

Can Christians Change the World without God?

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That the compatibility of religion and politics has become an acute problem today is nothing new. Several documents published recently in France clearly show the problems with which the Christians are confronted when they try to accomplish the ideals of Christianity in politics.

Since Christians, on becoming aware of the real implications of political opinions and actions, feel that they must abandon a rather passive acceptance of the existing political status, they are confronted with the anguishing question: should they accept, support and rally the more or less radical ideologies and practices which claim to change the world, that is, mainly, Socialism and Communism?

With the imminence of general elections in France (scheduled for March 1973), this point is given an increasing importance.

In fact, in this very complex situation, we can see a tendency among Christians to forget "ideological divergences with Communism, in considering an apparently identical desire to get rid of the inhuman aspects of this society. Some Catholics and Protestants are ready to go very far in that way: "Their (the Communists') atheism does not trouble me", a priest declared in the left-oriented magazine "le Nouvel Observateur". On the other hand, Communists are very busy in trying to convince Christians that differences in their "personal philosophical points of view" should not prevent people from uniting in order to fight against an evil society which all condemn, for new ideals of justice and equality on which all agree. The aggressive attitude against religion as the "opium of the people" has somewhat faded away.

The new line of the Communist Party is very well resumed in a leaflet distributed by its members in front of the Churches in France, in which George Marchais, delegate Secretary General of the Party, confirms that he has nothing against Catholicism as a private philosophical opinion; in the same text, however, Mr. Marchais also confirms that Communists would immediately close all religious schools and dismiss clergymen from public institutions, if they came to power. He then invites Catholics to cooperate in their common struggle for a better world.

Although a large number of priests and bishops have been rather favorable to socialism for many years, approving it on many occasions, the Church, Catholic or Protestant, has always remained very careful in its declarations about the political engagement of Christians.

However, Pope Paul VI's letter to Cardinal Roy and the report of the Episcopal Commission of Workers' World had, already given several indications. Now, two more documents, which seem to be particularly significant, have been published. The first one, due to the Protestant Church of France (a small minority in

the country), entitled "Church and Powers", has been qualified as a "bomb" and has caused a burning; controversy among protestants themselves. It is a severe condemnation of the present social status and of the attitude of the Church as well.

The Annual Plenary Assembly of the French Episcopacy, which was held at Lourdes from October 23rd to October 30th, has given a more complete view of the situation; its declarations are of considerable weight, since the Catholics (the large majority in France) can now use them as a reference, even if they are not intended to be more than "indications".

The sessions opened with the reading of the report of Mgr. Matagrín, bishop of Grenoble. Mgr. Matagrín emphasizes on the fact that politics have recently become a major component of the society, and that economical and financial powers have become exceedingly important under all regimes. Politics, Mgr. Matagrín continues, do not only represent the choice of certain means, they engage us towards a definite goal. Through it, man takes the responsibility for his destiny on a world level.

But later, he states: "In a secularized world where atheistic ideologies are dominant, it is possible that the overemphasizing on politics is an attempt to answer the question of the ultimate meaning of life." Quoting the Orthodox theologian Olivier Clement: "Politics are the opium, if not of the people, at least of a youth and of an intelligentsia who are searching God by denying Him."

Faith cannot be reduced to politics, it can give an original answer, revealing the ultimate meaning of history. But "the Christian's itinerary remains obscure."

Finally, mentioning the power of love in reconciling people, Mgr. Matagrín said: "Love, however, cannot be separated from the accomplishment of justice, otherwise it leads to oppositions and even to struggles. To refuse to fight against oppression by pretexting that one loves all people, and that one does not want to hurt anybody is, in fact, the mask of complicity."

The document representing the conclusions of the Assembly itself, entitled "For a Christian Practice of Politics", was adopted by a large majority of the bishops.

Our purpose, the bishops say, is to suscite among Christians "the desire of acquiring the means to invent a Christian practice of politics. The increasing importance of the political action results from the birth of what has been called a new world. The innovations of technology and the upsetting of culture create new conditions for the child, the youth, the adult and elder people, life and death, workers, knowledge, love and power. The whole of mankind is involved in a huge exodus: it passes from one age to another."

In their report, the bishops recognize the fact that, more and more, the political options of Christians in France cover the entire scope of ideologies, and question if "concerning the fundamental problems -- those which often arise in politics-is it possible to accept all opinions, as well as their contradictions?"

"Confronted with this problem, the Christian mind reacts simultaneously in two different, contradictory ways. Sometimes, it considers the political diversity as a calamity, even as a scandal. But at other times, it is easily satisfied by this pluralism of opinions, being convinced that the political thought, adhesion and action is a private affair, depending only on the conscience of the individual. This has not always been that way. In its origins, the Christian community recognized that there were a number of practical criteria, depending on the situation in time and space, to live, beyond the orthodoxy of the dogma, a coherent practice in their public action."

The deep differences of social origin, formation, character, ideology, etc. make a diversity of options in politics unavoidable among Christians. There is a fundamental ideological contradiction which opposes different ways in politics, the report states; "it seems that it is not possible to imagine a global conception of social life which unites in a balanced synthesis all essential values."

Still, "the Bible clearly indicates a number of ethical rules No Christian has the right to support options which accept, extol, cause or help what the Revelation, as well as the human conscience, reprove. This would mean to betray their faith. For Christians, these evangelical criteria -- determining their adhesion or their refusal do not identify political options and actions to accept or to reject."

The second part of the document, "Christians, conflicts and class struggle", has had the most repercussion. It is the only chapter which had to be revised after a first vote of the assembly. This shows already that this theme does not only represent a problem for laymen. Left-oriented newspapers have greeted the fact that the bishops "have recognized that class struggle is a reality", but admit that the Church "still" does not take clearly a position.

Actually, the report admits that a "working class" has appeared in the last century, and that it is confronted with a society which, despite its improvements, still does not provide really human conditions to the people. It also recognizes that many Christians today decide to analyze the situation in terms of

"class struggle", often referring themselves more or less to the Marxist analysis, and that "this has helped many militants to distinguish more precisely the structural mechanism of injustices and inequalities."

"But," the report further explains, "man can never be entirely reduced to just belonging to a class. This reducing of social struggles to a fundamental and decisive struggle between two classes presents itself as the fruit of a scientific analysis."

So intellectual honesty requires a critical lucidity to consider how far the conflict which originated in production relations can be accepted as the source of all present conflicts. Marxist analyses emphasize the structures through which social struggles develop. But they omit the fact that the relations of power and violence have their origin in a native split in man, which is deeper than the alienation resulting from economical, political or cultural factors."

"Violence divides the heart of every man, whatever his social status."

Furthermore, considering the idea of the conflict as origin of all development, the report says: "The whole process and history of society cannot be reduced to the mere development of conflicts. In the principle of social life itself, there is dynamism of recognition of the person, of solidarity, of communion, which is the condition which makes the political and social life possible. Without this fundamental dynamism, the conflict could not even exist, since it is, finally, the product of this desire of mutual recognition. This meets the Christian's faith in dynamism of reconciliation which has its source in God."

As conclusion, the text underlines that church and faith cannot and should not be separated from political activity. There is one more attempt to define the convergences and differences of religion and politics, and the vital importance of their cooperation today: "It becomes clear that, if the existing types of social organization are not drastically changed and reoriented in depth, they will come to a dead-end and produce inequalities as unbearable as the old ones. Today, politics have reached the level of the final goals".

From this text, we can clearly see the hesitations of the Church regarding politics. It is easy to show that the present society does not correspond to the ideals of Christianity, that it is the duty of Christians to try to change it through concrete action, and that very little has been done until now. It is also easy to show, as the assembly at Lourdes did, that not all means of change are acceptable, and that man cannot be reduced to the product of economical conflicts. But the Church does not seem to be able, or willing, to draw conclusions concerning the adoption or rejection of Socialism or of any other solution.

Actually, the Church considers that to hope for an overcoming of social problems "is not realistic in the foreseeable future." (Report from Lourdes); however, it is now confronted with Christians who are determined to achieve that goal, and with ideologies which claim to do it.