

Chapter 6.06 Justifiable Rebellion

This chapter and the next are about responses to the contradictions and hypocrisy of modern life. The contradictions invert normality and they confuse anybody who is just trying to live according to the message of Jesus. This chapter does not cover all responses but focuses on rebellion as a way to understand inversions. That is enough to clarify other responses taken up in later chapters. Some people have a hard time accepting any religion. This chapter is not a roundabout way of talking somebody into religion. That is a bad idea. It is better if people make up their own minds and find their own religions. Sometimes people can find a religion if we remove the blinders and seductions. That is all that this chapter and the next few try to do.

Response by a Follower of Jesus. Rather than present the dilemmas first and the reasonable response later, it is better to give the reasonable response first so as to have a background by which to be clear. The response sounds like platitudes but sometimes those work. Most people on their own overcome the dilemmas to adopt pretty much this solution but it is worth stating the obvious.

-Don't worry about what group you fall into. Don't worry if you are a follower of Jesus, standard Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Black, White, Asian, Native American, cool, nerd, jock, artist, rebel, decent person, "rude boy", etc.

-Learn to understand the situation with the world and your country as best you can. Learn to recognize the problems and contradictions of modern life.

-Learn to recognize the situations of specific groups of people, such as the poor, unemployed, the old, animals, nature, working people, business people, and professionals.

-Think about what needs to be done.

-Think about your talents.

-Think about what you can actually do.

-Work hard to do it.

-If you can help through your special talents, such as through being a scientist or comedian, try doing that. If you feel you can help through your work, such as by being a police officer, try that. If you feel you should do even more, then go ahead as long as you don't burn out.

-Find likeminded people to work with without become crazed zealots.

-Learn the tactics of zealots and other bad groups so that you are not taken in.

-Work against bad guys when you have to.

-Try to find the right line between private action and public action, between what we can expect the state to do and what we have to do ourselves.

-Try to keep the big picture in mind so you can assess how the world is getting along and so you can change directions if you need to.

Band Aids versus Systemic Cures.

Before getting into rebellion, it helps to see something that modern people rebel against. People naturally can handle the following situation: A problem comes up. We find a solution - at least so that the bad effects almost go away and the problem will not recur very often. If it does recur, we can always use the same solution, or a similar solution, to address the problem again. This can be like buying a new car or like getting a flu shot. It might hurt at the time but we can live with it. Even if we do not avoid the flu fully but do get a milder case, we can live with it.

In contrast, people naturally dislike band aids. A problem comes up. We cannot find a way to completely solve it. We can find ways to soften some of the bad effects but not to cure the bad effects so much that we cure the problem. The problem never goes away. The bad effects always simmer just below the surface. They always threaten to erupt again. We always have to devote a piece of our minds to the problem. This way to soften the bad effects, by using band aids, is more a curse than a blessing. This is more like having a dog with chronic diarrhea than a dog with one bout of constipation.

Religion all too often is a band aid. It can be worse than a bad aid because it enables exploitation. Poor people never go away. Tending to the poor is a never ending job. Tending to the poor only allows the rich to exploit the poor more and to get richer because they know other good hearted people will be around to clean up their mess. The solution intensifies the problem it was designed to cure. Christianity is especially prone to this trap.

Who would want a religion that is only a band aid or worse? Who would want a religion that indirectly spurred the problems and aided oppressors in the name of goodness? This is a legitimate complaint against Christianity.

All I can say is that this is a short-run view. In the long run, we have made progress. We have cured problems. Maybe we did not cure problems directly through aid to the poor but we did cure problems indirectly through science, research, development, and democracy. Indirectly those all helped the poor enormously. Without Christianity, and without its band aid measures, we probably could not have done that. With Christianity, in the long run, we are more like the first problem situation than like band aids. I know it is hard to help poor people with handouts when you know that a real job for them in an honest economy would be a lot better. It is hard to help poor people when you know the job they really need is denied them so wealthy people can make even more money. But the poor need to stay alive in the meantime until we can find a real economy that will give them a job. It makes sense to give comfort to cancer victims until we find a cure for cancer. Unless we do comfort to cancer victims, and experiment on them while doing so, we will not find a cure for cancer.

If you can figure out how to make structural changes that will permanently cure problems and save people, then do it. If you can figure out how to cure core contradictions and hypocrisies, then do it. If you cannot participate in band aid measures, then don't. If you can't participate in band aid measures, then figure out something else to do with your insight, talent, and zeal, something that is genuinely useful. If you think exposing hypocrisy will help, even though people already know what you are exposing, then do it. On the other hand, if you see that merely exposing hypocrisy rarely gets people to change or to do any better, then I understand. In the meantime, don't look down on the people who are willing to work hard to help in any way they can and don't look down on people that help one case at a time.

Inversions.

When people have to live with contradictions and hypocrisies, they seek ways to turn the world right side up, in their dreams if not in everyday life. Too often they turn the world sideways instead (Marx said they (Hegel) had turned it upside down, and Marx's job was to turn it back right side up). What follows is so common now in popular culture that I won't bother to point out examples.

When we feel that religion and the law cannot serve decency and often serve indecency, then we feel that decent people have to live outside the law and outside religion.

When decent people have to live outside, then we begin to think that everybody who lives outside is secretly a decent person forced to live outside by power and corruption. We look at every outlaw as a saint. We look at every bad boy and bad girl as really an angel in disguise. We give selfish people, rude people, scoundrels, demagogues, and ideologues too much benefit of the doubt. We lose the ability to recognize bad people or to recognize bad tendencies in good people. We lose the ability to acknowledge the bad in us. We lose the ability to tell the difference between bad-on-the-outside-but-good-on-the-inside versus just plain bad.

We begin to look at all people within the law and religion as necessarily the servants of corruption and vice, as necessarily deluded and rationalizing, or as intrinsically bad. We look at all civil servants and business people as if they were corrupt members of an evil conspiracy. We look at the entire world as if it were "V for Vendetta". We forget how much we need good leaders and civil servants, and how often they do a good job. We lose the ability to see a good person when that person is within the law and religion.

When we cannot see a good person within the law or religion, then eventually we cannot see a good person at all. We get really confused.

Worst of all, because of our self-perpetuated confusion, the real bad guys win. We lose the ability to see the root contradictions clearly. We lose the ability to deal with the problems. We get fake versions of the problems, which blind us to the real versions. Instead of seeing bad government and bad religion clearly, we get lost in conspiracy theories. Bad people, preachers, and political commentators lead us on a wild goose chase against made-up bad government and made-up bad religion to keep us from seeing real bad government and real bad religion. Pop culture fantasies serve real bad government and bad religion by letting us rest content in our moral indignation over made-up unreal bad government and bad religion. Pop culture serves bad government and bad religion by letting us feel justified as bad boys and bad girls.

We clean up the imaginary corrupt town on TV instead of cleaning up real mundane problems of poverty and pollution.

The cure is to see the problems clearly, see why people need inversions, see the basis for the inversions in human nature, and then not to get sucked up into traps. We can't fully trust the system and the leaders. Simple realism requires a good dose of rebellion. But we can't live there. Left wing programs flounder because they cannot find an alternative system that works any better than the old system: "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss".

History of Well-Adjusted Rebellion.

A little history helps us to understand even rebellion. In the middle twentieth century (1900s), people realized: the world is tending toward one whole; the one world has a lot of good to offer, more good than bad for most people; but also the one world has intrinsic flaws that make it hard to enjoy. Maybe this is the modern notion of the Fall. Even if you are well off, it is hard to enjoy life if you think that, in the end, everybody in this world is all together, yet many people are bad off. Hunger, violence, poverty, unemployment, racism, sexism, bad health care, the maiming of nature, and the emptiness of suburbia, tarnish the world. People sense that much of the problems come from intrinsic flaws of capitalism and that capitalism is now the world system even with its flaws. The fact that people who suffer often do contribute to their own suffering through bad attitudes does not justify the situation or make the underlying problems disappear. It does not mean there are not problems that would persist even if the sufferers were angels. It does not allow us to blame the victims only. It does not allow us to enjoy our affluence with unconcern. It only adds another level of complexity and frustration.

In the 1950s and 1960s, with the rise of affluent middle class America, the response to the problems was largely on a personal level rather than on the level of social justice. This was so despite all the 1960s social activism that we read about. People sought to "be well adjusted". They figured there was more happiness than misery. If you were financially well off but still felt unhappy, something must be wrong with you personally rather than with the world. You might as well get your piece of the happiness pie. If you could not do anything about problems, you should ignore them or blame the victims. There was enough wealth to go around, so anyone who suffered financially was lazy. You could get help through therapists, alcohol, prescription drugs, schools, groups, or your church. While you were getting well adjusted, somebody else could suppress the people that had problems to make sure their discomfort did not spoil your well-adjustment. To be well adjusted was to be justified and saved.

At about the same time, we got existentialism. Existentialism is like an intellectual version of the work ethic. One version of the work ethic finds fulfillment through our calling. Existentialism sees fulfillment in our "project" and in being honest to ourselves in our project. Being honest in our project is the existential equivalent of justification that leads to salvation. If we become a doctor, banker, bank robber, private detective, or samurai, we can find salvation-and-justification in seeing out our project to the end and by living up to the code of our project. Samurais have to live by the samurai code. Private detectives have to live by their code, as "The Maltese Falcon" pounds into us. That might sound romantic and great, but that is not how it works in practice. Whatever existentialism might be as a high philosophy, for most people, existentialism is about merely changing attitude. It is a pretentious version of getting adjusted. Whatever your project, even if it is bad, even if it ignores social problems, even if it

hurts other people, you are saved as long as you are true to your project. Existentialism is about self. Social justice is irrelevant unless social justice happens to be in your project. The arena is you, not the world. You can change your life if you change your attitude and you make yourself feel good about yourself. Elaborate rationalizations replaced drugs and therapy as the props to sustain adjustment. If the world seems crappy, that is because you are not committed enough to your project. Existentialism goes along with some theologies in which salvation is entirely internal; and it fed modern poses of the victim, artist, rebel, rock and roll, confidante, crusader, teenage angst, celebrities, and politicians. It allowed people to dress up self-indulgence.

Unfortunately, cinema, TV, and popular music too often enabled the need of people to get well adjusted and to rationalize it with existential stances. Fortunately, enough art did not entirely buy this crap. For example, just because you feel good and feel honest working as a gigolo, prostitute, or corrupt politician does not make you a saint. Just because you feel good and feel honest about sticking up small stores does not make you a saint; although modern fiction does say it is OK if you rob banks instead of convenience stores and if you have a sense of style at the same time too. Some artists figured out you cannot feel truly good unless you also face up to the problems of the world, even if you don't solve them, including the problems of other people and nature. It is not just you, it is the world too. See the movie "The Hustler". The novel "Catch 22" shows how someone (Yossarian) felt who could sense problems but could not get other people to believe what he saw and could not get other people to do anything when other people did see. Other people were too interested in getting what they could in their own little project. The problems were with the world, not the hero. No amount of self-adjustment could solve problems that were outside of you rather than in you. When you understand this, you understand that dissatisfaction is not always asocial, amoral, or crazy; sometimes it is justified, moral, and completely sane.

Pseudo-philosophical rationalizations allow people to use contradiction to further their own ends, so people actually cultivated the contradictions described in the previous chapter as a way to feel good about caring while not really doing anything. For most people, the problems were not specific such as hunger next door but were a kind of general angst.

Dissatisfaction leads to rebellion. If rebellion really serves social justice then it can be good; but rebellion too often is a stance that allows us to feel good about ourselves without really doing anything. Especially rebellion works that way when combined with philosophical rationalizations. As long as you stay superficially true to the rebel code, and show off the rebel attitude, you are saved without having to confront real problems. Righteous rebellion is the drug and the media are your therapist.

Rebellion feels good, especially in America. Rebellion got entrenched and romanticized. A simplistic version of Tom Sawyer fused with a simplistic version of Huck Finn. Already by the time rebellion featured in teen movies in the 1950s, it was a major romantic force. You could symbolically solve difficult world problems by cleaning up the corrupt town singlehanded or by being the hero's girlfriend or sidekick. You were rebellious, justified, and saved if you wore jeans-and-a-tee-shirt and pouted hard. It does not take much to see through this pose. Even rock-n-roll had enough insight to satirize its own fantasy, as early as Dion and the Belmonts in the early 1960s: "I got my two fists of iron but I'm goin' nowhere".

The rise of Political Correctness in the 1970s and Conservatism in the 1980s are further elaborations on the theme of getting self-satisfaction while appearing to care about problems, but not really doing much about them that is not also in your own best interests. Both PC and Conservatism combined pseudo-moral strictness with rebellion; amazingly, the idea of the rebel Conservative caught on. As I revised this chapter in December 2012, Tea Party Republican House members had once again managed to shut down the country so as to serve their self-image as beleaguered Conservative rebels. Several other developments in the decades since the 1950s show the same signs. It would not add much here to go into the details.

Justified Rebellion.

In a world of endemic contradictions, attendant problems, social injustice, and hypocrisy, any religion, especially Christianity, seems like part of getting well adjusted, taking care of yourself first, seeking personal justification-and-salvation, and pretending to care about social justice. Christianity is especially prone to being used this way because of its emphasis on social justice and its historic ties to the godly state. Liberal and Conservative Christians each have their own versions but both are variations on the same theme. You can find comfort in your version of salvation and in people like you. Everybody else is a loser going to the appropriate poetic hell. You do not have to feel personally guilty anymore about the bad in the world, and so you do not have to think about it. You can easily overlook problems or can blame victims: "Blacks cause their own poverty. Whites are all corrupt oppressors; they hold authority not because of ability but because of conspiracy. Conservative fascists run the state and ruin it for everybody. Liberals tax everybody to support their clients." Anybody can simmer away in his-her own version of salvation. Jesus becomes another drug, like alcohol, "downers", therapy, existential stance, or rebellion.

Because the contradictions and hypocrisy are real, some rebellion against churches, formal and informal, against Christianity, and against any simple version of Jesus' message, is actually justified. It makes no sense to follow a version of Jesus that leads us to avoid real problems in the world or that leads us to see them as a threat against us, our families, and the people like us. It makes no sense to follow a version of Jesus that does not lead us to real cures, that just covers up the problems or makes the problems worse. Better to live without Jesus than to accept a version of Jesus that requires us to be blind. Jesus would not have accepted a version of himself that allowed such self-indulgent hypocrisy. Unless you want to accept some sort of quietism, if you are alive, you have to feel a little rebellious. You have to feel some anger. You have to want to do something.

While doing something, you have to avoid getting sucked into the traps that use your feeling of rebellion to neutralize itself. You have to make sure rebellion is not the band aid that you were trying to avoid in being rebellious. You have to make sure that rebellion does not become just an attitude or a pose without any real results. You have to make sure that you don't just rebel to feel righteous, to feel justified and saved. Some rebellion is justified but romanticized self-serving rebellion is the antithesis of what is really needed. Ridiculing the posers is justified but don't merely take a pose in ridiculing the posers. Get angry about the stupidity in the world, and then really do something about what you can understand and can really do something about.

Do what you think Jesus would want you to do. Act on a personal level if you can. Act through the programs of your church if you believe in them – many Christians also feel the problems and have developed programs in their churches to address the problems. Act on a political level if you think you know what you are doing. Get strongly involved in causes if you understand the causes and think they are the best uses of your talent. Do not take any drugs, chemical or ideological, that let you get well adjusted if you think getting well adjusted covers up reality. Do not take any chemicals or ideologies that let you wallow in rebellion, righteousness, attitude, existential stance, or victimization as a form of justification. Don't bother to put on attitude. People that actually do things don't need to put on attitude. Take the energy from your attitude and put it into something useful. Learn about the real world, and measure Jesus' ideal message by the standard of the real world. I don't know how justifiable rebellion meshes with Jesus' tendency toward sweetness and light but I am pretty sure they do get along somehow.