

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND WORLD AFFAIRS

A View of Recent Declarations on Aid

Thomas Molnar

We live in an age of unexamined concepts which risk becoming the more dangerous as they pass into action under the pressure of vague emotions. This is not to say that generosity is completely lacking, only that its impulses are not followed up by a careful analysis of reality. In fact, such an analysis is easily branded "cold" and "inhuman," and generosity, the heart's voice, comes to be regarded as a substitute for policy. This situation is not improved but rather worsened by the entry of organized religious forces, the churches, into the area of international politics. The Christian churches, Catholic and Protestant, have of course been present in that area for centuries as very active elements. I have had some opportunity to express my admiration on these pages for the activity of missionaries who overcome, almost singlehanded, local inertia whether in Africa, Asia or Latin America, and prepare the peoples under their care for a much-needed development. In contrast to this concrete and direct aid, I wish to speak here of the churches' new policy: urging instead of preparing development, the adoption of empty slogans, and a general me-too attitude — if anything, detrimental to the advocated cause. Perhaps never before have words like "concern," "commitment," "optimism" and "brotherhood" been used with so little genuine charity at their kernel.

One irony of the situation is that, by all agreement, technicians, competent managers, industrial and agricultural experts constitute the first line of necessity in underdeveloped areas; yet, the churches generally have no such experts, only hastily prepared sociologists — and worse: avant-garde theologians — who make emphatic statements, echoing other specialists without Christian background or perspective. What these statements lack in precision and responsible scholarship is "compensated" by a dramatic tone and, deplorably, the ignorant's exaggerations. While Marxists, for reasons of their own, speak of, and promote the coming World Revolution, Christians, whether at the Vatican or the World Council of Churches,

speak of the coming Apocalypse. But since the latter is simply not an operational term, its evocation is interpreted as the promotion of revolutionary goals. The world is always quick in lending false contents to religious pronouncements, particularly today when various ideologies look upon spiritual things as part of the superstructure expressing the underlying socioeconomic realities.

It would be foolish to demand of religion today that it refrain from participation in world issues. Seminar-ians, priests, bishops are preoccupied with them. But it is important for them to realize that they can turn into ivory-tower intellectuals and doctrinaire ideologues unless they enlarge their vision to include at least a modest corner of Christian realism. It seems as if churchmen had not heard that the age of ideologies was over, and were trying to revive these dead bodies.

It is in this sense that the *Wall Street Journal*, not known for hasty editorial statements, spoke of the latest encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, as "warmed-up Marxism." There is a tendency in the Catholic Church to jump on bandwagons that have been switched to a side-track and abandoned by sharp-eyed scrutinizers of the future. (Thus John Dewey and Freud, decidedly "old-hat" among the cognoscenti, have just been discovered by Catholics!) Hardly any respectability may be gained from such post-last minute, clumsy efforts. An illustration is *Populorum Progressio*. It contains passages which, if followed, would bring, at best, continued stagnation to the economically undeveloped. It gives preference to a "planned program" rather than to "occasional aid left to individual good will," a statement so loaded that nobody could disagree with it, but for that very reason obscure, and potentially harmful. The obscurity, but not the harm, is only dispelled when the text calls upon "public authorities" and "government officials" to lay down the objectives to be pursued and the ends to be achieved, to impose the necessary taxes on wasteful expenditures, etc.

A whole book would be needed to examine and duly modify this passage because it can be read as a diluted Marxist program that neither European socialists nor American labor leaders, for example, would find ac-

Dr. Molnar, whose most recent book is *Utopia, the Perennial Heresy*, dealt with "Religions in Africa" in the October 1966 issue of *worldview*, and with Latin American unity in the issue of January 1967.

ceptable. Aid should not be left, of course, to individual good will, but should — and would — follow from normal entrepreneurial interest if conditions in underdeveloped country X were stabilized for the reception of investment. We might as well learn that investment will never budge unless the last Sukarno and the last Nkrumah are removed from the country in need of help. In the second place, why the uncritical trust in “public authorities” and “government officials”? We agree with the encyclical when it states that “private property does not confer unconditional and absolute rights”; but then let us be consistent and assert that public property does not confer such rights either. In fact, while the State usually possesses sufficient power to interfere with private property, what power exists in this century to coerce the State to denationalize property once collectivized but badly managed? True, such denationalization did take place in Austria and Great Britain, for example; but as a rule, deficit in a State-run enterprise can be indefinitely hidden, absorbed under various headings of the national budget, and even increased from one year to the next. The Latin American countries particularly offer notorious illustrations of how such deficits can wreck the whole economy.

Indeed, *Populorum Progressio* does not address itself to Austria or England, but, rather obviously, to the Latin American situation. I recognized in it entire sentences and passages I had previously heard from Chilean Jesuits and the Archbishop of Recife, Dom Helder Camara. Now in Latin America most governments usually represent one political party or a coalition of two parties, but emphatically *not* the nation in its entirety. The corruption which plagues them results, among other things, from party efforts to provide its bureaucrats — an important sector of the electorate by its number and power — with plush jobs, several of which are usually cumulated by one individual. The major criticism against the Alliance for Progress all over Latin America is precisely that its funds go to the government, that is the party in power, and are distributed by and to *its* partisans, according to plans drawn up by *its* own experts. These funds hardly enter the general circulation of the economy; they are blocked at high levels where decisions are made. At any rate, they contribute only marginally to what would be the most vital sector: industry and its diversification.

When the Pope singles out the “government officials” for planning, distributing, taxing and mobilizing the people and the economy, he merely adds the seal of approval to their already swollen power over present and future, local and foreign funds. This does not mean, of course, that governments should

be excluded from the task of development. But it does mean, emphatically, that the government should not be entrusted with the entire task. For example, President Kubitshek’s decision to build Brasilia, the new futuristic capital, was a disastrous one in a country desperately in need of investing in the development of its Northeast. On the other hand, the government-backed SUDENE (for the development of the Northeast) now smoothly cooperates with private companies of the industrial South since the latter are granted tax exemption when investing in the Northeast or the Amazonas basin.

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The latest encyclical also suggests that the “superfluous wealth of the rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations.” Let us only briefly touch on the contradiction between this and the previous statement. “Superfluous wealth” exists in exactly eighteen nations, the Western ones plus Japan, as it was painfully demonstrated at the Geneva International Conference on Trade three years ago. The Communist countries, for the first time exposed as naked emperors, hid in embarrassed silence their inability to aid the underdeveloped nations. Now it is evident that “superfluous wealth” did not come into existence through government intervention; how can one then recommend the latter method as a means of creating and promoting wealth? True, the 1966 Conference on Church and Society organized in Geneva by the World Council of Churches mentioned capitalism, socialism and communism as equally “capable of rapid economic growth and wide distribution of income”; but nobody takes this kind of statement seriously (did the authors?), least of all countries like socialist India which are being fed from the surplus of capitalist accumulation.

But let us leave the question of surplus creation aside; the problem of placing the existing wealth at the service of poor nations remains enormous. Two things come to mind, neglected by the encyclical. Under the influence of fashionable slogans, *Populorum Progressio* assumes that government-to-government aid has some magic quality, absent from private investment. I have already mentioned in *worldview* the serious charges one hears all over Latin America about the Alliance for Progress because its money must be used for buying U.S. merchandise, consulting U.S. expertise, transportation by U.S. carriers, etc.

One hears the same story in Africa. In Nairobi I was told (and I had always taken it for granted) that foreign aid, whether American, German, Italian or Japanese, comes with strings attached. If Washington or Bonn or Tokyo sent machines, trucks or television

sets to refurbish the Congo after three years of ruinous warfare, it was to quickly take the place of departing Belgians and to secure for the suppliers a future market. This practice has always been and will always be the rule of economic life.

The second thing that comes to mind is the problem of technicians and managers needed for development. Not only are such persons not trained in sufficient numbers by and for the underdeveloped areas, but even those who acquire sufficient competence emigrate in alarming numbers or do not return home from foreign universities, causing a "brain drain" in their respective countries. The only way such personnel can be persuaded to stay and produce wealth and offer the needed services is to create local industry remunerating their work and stimulating their research. The Centre International de Developpement, certainly not a pro-capitalist organization, writes in its new Manifesto (signed by its president, Josué de Castro) that only foreign companies can bring technicians, managers and researchers to these countries because only they have "the required knowledge of organization and dynamism" (*Le Monde*, April 27, 1967).

Examples abound bearing this out, yet churchmen now *à la mode* wish to be blind to it. Dom Helder Camara, jokingly called "my Communist Archbishop" by the Pope, gave me what he considers the rockbottom analysis of U.S.-South American economic relations. He did not even hide that he was quoting figures published by the leftist Raul Presbisch. According to this story the U.S. has, since the end of the war, taken out of Latin America 13 billion dollars worth of profit made on copper, tin, coffee, cotton, bananas, etc. In the eyes of Dom Helder this is the worst example of economic imperialism, and he went last October to the Latin American bishops' conference at Mar del Plata to denounce North American acts of undisguised exploitation. His hopes have been over-fulfilled since his phrases have found their way into the spirit and the text of the latest encyclical.

What the Archbishop of Recife did not take into consideration was that without foreign (mostly U.S.) investment the quantity of copper, tin, and bananas yielding 13 billion dollars' profit would not have been produced in the first place. Neither local nor European companies would have had the capital to invest in mines and plantations, and outside the United States no market would have been found to absorb the quantities produced. The second thing unmentioned by Dom Helder or, for that matter, by the encyclical, is that taxes paid by their companies give the host country a substantial revenue, at times up to 70% of its annual budget, and more important still, they permit the diversification of industry, thus putting an end

to the cause of monoproduction or overwhelmingly agricultural production. Oil revenues in Venezuela, for example, pay for an extensive urban and rural apprenticeship and training program which, in turn, provides jobs in factories, offices, rural centers, etc.

Similar programs exist in all Latin American countries, and here I mention only a fraction of company contributions to the economy and to education. The same pattern could be followed in Africa where, in most cases, the infrastructure for the economy—roads, railroads, bridges, airports—is in a more primitive state than on the South American continent. This means that conditions for investment would have to be made more favorable.

Another favorite expression of Dom Helder Camara is "the cooperation of continents." Another high-sounding but vacuous term. How, for example, could Africa and South America cooperate economically when both are mostly situated in the tropical zone and have similar soil conditions, hence identical products? Inter-African as well as inter-South American trade represents some 10% of the total, which means that the production policies of both immense land masses cannot be directed at each other but must be directed towards Western European and United States markets. The Africans have shown enough realism to abandon the earlier talk about a common market, even of regional cooperation. Countries like the Congo and Nigeria are unable to control even their own economies and tax systems. Latin Americans are similarly unable to cope with the issue of smuggling, so damaging to the economy. It robs a country like Bolivia of substantial revenues. If the Latin Americans speak more often of a "common market" than the Africans, it is under Washington's goading since Washington always tries to generalize and universally apply one particular formula, whether "common market," "democracy," or "self-determination."

This leaves precious little substance for the "cooperation of continents," except what recent Church declarations like to label American (or Western) exploitation of poor countries. *Populorum Progressio* speaks disapprovingly of "luxuries and wasteful expenditures," and calls on government officials to tax them heavily. This Galbraithian language takes no notice of the fact that if citizens of rich countries were taxed out of their generous buying habits, their correspondingly diminished imports would bring immediate catastrophe to half of the world. It is a brutal fact, of course, that the world today is sharply divided between rich and poor nations; but it would be more brutal yet to deprive the latter, some two billion souls, of their subsistence as producers for some 700 million consumers.

The Christian churches are generally hailed for their "new concern" for the world. Yet, I am not at all sure that we ought not to qualify this praise. The Christian religion has a prodigious sense for concrete action in what is now called the social dimension; but the churches' theoretical statements, situated in the no-man's-land between doctrine and action, are often embarrassingly unrealistic. This lack of realism is further emphasized by the zeal that activist priests, pastors and theologians infuse into it. The mixture is explosive: the earlier-quoted World Council of Churches conference suggested to Christians the "violent overthrow of the existing order," or the more abstract but not less questionable "fundamental restructuring of the world economy" resulting in "temporary dislocation and possible suffering for a large number of people."

The impression is one of painful irresponsibility in an age which has seen all too many revolutions, dislocated populations, displaced persons and untold suffering. Such things should not be played with lightly at church conferences. Not only for the obvious moral reasons, but also because such statements are based on a mistaken evaluation of the world.

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The so-called "new breed" churchmen find themselves not only in the no-man's-land between doctrine and concrete action, but in another kind of no-man's-land too. They seek the company and the support of the most radical elements (the World Council of Churches questions the validity of the family in face of an "increasing interest" in extramarital sex) in regard to which they have an inferiority feeling. But they do not stop to realize that this radical element, unstable and shifting, is an urban phenomenon of the affluent society, very far removed from the genuine problems of underdeveloped societies. The same long-haired beatnik or hippy types may be found in the nightclubs of Dakar or Bombay as in those of New York and Paris, but these nightclubs and their habitués form a very thin layer over the world's and society's surface; they should not be taken as representatives of the world's discontent.

The churches' by now frequent statements read as if they were written for this Western and urban *Lumpenproletariat*, or, at best, for the idealistic youth of the Peace Corps who have picked up fragments of "world affairs" in sociology and political science classes. Sex and Revolution are luxury items debated at bull sessions in American colleges, but not concrete problems showing the way to human betterment.

If the Christian churches desire to be socially updated and integrated, they will have to listen in when

sober words are exchanged by European social democrats, African negotiators with the Common Market, or Japanese businessmen. It was the Socialist Foreign Minister of a European country (and I do not mean Mr. George Brown) who expressed painful surprise over the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, remarking that not once is the word *freedom* mentioned in it!

What is the gate of entry, so to speak, of the Christian churches into the area of modern world affairs? It is quite evident that the churches, and the individual priests or theologians, do not possess an independent research apparatus which would help them reach original conclusions about disarmament, the nuclear stalemate, or aid to new nations. As a result, it is rare to find among them a genuine confrontation on such problems as Rhodesia, Vietnam or worker participation in the management of factories. They rely, with distressing regularity, on biased data prepared not in view of a possible solution, but in view of accrediting ideological or emotional lines of thought.

Authors of church documents on political and social questions seem to adopt a style unsuited to secular matters. They confuse morality with politics on the simplistic assumption that communities apprehend the distance between means and ends in the same way as individuals may do in their private lives. They then treat nations, classes, races and indeed the whole world as if these were entities endowed with a conscience, and as if this conscience could be mobilized like that of a parishioner.

Complex issues are not simplified in this manner but only made irrelevant through the injection of false and falsely applied spirituality. Whether we like it or not, civil society is divided along many lines of interest and *Weltanschauung*; treating issues which are at the intersection of these lines as if the Ten Commandments or the golden rule were immediately applicable to them is fantastically naive. Particularly at a time — and this is the real paradox — when the churches which adopt the exhortative tone on social and political affairs, begin to question the source, nature and scope of their own spiritual authority. If the individual member of the church is granted every day a greater freedom of conscience and right to interpret religious doctrine, why should he submit to a social and political creed preached by his pastor, priest, council or synod?

It may be a good thing for the churches to acquire an influence in the shaping of tomorrow's social realities. However, for this influence to be relevant and beneficial, they must learn to abstain from stating ideological positions in the style of a Moses descending from Mount Sinai.