, keeping in mind the obligation of avoiding greater evils and of seeking the common good” (290). Here too the idea is that Marxists can (even should) be worked with in a revolt aimed at the attainment of the conditions for social justice, but they should not be trusted to provide a morally sound structure for those conditions. These passages indicate for sure that at this point of his life we ought not to call Torres a Marxist in any sense of the term; but at the same time they attest to his progressive warming up to the methodology if nothing else of Marxist theory and to their pursuit of his same goals of social change. These are important steps along his path to becoming the titular *Revolutionary Priest*. (However, they are not steps “toward a goal,” because there is no one point in Torres’s life where he is properly called a socialist or a communist. To the very end he remains committed merely to a pragmatic compatibility of some *actions* that are independently mandated by both Christianity and Marxism, even as he is convinced that the two ideologies remain fundamentally incommensurable at the doctrinal and philosophical level. I will discuss this point in more detail in the final section).

II. Love and revolution

Until now I have sidelined a more thorough discussion of Torres’s conception of love, but as it underwrites much of his views about Marxism it can no longer be delayed. In the 1963 essay “The Integrated Man” he calls love “a moral imperative” for Christians (1971: 243), and in the aforementioned “Revolution: Christian Imperative” he states that Christianity is “the manifestation of love for one’s neighbor,” which is “the end and purpose of apostolic activity” and its only “indispensable condition” (1971: 262). From a New Testament biblical perspective Torres claims that love is “the fulfillment of the Law” (Romans 13:10): the divine source of our charity and our motivation to help our neighbors. Christians must put this love in practice in the world through their works: they ought to “forever seek the application of [their] life of supernatural love in the economic and social structures in which [they] should always be active” (1971: 284). This is why Torres thinks that priestly work is first of all a mission of charity, intended not as redistribution of material wealth but as liberatory action.

In an essay written the next year, 1964’s “Crossroads of the Church in Latin America,” Torres relates this account of Christian apostolate with his sociological analysis of Colombia from the earlier writings. He argues that too many Colombians could not in fact love their neighbor because of the extant sociopolitical arrangements that precluded them from being good Christians. The upper classes showed allegiance to “external” or “ritualistic” liturgy (going to church, saying certain words, praying in a certain way, etc), whereas the lower and poorer classes showed a better understanding of the Christian requirement of love as charity for one’s neighbor (1971: 327-9). So it was the fact of wealth inequality and unfair resource appropriation that made the rich minorities literally love less than their neighbors: “it would be hard to prove that the parties most united to the external structure of the church are those which best fulfill the Christian commitment to love for all [hu]mankind” (1971: 334). For Torres, then, wealth inequality was the source of the inability of a sizable chunk of Colombian society to be “real Christians” (1971: 329). Here one detects an almost psychiatric diagnosis of the upper classes, an affliction of lovelessness or literal apathy, in the sense not of being unloved but of being unable to show love. As sociopaths

cannot feel basic human empathy, so are the rich incapable of embracing even the most basic of Christian and human virtues. In this regard, Torres's argument is an example of Leftist modernity, as the upper classes' disdain for and branding of the poor as lazy or stupid is an essential constituent of contemporary liberal discourses of social justice.

Torres does not explain in any more detail what exactly he means by "love" or how love is to be connected to good works. He says that "[a]mong the common people there is love, cooperation, hospitality, and a spirit of service" (1971: 329), though it is unclear whether he means those terms—cooperation, hospitality, and a spirit of service—to *define* love or if they are merely often *displayed* along with love by people of comparable social extraction. Similarly, in his 1965 letter to Bishop Rubén Isaza, he says that love entails "self-surrender" for Christians and all other people (1971: 304), and in "Message to Christians" from the same year he reiterates the connection of love to his sociological arguments from 1961 and 1962:

For this love to be genuine, it must seek to be effective. If beneficence, alms, the few tuition-free schools, the few housing projects—in general, what is known as 'charity'—does not succeed in feeding the hungry majority, clothing the naked, or teaching the un-schooled masses, we must seek effective means to achieve the wellbeing of these majorities. (1971: 367)

So while we lack a clearly stated definition from Torres of what love is, he gives us a satisfactory general picture of how he thinks that it should be used socially: Christians must love their neighbors as a requirement for eternal life; one cannot fully love one's neighbors until one has shown charity toward them; and to show charity means to labor socially and politically toward creating a more just society for them.

This conception of love recalls both the Greek notion of love as *philia* and the biblical notion of love as *agape*. For Aristotle, *philia*—often rendered in English as *friendship*, as in the popular translation by W.D. Ross below—was a bonding social love that united the people of a community. Aristotle thought so highly of political friendship that he saw it as closely related to the idea of justice and inseparable from it:

Friendship and justice seem, as we have said at the outset of our discussion, to be concerned with the same objects and exhibited between the same persons. For in every community there is thought to be some form of justice, and friendship too; at least men address as friends their fellow-voyagers and fellow soldiers, and so too those associated with them in any other kind of community. And the extent of their association is the extent of their friendship, as it is the extent to which justice exists between them. (*Ethics* VIII.9)

This is somewhat similar to the biblical notion of *agape*. The word was occasionally used by early Greek philosophers to mean filial or spousal love, but in the Bible it is used primarily to refer to the love of God for all of humankind (Kraut 2014). Torres's conception of love seems to be a mixture of these two, for on the one hand he advocates for people to take care of one another in recognition of their bounds of social love; but on the other he motivates them to do so in recognition of the divine love that God has for us all as Christians and humans.

Given this analysis, it is not surprising that love is such a fundamental concept for both Torres's theology and his political program. The concept itself, in addition to its personal connotation of romantic love (*eros*) that everyone is familiar with, is also theological and political. At the most basic level, love entails *care* for others in the form of dedication to their well-being. This is the essence of Torres's message of charity toward one's compatriots, especially "the hun-

gry majority” (cf. quotation above from “Message to Christians”). In addition to care, love may also be the interest in or acceptance of participating in the same scheme of distributive justice. When one agrees to stand under the same government, to respect the same laws, to be taxed similarly, and to assist one’s fellow citizens through a fair (not necessarily equal) distribution of resources, one displays a political act of love by affirming one’s *belonging with* one’s community. Not surprisingly, ailing societies are those where the willing participation of citizens in a scheme of common distributive justice is marred by their self-alienation from those that they are asked to assist, such as Torres says that the rich minorities feel toward the poor majorities in Colombia. On this conception of political love, insofar as the rich Colombians do not truly love the poor Colombians, then there was no united “Colombian society”—or, at the very least, Colombian society was profoundly ill. To my recollection, Torres does not speak of *la violencia* as a malady, whereas he spoke of the lack of social mobility that *la violencia* addressed as a malady; but neither did he claim that *la violencia* was an expression of love, but merely as the inevitable result of class conflict and the catalyst for revolution. In “A Letter to Christians,” John Gerassi follows a similar line of thought by arguing that “both faith and love are violent. Love, for example, entails the destruction of individual, egocentric will to build dual or common consciousness,” while brotherhood “reflects the same violence in the destruction of master-slave relationships to establish collectivism” (1971b: 448).

III. Christianity and Marxism

In this final section I analyze in more detail Torres’s evolving views about the relationship of Christianity and Marxism. Several issues are worthy of attention. One is the *philosophical* question of whether the two ideologies are conceptually reconcilable; Torres believes they are not. Another is the *pragmatic* question of how Christians and Marxists can cooperate in the world despite their doctrinal differences, which I have already begun to discuss in section (I). Related is the *political* question of whether short-term cooperation between Christians and Marxists is likely to continue in the post-revolutionary period while respecting the core elements of both ideologies; i.e., whether Christians and Marxists will turn on one another if and when the revolution is won. This also raises the *definitional* question of which elements constitute the core or essence of each ideology and which ones are renounceable; this relates to the philosophical question of doctrinal compatibility, because substantial inconsistencies among core theses will render philosophical reconciliation unlikely. Finally, there is the historical and *biographical* question of whether Torres himself was a Marxist, a socialist, or a communist in any sense of these terms.

There is ample textual evidence in Torres’s writings, especially from 1964 on, to shed light on all these questions. All are related, though some mattered less to Torres than others and I will not discuss them at length. For illustration, consider a passage from “Communism in the Church” in 1965, where Torres writes: “Communism is a philosophical system incompatible with Christianity, although in their socioeconomic aspirations the majority of Communists hold precepts not opposed to the Christian faith” (1971: 313). This is the clearest statement of his belief that pragmatic overlap is possible despite philosophical incompatibility, and it also hints to the definitional issue by mentioning “precepts” held by a “majority” of communists. In keeping with the main focus of Torres’s work, I will sideline both the philosophical and the definitional questions. Surely we could try to identify a set of indispensable theses—such as historical materialism and class struggle on one side, divinity and supernatural love on the other—that remain fixed even as others are endorsed or rejected, and then discuss whether these theoretical cores are philosophically

compatible. I am not sure what the prospects are for that analysis, but I also do not find it too important for this paper because Torres himself is not interested in it: if he had been, he would have written more about it, so I feel confident in leaving it aside.

As concerns the pragmatic question, Torres thinks that for fruitful collaboration to exist both Marxists and Christians must transcend their paradigms and focus on action instead of doctrine. Already in 1963 he had written: “If the application of economic and social principles turns out well, it is probable that the insistence on philosophical speculation will fade out” (1971: 289). And in 1965, in his “Address to Union Delegates” of the workers in Bogotá, he states:

Why do we Catholics fight the Communists—the people with whom it is said we have most antagonism—over the question of whether the soul is mortal or is immortal instead of agreeing that hunger is indeed mortal? Why do we argue over whether the Catholic church is the true church or whether we should do away with it, while the reactionary sectors, both in the church and outside it, are rallied against us? [...]

Therefore, our platform to unite the popular class should not get involved—as I have tried to avoid—in ideology or in philosophy or in religion. That is why you have seen the oligarchy react by pressuring the Catholic hierarchy to declare that platform contrary to Catholic doctrine. (Torres 1971: 350-1)

One wonders if Torres had ever read William James or other exponents of the American pragmatist philosophical tradition, who questioned the relevance of metaphysics with similar reasoning as Torres uses to juxtapose the mortality of hunger with debates over the mortality of the soul.¹ What matters in the end is that people are mortal in a real and near sense: that they are starving.² Failing to unite in firm action against this reality because of philosophical disagreements merely serves the interests of the oligarchs, who are perfectly comfortable with that reality.

The latter passage especially sees the philosophical and the definitional questions as being inherently divisive among those who ought to unite. In “Communists in the Church” Torres reiterates the same argument with even greater force. Attempts to divide Christian communities along communist versus anti-communist lines is comparable to the work of the Spanish Inquisition and McCarthyism. The identification of communism as the main enemy of Christianity is not rooted in social reality and is merely a defense system of the ruling class (1971: 312). It is also “not very theological because in Christianity the principal evil is lack of love, both for other Christians and for non-Christians, including Communists” (1971: 313). One must notice, though, how quick Torres is to point out in the next sentence that lack of love is also the main evil for communism itself: “Communism as a solution, with all its wisdom and all its fallacies, comes from the lack of real love applied in temporal structures in scientific form by Christians” (1971: 313). This passage echoes Torres’s claim from the previous year’s “Revolution: Christian Imperative,” where he had argued that while Christians can cooperate with Marxists in a revolution, they must not lose sight of their moral imperative along the way, because Marxism left to its own devices is likely to abuse human rights in the end (which I suppose is what Torres means here by “its falla-

¹ Refer to James’s “Lecture Three: Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered” in *Pragmatism: A new name for some old ways of thinking* (1907), especially pages 46-48.

² In the same vein, twenty years later, Richard Rorty (1972) also dismissed the importance of philosophical debates as things that people worry about “when their bellies are full.”

cies”). This places an even heavier burden on the Christians, whose fault it will be if communism is allowed to reign free without love in the end.³

All of this does not exclude the possibility of philosophical reconciliation after the revolution (a political question). Indeed, especially in the latter passage, Torres seems to think of Christianity and Marxism as somewhat complementary. He even seems cautiously optimistic:

When the people take power into their hands, thanks to the cooperation of all revolutionaries, the nation will consider the question of its religious orientation. The example of Poland shows that it is possible to build socialism without destroying that which is basic in Christianity. One Polish priest clarifies this: “We Christians are duty-bound to help build the socialist state when we are permitted to worship God as we wish.” (Torres 1971: 372)

There is a hint of ingenuousness here as Torres glosses over the historically real possibility that a socialist regime would eventually disenfranchise Christians, as Leninists and Stalinists did in the Soviet Union; quoting the Polish priest shows, at most, that other Christians have been similarly hopeful, without saying much about whether or not their hopes have been realized. This passage also contains a definitional and philosophical comment on the nature of Christianity. What exactly is “basic” in it? Again I will not dwell on this, but from my discussion in the previous section I think that, if nothing else, Torres thinks that love is basic, a charitable dedication to effect social changes in the direction of justice with the ultimate goal of attaining eternal life for all people. If that is what is basic in Christianity, it just might survive collaboration with Marxist revolutionaries; it would thrive, in fact, for revolution grows in the same soil as charity so understood. And it might also survive the installation of a post-revolutionary socialist regime, so long as the regime allowed Christians to worship and continued to operate in the direction of social justice.

By now the answer to the last question I raised earlier in this section—whether Torres himself was a Marxist—should be obviously negative. Yet it is interesting to note his nuanced rhetoric on this issue. In his 1965 essay “A Letter to Communists” he presents a simple syllogistic argument: “I have said that as a Colombian, as a sociologist, as a Christian, and as a priest I am a revolutionary. I believe that the Communist party consists of truly revolutionary elements, and hence I cannot be an anti-Communist either as a Colombian, a sociologist, a Christian, or a priest” (1971: 370). Torres claims that he cannot be an anti-communist as a Colombian because anti-communists harass the poor regardless of whether or not the poor are in fact communists; as a sociologist because he is sympathetic to the Marxist methodology; as a Christian because anti-communism “implies condemnation” of everything that communists stand for, including their drive toward just revolt and social justice; and as a priest because “among the Communists themselves, whether they know it or not, there may be many true Christians” (1971: 370-1). So since Torres and the Marxists share an enemy, to be anti-communist would be to side with the enemy.

Notice the wording, with the double negative “*not anti-communist*,” and the repeated pragmatism of Torres’s reasons for rejecting anti-communism as he emphasizes poverty, revolution, action, and class. There is nothing philosophical, theoretical, or conceptual in his argument. In the next paragraph he repeats that he will fight along Marxists “for our common goals” and that he is not singling out Marxists as the only ones with whom he is willing to fight: “I have always

³ Strictly speaking, Torres insists that *of course* “there are” communists in the Church, for being baptized is what it means to be in the Church, and surely a lot of Colombians who self-identify as communists have received the sacrament of baptism (1970: 311). I think these passages are mostly sarcastic, given this essay’s emphasis on practical collaboration in activism and on the defense systems of the ruling class.

sought to work together not only with them but with all independent revolutionaries and revolutionaries of other convictions” (1971: 371). In this sense, Torres is reminiscent of “professional” revolutionaries who fought with the poor and the disenfranchised from many political affiliations in Europe and Latin America against a variety of oppressing regimes; well-known historical figures like Garibaldi and Guevara come to mind.

Perhaps the most remarkable reminder of Torres’s pragmatism is how little his last essays discuss religion. The words “Christian” or “Christianity” appear only five times in his final fifteen articles, from September 1965 to January 1966, one month before his death; and both the goals and the general tone of his writing has become exclusively centered on activism. For that matter, he no longer speaks of Communism or Marxism wither, save for referring to socialists as a political party involved in the liberation struggle as opposed to those who are not. In October 1965, Torres had joined the Army of National Liberation that was fighting the regular army in the Colombian mountains, where he would be killed in action three months later (Gerassi 1971a: 30-1). It is bitterly ironic, and in a sense justly poetic, that he began his public intellectual career with sociology, gradually incorporated discussions of both theology and politics, and eventually shed all but the most deeply held social concern for the wellbeing of his fellow citizens.

IV. Conclusion

I wish to conclude by quoting three passages from theologians who have interpreted Torres’s work quite differently. As this paper focuses on Torres’s work alone I do not mean for this extremely brief concluding section to be exhaustive, but rather to show three diverse and yet sensible reactions that Torres’s life, work, and sacrifice has inspired in some of his successors.

Writing in 1968 support of nonviolence, Bishop Helder Câmara states:

I respect those who, in good conscience, have felt obligated to opt for violence, not the easy violence of salon guerrillas, but the violence of those who have proved their sincerity by sacrificing their lives. It seems to me that we should respect the memory of Camilo Torres and Che Guevara as much as that of Reverend Martin Luther King. (translated by and quoted in Gerassi 1971a: 44).

Câmara cannot *agree* with Torres’s methods, but nonetheless he *respects* his undying dedication. Torres was not one to seek compromise, on Christianity or politics or anything else, and a “militant” pacifist like Câmara has to appreciate that. We see a somewhat different appraisal of Torres from Enrique Dussel, one of the most prominent liberation theologians, who argues in 1990:

La cuestión de «fe y política» es prioritaria. Lo cierto es que muchos cristianos, al entrar en la arena política, «pierden» su fe. La cuestión es: ¿por qué «pierden» la fe?, ¿no debería haber otra expresión de fe que pudiera resistir a la «prueba» de la política? El compromiso extremo de Camilo Torres, que muere en 1966, es el fin de la experiencia «foquista»—muchos jóvenes se comprometieron en esta línea en la década del 60—. Hay que descubrir otro camino. (Dussel 1990: 117)

(transl.: “The issue of ‘faith and politics’ is a priority [for liberation theologians]. The truth is that many Christians, upon entering the political arena, ‘lose’ their faith. The question is: why ‘lose’ faith? Should there not be another expression of faith that could resist the “test” of politics? The extreme [compromise] of Camilo Torres, who died in 1966, is the goal of the ‘foquista’ experience. Many young people committed to this line of thinking in the 1960s. We must find another way.”)

The assessment of this paragraph hinges on the translation of *compromiso*, which literally means “commitment” or “engagement” but which can also mean “compromise” or “sacrifice.” Torres’s commitment to (his understanding of) Christianity was extreme, as was his sacrifice in dying for it; and there was no compromise in him at all, not in the sense of “bargaining” or “settling.” But I think Dussel means that Torres *has compromised himself* or his ideals by endorsing violent revolution, in the sense of “corrupted” or “tainted.” I hope to have said enough in this paper to show that Torres did not see himself as either having compromised or being compromised. Revolution for him was a moral imperative that any Christian worth his salt should have endorsed in similar circumstances. At most, we can say that Torres would have preferred another way to violent revolution; his remarks (see section I) about the unwillingness of the Colombian ruling hegemonies to concede anything unless it was taken by violence are filled with regret and with the hope that violence would not be necessary. But that by itself is not “compromise” of either sort that Dussel could be meaning.

Gerassi seems to me to most accurately capture the spirit of Torres’s work. The following excerpt is from his 1969 essay “A Letter to Christians: Violence, Revolution, and Morality”:

The rationale for revolutions—be they Christian, nationalist, communist, or whatever—may not always have been that they were for anything. Usually, in fact, they were against something. But that is because the spontaneous rejection of an established order or structure is at first motivated by anger, frustration, injustice, or inequality, which are all negative. Implied in all these feelings, however, is very obviously the moral imperatives that all men are created equal and that society must be just for all. Thus, every revolutionary, as negative as his motives may appear, is in fact a moralist, an absolutist, and a collectivist. What he believes is good for him he really posits as a universal good for all. (Gerassi 1971: 448)

I say that this passage faithfully embodies Torres’s thought for two reasons. One is because of its emphasis on equality and justice. These are cornerstones in the essentialist and universalist traditions of liberal theory, but they are not by themselves individualistic notions—such as “freedom” or “autonomy” are—and can be endorsed by Christians and Marxists alike. Both Christianity and Marxism are collectivist ideologies, if not always philosophically at least in practice, and at least surely in Torres’s interpretation. The second reason is that Gerassi does not only say that equality and justice are the goals of revolution, but that they are *moral imperatives* that should spur us to revolt in the first place. Above all, Torres’s life work is itself one long moral argument for the necessity of revolution driven by his conception of love. The moral force of his argument comes from its irresistible normativity: the duty to participate in struggle is mandatory and not only supererogatory for those who have at heart the well-being of others; for those who, like Torres, are “moralists, absolutists, and collectivists.”

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