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CHRISTIANS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A NEW SOCIAL ORDER
IN LATIN AMERICA

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COLOMBIA

In Mexico City, that great Latin American metropolis of more than six million inhabitants, there is an unusual square called Plaza de las Tres Culturas (Square of the Three Cultures). It occupies the centre of an impressive group of tall apartment buildings, built by the government, specially for public service employees. The Plaza is built on two levels. On the first are the remains of Aztec pyramids, perhaps temples, with their pre-hispanic ceramics and murals. They belong to the first culture, that admirable civilization of the ancient past, of which the country is justly proud. Some stairs lead up to the second level of the Plaza. There the prominent feature is a typically colonial Catholic Church with its adjoining convent. It is built on top of the ruins of the Aztec temples with materials taken from the pyramids. That church, according to the explanation of the guide, represents the second culture characterized by the dominance of the Church and the imposition of Christian religion on the Indians by the Spanish conquerors. Having led tourists through the Plaza the guide then takes visitors to the street, eagerly waiting for the usual question: "And where is the third culture?" Whereupon his face lights up, his eyes shine and with a proud smile he points to the beautiful, ultra-modern buildings, saying, "The Third Culture is Mexico of Today"! As you walk between these buildings you see schools, child care centres, sport stadiums, swimming pools, consumer cooperatives, parks and so on. If you mention the absence of church buildings, the guide explains that these the government cannot allow as a part of a public project, because Mexico is a secular state that cannot promote any religion.

I believe, this Plaza illustrates the two factors that are making the strongest impact, both in the Church and in Latin American Society, which are to determine the future of both: first, the gradual emancipation from religious criteria, and second, the concern for the building of a new social order, oriented toward the solution of the basic material problems of the masses. These two factors maintain an intimate relation of cause and effect and both are signs of a slow and painful process, which although considered irreversible, is as yet far from being definitive. In Mexico, for example, as well as in other countries, the emancipation from religious tutelage has been attained more rapidly in political institutions than in the mind of the people. Uruguay is probably the country where secularization, as an attitude toward life, has penetrated most deeply in its institutions as well, as in the mentality of the people.

There are some countries, however, where the influence of dogmas and religious practices, the attachment to tradition and sentiment, and the ecclesiastical influence and even control over the nation and its institutions is still very important. Such is the case in Colombia. Furthermore, phenomena also exist

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which seem to resist and even contradict the process of secularization, indicating not only the persistence of religious control over the minds of the people but also its increment. One is impressed, for example, by the strength of "spiritism", the persistence of rituals such as "Candemlé" and "Macumba", specially in that Negro Latin America which is often forgotten; the survival of Voodooism in Haiti; the many syncretistic forms of popular Catholicism in Mestize Latin America, and perhaps we should also mention in this connection the dramatic growth of the Pentecostal Movements chiefly in Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Puerto Rico, which takes place in every racial segment of the continent. Are we to consider these phenomena as refuges from the advance of secularization? Or, will they simply be other unconscious forms of social protest? No matter what interpretation we give to this persistence of religiosity, it is a fact to be reckoned with in any study that deals with the factors which affect social development in Latin America. There is a growing acceptance of the belief that the possibility of securing extensive popular backing and commitment to the building of a new social order depend largely on the freedom of the minds from religious and supranatural control.

For the churches this is a difficult truth to accept. The fact is well known and accepted that the Christian Churches in Latin America, particularly Roman Catholicism, have been bound to a pre-scientific mentality based on religion, with its social sequels such as fatalism, resignation, lack of incentive toward economic commitment, social passivism and lack of social solidarity, the latter being due to an oversimplified universalism imposed on the Latin American resulting from an ideological leap from loyalty to the family and the small group to transcendental identifications with all humanity, bypassing a true identification with intermediate communities. If we keep in mind this fact it will be easy to understand the tremendous obstacles which confront those Christians who attempt to integrate themselves into the process of emancipation from the past in search of a new social order. They are required the irrevocable decision to give up the advantages and the apparent security of traditionalism, oversimplified universalism and ecclesiastical privileges, a renunciation which is the price for radical social change. The new fact today is the existence of Christian minorities of growing influence, that are willing to submit to this renunciation with all its consequences.

Cultural ambivalence of Latin America

It would be impossible to understand the internal tensions that Latin American Christians and the Churches are experiencing today, and even less the options that some Christian segments are taking, without realizing that cultural ambivalence which characterizes the reality known vaguely by names such as "Latin America", "Ibero-America", "Indo-America", or simply "America, South of the Rio Grande". The countries covered by these names, specially those that have had a relatively high Indian or Mestize population, face the problem of coexistence of two cultures within one nationality. One, typically Western, the matrimony of a privileged minority of descendents from early colonizers; the other, of a syncretistic type where the Indian element is mixed with Western or African elements, in proportions which vary from country to country.

matrimony

A material acculturation has been imposed on the Indian or syncretistic segments of the people, while the non-material acculturation has been limited to outer forms without their content. We have received, for example, economic, political, juridical and religious (both Catholic and Protestant) institutions, without having assimilated in our values and patterns of conduct (at least in regard to the popular masses), the true meaning of the same institutions. It is the case of countries whose authenticity has been hindered because of persistent ideological colonialism. In this regard Latin America's distinctive contradiction is that while it definitely belongs to the "Christian West" in all its outer forms and with respect to its ruling classes which are racially and culturally of European origin, its countries nevertheless, share in all the structural and ideological problems of the non-European countries colonized by the West. Thus, it is not surprising that while the ruling classes are identified more and more with European and North American colonialism, the masses feel themselves closer to Asia and Africa, and together with these continents consider themselves part of the "Third World". This ambivalence has become today extremely radical due to the rapid growth of the popular class and its increasing awareness as an oppressed and margined majority, while on the other side a narrowing privileged minority increases its identification with economic, political and ideological colonialism from abroad.

It is not difficult to see the problem which the Christian churches and Christians in general encounter in this situation. In what measure have their forms of life, mission, organization and patterns of the ministry been simply one more aspect of the imposition of alien institutions without the application or assimilation of their content according to the particular conditions of the Latin American countries? This question becomes increasingly valid with respect to those ecclesiastical traditions that we might call "classic" or belonging to traditional Christianity. However, in regard to the growing awareness to the need of renewal another question must be asked. Is it possible to initiate a renewal of the Church on the basis of a "renewed orientation" from New York, Geneva or Germany? Would not this simply be the prolongation of the same old ideological colonialism? Furthermore, is the renewal of the Church possible at all apart from the renewal of Latin American Society? Doesn't the struggle for a new social order have precedence, as a Christian task, over the task of renewing the Church? This appears to be what the Cuban experience is teaching to the Churches in the rest of the continent, because as I understand, the Church in Cuba is now passing through a very promising process of renewal which had not been possible before the revolution. The priority of the struggle for a new social order was understood by Father Camilo Torres, that great Christian assassinated in February of this year, when he decided to devote himself fully to the revolutionary cause in Colombia. At that time he wrote a "Message to the Christians" saying: "I have left the privileges and duties of the clergy, but I have not left the priesthood. I believe to have devoted myself to the revolution out of love for my neighbour. I will not say the Mass, but I will realize this love to my neighbour in the temporal, economic and social realms. When my neighbour has nothing against me, when I have realized the revolution, I will then say the Holy Mass again. Thus, I believe to obey Christ's command, 'If you are offering your gift to the altar, and there remember that your neighbour has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your neighbour, and then come and offer your gift'."

Tensions in Latin American Christianity over the social question

An awakening to these problems on the part of a growing minority of Christians -- awakening that coincides with a consciousness of the true nature of their problems by Latin American Societies -- has produced in recent years a series of strong tensions that are at the same time a danger and a hope for the future of the Church:

1. There is tension between a concern for the safety, prestige and survival of the religious institutions (such as dogmas, "principles" and structures) threatened by the advance of secularization, on the one hand, and the claims to full Christian liberty, with regard to such institutions, in order for Christians to participate responsibly in the historic processes, specially those of a socio-political-economic nature, on the other. In Protestantism we see an institutional hardening, which in the past had been attributed only to Roman Catholicism. Religious institutions seem predisposed to chastise, persecute, expel and openly condemn, "casting into outer darkness" the elements that for reasons of conscience take positions in social and political matters that do not harmonize with religious and ecclesiastical interests. Cases are multiplied throughout the continent and in almost all denominations. The list of Protestant pastors who have lost their charges, or been forced to leave the country due to the withdrawal of the backing of their churches, is already an impressive one. In Catholicism the most symbolic case was that of Father Camilo Torres, mentioned above. Tension with the Colombian hierarchy first put him on the margin of the institutional church, then on the margin of civil institutions and finally, totally abandoned by his own Church, resulted in his violent death. Similar cases, without having led yet to the supreme sacrifice, but that have involved persecution and jailing are those of Father Lage Pessoa of Brazil and Father Salomon Belo Hidalgo of Peru. (!)

2. There is tension between individualism, firmly rooted in the ideological colonialism of Iberian origin, which in the past had a determinative influence on the continent, on the one hand, and the claims of social solidarity and national integration which are indispensable for economic development within social justice, on the other. Latin American Protestantism, for example, has appropriated for its own, without deliberation or theological formulation, but - up to now - by general consensus, the "doctrine" of individual self-promotion socially and economically, as a natural consequence of the regeneration of the inner man, through faith in Christ. This dogmatic position conflicts with these groups of Christians who have become aware of the complex structural aspects, national and international, that make possible or impede, the social and economic betterment of a country. These groups of Christians have come to understand that the social solidarity of all the members and segments of a country that attempts to achieve economic development is the condition sine qua non to attain the desired goal within social justice. On their side they have the evangelical teaching of the indissoluble solidarity of every man and his neighbour. The minority of Christians that think thus also understand the mission of the Church in a different way. The Church wouldn't only be concerned with a congregation of believers, separated from the rest of society whose temporal and eternal well-being would be the purpose of Christianity to achieve. Rather, it would be the Church's task to work together with all the segments of society, with all men, even with seeming adversaries, who are in search of a social and economic order that benefits every one, lifts all to a higher level, and attains national development within a framework of social justice. This understanding assigns to the Church a humanist mission with a Christian inspiration. These two conceptions, one which concentrates on the individual believer and his

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social and economic ascent, and the other which puts the emphasis on solidarity with society as a whole, tend to assume radical positions within the churches, making denominational unity increasingly precarious.

3. There is tension between those, on the one hand, who out of respect for the social and political institutions of the established order, still believe in the possibility of gradual evolutionary change counting on the rational cooperation of the dominant classes, and those, on the other hand, who are convinced of the need and justification of active resistance to the established "order", even to the point of subversion, for the sake of the majority. Both positions appear to have some "Christian basis" within the cultural patrimony of classic Christianity. Basically it is a theological conflict. There are those who believe that God's interest is concentrated on the Church, and on her freedom to fulfil what she considers her mission. For them, as long as this freedom is not threatened, there exists a social order that, without being perfect is at least tolerable. But there are also those pastors and laymen who are convinced that God's interest is concentrated on man's wellbeing in actual situations, and that the established order in many countries is an affront to God because it is precisely, an affront to man. Active resistance to this "order", so as to force the establishment of a new social order rationally planned economically, based on social justice in its internal relations, and on national dignity in its external commitments, should be considered a Christian task. "When an authority exists contrary to the people", wrote Father Camilo Torres, "that authority is not legitimate and is called tyranny. We Christians can and must fight against tyranny".

It is within this context that we encounter the problem of recourse to force as a revolutionary instrument. The question is whether Christians, convinced that the present "order" is an "affront to God and man", and conscious of the multiple forms of violence that the established order exercises against the weak, the deprived, the poor, the marginalised people -- that are the majority -- are going to resist this situation effectively, until they attain the goal of a new social order based on justice; or if on the contrary they are simply going to be content with a permanent rebellious attitude that achieves nothing, or with certain isolated reforms equivalent to social anesthesia. Christians who understand the necessity of carrying the struggle to the end, reason this way: "The most important thing in Christianity is love for one's neighbour, because 'he who loves his neighbour fulfills the law'. This love to be genuine must search for efficacy. If benevolence, alms, a few free schools, a few housing projects, what has been called 'charity', be it individual, national or international, does not solve the problems of underdevelopment, we have to look for efficacious means to do so. The privileged minorities that have the political power are not going to apply these means because generally effective means force minorities to give up their privileges. It is then necessary to take power away from the privileged minorities and give it to the poor majorities. This revolution can be peaceful if the minorities do not resist violently. Revolution is therefore the form of attaining a social orientation that allows the practice of love for one's neighbour, not only in an occasional and transitory way, nor only for a few, but permanently and for the majority of our neighbours. Therefore, revolution is not only permitted, but is obligatory for those Christians who see it as the only effective way of fulfilling love to one's neighbour". (1)

(1) footnote see next page

marginalised (marginated) people

For those who favour a gradual, peaceful change, the reasoning and the position that we have just given constitute the clearest and more justifiable cause for rejection or expulsion from the bosom of the Church. In fact, the churches are already divided in this respect, even though the two positions go on wearing the same Christian or denominational label.

A careful analysis of these two positions, in the light of recent developments in such countries as Brazil, Argentina, Dominican Republic, Colombia and Peru, leads us to ask if we Christians in Latin America are not in danger of falling victims of a conflict between two myths. On the one hand, the myth of peaceful, painless change, that aspires to social transformation without alteration of the system, or great political modifications, or even without touching the centres of power; and on the other hand, the myth of rural guerilla warfare, that has its inspiration and example in Castroism, without distinguishing between the pre-Cuban and the post-Cuban situation in Latin America. The latter is the myth of those who are obsessed by the belief that a coup de force will necessarily open the way to a new social order. Consequently, Christians committed to the struggle for a new social order, are beginning to understand the necessity for constant dialogue with technicians and experts in social development, in the search for possible alternatives to the myths we have mentioned.

Summing up, we can affirm that the tensions that we have analyzed in the level of beliefs and positions within the Church, reveal a deeper tension between two theologies. One, centered in God, the other centered in man; one, integrist and separatist in relation to society in general, the other solidary and committed to society as a whole; one, attached to dogmas, principles and structures of traditional Christianity, the other committed only to the man, in particular situations. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin: "Around us the real struggle doesn't take place between believers and non-believers, but between two kinds of believers, two ideals, two concepts of God. A religion of the earth is being formed against the Religion of Heaven".

(1) The conclusion of El Tabo Consultation on Church and Society (Chile, January 10 - 20, 1966) at this respect is basically the same, although greater emphasis is laid on "private decision" by individual Christians. The pertinent paragraph says: "Within this context (of permanent social violence exercised by the established order) the immediate Christian task would be: to uncover and point to those forms of permanent social violence; detect its causes and possible remedies; put the latter into practice with the least use possible of direct violence; when finally he should decide for one way or the other, remember that he might never be in absolute certainty about his course of action, and hence he should keep as close as possible to his brothers who might have decided differently from him. As Luther, the Christian of today, after taking his position on the use of force, should submit himself to God's judgement and forgiveness: "This is my decision. God help me" (Report of Group 3, Crisis and Revolution in Latin American political structures).

Ecumenical projections

1. The Christian minorities to which I have been referring, committed to the struggle for social change, are a phenomenon of extraordinary significance, if we take into account the traditional conditions of Christianity, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, in Latin America. Some years ago, the Christians who were most aware of the social problem, not finding an authentic revolutionary movement based on a Christian-inspired humanism, felt themselves forced to resort to Communism as the only agent of social revolution. This is not the case today. Chile is an example, although one cannot cherish much hope for a genuine revolution under the so-called "Christian Democracy". In Brazil, Peru and Colombia, the leaders that have become symbols of the revolutionary cause and have made the greatest popular impact in recent years, have been Christian-inspired revolutionaries. Within Protestantism today, in every country, both in classical and in more recent denominations, even among Pentecostals and Fundamentalists there exist leftist Christian minorities that attract attention for their renewed thinking and their social vocation. Thanks to the Latin American Junta of Church and Society, these Protestant groups, scattered over the continent, are gaining a sense of continental unity and acquiring coherence of thought and action. This is a new fact of the greatest ecumenical import in the history of the continent.

2. The Movement of Church and Society within Protestantism, and the revolutionary movements of Roman Catholic extraction, are coming closer together. Social commitment in situations of misery, marginalization and exploitation, is providing a solid meeting ground that never would have been possible through ecclesiastical dialogue. In the present Latin American situation ecclesiastical ecumenism is insufficient and even dangerous, for its easy tendency to become one more separatist activity that takes place intra mures, having as its goal that which according to the New Testament is the starting point: the unity of the Church. We also find insufficient that religious ecumenism which, taking as its basis a common theism, and often motivated by defensive considerations, ignores God's commitment with man in his incarnation, and lacks therefore, the basis for an authentic historic involvement on behalf of men in specific situations. The experience of unity in the cause of social redemption is opening up a new, deeper, and more dynamic concept of ecumenism. It is a Christian ecumenism whose distinctive feature is efficacious love (pro-existence), without discrimination, and having Jesus Christ for its example. It is the expression of human social solidarity based on the presence of Jesus Christ in all men, even in those who are seemingly dangerous and adverse, such as the prisoners and the marginalized/according to St. Matthew 25:31-46, that could be called the parable of social solidarity. The ecumenism which Christ creates, according to the thinking of the Apostle Paul, is expressed in the "new creature", for whom "neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision". Or, as we would say today, the new creature overcomes the division between religion and non-religion, between theism and atheism, breaking down the absolute rigidity between these opposites, because the "new creature" takes place in Christ, who is agape (Galatians 5:6). In the words of a young theologian, closely identified with the Latin American situation: "The new man, without denying the differences that exist in this world, overcomes them because they are relative. When love is put into practice then ecumenism (or simply, Christianity) takes place, even unconsciously, because there are men who live as the Lord wills, even though they do not know it themselves, for they ask, 'when did we see you in jail and visit you?'" (Karl Lenkersdorf).

*/ in the parable ...

3. The experience of unity that is beginning to appear among Christians committed to social change in Latin America, is revealing new aspects of the division of world Christianity and, at the same time, is opening new possibilities for the expression of a genuine ecumenical unity. The real Christian scandal, for instance, is not so much that lack of unity that makes it impossible for all Christians to take part in the same religious rites and practices, or that hinders living together within a single ecclesiastical organisation. The most scandalous aspect of Christian division is that which is revealed in unjust international relations which perpetuate underdevelopment, with Christians participating on both sides. When this happens between so-called "Christian nations", the scandal is even greater. However, the realization that the struggle for the social redemption of man is universal, present in all countries, both in the developed ones and in those of the Third World, is opening up new possibilities for approximation, new points of contact, new incentives for identification and solidarity between countries that would otherwise maintain irreconcilable political and economic positions. In Latin America, for example, those of us might feel infinitely separated mentally and psychologically from the United States for very justifiable reasons, who are discovering how near we are to the valient fighters for civil rights, giving their lives and possessions for the cause of justice in complete identification with the ideals of the revolutionary movements of Latin America. This has led us to ask ourselves whether we really are as distant as we thought, and to discover that human link that goes beyond ideologies, myths, and the unjust structures that separate us.

4. Finally, I think that the revolutionary, Christian-inspired vocation that is appearing in Latin America -- a kind of evangelical charisma with social and political content -- promises to give the revolutionary movement in general some of the attitudes which are indispensable for the success of the cause. The strong sense of "brotherhood" which has been characteristic of evangelical congregations in Latin America, can be widened and converted into cement that is essential for cohesion of all those who seek social renewal. Up to the present evidence of this promise is as yet slight, but noteworthy, such as the attempt of Father Camilo Torres to create a "United Peoples Front" in Colombia. Upon gathering strength this tendency could overcome the worst of the problems of all the opposition movements in Latin America, which is its division into small units surrounding a leader.

Furthermore, you observe certain morale, without fear of sacrifice, based on transcendent convictions, that recall those examples of tenacity and valour recorded in the first centuries of Christianity. Like them, the new revolutionaries feel "Blessed to suffer persecution for righteousness' sake", knowing that afflictions and poverty ~~on~~ the continent. It is impossible to miss this spirit in the following paragraph of a message of Camilo Torres to Colombian political prisoners: "From jail the revolutionary should give an example to the people of valour and decision, a spirit of sacrifice and loyalty to the revolution. His time there should be spent in studying to prepare himself to better understand the justice of revolutionary ideals, to be ready for the day when he regains his freedom. The political prisoner should

*/ is all that they can expect from the order of injustice that prevails...

demonstrate to the guards and to the other prisoners that there is a great difference between him and a common delinquent. By his conduct the revolutionary should exact from the jailkeepers a treatment that his rank as a fighter for the people deserves. Rather than feel ashamed for being a prisoner, the revolutionary should feel proud to suffer persecution for righteousness' sake" (1).

Whether Christianity manages to impress this morale on the movement of social redemption or not, will greatly depend on the growth of the revolutionary vocation among Latin American Christians.

(1) Compare the impressive paraphrases of some biblical psalms written by Ernesto Cardenal, of Nicaragua.

