

humanity open to that dimension of quality which is always possible and always needed. That is what the metaphors of artistic process and aesthetic experience seek to do with their symbols of peace and justice and solidarity: to release those energies of vision and possibility in the midst of dwelling so as to bring to appearance those qualities of life which are so easily lost and forgotten in the normalcy of what passes for everyday.

### Notes and References

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, pp. 210-224.
2. Gibson Winter, *Liberating Creation* (New York: Crossroads, 1981). Gibson Winter does not explicitly develop this theme of the inaccessibility of meaning within the Heideggerian framework of disclosure and hiddenness. Nevertheless, I believe that Winter's approach to symbol and metaphor within the social world results from his concern with Heidegger's treatment of Being as both disclosed and hidden within the human world.
3. Although Winter makes direct reference to his dependence on Alfred Schutz, I believe that Winter's approach to the social world via symbol and metaphor goes beyond Schutz's treatment. Schutz appears to found the social world upon subjective intentionality. See his *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston: Northwestern U. Press, 1967), translated by George Walsh and F. Lehnert. Winter's approach founds the social world equally upon the interplay of a contextual between which transcends any merely subjective ground.
4. Alfred N. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 8.
5. For an interesting treatment of this ambiguity as it arises in economic assessment, see Kenneth Boulding "What Do Economic Indicators Indicate? Quality and Quantity In The GNP" in *Economics of Pollution* (New York: New York U. Press, 1971). Cf. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
6. Among the many books written on this topic, one of the more readable remains Robert Heilbroner's *Inquiry Into The Human Prospect* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975). See also Rufus E. Miles, *Awakening From the American Dream* (New York: Universe Books, 1976).
7. Gibson Winter, *Liberating Creation*, *op.cit.*; especially see chapter 1, "Metaphor and Society."
8. There is an ever growing amount of literature developing this theme. As examples, see: Donella and Dennis Meadows, *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books, 1972); Mesarovic and Pestel, *Mankind at the Turning Point* (New York: Dutton Press, 1974); the Editors of the *ECOLOGIST*, *Blueprint for Survival* (New York: Signet, 1974); Gerald and Patricia Mische, *Toward a Human World Order* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).
9. In particular, I have in mind Marcuse's recent work, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978). I am also developing some of the ideas he presents in the chapter "The New Sensibility" in his *Essay On Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). I am aware of the fact that Marcuse emphasizes more the subjective and intentional aspect of aesthetic experience, whereas Winter emphasizes more the interplay that transcends mere subjectivity and its intentionality. However, I believe that both treatments are important and that the real difference may be more in what one chooses to focus on. Winter certainly makes clear that subjective transcendence is part of the interplay within artistic process.
10. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964)
11. Gibson Winter, *Liberating Creation*, *op.cit.* See especially the final chapter entitled "The Liberation of Creation."
12. I believe it is fair to say that for Winter social ethics has a religious horizon precisely because the human stands open to this transcendent summons from within the possibilities of its world. In this, I believe that Winter's approach is consistent with the theological framework developed by such a thinker as Paul Tillich with his dialectical theology of the Unconditional which summons the human from within the depth of its Being.

## CHAPTER XVIII

# Free and Compassionate: A Perspective on Religious Foundation of Political Ethics

by Koson Srisang\*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the clearest characteristics of the present human condition is the widespread and deeply felt experience of some kind of crisis. And the situation seems to be deteriorating. Searching for solutions to this problem people have proposed a variety of answers. An important mode of such proposals for action is in the form of political theology or political ethics.

A few introductory remarks may be helpful. The title of this essay reflects my conviction about the intricate relatedness of religion and politics. "Freedom" and "compassion" seem to me to be the two most encompassing symbols in human life and history, and as such, they are at root religious and are, therefore, crucial for politics. Further, this essay is basically a case study, reflecting on the "short-lived Thai political freedom of 1973-1976" which constitutes the first part of the paper. The first section tells the story, which for me is integral to any political ethics. The second section focuses on the necessary method; here we must emphasize that method and substance for us are essentially two sides of the same coin. In the third section we look at peoples' participation as politics from below, and in this context we discuss the issues of "freedom" and "compassion" specifically as these issues relate to the problem of development and surrounding issues. Finally, we conclude by briefly looking at the religious nature of political ethics.

### I. THE STORY IS NOT ONLY TO BE TOLD: THE SHORT-LIVED THAI POLITICAL FREEDOM OF 1973-1976

#### 1. *We All Wear a Pair of Spectacles*

The year was 1961 A.D.  
When headman Lee called the village assembly.  
"I'm just back from the meeting in town",  
he declared, confident and proud.  
"The government has just announced  
a new development policy:  
we must now raise 'sukorn' and poultry."

Dumb-founded was grandfather See:  
"What in the world is this 'sukorn', excellency?"

Standing up straight, enjoying his pride,  
 headman Lee uttered a reply,  
 "Ah! the sukorn, it's nothing more  
 than the ordinary dog we all know."<sup>1</sup>

Thus goes a modern Thai folksong, originating from and still very popular in the northeast province of Isan. The song is an apt commentary on the "top-down" development policy in Thailand which, unfortunately, has not substantially changed in the last twenty odd years. Language alone is a good reflection of this, a case in point: "sukorn" is the word for pig in the official parlance of Thailand, which is usually unfamiliar to most villagers whose word for a pig is "moo". But this word is considered low-class, improper and therefore unofficial. Given such a policy, the pig (*sukorn*) becomes a dog even for the village headman Lee!

Yet, not all the problems originate in Bangkok. That day in 1961, flattered by the clever Chinese merchant in town, Lee bought a pair of black spectacles. It was a bright sunny day, but through the black spectacles he saw a different world, "My goodness, it's going to rain!" he thought. Feeling dizzy because of the spectacles, he took them off. It was the same clear day on which he had started his journey home.

We can hardly laugh at headman Lee, unless we are willing to laugh at ourselves as well. For we all wear a pair of spectacles. I mean, of course, we do have our own biases – be they ideological, philosophical, or even theological positions. The question is not whether we wear glasses, but rather what kind of glasses – exclusive or inclusive, destructive or life-affirming, enslaving or liberating – do we wear? It is, in short, the question of perspectives. That is, it is the question of perception, understanding, commitment, interpretation, and appropriation, all of which constitute the foundations of our action, political or otherwise.

## 2. *Despair and Hope*

The development action based on the top-down, elitist perspective has caused much suffering, despair and protest for the people today. In this suffering we have to look for the signs of hope if we are to understand the full implication of political ethics.

"I look to the mountains: where will my help come from? My help will come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2). This cry of the ancient Israelite was at once one of despair and hope. Oppressed and desperate, people cry to heaven for help and deliverance; and their hope lies in none other than the Lord of heaven and earth. Such a cry is to be found in all religious traditions. Indeed it is a familiar cry, but its volume and urgency today seem to fill the air. Listen to the following poem by one of the sons of *Isan* (1957):

In the sky there's no water  
 Worse still only sand in the soil

Mixed with tears forever falling  
 Our blood covers this thirsty land.

There's power in our arms and shoulders  
 Everyone hears our voices raised in anger.  
 Isan man, stand up and fight  
 To the end with your two strong hands.

When the dry wind blows and shriek  
 Blurring the line between forest and field  
 There emerge the mass of our people.  
 Who could ever dream to crush us all.<sup>2</sup>

This is a particular cry of protest. It is also a particular expression of people's consciousness of their plight and power. Truly particular, it is therefore truly universal. Do we not hear the same cry all over the world? The underlying theme is the same: poverty, exploitation, powerlessness and despair. Created, however, in the image of God, people are eternal, God is on their side. The human spirit will not give up, after all and in spite of it all. But it is not easy, in fact, it is very costly. The need is clear: the power to be and to act for people, in order for them to create their own history and to enjoy their own culture as well as the blessings of the earth which God has given them. However, if the need is clear, the question of "where do people turn for such a liberating power?" is very complicated. The answer is difficult to come by, and when it does come, it is always ambiguous.

## 3. *The October Mystery in the Thai Story*

Moving now to the national scene proper, telling the dramatic story of the Thai people's struggle for liberation during the 1973-1976 period is particularly instructive for our present concern for political ethics. For this indeed is the unfolding drama where all actors and all powers were involved, all the major symbols and conflicting ideologies were laid bare on the Thai political landscape, the relation of religion and politics was clearly manifested, and the possibilities and the ambiguities of the Thai future were disclosed.

a) *Ethos and symbols*. Among other things, the drama of the 1973-1976 period was a conflict between different interpretations of the Thai ethos and symbols, as we shall see below. Our contention here is that an adequate inquiry on political ethics has as its proper locus the interpretation of ethos and symbols.

Ethos, as Pitcher and Winter point out, "refers to the way in which symbol, myth, language and ritual lend direction to the human life of a people. Ordinarily the ethos of a society is an unexamined reality; its power as the shaping, informing and ordering source comes to light only when the meaning of the common life comes into question."<sup>3</sup> A people's ethos is grounded in and draws its inspiration from their common religious vision, that is, the fullest expression of their experiencing of the divine power.

b) *Thai ethos*. Drawing on my earlier work, it is clear that the ideal of

compassionate Buddhist Kingship has been the encompassing ethos of the Thai social order. This ethos had been translated into ideology taking the form of nation (*chat*), religion/Buddhism (*sasana*) and king (*phramahakasat*). Since 1932 however, a fourth member has been added to this trinity, namely, constitution (*rattathammanun*).<sup>4</sup> The nation element has been invoked only in times of war or border conflicts. The religion element is usually ignored except when pomp and ceremony is needed to boost the aura of those in power. The king element has both regained prominence and become very crucial in Thai politics in recent years.<sup>5</sup> It has been both ambiguous and controversial. In the prevailing Thai ideology today the trinity has been fully revived and the king element has become all-pervasive and encompassing, and through all this the constitution has dropped out altogether.

c) *October 1973*. If the number of constitutions is the measure, Thailand must be one of the richest countries on earth. Since the revolution of 1932, we have had twelve different versions.<sup>6</sup> It was a public demonstration to demand one of them that led to the famous student led revolution of October 14, 1973. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Bangkok, the most massive demonstration ever, and toppled the twenty five years of military domination. The people were victorious and in the early phase of this period enjoyed full political freedom. Gradually, however, opposition by the power elite began to emerge and some of the student leaders were assassinated. Farmers and workers began to organize in coalition with the students. Strike and demands for better wages and land reforms were still being heeded by those in power. Socialism had gained prominence, providing promise of better society for many and a serious threat to the powers that be. The Communist Party of Thailand began their real political bidding. But there was another act that was reaching another climax at the time, and it took place in 1976.

d) *October 1976*. On October 6, 1976 Thai police, on the order of the government, invaded Thammasat University, killing some 40 students and wounding hundreds; they also arrested some three thousand people.<sup>7</sup> Freedom had been brutally assassinated with one sweep. Hatred filled the air, compassion was nowhere to be found. If October 14, 1973 brought life and hope to Thailand, October 6, 1976, ushered in darkness and doom.

This then is the Thai context. Its challenge is there for all concerned, including those interested in political ethics. This is precisely our task in the present project. For the story is not only to be told.

## II. THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL ETHICS

### 1. *The Renewed Attention*

There have been quite a few discussions in the recent years in religious and political circles on political ethics.<sup>8</sup> The common underlying reason for the emergence of this concern, I believe, is the pervasive awareness of the societal crisis of our times, a crisis at once political and spiritual in character.

If this is true, there is then a prior question: the question of vision, or of perspective — that which is both encompassing and liberating.

### 2. *Towards an Encompassing and Liberating Perspective*

Four perspectives have emerged in the ecumenical process of reflection and dialogue on the issue of political ethics:

a) *Ethics of responsibility*. In his famous essay, "Politics as a Vocation," Max Weber sees politics as a "striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within the state. A State," he goes on to say, "is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence. The modern state is a compulsory association which organizes domination."<sup>9</sup> Given this understanding, Weber distinguishes two types of ethics: "an ethic of ultimate ends" or "an ethic of intention" or "a dispositional ethic" on the one hand, and "an ethic of responsibility" or "a power ethic" on the other. For Weber, Christian ethic is "the ethic of love," whose maxim is "resist not him that is evil by force." On the other hand, the maxim for political ethic for Weber is "you shall resist evil by force, or else you are responsible for the evil's winning out."<sup>10</sup> On the surface, Weber would seem to make perhaps too neat a distinction between a religious ethic and a political ethic. Actually the two ethics do converge "in the person of the politician," who for Weber is everybody, in one way or another. That is, they converge when the person comes to a point when s/he says, "Here I stand; I can do no other."

Continuing in this heritage, Wolfgang Huber (of Germany) goes further to include three more elements: participation of people, dialogue with other religious and cultural heritage, and exemplary life styles and action.<sup>11</sup> Despite this broad ecumenical inclusion, the exclusively European root of this perspective is clearly evident throughout his work.

b) *Ethics of involvement and action*. The key to this perspective is a call for theology to overcome its isolation, not only from political and social sciences, but also from people's life and struggles. This approach, therefore, takes seriously people's life context (suffering, injustice, etc.) in dialectical relation to some ideological and/or theological value-assumptions, responding especially to people's needs, aspirations and capacities for knowing and acting. The aim is no less than true self-reliance, as people begin to take charge of the organization and management of their own life.

This perspective rejects any absolute value in scientific knowledge, positing that such value is shaped by the interests of the classes involved in the shaping and accumulation of knowledge. More positively, it considers popular science or popular (folk) wisdom at the base of society to be crucial to people's empowerment in their struggle for justice and self-reliance.

Notably, this ethic of involvement and action draws from the critical school of social scientists who, in the last decade, have promoted the participatory action research. Although widespread, the most articulate advocates among

them are from Latin America, associated with such names as Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda.<sup>12</sup> More recently however, some critical voices have emerged from within Latin America itself, a good example of this is Professor J. Ramalho (from Brazil) who has criticized the lack of attention to the native (Indian) cultural and religious heritage and women's participation in this particular approach.<sup>13</sup>

c) *Ethics of story-telling*. Having emerged from the Asian experience of people's struggle, this perspective shares much with the involvement and action ethic. There are, however, two distinctive additions: the vision of messianic kingdom and the recovery of people's religious and cultural heritage.<sup>14</sup>

More specifically, four major elements may be identified in the ethic of story-telling. First, faced with the abject poverty and systematic oppression, and inspired by the vision of the messianic kingdom (both Christian and other religious inspirations), the people are engaged in the struggle for a just society. Second, in search of their identity and power, poor and oppressed people reinterpret and recover their historical roots, their cultural and religious heritage, their collective memory and their folk wisdom. Telling and interpreting significant historical epochs, foundation myths, folktales, and the arts and literature – i.e., the legacy of symbols and ethos – are crucial in this connection. Third, articulating the present reality, analyzing and identifying both the demonic forces and the liberating possibilities. Fourth, based on the above, this ethic accepts the sharing of the cup of suffering and joy of the people (compassion) on the one hand and organizing for people's power and action for liberation and justice (freedom) on the other.<sup>15</sup>

d) *Ethics of interpretation*. Drawing from both European and North American intellectual heritage, this perspective is based on the theory of interpretation. As such, a paradigm of reading the text is fundamental. With regard to the problem of political ethics, the text to be read, as Winter points out, is the societal text, and entails three moments or steps which are interwoven in any actual reading of a text:

- I. *guessing* (sensing) the structure of the whole;
- II. *analytical explanation* of the sense of the text;
- III. *comprehension* of the referential meaning of the world the text projects.<sup>16</sup>

More specifically, from this perspective, "the text of political ethics is the politico-historical life of the People in the context of faith. Any attempt to shortcut the People's story by imposing a program from the top violates this understanding of political ethics, adding one more oppression to the existing structures. The People's story is a praxis, an historico-political struggle for liberation from suffering and oppression . . . This means that political, ethical and theological interpretations and proposals are qualified by the contingencies of the People's story."<sup>17</sup>

The hermeneutic approach, advocated by Pitcher and Winter, locates the problematic of the common life in deeper conflicts in human being's relation to

his/her ethos and the source of his/her being. "The ethos is understood as a bestowal of meaning through symbol, myth, language, institutions and relationships in which the human finds its possibilities. The human participates in a creative process through language and community, yet the bestowal of possibilities is concealed as well as manifested in the emergence of history."<sup>18</sup> The hermeneutic perspective is, therefore, concerned with the interpretation of historical possibilities in the light of divine grace as the locus of meaning and truth.

An explicit critique or judgment on these four perspectives is, at this point, premature and perhaps unnecessary. What becomes clear in these discussions in the light of the Thai October story is the areas which need to be covered in any discussion on the method and content of political ethics. These concern areas are: first, that political ethics has a lot to do with symbols, ethos and religious vision. Second, that political ethics essentially concerns the specific actualization of the religious vision, the application of the ethos and the translation of symbols into action, mediated by ideology and other forms of power. Third, that political ethics has a great deal to do with personal motivation, moral commitment, ethical courage and practical wisdom on the part of the "politician."

While deeply appreciating the contribution of the various perspectives, I may note at this point (to be elaborated in the last section of this essay) that the present inquiry identifies with the story-telling and the hermeneutic perspective, with two distinct additional concerns: the motivation and political education of the politician, and practical wisdom and organization power for effective action.

### III. THE CENTRALITY OF THE PERIPHERY: FOCUS ON PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT

#### 1. *Freedom and Compassion: "The Substance of History"*

Human beings, in their journey toward personal and social fulfillment, build their life-path (or tread those already built) with two kinds of substance: *freedom* and *compassion*. The journey's travail, its joys and sorrows, has two dimensions to it: the *historical* and the *eternal*. Shaping and characterizing both the historical and the eternal dimensions of the human journey or experiences are the dynamics of the relationships between these two substantive elements, freedom and compassion. However, the nature of this characterizing dynamics is basically differentiated. That is, characterizing the historical, the dynamics of freedom and compassion is both creative and destructive, and thus ambiguous. But characterizing the eternal, freedom and compassion become one, united and identical. In Christian theology, this union is known as eschatology, the final coming of the Kingdom of God. In Buddhist philosophy, it is known as *Nirvana*, True Liberation.

These two dimensions of human experience, historical and eternal, are

dialogically related but finally distinct at the same time. The historical refers to that dimension of human experiencing which is shaped, in time and space, by the contingencies of human needs and the availability or scarcity of things which satisfy those needs, mediated or effected by the exercise of power. Exercising power to meet their needs, human beings have the capacity to embody or actualize freedom and compassion, whose actualization not only links the human species with eternity but also distinguishes that species from others. But in reality this is not always the case, thus rendering the historical always ambiguous. Basically political, the historical partakes deeply of the religious.

The eternal, on the other hand, refers to that dimension of human experiencing which dwells in the historical but at the end transcends it. That is, ultimately religious, the eternal finds expression in history and politics. In truth, it is the religious-eternal that motivates self-sacrifice. Moreover, it is the common sharing of such religious-eternal vision that constitutes the human community, unites its members, underlies its history, motivates its historiography and provides its sense of destiny and power. In short, the eternal provides the ground and inspiration to the historical; the historical is the plane for the actualization of the eternal.

Inspired by the eternal, human beings dwell on the historical realm. In the unfolding of the historical dwelling, we need both to be free and to belong. That is, we need to develop our identity or selfhood, actualizing our potentials, etc. But at the same time, our identity does not exist in a vacuum; in fact, it is formed in relation to a community. Therefore, we also need to belong and to participate. It is by belonging and participation — bound together by love or compassion — that gives meaning to our life and history. However, it is precisely the dynamic interplay and conflicts between these needs which makes history both exciting and tragic. Their perverted relation leads to tyranny and dictatorship. For justice and human dignity, an appropriate relation between them is required. True freedom is the proper realization of selfhood. Compassion is that value which not only unites people but also motivates them to make self-sacrifice for others. Therefore, freedom and compassion together constitute the substance of human history. Their presence brings life and joys; their absence spells death and sorrows. Unfortunately, the latter is more real today, bringing hunger and deprivation, loneliness and alienation, powerlessness and despair. One of the main reasons behind this, I submit, has to do with uneven development.

## 2. Uneven Development

The third development decade has already started, with the United Nations continuing to champion the cause. All nations of the world are caught up in the development game. But, as we have seen in section I, poor and oppressed people are still crying and dying in pain.<sup>19</sup>

As the song about headman Lee, quoted in section I, indicates, modern

development planning and execution from its very inception was (and still is) top-down, elitist, power centered strategy with little, if any, attention to people's participation, except as that participation takes the form of obedience to what the government officials tell them to do. In order to rectify this we need a people-centered perspective which will shift the focus of development so that those who participate and benefit from it are the people. Here, space does not permit a thorough treatment of all the issues involved. Suffice it, therefore, for us to deal with people's participation in the context of WCC contribution to this issue, particularly in connection with the ecumenical participation in development.

a) *The centrality of the Periphery: the poor.* In his reflection after the Melbourne world conference on mission and evangelism in 1980, Dr. Emilio Castro, director of the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, made the following observation:

Another symbol that made an impact in the Melbourne conference was that of Jesus Christ crucified *outside* the gates of Jerusalem; Jesus walking towards the periphery of life, looking for the marginals, the down-trodden and with them and through them working for the transformation of the whole society.<sup>20</sup>

It was Dr. Kosuke Koyama who, in his plenary address, actually articulated this plain truth of the Christian gospel: the centrality of the periphery, the importance of people and their participation. For Koyama, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29) builds his community with his mutilated hands; and he challenges the power of efficiency mindedness of the present technocratic society with his crucifixion outside the gates of Jerusalem, i.e. with a totally inefficient method, by the measure of modern rationality. Yet, that is the secret of his power. The crucified Christ who is the center is always in motion towards the periphery; he challenges the power of religious and political idolatry. In this he reveals the mind of God who is concerned about the people of the periphery. Jesus Christ is the center becoming periphery. He affirms his centrality by giving it up. From this utmost point of periphery he established his authority; and by moving to the periphery, he bestows his authority upon it.

The poor are periphery; Jesus Christ moves toward the poor. That is his message: in freedom and compassion, the center becomes the periphery; eternity finds expression in history.

## 3. Commission on the Churches' Participation in Development (CCPD): WCC Response to the Development Challenge

This centrality of the periphery, i.e., poor people, is indeed the primary motif of the CCPD story. Created in 1970, CCPD was designed to achieve three overarching objectives: to increase church involvement in development issues; to help give more coherence and direction to disparate church efforts in development; and most importantly, to serve as a creative growing edge for churches