

A French Declaration on Church and Power

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A few days before Christmas, 1971, the Protestant Federation of France published a 12,000-word draft statement, *Eglise et Pouvoirs*, which immediately caused repercussions around the world. The extraordinary, and for the French Protestant leaders startling, controversy over the statement was initiated by the French centrist newspaper *Le Monde*. On December 19 it printed a full page of extracts from the document under the provocative title "The French Protestant Federation declares: *Our society is unacceptable.*"

Immediately, all the French dailies and weeklies came out with numerous quotations and analyses, constituting a press reaction greater than any ever caused by a church statement in French history. The foreign press, notably the *New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune*, were not far behind. Press, radio and TV reporters brought a sudden and unwonted animation to the offices of the Protestant Federation of France (an old building, the House of French Protestantism, on the Rue de Clichy across from the Casino de Paris, famous music hall of Mistinguett and Maurice Chevalier).

French public opinion was surprised to discover that the small Protestant minority had issued a very energetic text, written in an unusually secular and direct style, concretely challenging the evolution and values of French society. The President of the Republic, Georges Pompidou, and the Prime Minister, asked their offices to analyze the document carefully, keeping a sharp eye on what it might mean for relations between Church and State. On at least one official occasion Pompidou expressed his surprise and displeasure with the document's sharp

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criticisms of society under his own regime.

After some delay, the French Protestant press began to react, and a hot polemic ensued between opponents and supporters of the general line of the text. A group of French Protestants—members of the middle class and high functionaries for the most part—led by some vigorous Lutheran theologians, launched a counter-campaign, the first result of which was to increase the document's publicity. The Roman Catholic press took up the challenge, and numerous articles appeared in weekly and monthly organs (first in the leftist journal *Témoignage Chrétien*).

Meanwhile, parishes and ecumenical groups, including several theological and philosophical seminaries, some of which were non-Christian, began the intensive study that was the document's purpose—for this was not intended to be a "Protestant encyclical" but an invitation to think through decisive factors of Christian life today within the framework of French society. The president of the French Protestant Federation, a layman and banker, Jean Courvoisier, stated in his introductory letter:

It would have been quite surprising if such a text, vigorously written because of its purpose, could have been approved by all of the members of the Council of the French Protestant Federation, who reflect the considerable diversity of French Protestantism. It does constitute an interpretation that has provoked just the kind of questioning we have been asked to encourage among the churches. Furthermore, it was written in complete faithfulness to the Gospel, and this should allow the readers to receive it with humility and to study it with care. . . . Therefore no Christian and no parish—even if irritated by certain parts of the text, or by the general analysis—can deny that it exposes a major problem which has for too long and for probably wrong reasons been excluded from our Christian pre-occupations.

Founded at the beginning of this century, the

French Protestant Federation (Fédération Protestante de France—FPF) served originally only as a meeting place for dialogue and common planning among the several denominations of French Protestantism. As part of the general search for unity, the Federation has become since 1960 a more organic agency for common action, although it has no authority to interfere in the internal life of the several member churches. Like all big ecumenical agencies, the FPF assumes a degree of common faith and mutual recognition (for example, all member churches practice intercommunion without reservation) and a common will for external actions (relations with the state, with the Roman Catholic Church, services of general interest). The FPF includes six denominations of French Protestantism (less than two per cent of the total French population of fifty million): three reformed churches—Eglise Réformée de France, Eglise Réformée en Alsace et en Lorraine, Eglises Evangéliques Indépendantes; two Lutheran churches—Eglise Evangélique Luthérienne de France, Eglise de la Confession d'Augsbourg en Alsace et en Lorraine; and the Fédération des Eglises Evangéliques Baptistes.

The two churches of Alsace and Lorraine were separated from French Protestantism by the German occupation of the two eastern provinces between 1871 and 1918; both are state churches, living under the Concordat concluded between Napoleon I and Pope Pius VII in 1804. In addition, the small group of the Eglises Réformées Evangéliques Indépendantes is a union of fundamentalist parishes located mainly in the south of the country. Almost all of the work of French Protestantism—from student movements and theological study to military chaplaincies and television work—is in one way or another organically linked to the FPF, whose decision-making body has been, from the outset, the democratically representative General Assembly of almost two hundred deputies from the member churches.

In 1960, in the midst of the Algerian war, the FPF held its General Assembly in Montbéliard and chose as its theme "The Future Tasks of the Protestant Churches in France." It was decided to have the General Assembly meet every third year to organize and coordinate the different activities, movements and services of French Protestantism. From being merely a meeting place the FPF became increasingly an active, inspiring organism. The influence upon it of the World Council of Churches, already strong, was firmly secured when its president, the great Marc Boegner, served simultaneously as secretary general of the WCC (and subsequently as president). It was therefore natural that the WCC assemblies at Evanston (1954), New Delhi (1961), and Uppsala (1968) had tremendous impact on the life of French Protestant communities; especially important was the Geneva conference in

1966 on the issues of "Church and Society."

From almost exclusive concern with internal problems of French Protestantism, the general assemblies of the FPF began to deal with the tasks of all Christians and churches in today's secularized world: "The Church as Servant to the World" and "Toward a Church for Others" were the themes of the two assemblies following Montbéliard. In Grenoble in the fall of 1969, the FPF assembly had to deal with the most urgent and delicate question: "What development for which man?" The assembly heard from, among others, sociologists, theologians, development specialists, from an engineer working in black Africa, an Italian pastor with the background of his Sicilian commitment, a theologian expelled from Bolivia after working a year among miners and a Cameroon sociologist. Speakers denounced the hypocrisy of so-called "aid for development." The full text of one panel, with the critical reactions of some of the usual assembly leaders, seemed so provocative that some leaders of the FPF were not ready to release it for wider publication. But it had been recorded by participants and was fully published in the first months of 1970 in the review *Christianisme Social*. Some extracts give an impression of the language and spirit of the presentation:

Development and underdevelopment are not determined by fate. They are the products of power structures. On all levels—religious, political, economic and cultural—the world today is ruled by the so-called developed countries, and these have created power structures which, by their own permanently improving dynamics, automatically bring about the underdevelopment of the others. . . . Who is ready to pay the price for the concrete solidarity of all mankind? For instance, would one be ready in Europe (specifically in England and France) to stop selling arms and planes to other countries even if this means unemployment for a certain number of people, a reduction in the benefits of the French commercial balance? . . . Which minister or deputy would dare to propose this in the next electoral campaign? [A Tolen, Cameroon].

Some speak of help to underdeveloped countries. I would like to speak of reparations for the past and of indemnities for the present; we have laid these countries waste and now we are giving help, but within our own structures we continue to lay them waste . . . [T. Vinay, Rieti, Italy].

In Latin America, I never met people who needed help. I always met people who invited me to share their struggle against certain forms of social structure, which is very different. . . . We must try to see what we can do not for the underdeveloped countries but with them. The fighting begins with the transformation of our own society [Y. Aubron, France].

After these exchanges, the assembly unanimously expressed the wish that "the FPF might encourage member churches to examine the effective relationships they maintain with the established economic

and political powers, and to ask themselves how these relations might really correspond to their mission." This is the origin of the document *Eglise et Pouvoirs*.

One of the first acts of the newly elected president of FPF was to designate a commission of six responsible for preparing a text in response to the challenge posed at the assembly. The commission included two laymen, one a director of one of France's largest industrial enterprises, the other a specialist in statistics, political economy and banking; and four clergymen—a pastor of a traditional community, a leader of an industrial mission, an "animator" of a new urban center, and a theology professor. The first sessions of the commission brought to light deep gaps, on both political and theological levels, among its members. Some wanted to resign, but the president persuaded them to continue the work in common, and with remarkable patience he promoted a process of real dialogue. Each expressed his own point of view, which was challenged and amended by the others. At the end of eighteen months and seemingly endless hours of dialogue, the commission produced a first draft. None of the six would have signed alone, but together they were ready to support it.

After further criticism and amendment in discussions with the Council of FPF, the Council decided in October, 1971, to publish the document for distribution to all churches, services and movements of French Protestantism.

The document's eight chapters can be reduced to three main parts. In the first, the authors try to summarize the history of the relations between the church and "principalities and powers." In the second (which is without doubt the central one), they offer an analysis of the development of technological society with, at the end of their mostly negative appraisal, a scheme of two possible ways toward the future, one reformist and the other revolutionary. In the third part they apply their findings to the concrete realm of the church's message, structures and life. Finally, they suggest solutions for a new beginning of the role of the church.

Nowhere do they endorse specific solutions: their choices are working hypotheses to be considered, tried, even risked; they do not intend to lay down patterns but to challenge, question and provoke responses of all kinds, which will, they hope, be more concrete in their expression than the text of the document and even go beyond it. To judge by the reaction so far, such response will be forthcoming.

In the historical section, the document notes that the Constantinian concept of Church-State relations led the churches to a one-sided understanding of the biblical witness concerning their relation to society. In recognizing the legitimacy of the State and its order, the churches have concerned themselves with their own existence and with the positive oppor-

tunities permitted for evangelization. In a simplistic way they saw the task of the State as constituting a neutral framework which they would have to fill with a spiritual content. As a result, they have often ignored the structural violence in State power and even entered into complicity with its manifestations both by granting their approval to the established order and evidencing psychotic fear of political or social disorder on any level, especially when actually or potentially revolutionary.

Of course, in contrast to this Constantinian concept, with its extreme form of the "clerical pact" and of the classic Lutheran "doctrine of the two kingdoms" (e.g., the two realms of political and ecclesiastical competence), there is the "apocalyptic" concept of the church's role (the distinction derives from Friedrich Engels's analyses) which leads the church to a more ready challenge of State power. But this apocalyptic concept was represented mainly by heretics who, like the Anabaptists, were regularly defeated.

Calvinism's special contribution was to underline the positive role of the State as defender of justice, to open the door to creative reflection on the dialectical relation between law and justification, between the predication of the Gospel and the defense of a human social order. Here are the roots—although, to be sure, in a Constantinian context—of the political theology of Anglo-Saxon communities, of the Social Gospel movement and, in recent years, of the two great European evangelical theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Barth and Josef Lukl Ilromadka.

The churches have been equally handicapped in the economic sphere. Concerned mainly with the problems of individual ethics, the churches, according to Max Weber (and especially those in the Calvinist tradition), have been responsible for the development of capitalism; their ignorance of social reality made them incapable of extending needed criticism. This is not a reproach on the past attitude of churches, since they shared in the general lack of how to understand and change economic structures.

The situation changed with the appearance of liberal democracy, the organization of economic powers, the growing importance of trade unions and, of course, the crises of the State in the forms of socialist authoritarianism, fascism and national socialism. These developments challenged Christian conscience with the unavoidable necessity of responsible commitment in economic and political realities. Many expressions of "political theology" have emerged since the beginning of the twentieth century and have shaped a new Christian conscience regarding the social order. A new sense for justice and peace has also been carefully nurtured under the influence of the great ecumenical assemblies.

It is impossible to ignore the general process of globalization in the history of mankind: human exis-

tence is first of all social existence. At the same time, the growing unity is defied by glaring injustices between minority rich and majority poor; the gap between rich and poor is the greatest single threat of our common future. A new discovery of global (e.g., historical and eternal) liberation as the main thrust of the Gospel leads to critical encounter with the powers of the existing society. The difficult question of violence and/or nonviolent resistance receives increasing attention in churches around the world.

Today's society is characterized by an explosive dynamic and, especially in the French free enterprise system, by an extraordinary capacity for organization and renewal. Competition is constantly intensified with the aim of reaching the maximum possible profit. The capacities of an efficiently dominating technology *could*, it is true, improve the existential level and quality of life for the majority of the population, but, in fact, they serve only the increasing benefits of the owners of economic and, indirectly, political power.

We recognize the growing instability of employment in relation to the permanent renewal of the conditions of work. The majority of workers live in a constant state of insecurity, involving periods of unemployment, and face continually the difficulty of adapting to new forms of labor. Meanwhile, decision-making is concentrated more and more in the hands of a very few leaders. The result is that understanding and direction become the privilege of the very few, who would become the true masters of socio-political evolution. The less informed, those less educated to change, those less involved in the central mechanisms of evolution, the workers—especially the foreigners among them—run the risk of becoming mere tools in the general strategy of the masters of technology.

These are the hard features of the "new society" in which we are already living and which must be considered radically different from the imperatives of the Gospel. The authors of *Eglise et Pouvoirs* have no utopia in mind which could be in perfect accord with the Gospel. Seeing the growing inhumanity of the capitalistic-technological system, they exclude both *conservatism*, which only increases social violence and injustice, and *anarchism*, which, rejecting technological and industrial development, leads only to resignation and collective suicide. In their search for alternatives, the commissioners came down to the options of reform and revolution.

Reformism is a bet on the positive possibilities in the actual situation and on the potency of protest. Social reformers are optimistic about the dynamic of technology, which has to be dominated, reoriented, but surely not destroyed. Its negative trends can be mastered; adult human beings never accept rule by the fates.

No society can survive without responsible participation by the majority of its members. Therefore reformism looks to the strong intervention of public opinion; its hope is to bring into concert State power, free enterprise and the influence of well-informed and educated citizens. This concert can defend individual liberties and reduce the antagonisms between industrial-commercial competition and the concrete existence of the workers. The greatest hope is to recapture the virtues of liberal democracy, and through the regaining of lost values to move toward the "responsible society." If information and education increase, mainly on the economic level, this can become a decisive factor for the renewal and reshaping of Western society in its French form.

As for the revolutionary option, the document avoids falling into a new mythology: It does not speak of *the* revolution, as if revolution were a unique event and process; it does not specify the features of a new society, because *revolutions* are always unexpected and original, *when* they happen. The fundamental consideration, therefore, is a doubt about the possibilities of braking and breaking the ruling powers of existing society by the mere influence of public opinion within the present system. The document recognizes the need for radical transformation by changing the structures and relations of production through dispossession and socialization of the means of production. The revolutionary view questions the ability of any real society to humanize itself, to open new perspectives of hope. The class struggle cannot be settled, it must come to its normal end—that is, the victory of the oppressed against the system of economic and political powers.

In this view, State leadership is not neutral but objectively ruled by the representatives of the great capitalistic interests, by the owners and defenders of the existing means and organization of production. This implies the need for a worldwide turnover, since neo-capitalism is a worldwide system of planetary exploitation. No "concert" of positive forces can change its true nature; it must be destroyed. Each country has the task of achieving this with and for other nations, especially in the interests of the Third World.

The difficulties in realizing this revolutionary option are enormous. How, for example, is a society to be radically turned around without, at the same time, destroying the entire productive and technological system which makes the society viable? To take not the least important facet of this question, How is revolution achieved without throwing millions of people into deepest economic crisis? Once again the document *Eglise et Pouvoirs* offers no specific plans for revolution. It suggests that a succession of social reforms, legal elections and possibly violent and subversive action may be ways of de-

cisively changing a specific situation. It cautions that violence should not be discussed in a lightly theoretical way. Violence as *ultima ratio*, that is, revolutionary violence, may, in a specific situation, become the only possible response to the terribly destructive violence of the established order.

After this long march through historical and sociopolitical analyses, the authors finally come to the specific question which mandated the study. The mandate was for the churches to assess candidly the features of the actual society and its consequences for the majority of people. In addition, the churches were to take a painfully lucid look at their own role in the established order (or "disorder," as Emmanuel Mounier called it). When the document says that French society is "indefensible," it fully recognizes that the churches, Protestant and Catholic alike, are deeply implicated. The truth is that we see in the churches a certain pattern of pietistic "marginalization." Rarely do the churches actively oppose the powers, for they themselves are part of the Establishment, enjoying a guaranteed prestige and role. Even if they do not live under concordats as in the past, the churches still more or less accept the system devised by "clerical pacts." The French State approves of the churches so long as they, at least by their silence, do not criticize the State.

Within the churches themselves, leaders are vigorously criticized by some parts of their memberships when they express concern over facets of present French society. Even small tensions between the churches and the regime are deplored by many people who, in fact, love order and social integration more than the service of justice. The church cannot live outside the society; the question is whether its presence within society is a *significant* presence. A church's service of justice, necessarily sometimes abrasive to the authorities, must be sustained even in the "post-revolutionary" situation. The mission is equally urgent whether in a capitalist or a so-called socialist society!

The document concludes with a call for a prophetic and confessing church, which, being freed from the idols of richness and power, would live in joyful solidarity with the poor, being poor itself and therefore open to the possibilities of a truly human society, looking without anxiety toward the future achievement of history.

Such a church would be permanently engaged in analyzing the realities of any present moment, always open to better information and to "counter-information"; it would reject any kind of separation between the spiritual and temporal realms of existence and would embrace an understanding of Christian communities as "critical groups"; always it would strive to clarify the political implications of the Gospel, focusing especially on the call to individual and social conversion; it would proclaim a theology of hope closely related to the laws and received values

of society; it would be attentive to every "marginal" movement within society, especially those aimed toward creating utopias and experimenting with new styles of life in powerlessness and joy; such a church knows that it does not exist for itself but for the gathering of mankind around the unity given by the cosmic action of Christ. The life of such a church is always and emphatically a dialogical one.

Now I can again be a Christian!" wrote one friend in response to the document. "It has nothing to do with the authority of God but is clearly inspired by the ideology of Marxism," wrote the director of a Christian weekly. The generally balanced editor of *Vie Protestante*, published in Geneva, reacted with an editorial ("the gentlemen sociologists have fired the first shot") in which he accuses the authors of robbing the Gospel of its salt and leading French Protestantism into a leftist conformity to the present world. The venerable New Testament scholar F. J. Leenhardt responded to this editorial: "I don't agree with you when you reproach the document of the FPF for not being what it never intended to be. It does exactly fulfill its task, which is not to add anything to the abundance of theological considerations which are so easy to formulate, but to go to the next stage, of analyzing the concrete situations in which Christians and churches must demonstrate the ethical *consequences* of the great theological assertions. We are always more clever in theological preludes than in confronting situations. . . . Christian liberation of course does go beyond social and political aims—but it passes through them."

The authors of *Eglise et Pouvoirs* proceeded in a deliberately inductive way. We might have begun deductively, offering a variety of theological statements and then applying them to the particularities of our historical situation. In that case, the beginning might have been firm, but the consequences extremely timid and relative. We started, however, with a firm analysis and, although the theological positions do not emerge as such from the analysis, they are formulated in relation to it. That is, we accepted the hermeneutical option of reading Scripture *in and for* a particular historical situation. As the French Protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur has written: The decisive element for a theology of today is the "total reciprocity between biblical understanding and the understanding of our time."

Because we did not begin from theory but from concrete experience, the document's assertion that we find French society "unacceptable" is not an ideological statement but a reflection of experienced misery, exploitation, oppression and dehumanization. In short, the authors are not spectators. However else they may differ, they have in common a determined refusal of everything which inherently prevents people from becoming themselves. The doc-

ument challenges every Christian to refuse radically the unbearable and to participate actively in efforts to overcome it.

The authors make no apology for utilizing aspects of the Marxist analysis of reality. This is not because we are Marxists but because some categories, such as alienation, exploitation and imperialism, belong now to our common cultural heritage and, indeed, correspond exactly to much of our experience of actual society. Together with some experts on Marxism, such as Gollwitzer and Garaudy, the authors carefully distinguish between Marxist method and ideology, on the one hand, and Marxist atheism, on the other. This conviction of the authors is clear: No one can be a responsible member of society today unless he is permanently involved in a process of analysis that emerges from action (*praxis*) and leads to better action. One suspects that some critics of the document have never read the generally available statistics on the relationships between rich and poor nations in today's world!

The document does have a definite theological stance. It separates itself from clericalism and pietism on its right, and from a complete rejection of theology (replaced by mere ideology) on its left. The theological thrust is toward the dynamics of *incarnation* (the givenness of life, active solidarity with the struggle for liberation, a sacrifice of self for community . . .), which means a commitment in history. We refuse to separate the sphere of the absolute from the sphere of the relative; we reject above all every manifestation of the ambition to power. The premise is that authentic Christian existence means always bearing the Cross with and for others. Every contrary approach to life is challenged and overcome by encounter with "the man for the others" (Bonhoeffer).

The horizon and goal of the class struggle is the utopia of a fraternal and classless society in which all people, including the former oppressors, live together in new relations of freedom. A Christian name for this utopia is *hope*; its eschatological achievement can in no way be separated from the concrete destiny of all the victims of the actual powers in the present world. Evangelical hope is neither an ideology nor an idealistic statement, for it is related directly to the historical and living person, Jesus of Nazareth; evangelical hope is the prospective dimension of faith, namely, that *He* has already overcome all powers of oppression and has reversed the history of the world by breaking down the negative determinisms of every social order. The Christian commitment is therefore a creative questioning of every establishment, a firm refusal of every status quo.

In this light, the authors conclude that French society is neither neutral nor innocent. They are forced to ask whether it is possible to be a Christian and at the same time support the structures and values of

capitalistic society. The "revolutionaries" among the authors are not captives of any illusions about the actual situation in today's "socialist" societies. But the more they are disappointed by present realities, the more they are convinced that socialist hopes and claims must be sustained at their highest level.

Central to all this is the evangelical concept of conversion. The idea must be extended worldwide, for it means the penetration of a human being by the dynamics of the Resurrection ("of the flesh," according to the creed of the early Church). Conversion is a transformation of total reality, an encounter of the visible-material world by those who would not only see, know and explain it but would also *change* it. Converted Christians are *reborn* and enabled to participate in the process of society's new birth. Nobody and nothing can deliver the converted Christian from this vocation until world history has been achieved.

And, of course, the institutional churches must also be reshaped; poverty, service, unselfishness, solidarity, sharing in the historical struggle of the poor—these must be the signs of a new church. The church as eschatological-prophetic community interprets the present time in the light of its incarnated hope and signals a coming of the world initiated by the victory of a crucified servant. (Protestant critics of the document would be surprised that some of the sharpest Roman Catholic theologians have found that, precisely in its theological line of incarnation-hope-conversion, the document is characteristically and emphatically Protestant!)

Among the critics of the document one can clearly recognize the dynamics of a common class reflex. Indeed, the class reality transcends all theological and denominational lines, as the frontiers of the class struggle also fall across all Christian communities. The class struggle is the new organizing reality of Christian ecumenism. Wrong forms of unity are already exploding, and new regroupings are underway. We may well see a coming together, from both existing Protestant and Roman Catholic communities, a new servant church, manifest—at least at first—in small groups and informal cells which are clearly committed to the socio-political struggle.

The issuing of the document *Eglise et Pouvoirs* may in itself seem a small thing. Yet the questions it poses and the controversy surrounding them touch upon the credibility of the Christian community in our time. What is at stake is nothing less than the authentic "re-presentation" of the Gospel in history, nothing less than the "future of Christ" in the world. It is normal, therefore, that the document has become both a sign of contradiction and a new source of hope for many people. Its message reverberates far beyond the boundaries of Protestantism and of France.