

A KINGDOM OF EARTH AND HEAVEN

By JAMES WALSH¹

*Socialization, as it is called, is not without its dangers, but it brings with it many advantages for the strengthening and betterment of human qualities and for the protection of human rights.*²

*Whoever says that religion is not political speaks as erringly, and . . . offends with his tongue as certainly as if, in St Paul's time, a man had said it mattered not whether he was christian or heathen.*³

THE AVERAGE Catholic churchman, though he might be able to trace the source of the slightly cautious utterance of this first quotation, would be hard put to it to identify the second. The context in which the saintly and learned Cardinal was speaking is far removed from that of our own day and the conflicts and varying ideologies which made Puebla such a difficult task for the new Pope, John Paul II, in the opening months of this year, and aroused such great interest across the world, thanks to the glare of mass-media spotlights. To complicate matters still further, an anglican clergyman, who is also a Cambridge Don and a social historian of some repute,⁴ had, in his own scholarly language, roundly attacked liberation theology, and had labelled the social christian movements of Latin-America and elsewhere as 'the imperialism of political religion', claiming that 'Church leadership . . . in the 1960s reflected the radical critique of capitalist society then common within the western intelligentsia; in the 1970s

¹ I am most grateful to Fr Michael Campbell-Johnston S.J. for providing much material and basic ideas for the writing of this article. Its structure, development, and particularly its defects, are wholly mine. (Fr Campbell-Johnston was for eight years director of the Guyana Institute for Social Research and Action [GISRA]. He is now in charge of the Jesuit Socio-Economic Development Secretariat in Rome).

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 25.

³ John Henry Cardinal Newman.

⁴ Dr Norman is Dean of Peterhouse and Lecturer in History at Cambridge University.

they have moved on to identify Christianity with the ideology of human rights'.⁵

It is, of course, true that the Catholic Church, largely through the utterances of its Popes, has considerably changed its views towards the two incompatible political ideologies — at least in their more extreme forms — which dominate our world today: capitalism and socialism. In the sense that the motive force of the capitalist machine is man's basic selfishness towards his fellow men, with personal enrichment as the primary goal of his activity, then, as Archbishop Helder Cam ra of Recife has said, 'capitalism is bad in its essence'.

However, when Pius IX condemned socialism in the form of the communism of the mid-nineteenth century, as 'this execrable doctrine which destroys natural law itself', the papacy had recently suffered the loss of practically all its temporal power and property; and the socialist movements of the time were united in their common and violent hostility to religion. When Mrs Margaret Thatcher, interviewed recently on television for a few brief moments as she made her way to Downing Street to make her Cabinet appointments as Britain's first woman Prime Minister, she quoted the well-known prayer of St Francis of Assisi ('Lord, make me an instrument of your peace') — one accepted by all as a symbol of the universal brotherhood of man — as a kind of summary of her Government's aspirations. Many felt that this was a typical piece of political opportunism: 'the devil himself can quote scripture'. At the same time, she is the leader of the British Conservative Party, which represents for many the basic evils of the capitalism to which Dom Helder Cam ra referred.

Much of what John XXIII and Paul VI wrote in their respective 'social' encyclicals, *Pacem in Terris* and *Populorum progressio*, would have been scarcely credible as papal utterances on socialization at the time of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, which became known as the 'Workers' Charter'. In that encyclical of 1891, socialism was still condemned, in that its current manifestations advocated the suppression of the right to private property, and held that class warfare was natural and inevitable. However, in Paul VI's clearest and most crucial statement, his Apostolic Letter to Cardinal Roy, President of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, the point is made that labels such as socialism and capitalism are

⁵ In the BBC Reith Lectures, 1978, published as *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford, 1979), p 44.

extremely equivocal. The word socialism, for example, is used of totalitarian marxism and of socialist régimes which are thoroughly Christian, at least in theory. He writes:

Some Christians are today attracted by socialist currents and their various developments. They try to recognize in them certain aspirations which they themselves feel to be a result of their faith. They believe that they belong to that historical current, and wish to have a part in it. But this historical evolution, whilst using the same name, takes on different forms according to different continents and cultures, even though it once drew its inspiration, and in many cases still does, from ideologies incompatible with the faith. Careful discernment is most necessary. It is too often the case that Christians, attracted by socialism, tend to idealize it in very general terms: a desire for justice, human solidarity, and equality. They refuse to recognize the limitations of the historical socialist movements which remain conditioned by the ideologies which gave them birth.⁶

Allowing for the *stylus curiae*, it is not difficult to understand the message. When socialism means those basic human aspirations for a more just and equal society, it can indeed be truly Christian (and, in fact, the whole of western 'capitalist' society would agree with it, though its motivation may differ). But when socialism means an ideology which claims to give a self-sufficient picture of man, such as marxism does, it is entirely unacceptable to the Christian.

He cannot adhere to the marxist ideology, to its atheistic materialism, to its dialectic of violence and to its absorption of individual freedom in its doctrine of collectivity, least of all to its denial of all human transcendence in man's personal and collective history.⁷

If socialism is to be linked with Christianity, this can only be in so far as it safeguards the values of liberty and responsibility and inculcates a true respect for man's spiritual nature. Only thus can his integral development be guaranteed. Within these provisos, we can find the same Pope setting out the goal of what some would call a truly socialist society:

A world in which every human being, irrespective of race, religion and nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from all enslavement

⁶ Letter to Maurice Cardinal Roy, 15 May 1971.

⁷ *Ibid.*

imposed on him by other men, or by natural forces over which he lacks sufficient control: a world in which freedom is not an empty word, and where Lazarus, the poor man, can sit at the same table as the rich man.⁸

One might go further and say that the Church, finding herself in a world increasingly dominated by technology, and with ever more efficient means at its disposal for extracting the hitherto hidden wealth which the earth contains, tends to favour socialization of society as the better way of organizing the political community, based on ideals which Church and State can share — the essential dignity and the universal brotherhood of man. In fact, the present Pope has stated quite firmly that the essence of the State consists in the fact that society and the people which compose it are master and sovereign of their own destiny; although, and this is normal in universal pronouncements, there must be qualifications to suit different cultures, circumstances and degrees of political maturity:

This is a necessity in our present era, with its immense increase in the social awareness of peoples, and the accompanying need for citizens to have a rightful share in the political life of the community; though one must take account of the actual conditions of each people and the decisiveness required of public authority.⁹

In fact, it would seem possible to deduce from the documents of the Council, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae*, and subsequent papal pronouncements, a number of social, economic and political objectives which have been listed by a Catholic expert in this field as the objectives of a true socialist society, in one particular country in South America.¹⁰ He enumerates them as follows: universal brotherhood, equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, social ownership of the means of production, popular participation in decision-making, freedom from all forms of oppression, and a high standard of moral values and behaviour. He would be a plain-speaking politician indeed, in front of or behind any curtain one would care to name, who would not pay lip-service to all seven propositions, except, in western capitalist society,

⁸ The Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*.

⁹ John Paul II's Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (english version, pp 62-63); cf also *Gaudium et Spes*, 31.

¹⁰ Cf M. Campbell-Johnston, 'A Socialism for Guyana', in *Gisra*, vol 6, no 2/3 (June/September 1975), pp 26ff.

social ownership of *all* the means of production; whilst there would be endless discussion on what precisely is meant by 'equitable' distribution of wealth. However, let us consider first the proposition 'the social ownership of the means of production'. And here I will let Fr Campell-Johnston speak for himself:

On such a controversial topic, my own opinion is that, apart from certain basic utilities which, because of their size or importance need to be controlled at a national level, social ownership and means of production is not and should not be equiparated with state control or nationalization. I believe the role of the state to be a subsidiary one: that is, its task is to support, encourage and foster intermediary groups and organizations, whether communes, co-operatives, rural or industrial communities, to undertake themselves economic and social functions wherever possible, and thus assume responsibility for their own future and development. Where this is not possible, the state has the duty to undertake these functions directly.¹¹

This principle, thus formulated, along with the rest, is clear; it is also acceptable, one would have thought, to every society that calls itself christian, or at least humanist in the best sense. But Latin-America, a continent entirely christian and almost entirely catholic christian at that, at least in name, is a continent in which these principles are consistently violated. They are all bedevilled, and have been for decades, by a high level of unemployment; a very unequal distribution of income and wealth; a high rate of illiteracy; and the dominance of the economy by foreign multi-national corporations.¹² The action and reaction to this state of affairs seems always to have led to violence, in many cases institutionalized by military dictatorships. One of the most moving documents emerging from Puebla was the letter sent by the vast majority of episcopal participants to Mgr Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador.¹³ They spoke of a 'state of actual persecution against the Church there, because of its work for christian liberation on behalf of the oppressed and poverty-stricken against a powerful and rich minority'. They spoke of the murder and expulsion of priests, of lay-catechists and ministers of the word: which they called the Archbishop's 'permanent cross'.¹⁴

It is not difficult to understand, in actual situations such as these, that the service of the faith in all its eschatological dimensions, and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 27. This is a very neat application of the principle of subsidiarity, as enunciated by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*. Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 86(c). ¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Letter from Puebla, 10 February 1979.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the promotion of a justice which belongs very much to the here and now, can give rise to intolerable frustration, to anger, and to perplexity at the 'conservative' attitudes of those who come from other parts of the Church and world: particularly ecclesiastics from, say, the Vatican Curia, for whom diplomatic language and gestures are second nature. It is also easier to see why, for some, certain marxist concepts are seen to harmonize with the aspirations of an oppressed and impoverished people; whilst others, who have suffered neither poverty nor persecution on this scale, will speak of certain theological and social movements as 'the wooden horse of marxism in the Church'.

Without making any pretensions to have studied at depth or in extent the voluminous literature (almost entirely journalistic) which has already appeared within the last few months since the conclusion of the Conference at Puebla, one has the impression that the more balanced commentators, including many of the liberation theologians themselves, are moderately satisfied with its final documents. Others, less patient or less moderate, have preferred to dwell upon its shortcomings. One spanish theologian has already written at length of the 'manipulation' of the Pope on the occasion of his visit to Mexico.¹⁵ And many journalists have drawn emphatic attention to the extraordinary 'in-fighting' before and at the beginning of the Conference.¹⁶ We are also told how easy and erroneous it is for Europeans — not excluding the Pope himself — to judge the third conference of Celam on an East-West basis, rather than a North-South.¹⁷ If this is universally true, then all Europeans would be better off saying nothing. In this context, it is worth noticing that there seem to be huge political differences on the South American continent itself. Peru's *Plan Inca* or 'Revolutionary Humanism' according to its government, is drawn 'from the *universal historical tradition* to which Peru belongs'.¹⁸ Part of it reads:

Revolutionary humanism is inspired in *christian* thought by: maintaining the basic equality of all men, founded on human brotherhood and consequently rejecting every kind of economic and social injustice;

¹⁵ Cf 'La America-Latina que esperaba al Celam', in *Sal Terrae* 3 (March 1979), pp 167ff. The periodical is edited from Santander in Spain.

¹⁶ Cf e.g. *Après Puebla: satisfaction modérée*, in *Études* (April 1979), p 550.

¹⁷ *Sal Terrae*, *ibid.*, p 163.

¹⁸ *Italics mine*. The fact that the plan seems to have made no headway does not detract from the quality of its ideals.

heightening of the value of solidarity and proposing the elimination of the causes that historically have created inequality, hatred and conflict among Peruvians;
 affirming that only by the construction of a just society can a people have true freedom and fully develop their personality in all its dimensions;
 aspiring to the construction of an authentic co-existence in order to achieve a society without exploiters or exploited . . . ;
 recognizing that the family is the fundamental unit of society and a school of the truest humanism.¹⁹

It may even be necessary, now that some of the dust of Puebla has settled, to recall that the Holy Father went to Mexico precisely as Pastor of the Universal Church; and further, that what he has to say in *Redemptor Hominis*, particularly in the section entitled 'Redeemed man and his situation in the modern world',²⁰ deals with man's inhumanity to man in north, south, east and west. The Pope speaks, for instance, of the eschatological scene of the Last Judgment in the Gospel²¹ as always applying to man's history: as the measure of human acts in each one's examination of conscience.²² He also adds:

The Church has always taught the duty to act for the common good, and has put this into practice by educating good citizens . . . she has also taught that the fundamental duty of power is solicitude for the common good of society . . . the rights of power can be understood only in the context of respect for the objective and inviolable rights of man. Authority in the State serves the common good in full measure only when all the citizens are sure of their rights. Without this assurance, society tends to disintegrate, and we are led into a situation of opposition by citizens to authority, of oppression, intimidation, violence and terrorism. . . . Thus the principle of human rights is of the profoundest concern in the area of social justice, and it is the measure by which it can be tested in the life of political bodies.²³

New earth, new heaven

Thus far, we have been considering the development of the socio-economic teaching of the Church in the context of *Celam III* at Puebla; and in particular, the present Pope's self-awareness of his presence, precisely as Vicar of Christ, at this critical moment

¹⁹ Cited in *Gisra*, ed. cit., p 29.

²⁰ English version, pp 39ff.

²¹ Cf Mt 25, 31-46.

²² English version, p 57.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp 63-64.

on the latin-american scene. This has inevitably led us into some rather superficial side-glances at liberation theology. The average latin-american theologian would, I think, find fault with *Gaudium et Spes* in that it strives to find an eirenic approach, even when it accepts that the Church's task is one of liberation, on the ground that conflict is at the heart of all liberation; just as Gutierrez has indicated that the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World is equally eirenic in its criticism of the staggering imbalance across the the world (first as well as third) with regard to wealth and opportunity. Allowing for the fact that such criticisms may be over-personal — what sounds aggressive to one man, appears simply as frank and objective criticism to another — it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that if it is a question of elaborating a theology from 'where one is', within a particular cultural stance and milieu, one is ultimately committed to moving backwards, consciously or unconsciously, through the Church's spiritual and theological as well as social history: and because of the magnitude of such a task, becoming selective in one's research, and inevitably seeking for events and utterances which support one's thesis. Thus theology becomes an episodic history of doctrine, or of various theologies which contribute to 'the Church's body of teaching' from a particular point of view and with the purpose of establishing a specific thesis. In fact, one of the most elusive and ambiguous words now firmly embedded in liberation theology is 'history'.

Gaudium et Spes heads the final paragraphs of its third chapter, 'Man's activity throughout the world',²⁴ with the sub-title 'A new earth and a new heaven', the conclusion of life's journey — the whole sweep of human history. There 'we are warned that if it profits a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose himself, the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one'. Yet another antinomy follows: 'Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's Kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God'.²⁵ Indeed, the fruits of our nature and our enterprise need to be cleansed of sin, illuminated and transfigured and spread abroad on earth before 'Christ presents

²⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 33-39.

²⁵ *Lumen Gentium* concludes its chapter (v) 'On the universal call to holiness in the Church' in rather more austere terms, citing St Paul: 'Let those who are at home in this world, not get too fixed in it, for its present form is passing' (1 Cor 7, 31).

to his Father the eternal and universal Kingdom: a Kingdom of truth and of life, a Kingdom of holiness and grace, a Kingdom of justice, love and peace; so that, though the Kingdom is now mysteriously present on earth, it will not enter into its perfection until the Lord comes'.²⁶

It has been noticed that the early 'seventies produced from several well-known european theologians extended works on Christology.²⁷ One liberation theologian of repute has now followed suit, with 'a latin-american approach' to Christology.²⁸ The author declares:

I am not ruling out ecclesial Christology in a second sense, i.e. Christology based on the conciliar and papal magisterium of the Church. . . . However, I do view this as a second stage in the ecclesial nature of Christology. To me the first stage in the hermeneutic circle seems more important. We must first reconsider the relationship between our conception of Christology and christian ecclesial praxis at a given concrete moment in history.²⁹

Such statements seem to stand the principle of *Gaudium et Spes* on its head.

Rather more serious, it seems to me, is Sobrino's univocal use of the words 'history' and 'historical'. He begins by speaking of 'the historical Jesus' as the starting point for theology (p 1); another chapter is headed 'The death of Jesus and liberation in history' (p 179); 'The cross is the outcome of Jesus's historical path' (p 215); 'in the history of the Church and of Theology we find a similar tendency to by-pass the scandal of the Cross' (p 190) — incidentally, an assertion which any patristic or medieval historian of spirituality or even iconography would find outrageous. Ultimately, he grasps the nettle of his lack of definition when he speaks of 'history in terms of promise and mission', and goes on to 'elaborate a concept of history that would satisfactorily allow us to understand the resurrection as a historical event: basing his meaning of the word 'promise' on a description of Moltmann's, and concluding that 'laying hold of history as a promise ultimately comes down to taking cognizance

²⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 39.

²⁷ Cf Gerald O'Collins S.J., 'Theological Trends — Jesus in current theology I', in *The Way*, vol XVI (October 1976), p 291.

²⁸ Cf Jon Sobrino S.J., *Christology at the Crossroads*, eng. trans. J. Drury (London, 1978), pp 201 ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp XX-XXI.

of a mission' (pp 251-53). These are fascinating, and to me at least, very helpful ideas spiritually, but they play fast and loose with any recognized meaning of the word 'history'. The reason is not far to seek:

First of all, the hermeneutics designed to comprehend the resurrection must be *political*. This means that it is possible to verify the truth of what happened in the resurrection only through a transforming praxis based on the ideals of the resurrection . . . *the resurrection can be understood only through a praxis that seeks to transform the world.*³⁰

Whether or no the exegetes and western theologians who have recently been turning their attention to the Resurrection of Jesus would throw up their hands in horror at such 'hermeneutics', the historical point (and I use the word of set purpose, to mean the words and events recorded — as those are now available to us in authentic documents — during the centuries of the Church's existence) is simple in its implications. There are two antinomical tendencies which occur in practically every period of the Church's life — the call to flee the world, and the call to transform it: that is, to avoid its sinfulness lest one be contaminated, or to take the risk on the apostolic understanding that 'I am with you always, even to the end of time'. Ultimately, liberation christology, at least according to Sobrino, involves taking the risk and paying the cost of discipleship. It is not without significance that he devotes the last pages of his book to a brief consideration of 'The Christ of the Ignatian Exercises', and offers it as his view that:

The Christology of the Exercises is a Christology of the historical Jesus that triggers a concrete form of discipleship structured after the activity of Jesus himself . . . Loyola's aim is to point out the one and only locale where room is left for contemplation in action. It is to be found nowhere else except in the following of Jesus.³¹

There is a plus and a minus here for the spiritual theologian. The positive aspect is handily expressed in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the conciliar decree on the renewal of religious life, where it is said that the *sequela Christi*, the following of Christ as enunciated in the gospels, is the supreme rule of every type of religious life: that is of the life

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 255. Italics mine.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 423-24.

consecrated according to the profession of the evangelical counsels.³² Further, it is a principle which the present Pope, in line with *Lumen Gentium*,³³ extends to the whole Church as the People of God, corporately and individually.³⁴ At the same time, one is forced to ask the question whether or not one of the more serious 'defects' in liberation theology is that, in its obsessive emphasis upon praxis, it rules out the value for the Church of the *ex professo* contemplative life. It would be a travesty of the truth to imply that the liberation movement, with, in many cases, its truly fervent *Communitades de Base*, were 'horizontal', and had no time for the 'vertical' in their spirituality. But there is a certain sense — and Sobrino's deep concern with the theology of the cross underlines it³⁵ — in which the immense stress on building the new earth here and now, diminishes the value of what many of the saints had to say on spiritual joy, which no christian spirituality, not even in the Latin-America of today, can afford to do without. There is a long medieval tradition, beginning, as western spiritual tradition so often does, with Augustine, based on texts like 'we shall see him as he is', and 'this little momentary affliction is preparing us for a weight of glory beyond all comparison',³⁶ which cannot simply be dismissed as part and parcel of the game which Marx invited us to play when he denounced religion as 'the opium of the people'. St Bernard sums it up for us when he says, commenting on the pauline 'The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking',³⁷

There is a joy which belongs to the Kingdom of God . . . where, in the meantime (*interim*) does this joy come from except from justice and peace? There will be a time when there will be spiritual joy in its fulness. . . . This joy in the meanwhile (*interim*) we possess in the Holy Spirit, and it is twofold: the contemplation of future happiness, and forbearance (*tolerantia*) in the face of present evils.³⁸

³² *Perfectae Caritatis* 2(a). For an extended biblical hermeneutic of this passage, cf David Stanley, 'The Supreme Rule', in *Supplement to the Way*, 36 (Summer 1979), pp 18ff.

³³ Cf ch V, 'On the universal call to holiness'.

³⁴ Cf *Redemptor Hominis* 21 (english version, pp 88ff).

³⁵ Cf *Christology at the Crossroads*, pp 201ff.

³⁶ 1 Jn 3, 2 and 2 Cor 4, 17.

³⁷ Rom 14, 17.

³⁸ *De diversis*, Sermo 18; cited by François Chatillon, 'Hic, ibi, interim', in *Révue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, 25 (1949), p 197.