

In other words, if we read these repeated directives attentively and boldly, in the context of Latin America's underdevelopment, we are compelled once again to recommend forms of socialism that international policy—primarily that of the United States—will inevitably interpret, and take reprisals against, as Communist and as hostile to U. S. interests, equating them with Soviet communism. None the less, they are in keeping with good Catholic doctrine, actually or potentially.

I would like to conclude by proposing five frank questions that we Latin Americans often discuss among ourselves and that some day, in an honest dialogue, we must discuss with our North American brothers. Perhaps some will see no connection between them and what has just been written. Yet there is a connection.

1. Why does U. S. public opinion fall into the mistake of looking on every tendency toward socialism in Latin America as a *rapprochement* to Marxist communism and to the Soviet bloc?

2. Why are the friends and allies that U. S. policy seeks in Latin America consistently those persons and groups most hostile to the very ideals that are the proudest accomplishment of the United States?

3. Why do U. S. public opinion and U. S. policy drive every revolutionary attempt in Latin America toward enmity with the United States?

4. Do the American people really believe that the injustice against which antitrust laws have been enacted in the United States is any less a threat to world peace—and ultimately to the United States itself—when it occurs in Latin America?

5. Finally, why does the U. S. electorate let the policy of Washington toward Latin American countries be dictated by the only group that is interested in big profits and a big military machine in Latin America?

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The Church and Conscientização

by Henrique C. de Lima Vaz

Few words have become so popular among Brazilian reformers and revolutionaries as that very Latin, quite untranslatable one, *conscientização*. (Roughly, it means "making people aware politically and socially.") The term has now passed beyond the frontiers of Brazil and is used all over the world, though in the process it has lost a bit of its original freshness and precision. Its continued popularity in Brazil is good proof, for any who doubt it, that this country is in a "pre-revolutionary" stage.

What was the original meaning of the word *conscientização*? What is the proper, most effective direction of the process it represents? In what significant forms has this process been tried out successfully? Again, since many organizations associated with the Church have made the word their war cry, what is the connection between *conscientização* and the Church's evangelizing work? Is this a proper task for the Church?

These are the questions I would like to treat briefly for North American readers. I hope my explanation will interpret for them one of the key aspects of what is going on in Latin America.

Initially, *conscientização* was something strictly pedagogical, a technique used in Brazil's unique basic education program. It meant a "first step in the revolutionary effort, the effort to liberate the Brazilian man." Once one decides to give a community of persons a certain amount of new knowledge and stimulate its members to break the bonds of their subhuman or marginal life, he is obviously going to seriously



change the awareness that that community has of itself. The new self-awareness will be a more dynamic one. The people's hopes will be higher; they will take a fresh and critical look at situations that heretofore they had viewed with limp fatalism.

But to bring about such a self-awareness, a particular kind of basic education is required, one that questions the community's global situation, its style of life, its attitude toward the challenges it must face—in a word, its *consciencia* (awareness). That explains why *conscientização* very soon became a burning topic of discussion among militants working in the nation-wide campaign, the Basic Education Movement (MEB), jointly undertaken in the early 1960's by the Brazilian Bishops Conference and the government. As the discussion went on, the serious implications of the topic became clearer. In fact, they determined the evolution of MEB and in the long run brought on the crisis that obliged it, under government pressure, to water down its program into a traditional sort of basic education with none of the explosive, revolutionary character of *conscientização*.

The whole thrust of MEB's now famous primer, *Viver E Lutar* (To Live Is to Struggle), confiscated in late 1963 by the police of the Governor of Guanabara, Carlos Lacerda, was toward *conscientização*. It not only taught reading and writing but aimed at changing people's outlook, their way of life and the community's collective attitude and even behavior. Few were surprised when

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the representatives of the established order condemned the primer as subversive.

Similarly, the method of basic education devised by Brazil's world-renowned educator, Paulo Freire—using slides and the printed word rather than (as MEB did) the radio—also aimed beyond mere literacy toward *conscientização*. Both the MEB primer and the Freire method not only made it easier for underprivileged adults to communicate (i.e., to read and write) but led them toward a *consciência*, an awareness, of their situation and a desire to improve it. Furthermore, under both the Freire and the MEB method, it was not isolated individuals who were taught, but members of a community—indeed, the total community, all living in a common misery and marginality.

To understand events in Brazil before the military coup of 1964, one has to realize the purpose behind the programs of *conscientização*. Once we grasp that, we can understand why so many efforts were enthusiastically undertaken both by the Church and by numerous other groups. Their programs were extended rapidly to take in not only basic education but also the much larger field of popular culture. In this connection, one must not underestimate the profound impression caused throughout Latin America, and especially in Brazil, by the Castro government's crash campaign of education, particularly by its all-out mobilization of resources to make every Cuban adult literate.

After starting out simply as an emphasis in basic education, the question of *conscientização* quickly turned into something much bigger; as two groups, with opposing political ideals and contradictory views of the future of Latin America, seized upon it, it became a bitterly divisive issue.

1. For one group, *conscientização* was the means to wake up the wretched, lethargic masses—part of a pedagogy of revolution. Its natural outcome, as its proponents saw it, was nothing less than a revolutionary transformation of

society from the ground up. Moreover, this transformation would be worthy of its name only if it was brought about consciously—and by the whole people, especially by those groups, the farmers and manual workers, whose subhuman living conditions had created the potentially revolutionary situation. It would be the opening phase in the formation of a popular culture, i.e., the formation of a revolutionary mentality to be shared, as much as could be, by the whole population.

Until 1964, many efforts were made, especially by university students, to spread this sort of popular culture; and later on, clandestine efforts were made in the same direction by means of protest songs, the theatre and the so-called "new" films. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the security police of a government representing the forces of conservatism reacted to this "poison"—spread under the guise of *conscientização* through popular culture—with censure and harsh repression.

2. An alternate approach was made a short while later as certain reformists sought to offset so revolutionary a method. They wanted to use *conscientização* for the social integration of the marginalized groups, whose underprivileged status was thus placed in the foreground. Basic education, the reformists hoped, could give these depressed groups the means to catch up with and be integrated in the body of society; it would help them lift themselves to such a level of culture and income that society at large would no longer feel dangerously divided or threatened in its unity.

The first group saw *conscientização* from a revolutionary point of view; the second, from a gradualist point of view. For these latter, it was the way to instill a self-help, reformist mentality, to produce an affluent society by patching up the defects of the present situation; such was the view, too, of those directing the educational projects of the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps.

And the uproar over the proposed reorganization of Latin American education (the student riots against the agreement signed between the Brazilian Ministry of Education and Culture and USAID are a good example) reflected the clash of the two divergent views.

What we have said so far shows that the question of *conscientização* becomes acute in a situation of social change, and necessarily involves ideologies. More precisely, it becomes a burning problem in transitional periods like the present, when countries are passing from an underdeveloped to a developed stage. The reason is that it can involve not only general basic education and the introduction of new ideas, values and cultural tools, but a reordering of the community's interests and goals; and this, by definition, is something ideological. How does one decide, among various possible changes, which will be "good" for a community? Once this question is posed—and it is the fundamental question of *conscientização*—we are involved in ideologies.

What is the difficulty in giving the masses an ideology? In the first place, one has to determine what ideology it will be. If one wants to offer the masses a system of ideas and values, claiming it is the only one that explains and justifies their demands for human progress and socio-economic improvement, it ought to be a matured, thought-out, "reflex" ideology, regardless of whether it is of the reformist or revolutionary sort. This is the difficulty the militants engaged in the work of *conscientização* have wrestled with. The question they have to answer is what ideology promotes the real interests of the group being taught. Furthermore, does not the very process of *conscientização* involve the risk of imposing one's own ideology on the masses?

The problem is to decide what the authentic purpose of *conscientização* is. The revolutionaries say the picture today is the same as when the founders of Marxism looked at the industrial proletariat of Europe in the mid-19th century. As Marx and his colleagues saw it, the proletariat, left to their own lim-

ited vision, would never come up with anything more than a trade-union mentality. Only a scientific interpretation of history—and that could never originate among workers, but would have to come from intellectual revolutionaries—could impart a revolutionary mentality, a true proletarian mentality. But until it was instilled into them, the proletariat would remain a prisoner of the ideological categories of the dominant class. In the same way, for the revolutionaries in Latin America, *conscientização* means bringing the masses forward, from their spontaneous, untutored, “lived” ideology—one that confusedly cries out for liberation—to one that is matured, thought-out and “reflex.” More exactly, they must be brought to a critical attitude in which they see clearly that their liberation can result only in the context of a revolutionary project.

In the context of the ideological struggle, then, *conscientização* has two different meanings:

1. The reformists say that the spontaneous ideology of the masses will be awakened when they receive well-being and prosperity as gifts from the dominant class—or in the last analysis from a dominant foreign economy. “It is not surprising that the Peace Corps, especially in the Brazilian Northeast, is engaged in building schools, teaching literacy and distributing food and clothing—in a word, providing material well-being.” What is affected by these gifts is not so much people’s bodies as their souls. The human dignity people yearn for can be given to them; it need not be one they conquer.

2. No, say the revolutionaries, such an effort is not enough. The spontaneous ideology of the masses will be awakened only when they become builders of a revolutionary new society in which they can conquer human dignity by themselves.

In any event, *conscientização*, which in Latin America began as basic education, is now principally an ideological and hence a political problem. And it is

precisely as a political problem that the Church must deal with it if the Church wants to justify its presence in Latin America.

The MEB effort in Brazil was different from the Church’s usual educational programs. It was typical basic education, but it was also *conscientização*, and thus Church leaders were confronted with a series of very special pastoral problems. MEB militants debated among themselves hotly and at great length, during 1963-1964, whether, or in what sense, the work was confessional. For inevitably its ideological aspects tended to dominate all discussion of the program. And once the Church took on the task of educating, of imparting a *conscientização*, it had to face the problem of ideological polarization that the program led to.

Hence various attempts were made to draw up an “MEB ideology” to guide militants. And it was precisely the issue of ideology that embroiled MEB in a crisis that ranged on one side the great majority of its militants, and on the other the hierarchy. This crisis came to a head at the moment of the military coup of April, 1964, which closed MEB down.

The episcopal counselors of MEB thought the ideological problem would be simple enough. They were confident that normative principles for *conscientização* would be spelled out in the Church’s social doctrine, that all the necessary answers could be found there for Christian laymen active in social matters. But it soon became clear that here was an issue in a historical context quite different from anything foreseen by Catholic social documents.

For *Populorum Progressio* was still in the future, and *Mater et Magistra* had been drafted along the classical lines of previous encyclicals. *Pacem in Terris* had just been published, but though it touched a few of the problems of underdevelopment that were central in *conscientização*, it unfortunately remained on the level of principles—as in its one very general statement on the right to share in culture.

At the same time, to the dismay of the bishops, the ideological position of MEB militants was shifting toward the revolutionary line, and *conscientização* was putting the Church in an equivocal situation: it found itself dealing with responsibilities in an area where ideological or political neutrality was simply impossible.

In 1965, the Brazilian bishops drew up a Five-Year Plan for Pastoral Action, and among the six directives they gave for evangelization, the final one mentioned “building the world” as a step toward human promotion. Here we are, then, right up against the problem of *conscientização*. It is the point where all the internal tensions between progressives and conservatives in the Church of Brazil today are concentrated. For when it criticized Brazilian society, the program was criticizing the Church, too, because Church and society had been intimately associated through the centuries of the nation’s history. Its role in *conscientização* put the Church into a paradoxical situation. In developing a critical awareness of conditions in Brazil, the program tended to produce a kind of ideological split, with two visions of the Church: one of the traditional Church, bound up, by their common history, with the Brazil that has been, and one of the Church undergoing renewal, committed to a radical transformation of the country.

From the pastoral point of view, this was a crucial problem. For the Church’s proper task is to preach the faith; it cannot and should not be identified with any political program or ideological option—or even a program of *conscientização* characterized by its politico-ideological elements. At the same time, faith is an act made by men. Divine grace influences them, but it does not alienate them; it rather fulfills their humanity. Hence in their existential life of faith, men ought to be able to fulfill and advance themselves in any historical context or age. That is exactly what the Brazilian bishops’ plan declared.



A typical page (text rendered into English) from the primer *Viver E Lutar* used in the MEB program of conscientização

Peter came home much informed by his lesson.
 He came home informed that:
 Government is for everybody.
 All should participate in government.
 Some have more than they need; some have nothing.
 Some earn an awful lot.
 Many work and their work is exploited by others.
 Lots of things are wrong in Brazil.
 We need a complete change in Brazil.

WE NEED A COMPLETE CHANGE IN BRAZIL.

Along his existential path of faith, man encounters different ideologies, each purporting to be the best way to human promotion and self-realization. He is thus faced with choices of a politico-ideological nature, which while not affecting his faith intrinsically can nevertheless condition its concrete exercise. This problem of every individual Christian is also the problem of the Church as a whole—and of its organizations—when they are faced with unavoidable, concrete historical choices.

Here, I think, is the explanation of the fact that movements in the Church, or those guided by it, like the Young Christian Students (JUC) or MEB, have, at decisive moments in the recent history of Brazil, adopted leftist positions that shocked a number of the bishops. As they preached the “faith” (through their presence in the market place or on university campuses or wherever they operated), these movements were guided by a concrete image of Brazilian man, whom they envisioned with all his “lived” ideology. It was the image of a man who, while making a conscious act of adhesion to the Church and of commitment to a life of faith,

was simultaneously struggling for his human advancement and against the historical burdens that were crushing him. His “lived” ideology could be nothing other than one of liberation, of revolution. Inevitably, however, his “lived” ideology was made explicit or “reflex” in the Christian choices he was making. Such was the experience of the JUC and MEB militants. Yet all the while they were trying to work out the lines of this “reflex” ideology, they were moving away from the area of faith and into an area of politics, with the risks and responsibilities that politics involves.

This, then, was the pastoral-theological dilemma the Church in Brazil had to face as it came up against the phenomenon of *conscientização*; and this is the dilemma the Church must face everywhere in Latin America. The Church has no right to form a party or to canonize an ideological pattern for Latin America’s revolution. Yet it must accept as inevitable and normal that politico-ideological overtones are involved in the task of evangelizing, for that task cannot be fulfilled in the abstract, but only in a given historical context.

This pastoral-theological dilemma raises two questions: 1) How are we to determine the limits that separate evangelization in the broad sense, which is the Church’s specific mission, and the *conscientização* it calls for, which forces the Church to politico-ideological decisions? 2) How shall we define—and guarantee—the autonomy and responsibility of laymen in this area, since the Church and its responsible organs would be less than honest if they tried to be neutral or took refuge in the safety of some “pure” religion?

The Church must recognize that its evangelizing work for human betterment brings it face to face with the phenomenon of *conscientização* and involves it in the gigantic struggle to liberate the masses of Latin America. The Church must be a ferment: that is the word the bishops use to describe its role in the *conscientização* and liberation of Latin American man.

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