While America has produced great businessmen and scientists, it has been unable to produce one great philosopher or theologian.

—*The Red Man in the New World Drama*

Religion cannot be kept within the bounds of sermons and scriptures. It is a force in and of itself and it calls for the integration of lands and peoples in harmonious unity. The lands wait for those who can discern their rhythms. The peculiar genius of each continent, each river valley, the rugged mountains, the placid lakes—all call for relief from the constant burden of exploitation.

Who will find peace with the lands? The future of humankind lies waiting for those who will come to understand their lives and take up their responsibilities to all living things. Who will listen to the trees, the animals and birds, the voices of the places of the land? As the long-forgotten peoples of the respective continents rise and begin to reclaim their ancient heritage, they will discover the meaning of the lands of their ancestors. That is when the invaders of the North American continent will discover that for this land, God is red.

—*God Is Red*

FOR THIS LAND

WRITINGS ON RELIGION IN AMERICA

VINE DELORIA, JR.

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JAMES TREAT

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NON-VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

The world has grown much older and smaller, it seems, since the days when, summoned to a new frontier which could be subdued by sincerity and purity of heart, we began a process of non-violent social change. In the intervening decade and a half we have seen the world revolve many times, heard prophecies of doom and reassurances of the normality of our existence, and participated in the martydom of many prophets of non-violence. After a decade of social and political effort to make the American ideology applicable to all people, we stand dumbfounded while the greatest political criminal in American history retires from the scene, pardoned and with pension and sympathetic groupies in hand.

The bitterness of reflection these days dwells not on what was accomplished but on what could have been accomplished had men been reasonable, just, or even consistent with themselves. But the purpose of disillusion is to force us to clarify what and who we are and to enable us to examine, in the light of our goals and beliefs, those forces that changed our lives and manner, in which both incident and coincidence forever altered our lives.

One cannot satisfactorily date the beginnings of our modern social movement, for there are many events waiting as candidates for historical immortality, and in choosing which incident proved to be the spark that caused people to become dissatisfied with the conditions around them, we preclude examination of what it was, in the final analysis, that we were trying to do. Perhaps a better way to review the meaning of our adult lives, for that is what we are discussing, whether we are fifty years old or half that age, is to examine the basis upon which we expected changes to come about. If there was any single motivating strategy in the

last decade and a half that had meaning, it was the commitment to seek change through non-violent protests, which carried symbolic and practical goals into the arena of history.

It is too easy to examine non-violence as a technique without recognizing that most significant practitioners of non-violence now lie in their graves, sacrificial victims of a process that demonstrated high ethical and social commitment in a world devoted to survival at any cost. We should not be concerned initially with the sacrificial victims, even though they form an indelible part of our world and describe for us the extent of commitment that non-violence requires. The task should be rather to question why we thought that non-violence was a viable option for any type of change that would certainly prove disruptive of existing conditions and institutions.

Non-violence, it seems to me, is a way of life that depends upon a number of factors that are generally assumed but rarely, if ever, exist in significant quantities in any society. It must certainly—for adherents of the Christian religion and peoples of some of the other traditions—stem from the religious worldview taught in religious institutions and promulgated in political theory as a justification for the concept of citizenship and its corresponding sets of responsibilities. Both citizenship and religious commitment seem to be based upon a number of propositions, two of which we must certainly confront in an examination of the place of non-violence in social existence.

One proposition that must be present when discussing non-violence would seem to be that societies and religions are built at least partially on the supposition that no significant number of people will be stirred from their inertia to accomplish anything. They will not think. They will not question. And, most important, they will not object to whatever happens until it directly affects the manner in which they view their own personal survival.

This inertia works constructively and destructively. A small group of dedicated people, enlivened with a vision of something better and more profound, can sway the inertial mass by introducing, symbolically and through non-violent refusal to go along, a new understanding of what it is that everyone thinks they believe. The genius of the early demonstrations of the civil rights movement was that the battle had already been decided in the courts. The symbolic question of integration that was raised was almost always "why *shouldn't* we integrate?" "Why shouldn't blacks have the same rights as whites?" The inertial mass had democracy, law, and ethics already defined for it in the courts, and the problem was one of bringing the message into tangible situations where it

could be understood. Suffering, as a means for defining in concrete terms the abstractions of citizenship and morality, was a powerful and proper weapon.

The commitment to non-violence, however, was soon twisted in its symbolic impact because the medium of television consumed symbolic events much quicker than people consumed them. The technique of illustrating injustice and oppression via demonstrations began to backfire as soon as the message of the demonstrations became complex. By the time of the Poor People's March, the issues were so profound and so much more complicated than the simplicity of integration that the inertial social mass could no longer understand the complexity of tangential issues which the leaders of social change could clearly see. Television became a demon creating instant leadership and raising issues of emotional intensity which had no structural place in the process of defining the meaning of human existence.

At this point in the process, the second basic proposition of non-violence emerged. Non-violence assumed that there was a basic minimum level of decency present in any society. This proposition was expressed in many ways, but never articulated directly so that people for and against social change could adopt it as a basic boundary of the meaning of human existence. Non-violence had to be based upon the idea that sacrifice and suffering were redemptive, because there was a minimum definition of the meaning of a human being which all people accepted and below which no person would dare to go.

The destructive nature of the inertial mass was thus able to assert itself, for as the situation became confused, the demagogic politician arose, who reassured the mass of the basic decency of human existence as defined by the old rules which the demagogue promised to reinstitute. By appealing to the fears and confusion of the inertial mass, the situation was reversed by proponents of the *status quo* and exploited for purely selfish and egotistical reasons. As we have seen from the Watergate revelations, there was no minimum sense of decency present in the administration past, and there may be very little existing in the present administration.

Non-violence, therefore, was a partial answer to the question of social change because it described partially and optimistically the best that was possible in human experience. Yet the use of non-violence assumed the existence of a benevolent god who presided over a benign universe and whose actions were largely incomprehensible yet always produced a satisfactory conclusion. Like the pre-established harmony of the philosophers, social conditions were supposed to resolve themselves because

the goal was right, people were sincere, and the principles on which change was predicated were consistent.

The mysticism of both the Christian religion and the American political system was examined minutely by the technique of non-violence and found wanting, because deep down there really was no basic definition of decency when confronting the reality of masses of people living together. Even the proponents of citizenship who believed deeply and not rhetorically in the American values, counseled people that it didn't matter how one voted, just as long as one did vote. Again the mystical assumption that beneath the tensions of social existence either the unseen hand of god or the wisdom of the people would automatically work to set things right.

Reliance on the unseen and unsuspected intervention of the minimum definition of decency seems to be a function of the prophetic role in Western religions. Jesus, in the New Testament, relates that the people who acclaimed him decried the fact that their fathers had killed the prophets and vowed that had they been alive in the times of the prophets they would have recognized the prophetic message and responded properly. Jesus' insight was merely an echo of what has been experienced in the past and what the future would one day realize. The attitude exists today and few people, if one were to ask seriously, would not have chosen to support abolition of slavery had they been alive a century ago, or would not have stolen Indian lands in fraudulent treaties had they been given the chance to negotiate the agreements.

If we understand the boundaries within which non-violence can work, we can see that we have been somewhat askew in understanding the nature of human existence. Neither our religious teachings nor our political institutions have been founded on firm foundations. We have traditionally skirted the question of evil in the world by observing, first, the needless suffering of people and jumping almost immediately to the question of how god can allow such things to happen. We have sought comfort before we have even understood the meaning of our problem. Instead of asking "why does evil exist?" we should have been asking, "why do men do evil things?"

The same principle comes into play with our political institutions. We have been taught to demand our rights, but there has been little emphasis on our responsibilities. The expectation has been that government exists to make us happy and to guarantee fulfillment of our personal whims whether by hook or crook, and the lower the profile the better. Political theory has demanded only that people assent to what does not

directly and immediately affect them, because the complexity of problems requires that we delegate decision-making and responsibility to our chosen representatives. We dare not question what motivates our political leaders to do the things they do. Our only responsibility has been to believe and to assume that somewhere a minimum definition of decency and integrity exists because we have defined governments as the means that individuals chose to order their social, political, economic and philosophical relationships.

The prophetic function of both religion and politics must stem less from the romantic and more from the practical, if we are to understand where we have been and why, upon reflection, we did not come the way we intended to come. One can perhaps only remember Jeremiah's commission "to root out and pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, *to build, and to plant*" (Jer. 1:10) to recognize the naiveté with which people in the domestic social movement approached non-violence as a prophetic commission, for the commitment to change failed to describe adequately or consistently the manner in which the world would again become comprehensible politically or socially.

One could object that Martin Luther King's great speech at the Reflecting Pond describing the new society that would be built on the old, or the optimism of "Aquarius" and the Flower Children was sufficient demonstration of a new order to attract a following and blunt the forces of reaction. But again we assume in this objection that the minimum definition of decency operates to pull people forward to a greater experience of their humanity. Spontaneity of visions can be inspirational, but they do not provide the myriad of minutiae demanded by a society in turmoil and change. Solutions in a social movement must come nearly as fast or at least as profoundly as the events that disrupt the society.

We cannot conceive of non-violence today without remembering the grandeur of former days when our motives were pure, our cause just, and our movement charging with single-minded determination toward a not-too-distant goal. As we recall former days, we should not despair at our lost innocence or degrade our memories of times of crisis and danger. Regardless of how far we appear to be from our original goal, the fact remains that we have changed the world in an irreversible manner, and in participating in what has been essentially an act of creation, we have broadened the boundaries of a possible minimum definition of decency which now needs to find the time to incarnate itself and grow old, familiar, and wear thin until we can rediscover at an even greater depth the absence of a commonly shared realization of our humanity.

Non-violence seems to be an exhaustive and consuming avenue in which the conditions for creation can occur. As such it consumes lives either in a corresponding violence of reaction or in an enervating passage of time in which the passion of justice becomes the wisdom of perspective. It would do well for us, in these days of institutional paranoia and political perversion of our lives, to reflect on the nature of non-violence as the procreative act necessary to trigger forces beyond the comprehension of any expectations we might have had.

Social existence in a real sense is the continual testing, expansion, and retesting of possible definitions of the meaning of human existence. The non-violent response to conditions is perhaps the most explosive method of change available to the human species, for it instantaneously freezes the definitions which orient humans at the deepest level of identity crisis and it forces these definitions which have been covered over by vague and comfortable beliefs to come together for a testing of the integrity of the world. And when that integrity is found wanting, as it will always be, because of the nature of our existence in time, a creational process must certainly ensue which can be benign or evil, but which most certainly will come to pass.

The final question for any society, therefore, is not how much violence it can take, but how much non-violence it can take. American society quite probably can take no more non-violence at present. Its myths are facing a geometrically increasing rate of dissolution with the revelations that the most profound representatives of its former myths, the politicians, are far behind the ordinary citizen in discovering a minimum definition of a human being. The most profound disruption today would be the articulation of common-sense alternatives, common sense being the rarest of human characteristics.

The very logic of our institutions compels such disruption. Pardons, it would seem, must abound if the most profound criminal of all has already received his pardon. If success can only be achieved through trickery and deceit, then the only criteria for action can be inconsistency, and we already see this eloquently demonstrated in Congress and our other institutions, for even good trickery can be predicted and only the arbitrary can be seen as a rational principle of operation. The very chaos of our times would seem to indicate a change for the better, because we appear to be exhausting all possible rationales for our existence. The inevitable logics that locked our minds into predetermined patterns of behavior are giving way to the possibility of the freedom of exploration of the meaning of human existence.

It was perhaps this intuitive leap that Martin Luther King and others

made when they described the civil rights results as being "free at last," for the connection is not immediately obvious to most of us. We come, then, to the original boundary of non-violence, the proposition that no significant number of people will depart from the generally anticipated patterns of behavior. In a society unwinding its rationale, there can be no deviations, merely a series of choices, but these choices will not be choices taught to us as the proper choices, they will simply be those paths of life that seem proper, attractive, and meaningful.

But finally, there is simply the profound sadness that comes to us when we hear old songs, recall half-forgotten incidents, or see the debris of places that once meant so much to so many people. Contrary to the American social doctrine, it is really good to be sad for a while. The final dimension of non-violence must certainly be in the comfort of the remembrance of having practiced it once in one's life and in allowing its mellowed wisdom to flow back in warmth, occasionally.

Debate over the validity of non-violence as a technique for social change must certainly and finally give way to one thing, among many that humans seem to share: expectations. Unless human beings have or are allowed to generate a certain number of expectations, they have no distinctions from the other life forms and probably do not do as well as the other life forms in fulfilling themselves. The demonstration of non-violence is the ultimate expression of expectation, because it opens the possibility of discovering that one is not alone—which is the only affirmation we have of our existence.

We have been and we will continue to be in a state of creation, generated a decade and a half ago. If we cannot see the waves of unexpected change sweeping over us as the direct result of the non-violence of the past and see that it is time to build and plant, then we have badly misunderstood the dimensions of our own existence. We will have mistakenly committed a final rejection of our own deepest beliefs in the efficacy of redemptive suffering which, once unleashed, energizes the universe and sweeps everything clean before it. We have no choice now but to follow the spirit where it leads.

There is, after all, no other way out.

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