

The Conservatives: Friedrich Julius Stahl, “What is the Revolution?” (1852)

Abstract

In his 1852 speech “What is the Revolution?” the conservative politician and Berlin law professor Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802–1861) describes the basic principles of conservative thought. He opposes the ideas behind the French Revolution, upholds the centrality of the Christian religion, defends the monarchical principle, and dismisses nationalism. Stahl also warns of the godless, anarchic conditions of revolution, of which communism was a final consequence.

Source

I. What is the Revolution?

A lecture delivered at the meeting of the Evangelical Association for Ecclesiastical Purposes on March 8, 1852.

Esteemed Assembly!

The Evangelical Association has given us — non-theologians — the difficult task of introducing the Christian core of any one of several sciences in an hour-long lecture. I believe that I might best achieve this task by taking up the following question as the subject of this lecture:

“What is the Revolution?”

For where there is revolution, there is also a Christian witness against revolution. Since March 1848 this witness has been borne from the pulpits of devout preachers, in the church press, at the Church Congress in Wittenberg in 1848, in the parliaments of Berlin and Erfurt. It is the Christian program: “to break with the revolution!” Our government has also solemnly committed itself to this program. It is therefore certainly of current interest, and is most appropriate for connecting politics to the core of the Christian position, that one clearly state:

“What is the revolution, and what does it mean to break with the revolution?”

Does revolution mean self-help and violence by the people against their governing authorities? Is it the same as rebellion? — By no means! Revolution is not a single act; it is a continuous condition, a new order of things. Rebellion, the expulsion of dynasties, the overthrowing of a constitution, are things that have existed in all eras. Revolution, however, is the characteristic world-political signature of our age.

Or does revolution mean political freedom and institutions for political freedom? — Must one, in order not to pay homage to revolution, be a supporter of absolute monarchy, or of unregulated police power, or of the immutability of old legal forms? Is it revolution to want a closer union of the German states or protection for the people of Schleswig against invasion by the Danes? Is it revolution to resist the will of the king or his ministers? — Far from it! Political freedom, the unity and power of the German nation are aims pursuant to God’s will. Loyal resistance to the governing authority has God’s commandment on its side. Thomas More, who denied the king of England the recognition of his arrogated ecclesiastical supremacy, was not a revolutionary. Even John the Baptist was no revolutionary.

Now if revolution is not the same as rebellion, and not the same as political freedom, then what is the

revolution?

Revolution means the specific political doctrine, the world-altering force that has shaped the perspective of nations and the institutions of public life since 1789. But if one inquires about its conception and essence, then it is this: Revolution is the foundation of the entire public condition on the will of man rather than on God's order and providence: that all governing authority and power is not from God, but rather from human beings, from the people; and that the entire social condition has as its goal not the application of God's holy commandments and the fulfillment of His world plan, but only the satisfaction and arbitrary conduct of human beings.

This is the innermost core from which the entire system of revolution unfolds. It is the key to understanding all of its demands. Permit me first to list these demands and then to comment on them:

Revolution demands popular sovereignty, be it a democratic republic, be it a monarchy in which the king is the servant of parliament, parliament the servant of public opinion or the masses.

Revolution demands freedom, letting people have their way in all areas of life, unrestricted divisibility and alienability of landed property, unrestricted freedom of residency and trade, unlimited freedom for public teaching, for the foundation of sectarian institutions, for divorce. It demands the abolition of the death penalty, decriminalization of blasphemy, and honorable burial for suicides.

Revolution demands equality: Abolition of all estates and classes and corporations [guilds], all existing government authorities, leveling of society.

Revolution demands the separation of church and state: equal rights to government offices for followers of all religions, equality for all cults, treatment of the Christian church as a mere private society bereft of interest for nation and state, introduction of natural religion instead of Christianity in elementary school and public instruction.

Revolution demands the charter, i.e. the destruction of the entire indigenous historic constitution of the country as it has been formed over centuries by tradition and individual laws, in order to make a new one in One Act, in One Document, so that no law is valid anymore unless it is in this document and only because it is there.

Revolution demands the abolition of all acquired rights on behalf of popular welfare.

Revolution, finally, demands a new distribution of states according to nationalities contrary to international law: that all Germans form a state for themselves, and all Poles one for themselves, and all Italians one for themselves etc., and that all treaties and rights of sovereigns standing in the way of this [national principle] be destroyed.

These demands — now in this form, now in that, now intensified, now toned down — are the ones that have been presented from 1789 up to this hour.

But the inner mainsprings of all these demands is nothing other than what the people are saying in their hearts:

We do not want to obey any king who has been placed above us by divine providence, but only the deputies we choose ourselves, and only for as long as they do our will; therefore, there should either no longer be a king, or, if one exists, he should obey the will of the majority of our deputies.

In our social union we want only to protect ourselves, so that none of us is killed, robbed, or has a contract broken, but not to apply God's commandments in the same. When husband and wife are

mutually agreed and hope for greater happiness from another marriage — why should we care about God's commandment: that what God has joined together let no man tear asunder? If the death penalty is not necessary for the preservation of society, i.e. for our protection — why should we care about God's orders for justice: that whoever has spilled blood, his blood will be spilled again? If the blasphemer does not happen to offend other people, such as the religious society of Christians or the St. Simonians, why should we be concerned about God's honor and punish the blasphemer?

We do not submit to God's plan, according to which each of us is assigned a place in the social body and thereby a different occupation and different rights; rather, we place above God's plan absolute human rights as firmly as a rock of ore. According to this, all are equal to each other, and no special rights or ties may exist.

We do not ask whether God has revealed a religion whose preservation and fulfillment He demands from the peoples and their governing authorities, but rather what each of us thinks about and wants from religion — this is valid because of his own will, and the opinion of one person [is valued] as much as the opinion of the other. God's commandment cannot give the Gospel any public validity vis-à-vis the will of the non-Christians in the state. It therefore cannot be the soul of, and prerequisite for, government offices, and not the substance of public instruction.

We acknowledge no constitution as binding that came into being by God's providence, that is passed down from one generation to another as a higher binding norm, that is improved only in part. Instead, we want to create the entire constitution anew, so that it is our work, our conscious, deliberate deed. From now on we shall set up only the state, the municipality and the royal power, as if there had been nothing before us, as if everything might exist without the help of God and nature and merely be the creation of our reason. We also do not bind ourselves to rights that have already been established; rather, the one [right] to which we now give favor, we give favor to, and we will take it and give it to the people.

Finally, we do not accept the division of states as God provided. We do not want to admit that He unites and divides the peoples and makes one people subject to another according to his [divine] council and retribution. Instead we all want to abolish these acts of providence and break open the seal of justice under which He has decided on them, and [we] want to return all the nations [peoples] of the world to their original condition, that all of this will be as it was from the beginning by way of our power and our wisdom.

This is the core of all the demands of revolution. Its final measure is therefore necessarily the abolition of property, communism. For what is property if not that man recognizes the advantage in possession that God's providence has allotted and granted to one person over another, by birth and inheritance, by prior seizure, by more successful labor, by more fortunate utilization; and what is the sanctity of property if not awe and submission to God's providence? If man does not everywhere recognize God's providence as binding, does not recognize governing authority and the constitution and the professional placement that God has decreed, why then should he acknowledge the advantages of possession? — and if man undertakes to create everything anew, the state, local government, the distribution of the peoples [nations] and states in Europe — why not also a new distribution of goods?

I now repeat my definition of revolution, and I believe it has been confirmed: Revolution is the establishment of the entire public condition on the will of man rather than on God's order and providence. Revolution is therefore, as the word already says, an upheaval; it consists in placing uppermost what should be lowermost according to eternal laws, and vice versa. It makes human beings into the source and center of the moral world order; it makes subjects into lords of their governing authority; it proclaims human rights without human duties and vocations; it lets the entire sinful muck of popular passion, which the power of governing authority is supposed to hold down in the depths, rise up

to the heights of power. — That is revolution. — —

It should now be clear that revolution is something quite different from rebellion or anarchy. Revolution is not fighting at the barricades and storming the armory and the howling of the Montagne [Montagnards] and the guillotine and the noyades.[1] All these are only symptoms of the illness, but not its essence. The revolution is not merely the momentary rising of the people against a certain governing authority, a momentary disturbance of order — it is the fundamental, permanent rising of the people against all given governing authority, against all given order. It is not merely a disturbance in the relationship of the people to governing authority, but rather it is the general dissolution and disintegration of the entire society. To be sure, all of this is closely related. Rebellion is usually an expression, indeed one of the most heinous expressions of revolution, and the means whereby it puts itself in place of the old order. But there is also rebellion without any fundamental arrogation of the people, owing to oppression or willfulness. It answers to its own judgment, but it is not revolution.

The English deposed Richard II and crowned Henry IV. So they rose up over king and lord. But Henry IV immediately became their sovereign king and lord, and they his subjects, and the entire society remained unchanged. That is rebellion.

In 1791, by contrast, the French kept the king, but established the people forever as sovereign and lord over the king and leveled the entire society. That is revolution.

The Protestant princes of Germany who waged war against their Emperor Charles V may be accused of rebellion — this, in fact, I do not grant — but in any event one cannot accuse them of revolution.

If a Holsteiner takes part in the struggle against his provincial sovereign on behalf of specific (whether real or supposed) rights of the duchy's inhabitants, but without participating in all those subversive principles and demands, he may have to decide in his conscience whether the extraordinary urgency of the situation justifies his act of self-help against his governing authority; but he is in no way a revolutionary.

By contrast, when the followers of Thiers and Odilon Barrot[2] assure us that they do not need to break with the revolution just now, they would have broken with it from the start, they would not have taken part in the struggles at the barricades, in the mobs, in the mischief at the National Assembly, they would be innocent in the February and the March revolution, then we should like to answer them: Have you not done everything in order to make the will of the king subject to the popular will? — and to take apart the entire society? — and to de-Christianize the state? To be sure, you have broken with the rebellion, with anarchy, but you have not broken with the revolution! — —

The revolution is therefore the utmost sin in the political sphere. Take other, equally serious sins, usurpation, tyranny, suppression of conscience — these are transgressions of God's order. But they are still not the fundamental abolition of God's order, not defiance of the authority of God's order, in order to put the authority of a human order in its place. Therefore, by the same measure, the sin on the side of revolution is always blacker than on the other side. The Parisian blood wedding[3] was an unprecedented horror. Perhaps that outrageous misdeed conjured up revolution as a disastrous fate; perhaps the innocent head of Louis XVI fell as penance for the bloodguilt of Charles IX. But even the sin of the blood wedding pales in comparison to that systematic, celebrated strangling during the years of the Terror, since it did not even pretend to do God a service, but instead slaughtered the victims on the altars of popular idolatry.

One might object to what I've said: How can revolution be so absolutely damnable, since it has indisputably brought about a higher good? Would one want, for example, to wish a return to conditions before 1789: the unrestricted whim of the king to authorize *lettres de cachet*,[4] the degradation of the

bourgeois under those born into the nobility, the serfdom of the peasantry, the lack of rights for all those not belonging to the state church? Is not the removal of all this indisputably a good? And do we not owe this good to the revolution?

All this I grant, but I ask: Is it not also a good that man has knowledge of good and evil, like God? And yet it was the snake that tempted humans in Paradise to seize this good! All forms of good turn into evil when man acquires this knowledge on his own, outside of God's order. The knowledge of good and evil is a good; but that man learned to distinguish between good and evil by his own sinning, that is the evil. The political freedom that revolution perceives as a sweet-looking fruit is a good; but the fact that this is not sought within the order resting on God's commandment and God's providence, but by way of a completely different order, [one] meant to be based on the will of man, that is the evil, and thereby all the good being sought also turns into evil. One wanted legal limits on the monarchy, and see, one lost the monarchy itself, that refuge of the nations; one wanted the good right of the bourgeois against the nobility, and one unleashed a war of the poor against the property owners; one wanted freedom of conscience, and one de-Christianized the state. And among us, too, where these abuses have long since ceased to exist, one lusted after political freedom in the spirit of revolution, and this befell us, just as the Jewish people in the desert lusted after meat and God gave them quails in abundance, so that [the people] became nauseated as a result. — —

The origin of revolution lies within that mode of thought now designated by the expression "rationalism." Rationalism is the same phenomenon in the introspective religious realm as revolution is in the outward-looking political realm. Rationalism is the emancipation of man from God; man's departure from God's hand, in order to stand on his own and not need and heed God; for man not to need revelation because his reason is wise enough, and not [need] the support of grace because his will is strong enough, and not [need] atonement through the blood of Christ because his virtue is pure enough, and for him to scorn what is received from God because that is contrary to his dignity. Out of rationalism comes the presumption and confidence of a philosophical system, which by human strength aspires to discover the ultimate grounds for the world's cohesion; indeed, which undertakes to establish the entire cosmos of things as a mere product of human reason, and its development necessarily culminates in a pantheistic or even materialist worldview. Rationalism is therefore not the same as unbelief. The Pharisees in their self-righteousness were unbelievers, but not rationalists; the Sadducees in their frivolity were unbelievers, but not rationalists. Rationalism is not merely disbelief in God; it is a counter-belief in human beings. Therefore, even rationalism in its initial stages is still compatible with belief in God and Christianity. But its ripened fruit shows it for what it already was in its seed, the self-deification of man.

The essence of revolution becomes even clearer through its origins in rationalism. In his heart, man pushes God off His throne and places himself on his chair. That is the original upheaval. Every other upheaval is just a consequence. Therefore, when the revolution reached its climax, it also obviously got rid of religious services and prayed to human reason in its temples. And the second coming of revolution, as the social republic is already heralded, presents two large inscriptions in advance: "Denial of God and emancipation of the flesh."

Therefore what was foretold about "the man of sin [...] who [...] sitteth in the Temple of God [and] [...] exalteth himself" fits in completely with revolution and rationalism. To be sure, this prophecy refers to a specific human being, a personality. But that is indeed the course of things; world-altering forces first fill the human race as a general element, and then present themselves in their highest intensification as individuality, as one specific personality. Is it not already completely fashionable for the human race to attribute divinity to itself, so little that belongs to it, and for a powerful personality, supported by the fanaticism of the masses, to declare himself the representative of divinity of the human race and to demand worship.

Rationalism and revolution are therefore not constant or ever-recurring phenomena in the history of the human race. They are the pure, distinct result of a mere principle. They therefore enter into world history at a specific moment, and form a specific, perhaps the last, stage in the development of the struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. They are perhaps the beginning of the end, signs of the onset of the Apocalyptic Era. — —

If revolution is from such an unfathomable moral depth, then one cannot give oneself over to the ordinary delusions about the means to shut it down.

One does not shut down the revolution with a constitutional document. This itself belongs more to the revolution. Between 1789 and 1852 the French were busy producing constitutional documents, and the revolution's gaping jaws were not shut by a paper muzzle.

One also does not shut down a revolution by mechanical force, by Bonapartism. The French Empire was not the shutting down of the revolution, but rather its consolidation. For the Empire, just as much as the Republic, also lacked the validity of all natural elements that God allowed to grow, and of all the historical elements that God has provided. There was no parliamentary representation based on natural popular elements, but instead the Emperor made the Senate; the Senate made the legislative body at will. There were no natural local governments with independent administrations, but rather the Emperor made the local governments and set up an administration for them. There was no natural development of science, but rather the University of France, this grand dicast of unbelieving scholars commanded science throughout France, and the Emperor in turn commanded the university. Even the Church in its apparent restoration was in the service of this mechanical power; the priests were at the mercy of the bishops, and the bishops were in the power of the Emperor. The Empire, furthermore, like the Republic, lacked any thought of commitment, be it to traditional law, be it to religious belief. It lacked the principle that exists as conscience in the individual human being, and that I might also label as its conscience in the state, commitment to a God-given order. Yes, is not the very epoch that is characterized by the French Empire in Europe the clearest documentation for how the thought of such a commitment was completely dismissed? Did not Napoleon break every law in Europe, destroy every act of divine providence, disregard every natural indicator of nationality? In every instance did he not show that his iron will acknowledges no higher law above him? And the Empire is, like the Republic, a realm based on human will, created by human reason in all its parts, serving only human will. Bonapartism is just another phase of revolution. During the Reign of Terror, it was the infernal powers that set up their empire in France. In the Empire natural powers were enthroned, the powers of the earth. Not a ray from Heaven fell upon this empire, and that is its most ghastly trait. For all the luster of outward education and intelligence, it was the destruction of the most profound human essence, which can only live and thrive in the rays from Above. The basic feature of revolution is the worship of man, the adoration of man; in the Republic it was the worship of the people, [and] in the Empire it was the worship of a powerful ruler. The *Divus Imperator* is a falling back into ancient paganism. But when a Christian people falls back into paganism, it no longer has the innocence of mere natural forces; sinister forces are at work. If revolution were the same as anarchy, then Napoleon has certainly shut down the revolution. But if revolution means the establishment of a realm of human will against God's order, then he has not shut down the revolution; instead he is its executor, its hero. And if, in recent times, absolutist power has wed itself to the sovereignty of universal suffrage, which is given the right to set up and depose governing authority, introduce and abolish constitutions at will; if, in other words, nothing binding is acknowledged any longer apart from the will from above, who asks, and the masses of the willing from below, who answer, an eternal counter-echo of human arbitrariness; should this be the closure of the revolution, rather than its gigantic unfolding? — — —

There is a power, but only one power, that shuts down revolution. This is Christianity.

Christianity is the most extreme opposite of the sins of the revolution. For it bases all of human life on

God's order and providence. But Christianity is simultaneously the most profound satisfaction of the impulses [otherwise leading to] revolution.

Only Christianity is still capable of guaranteeing the social order after the great masses have reconsidered its foundations, as well as those of monarchy, property, and marriage, and called them into question. Only Christian purpose has established for us joyful devotion to king and God, to marriage that God has joined together, to the occupation that God has assigned us, to the distribution of goods that God has provided. Christian purpose does not call for a governing authority that it establishes for itself, for a constitution it has made on its own, for law that it discovered out of its own reason. It would much rather receive all this from divine administration, and it is content with contributing its modestly small portion to the grand design of the times, as God has assigned it.

But Christianity is also [the] only [force] capable of fulfilling the real aims of the time, real progress. It is the only source of the principles from which one may expect a satisfactory construction of society — freedom, equality, fraternity in their true essence.

From Christianity comes genuine freedom, whereby man acts only out of his innermost self and according to the gift he has from God, and is not a judge over human governing authority, and yet at the same time [Christianity emits] commitment to God's orders, toward which true freedom itself immediately strives as if homeward-bound.

From Christianity comes true equality, whereby in every human being the likeness of God comes into its own right and privilege, which is higher than chivalry, and yet at the same time [Christianity emits] a position of membership for everyone, which carries along with it a diversity of rights and privileges.

And from Christianity comes genuine fraternity, which does not, as in socialism, boastfully celebrate the human species in every human being, but rather humbly loves the individual with heart and soul, and therefore [Christianity emits] compassion with the plight of the people, without fraternizing with sin and the depravity of the people.

Christianity grants the most precious of all political ideas, the idea of the vocation [*Beruf*], that is the calling [*Berufung*] from God. In this idea the opposition between right and duty, power and restraint gets resolved. When the proletarian maintains that he has the right to vote and be elected to a legislative assembly, like everyone else, he is asked if it is his calling from God to legislate; and when the large estate owner says it is right to enjoy the fruits of his property, and no public duties may be imposed upon him for the inhabitants of his estate and his poorer neighbors, he is asked if that is the calling for which God has awarded him such a large estate.

Christianity establishes the communion of the Holy Spirit, which, as a moral power and as a reciprocal guarantee of the divine order, even sets standards and commands respect over governing authority, genuine popular sovereignty.

Indeed, Christianity is above all the power that redeems and blesses individual human beings; only it is also the power within the nation from which alone [a] genuine constitution and genuine freedom arises. Christianity gives rise to the longing for one great community, which is a realm of the Lord, a protection for all personalities in their freedom and their purity, a harmonious joining of all gifts and vocations into one body, an application of divine justice and holiness — a type of community that fulfills that heavenly message which is also the final aim of the state: Glory be to God on high, and peace on earth and good will to men!

Therefore, since Christ appeared on earth, there has not been a gleam of political freedom that has not received its aura from the center of Christianity. The German Empire during its loveliest periods of freedom was based on Christian faith. What one now admires as political freedom, England's

constitutional monarchy, North America's democracy, are the work and product of the Puritans; and while the Puritans were certainly not free from profound errors, from revolutionary tendencies, which also adhere to both of these celebrated constitutions, they were driven from deep inside by a longing, within their community and in their national life, to build the realm of God and proclaim the glory of His name. This is the soul that they breathed into their political creations and that has maintained the existence of the American and English constitution to this day. And even the three eastern [European] powers that pledged themselves forty years ago to an alliance against the revolution on the basis of Christianity are not in any way prevented from granting to one another the complete development of political freedom, depending on the educational level of their people on the basis of divine order; and, regardless of this, they can lead the holy struggle against that empire that is based on human will against God's will, whether it show up in one form or another.

Only Christianity is capable of shutting down the revolution. For Christianity is the archetype [*Urbild*] of that realm of freedom of which revolution is merely a caricature [*Zerrbild*]. But where the archetype is consumed in the light of its glory, there the shadows of the caricature must fade. For that reason, too, the revolution will not be shut down, because the archetype of Christianity is never consumed on earth, but instead revolution can only be suppressed, have a foot placed on its neck; but it will never cease its rebellion, and when the guardians slumber, it will rise up. In the same way that Amalek was suppressed by Israel in battle, but immediately rose up when the praying hands of Moses fell. Therefore, there will be no return to the time in which governing authorities might nonchalantly give themselves over to their injustices and vices, their inclinations and hobbies, their rivalries [other] than in profound tranquility and under secure rule. The enemy of human society is girded and threatens to fell society when it leaves the fortress of divine protection by sinning against its divine vocation. And we, too, who live as subjects in this era, are already surrounded by divine tribunals on our earthly passage. We, too, dare not close the wakeful eye and take off the armor; for all of us are called to be guardians and fighters against revolution. Revolution is indeed a realm of sin that permeates all of human life and human essence. The fight against it does not stand still at the barricades and in the parliaments. Everyone who professes faith in Christianity and leads a life of God-fearing, of loyalty toward king, of contentment in his profession, of cultivation and love — he wields gigantic blows against the revolution. Christian faith and the Christian creed have the eternal promises on their side. The double-edged sword of God's word, even from the meekest mouth, will penetrate the rock-hard armor of the revolution. But these promises are linked to a condition: to Christian loyalty. Whoever wants to break with the revolution must first break with his own sin. Nobody can fell the enemy in the world unless he first fells him in his heart. Christian loyalty is the thoroughgoing, complete break with the revolution. Therefore may God provide that the princes among the nations do not depart from the fortress of his care and the guardians do not slumber and the fighters do not grow weary, and that the praying hands of Moses do not fall; and may He provide that we stay loyal, so that we may be contrived as victors in the early dispute and in the eternal decision. Let it come true!

NOTES

[1] Mass executions by drowning in 1794 at the hands of the Jacobins—trans

[2] French liberals, in opposition to the government of the July Monarchy, but not advocating its overthrow, as occurred in February 1848—ed.

[3] The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1588, when Catholics killed thousands of Protestants in Paris—ed.

[4] Royal orders, arresting and holding an individual indefinitely, without charges being brought—ed.

Source: Friedrich Julius Stahl, *Siebzehn parlamentarische Reden und drei Vorträge*. Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1862, pp. 132–46. Available online at:
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