

MBS TEXTE | 68



MARTIN
BUCER
SEMINAR

9. Jahrgang
2012

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**The Protester, the
Dissident, and the
Christian**



Pro mundis

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The Protester, the Dissident, and the Christian¹

Thomas K. Johnson²

2011 was widely recognized as the year of the protester and the dissident. The high funeral honors given to Vaclav Havel, the dissident Czech intellectual from the communist era who was elected the first president of democratic Czechoslovakia (and later Czech Republic), served as an exclamation point at the end of the year. As many have noted, only a few other years in recorded history (including 1989) have been so strongly characterized by a sense that the *status quo* is seriously deficient. This has been true on the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, Athens, Damascus, New York, Beijing, and London. The events and practices that have sparked the protests are so divergent they resist coming under any single heading. In some instances, I thought the protesters were misguided or uninformed. And we simply do not know what may result from the many protests; some revolutions have ended in tragedy. But for months I have been pondering, how we, as followers of Jesus, should relate to the social phenomenon of protest?

By personality and preference I am rather traditional. For example, I usually wear a coat and tie to church, simply because that is what I have done for 50 years, and I feel no compulsion

to follow the current fad of men dressing informally at church. Nevertheless, I think the biblical message pushes believers to become deeply discontent with our societies as they are, regardless of where we live. While our discontent cannot be more passionately expressed than has been the discontent of many who have knowingly risked their lives, our discontent with society can become deeper, wiser, and more balanced if we consider it before God, as well as in its social context. Many protesters only have a moral and political agenda; we followers of Jesus also have a spiritual agenda, bringing the biblical message to our world, which should also bring real depth to our moral and political concerns. The Bible pushes us to become deep, serious, and balanced dissidents with a spiritual agenda that lends depth to our moral/political agenda, even if we happen to be traditional in minor matters.

All protests start with at least three assumptions that are theological, though many people do not recognize that their own assumptions relate to God and the protester may be an atheist. We might call them *the hidden theological assumptions* of the dissident: 1. Even though we are sometimes mistaken, we know a standard of right and wrong

behavior that is outside our feelings, which provides a real basis for claiming something is wrong. 2. There is something special about human beings, dignity that is worthy of respect, justice, and care. 3. There are many things in every society that are terribly wrong, that merit a serious critique and need to be changed. Morally sensitive people come to these conclusions as a result of the general revelation of God's moral law, historically called the natural moral law, regardless of their religion, whether or not they consciously connect their moral convictions to God. God's general revelation is the condition that makes morally serious protesting possible.

If this is true, then the relation between special revelation and general revelation is crucial to a thoughtful Christian dialogue with protesters and dissidents. In general, this means moving from the secondary level of reflection to the ultimate level of reflection, from the moral/political level of discussion to the theological level of discussion, where Christian proclamation can take place. We can do this in at least four ways that I would call "The Christian Dissident's Mind." These four themes will help prepare believers both to become effective Christian dissidents and to engage in thoughtful Christian proclamation with dissidents and protesters who are not yet followers of Jesus.

I should mention that it will take courage to talk openly and wisely about our core Christian convictions among

dissidents and protesters. A few weeks ago I traveled to give a lecture about human rights theory to a group of pro-democracy dissidents who were in exile from their homeland. My theory of human rights is organically part of our theology: creation, the fall, the Incarnation, and even the cross. I felt some tension, perhaps even resistance, when I began to move from the moral level of hating a brutal totalitarian dictator to the ultimate level of thinking about the moral law, sin, and God. People are sometimes frightened to connect political convictions with convictions about human nature and the nature of the universe. Some serious thinking will help prepare us.

The Christian Dissident's Mind

I. The Christian can take the social criticism of a particular society of the protester and go deeper, to articulate God's criticism of fallen human nature on the basis of God's law, revealed both in creation and in the Bible. The flaws in society are the result of sin, including repressing our knowledge of God, which deserves God's wrath.

The Protester and the Dissident start with the conviction that something happening in a particular society is simply and profoundly wrong. Someone, perhaps much of society, is being treated in a manner that is inconsistent with human dignity. This is social

criticism. (Vaclav Havel's early writings were brilliant in the portrayal of offences against human dignity.) Inner compulsion and moral frustration rise to the point that people must speak, protest, and resist, even at the risk of their lives. The greater the personal risk, the greater the authenticity of the social criticism. Where there is no personal risk, we always wonder if the critics and protesters are serious.

Those who read the Bible will immediately notice the similarity to the Old Testament prophets, almost all of whom had a very difficult and conflicted relationship to their society. About 2,700 years ago, the prophet Amos proclaimed, "This is what the Lord says, 'For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom.'" (Amos 1:6) Amos simply assumes that all normal people know that human trafficking is terribly wrong; he assumes that people have a conscience that is partly informed by God's general revelation of the moral law. Therefore, everyone should have a direct awareness of human dignity, so we know intuitively that buying and selling people is wrong. What Amos pointedly adds to what any morally serious protester could say is the reference to the wrath of God.

On some occasions the prophets spoke to Israel and Judah on the basis of prescriptions of the Law of Moses, but on other occasions, as in Amos 1, they spoke to the surrounding nations on the basis of moral principles known

to everyone, regardless of their religion. Amos assumes there is a general revelation from God to all people through creation, so everyone knows something significant about right and wrong. The efforts of the morally serious protester and dissident can bear a lot of similarity to the work of the biblical prophets.

However, there are also ways in which the preaching of protesters and dissidents is usually deficient. Protesters and dissidents often ignore the spiritual dimension of the problems they describe. The dissident may protest against injustice in society but ignore the way in which injustice in society is also sin against God. In spite of great moral courage, the protester may lack the spiritual courage to recognize we are sinners before God. And protesters easily ignore the greatest injustice in the universe, that people repress the knowledge of God.

We Christians should borrow a page from the protesters and dissidents and become much more courageous to confront injustices in our world. Amos is in the Bible as a role model for all of us. But Christian dissidents need to also go a very large step deeper than do the protesters, to the ultimate level of discussion, to talk about sin, separation from God, and even the wrath of God. Then there will be no separation of our Christian proclamation from our concerns as moral dissidents.

II. The Christian can take the hope proclaimed by the protester and dissident and go much deeper to proclaim our ultimate political hope for a new heaven and a new earth.

People always look for a source of hope and courage that is based on a promise. Even when threatened with despair and disillusionment, people seem to find courage and hope for a better future; this happens as soon as they hear a promise about a better future that seems even slightly credible. The human heart seems like it was designed to trust in promises. And at the heart of every serious protest and dissident movement is a promise that a better future is possible, whether for us or for our children.

Social/political hope is both extremely valuable and very fragile. Hope empowers people to build a better future, even if it will cost blood, sweat, and tears. Even though I am deeply convinced of human depravity, I think political hope can be a tool of God's common grace to bring about a more prosperous, free, and just future. I think my ancestors lived under conditions of terrible poverty, and that hope for a better future provided the courage to bring about that better future.

Recognizing the depth of sin should not destroy political hope. The real threat to political hope comes from confusing secondary hope with ultimate hope, which means confusing political hope with religious hope. As Christians we should trust in the promise of God that he will give us "a new

heaven and a new earth." (Revelation 21:1) At that time, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (21:4) This is our ultimate hope in Christ. We believe it will come after the end of history, when, as we say in the creed, Jesus "will come as the Judge of the living and the dead."

People continually place their ultimate hope in the promises of a political savior or messiah, if they do not consciously place their hope in Christ. Already in the time of Jesus, some of the Jews expected a political savior who would set them free from the dominance of the Roman Empire. Some of the worst events in the twentieth century were caused by people putting ultimate, religious hope in a secular, political savior. Hitler and Stalin are prime examples. Death and destruction follow when people trust the promises of a mere human as if he were the Messiah and Savior.

We Christians should boldly say that no leader or ideology can bring heaven to earth at this time. But that does not mean we just accept the world as it is. Our ultimate, political hope, based in God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth, should give us hope for improvements in this age. Only Jesus will wipe away *every* tear, but we can wipe away a few tears. Only Jesus will bring the end of mourning and pain, but we can reduce mourning and pain. Jesus is the only ultimate Victor over injustice, but perhaps we can reduce

human trafficking and religious persecution. And all our efforts to change things in this world should be as a sign and symbol that Jesus will really, ultimately, wipe away every tear. We can protest against injustice as a sign that Jesus will ultimately end all injustice. And while we protest and work for change now, we have to always be sure to say clearly that our efforts point to the real hope, that Jesus is the ultimate Savior and Messiah.

III. The Christian can describe the Church as the real alternate, dissident community that points to our eternal hope.

It seems characteristic of dissident movements that they form an alternative community, with their own internal culture. Think, for example, of the dissidents in communist Czechoslovakia, who had their own foundational document (Charter 77), their own small group meetings, their own underground literature, and even their own internal conflicts and differences of opinion. Or consider the people who gathered in Hahrir Square in Cairo. They quickly developed their own internal culture, with norms, customs, and organization. Once people perceive their society to be fundamentally flawed, they very naturally form an alternate society, a counter-culture.

Already in the first century, the basic Christian confession of faith made reference to Christians' relation to their society. Roman society said, "Caesar is Lord." The Christians said, "Jesus

is Lord." With these words they not only described their trust in Jesus; they also said they did not trust or believe in many parts of Roman society, especially the ideology and religion that shaped the society. This immediately turned the New Testament church into a counter-culture. Believing in Jesus as personal Savior has moral, social, and political results. But it was not a counter-culture that was disconnected from the world; a central task of the church has been carrying the gospel to every society, which means the church must always be in close dialogue with society. And the early Christians recognized the advantages brought by the Roman Empire, such as roads, law enforcement, and a common language, as part of the God-given "Kairos," the appointed time for bringing the gospel to the nations. Then and now, believing in Jesus makes us an alternative community with a mission.

In the western world, we have a history of mistakes in this matter. I grew up in a Dutch colony in the US state of Michigan; the church was largely seen as providing the coherence for the society, without a clear dissident relation to the society. This was part of the lingering heritage of "Christendom," continuing from the time of Constantine in Europe. There were serious problems with the whole model of faith and society. Confessing faith in Jesus was too much like only promising to be a good citizen; the element of rejecting the false standards and false messiahs of the world was weak.

As soon as we describe the church as a dissident community, with its own standards and way of life, we encounter a recurring problem. We can understand this problem by considering a saying of Nietzsche, the atheist philosopher of the nineteenth century: “If they want me to believe in their redeemer, they have to look like redeemed people.” For a long time I thought Nietzsche was right to say this. But we have this problem among us: as Christians we want to look like something we are not. We want to pretend to already be fully redeemed, when in fact we are still in the process of being redeemed. If we are honest, we still find tears and mourning and crying and pain among us. We are in the process of being redeemed, but that process will not be complete until Jesus returns.

What makes us Christians a dissident people is that we believe that Jesus is Lord, which means there is no other Lord, Savior, or Messiah whom we accept. And we accept the message that Jesus is Lord with universal intent, meaning we think Jesus is the Messiah whom everyone needs. We are carriers of this message of hope for all the world.

IV. Like every dissident community, we want to make massive contributions to our entire society while we also preach the gospel to all.

If the dissident starts with the conviction that something is fundamentally wrong in society, then the dissident community wants to bring about real changes. This is true of almost every

dissident movement around the world. It is what defines them as dissidents. They protest against the world as it is in order to contribute to a better future.

This is also true for us as a Christian community. And our dissident agenda should be on two levels, on a moral/political level and also on an ultimate, spiritual level. We want to communicate the gospel of salvation by faith; we also want to contribute to making many other changes in society that might not always be so closely tied to believing in Jesus. For example, many of us would like to really reduce human trafficking, divorce, abortion, religious persecution, and racism, while we also tell people about salvation by faith in Jesus. Throughout Christian history, Christians have often felt a two-sided calling from God: to declare the gospel and also to make some other significant contribution to society. Sometimes this second contribution has been abstract, like the concept of human dignity or the “ethics of religious persuasion;” at other times it has been very concrete, like adopting a child who needs a family or starting a business to give people new jobs. Our two-sided agenda flows from the two-part revelation of God: his general revelation in creation makes a humane life in this world possible, while his special revelation in the Bible applies redemption in Christ. As Christians, we want to make it possible for people to come to a real faith in Jesus; as a dissident Christian community, I hope we also want to make serious contributions to our societies. Our world

needs a whole generation of people who are both missionaries and dissidents.

This is the “To do” list I would offer to Christian dissidents:

- A. Recognize that our world is deeply flawed. This is the starting point for any dissident and protester.
- B. Accept your role as a dissident in relation to society.
- C. Consider that honest protests are only possible on the basis of a moral law.

D. Develop courage to talk comfortably about our central Christian convictions as the foundation for being truly serious dissidents.

E. Identify ways in which you can both protest against and contribute to your society.

May we have the courage to become serious Christian dissidents, so that our temporal future is influenced by our ultimate hope.

Annotation Anmerkungen

¹This was originally presented as a sermon on January 1, 2012, at the International Church of Prague, after a reading of Amos 1. It has been lightly revised for publication.

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The Author

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Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (*Magna Cum Laude*) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (*Cum Laude*) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America. Since 1994 he has served the International Institute for Christian Studies and is now IICS Professor of Theology, Philosophy, and Public Policy. He was a visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8 ½ years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

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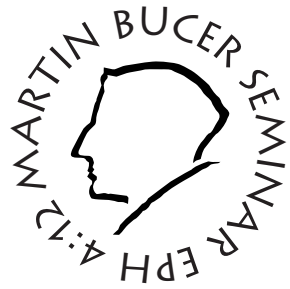
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Publisher:

Thomas Schirmacher,
Prof. Dr. phil., Dr. theol., DD.

Editor: Ron Kubsch

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