

EDITORIAL

The Revolutionary Myth

It is nearly ten years since the Most Reverend Dr. Daly, Bishop of Ardegh and Clonmacnois in the Irish Republic, preached his New Year sermon for 1972. It was one of the sad paradoxes of our time, he said, that the demythologizing of war had been accompanied by what amounted to a remythologizing of revolutionary violence. "A new myth is being manufactured in our time — the myth of romantic revolution . . . the ideologues and theoreticians are its promoters, the young and idealistic are its dupes, the weak and little men, the children, and the old and defenceless, are its victims".¹ Striking as they did at the legitimizing roots of Irish Republican violence in Northern Ireland, Bishop Daly's words were unwelcome to many ears at the time. Now, 2000 deaths and untold misery later, few in Ireland, North or South, would quarrel with them.

The message deserves a wider audience, for the myth has engulfed all the liberal democracies. Western news media generally reported the Iranian revolution in a delirium of enthusiasm. Scarcely a soul paused to consider whether that country's final condition would be better or worse than under imperial rule. The same may be said about Vietnam, Cambodia, Ethiopia, El Salvador. If things are imperfect, even in a region where perfect political patterns have never even been imagined, then, according to the romantic myth, revolution is justified. And because our liberal democracies do not always measure up to utopian hopes, they too can be drawn into the target area. Nations with ideological ambitions lay claim to revolutionary credentials, however reactionary their methods. Through the cult of revolution, they gain support in the West from people who have rejected one sort of war but are busily promoting another version within the new mythology.

The world has suffered enough these last ten years from the myth of romantic revolution. We cannot hope to rid the world overnight of war and violence: indeed, in our imperfect condition, there will doubtless be instances where no alternative is visible. However, if we are sincere in the search for peace, we cannot accept a double standard. If we give our moral support to revolution we must accept that what we are encouraging is simply another form of war, one which William Butler Yeats described well when he wrote:

Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!
A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.²

Footnotes

1. Quoted, *Irish Times* (Dublin, 3 January 1972).
2. W.B. Yeats, "The Great Day", in A. Norman Jeffares, ed, *W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry* (London, 1962).