

COMMUNISM, THE CHURCH, AND CUBA

The following excerpts are from two articles on Cuba taken from the April issue of the French publication Esprit. Translations of the full text of both articles appear in the spring number of Cross Currents. The articles are by Claude Julien, author of Le Revolution Cubaine and a two-volume study of the United States. Le Nouveau Nouveau Monde. M. Julien's observations represent a foreign point of view that may be of interest to Worldview's readers.

In moving closer to the East, Castro threatens all of Latin America; is Cuba to become a Soviet base in the heart of the Western hemisphere? Yet at the same time, this evolution brings reassurance: in its nationalistic phase, Castroism was particularly contagious for Latin America, but its attractiveness would tend to diminish if it can be presented as a docile instrument in the hands of Moscow.

Up to now, however, this fear and this hope have been deceived. The American reports according to which the U.S.S.R. has installed runways for rocket launchings are as fantastic as the findings of British information services ridiculed in Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*. If the Communist influence has grown, it is still too soon to know what a Communist regime might eventually be so far from Moscow, in a tropical climate where eloquence means more than ideology. On the other hand, if some Latin-American governments have kept their distance in regard to Castro, or have adopted a frankly hostile attitude, public opinion in the whole southern hemisphere continues to look to Havana with hope and envy.

We must remember that "Communism" is not a frightening word for the urban and rural unemployed of a vast continent which is both fabulously rich and seriously underdeveloped. Ideologies have no hold on illiterate populations which must fight each day against extreme destitution. The majority of the students and intellectuals know very well that the Communist bugaboo remains the favorite weapon of the owners who want to safeguard their privileges. The anti-Communist campaign launched by the United States is almost without effect on them. . . .

What is at stake is the awakening of a whole continent. The neighboring countries know that they must confront the same problems as Cuba some day.

Like Cuba, they will have to accomplish this effort with insufficient cadres, in the service of destitute populations who demand instant results and are not apt to be content with half-measures. In these conditions, how many can be certain that in their own evolution, if they meet with the same incomprehension from Washington, they will not be drawn toward Moscow?

Certainly the Cuban revolution has lost its character as an example, which had attracted the sympathy of the entire world to it in 1959, when it was nationalist and anti-capitalist without being Communist. It was then possible to hope that it might open a new path to socialism.

It remains exemplary for another reason. Asia and Africa have been shaken and thrown into disorder in the last twenty years by revolutions which lifted yellow and black peoples from an out-dated colonialism, the political colonialism of the 19th century. Latin America has been free of Spanish colonialism for a century and a half, but this has only meant undergoing the more modern form of colonialism, economic imperialism. It is against this economic imperialism that all Latin America must now achieve its second revolution. Paradoxically, the country which shows it the way is the one which remained longest under Spanish control, Cuba, which gained independence only at the beginning of the century, a hundred years later than the rest of the continent.

Asia and Africa, still badly adjusted to their new independence, are also interested in Cuba, for they have discovered that the departure of European governors, administrations and soldiers has not automatically freed them from economic exploitation from foreign bankers and business men who are always ready, in order to preserve their advantages, to accommodate themselves to political shifts. In the young countries of Asia and Africa, leaders emerging from the anti-colonialist battle can intoxicate their peoples by a great flood of nationalism. But this will only last for a while. Sooner or later, they will have to liberate themselves from underdevelopment, hunger and illiteracy. Sooner or later, they will have to exploit their natural resources for their own profit, instead of selling their raw materials to the West. Sooner or later, denunciation of political colonialism will appear for what it is, an anachronism, and they

will then attack economic imperialism. It is up to the West to see that this new struggle does not hurl them under another political domination, that of Communism.

Here resides the importance of the Cuban revolution. It is idle to give it approval or to criticize it. What is important is to understand it and to see in it a more or less complete prototype of the revolutions to come in the next generation.

“A new history is being made in Cuba in which the Christian spirit will prevail over pagan materialism.” With these words Father Llorente, chaplain of university Catholic Action, hailed the victory of Fidel Castro in January, 1959. In the euphoria of liberation, the Church breathed easily. The hierarchy, which had not publicly taken a clear attitude in regard to the abominable crimes of the Batista dictatorship, adapted itself with difficulty by withdrawing into a prudent silence, broken on rare occasions by rather unimportant statements. It now felt it had more elbow-room, and knew that a real revolution was in the making, in which the Church would necessarily be affected. . . .

The summer of 1960 marked a turning-point in the relations between the Church and the revolutionary regime. It was also the political turning-point of the revolution. Cuba was responding to U.S. economic sanctions by nationalizing American property. It was this moment (June) that Bishop Masvidal (auxiliary bishop of Havana) chose to protest against the excess of state control in economic and social life. The hierarchy had approved agrarian reform, the first serious cause of tension with the U.S., and other economic measures, but how were they to be realized if the state did not impose them? And all these reforms were menaced by Washington. It was pointless to applaud the economic and social shake-up by Castro if the only means he had to defend it was condemned.

The most categorical condemnation came on October 7, with a collective letter from the bishops: it approved of agrarian reform, proposals for industrialization, plans for lowering prices, building schools, hospitals and homes, and eliminating corruption and gambling, but ended with a vigorous protest “against the constant progress of Communism in our country.” The response of Castro was scathing: “Whoever condemns a revolution like ours, betrays Christ, and would be capable of crucifying Him all over again.” A month later Bishop Serantes returned to the charge of Communism, and the polemic continued on this tone.

Never in Cuban history have there been such frequent pastoral letters and episcopal statements. Was the Church free to express itself for the first time? Such frequent proclamations seemed surprising after the obstinate silence of the hierarchy under Batista. At the time of the most complete police repression, only one pastoral letter broke the silence: on March 2, 1958 the bishops asked for the constitution of a government of national union. It is certainly not up to the bishops to advocate a specific political formula, but we need not insist on the unreality of national union which was to bring together the Batista militia and the Castro *maquis*. There were many reasons of doctrine and morality for the Church to speak out, but it did not know how to seize them. If Castro has imposed a real dictatorship on Cuba, we must admit that in the eyes of the Cuban bishops a leftist dictatorship is infinitely more dangerous than a rightist one. . . .

Besides, everyone knew that more than fifty percent of the Cuban clergy was Spanish, and under the authority of superiors living in Spain. The record of the Church in Spain provided further propaganda material for the government. Nevertheless, Castro tried in several speeches not to condemn the clergy *en masse*. At the beginning of the revolution, the clergy was split. Later, although it was inaccurate to say that Cuba had become Communist, it was undeniable that Communist influence was now openly displayed. As soon as the bishops solemnly denounced it, the clergy closed ranks against the Communist menace.

There was one exception: at Castro meetings one priest, a Father Lence, declared himself a revolutionary. He was suspended by his superiors, who had serious motives to justify their suspicions, and the situation only led the clergy to withdraw even further from the revolution.

Besides, Castro gave many talks in which he mentioned Christ and the gospels with an awkwardness that naivete might explain as much as bad faith, but which could only alienate the faithful. It was primarily the police methods which presented serious problems for Catholics, especially since these tactics tended to eliminate authentic nationalist revolutionaries to the advantage of Communists. Believers are, therefore, divided into three groups:

The majority are against the regime, and in the name of anti-Communism condemn the work of the revolution as a whole.

A minority is both revolutionary and anti-Castro, wants to save the revolution from Communism, advocates “Fidelism without Fidel,” holding Castro

responsible for the Communist influence on the revolution.

A very tiny group, whose Catholicism would be difficult to estimate, remains favorable to the regime, but is discredited by the presence of Father Lence.

Here is the problem: a social and economic revolution is being accomplished in Cuba which is trying to remedy evils which the Church would not think of denying; it has already brought about certain results whose usefulness the Church would not dispute; but this revolution was originally achieved without the Church, and continues more and more in a climate of open war with the Church. How did this happen?

One must remember that Cuba was liberated from Spanish colonialism one hundred years after the rest of Latin America. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the Church appeared to be strictly tied to Spanish colonialism. It has had only fifty years to "Cubanize," and for many Cubans, it is still a foreign body. There is scarcely one priest for ten thousand inhabitants, and the clergy is concentrated in the urban areas. It is extremely rare to see a priest in the countryside, which, in fact, has never been evangelized.

Under Spanish domination and even since independence, the Church concentrated on the urban population, especially the bourgeoisie. In the larger centers, there are also popular parishes, but the rural parish is almost unknown. The first objective was to reach the "elite," thanks to which one hoped to extend the influence of the Church to the whole country. The drama consists in the fact that in a country like Cuba the elite is completely removed from the masses, whom it does not know. Secondary schools, and even a Catholic university, have been established, but no rural parish school. More than half the agricultural population is illiterate, and the Church has done nothing about it. Now in two years primary schools are emerging across the provinces, and it is the government, not the Church, that is creating them.

It is true that because of the dispersion of the rural population, and the want of priests, the problem was difficult. For sixty years successive governments were uninterested, and the Church did no better.

And now a revolution, begun by students belonging to the middle class, has made agrarian reform their number one objective. The primary beneficiaries are the peasants, whose living standards have

risen quickly, for whom villages and schools have been built. Thanks to the popular militia, the security of the regime depends principally on them. The clergy is unacquainted with these peasants who give their support to the revolution. Nor is the clergy complemented by an adult laity, which is almost non-existent. Catholic Action, such as has developed in Europe, is too recent and too little developed. The clergy has too often displayed an authoritarian attitude, not knowing how to let laymen take initiative. "The Cuban people are Catholic," the bishops stated in their pastoral letter of August 7, 1960. The truth is that the ordinary Cuban is, quite simply, non-religious. With few exceptions the Church has not gone out to meet him.

The peasants, who are not even baptized, ignore the sacrament of marriage. For two years the revolutionary government has attempted to regularize concubinage, both out of concern for order and dignity, and also to establish a real civil state. These "regularizations" are done in groups, and the Church has no role in the affair; it will have to begin with catechism for the adults.

The filthy huts and slums, where the peasants used to live, are being replaced by new villages grouped around a "people's store," where supplies can be purchased at low prices. In none of these new villages that have just risen from the ground have I seen the smallest temporary chapel to bear witness to the Church's presence, and its desire to share in this reawakening of the peasant class. Today the Church is tragically absent from its hope, as it was yesterday from its misery.

Above all, one fact is important: a revolution is taking place with the support of the peasants, among whom the Church has not been really established, and against a bourgeoisie to whose fate the Church finds itself tied. A revolution that Castro had wanted to be "humanist" is helping the tiny Communist party which did nothing to help it, and places the Church in an extremely critical situation. It is a revolution in which the Church has no place, and which in part is being carried out against it.

It would be easy to blame both the revolutionary leaders who did not know how to gain Church support, and a Church which did not know how to assure its presence in the revolution. But these quarrels lead nowhere. The real problem is to know why this succession of events could not have been avoided, and to draw the consequences for the future of the Church in those countries which, freed from political colonialism, sooner or later will take up their own revolution against economic imperialism.