

Fidel y la Religión: **Preaching before Princes**

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'...It is absolutely right and just to state that the revolutionary movement must have a correct attitude towards the (religious) question, and avoid, at all costs, a doctrinal rhetoric which offends the religious sentiments of the people, including that of workers, peasants and the middle layers, and which would only serve to help the system of exploitation.' Thus Fidel Castro, having offered an explanation as to why religion had been seen as the simple ideological ally of the forces of exploitation, answers Frei Betto's suggestion that 'one of the gravest errors of the Left in Latin America was to preach atheism in their work with the masses'.

This is just one of many points covered in a book which is the result of twenty-three hours of interview between the Commander-in-Chief of the Cuban Revolution and a Brazilian Dominican friar known already to readers of *New Blackfriars**.

Even had the contents been much less interesting than they are, their publication would already have been an historical occasion. Published in Havana in December 1985, the book sold 1,000,000 copies within four months (in an island of ten million people); it has been on the bestseller list in Brazil for a similar length of time, has gone through several editions in Mexico and other Latin American countries. It has been published in Spain, Italy and Poland. But for a few headlines such as 'Convert Castro woos Church' earlier this year, it has received scant attention in the British media. At the time of writing this—July—the only English-language edition is available in Australia and Oceania, but not in the U.S. or Great Britain.

Such lack of publicity is remarkable, for here we have a communist head of state discussing in a lively and readable way his own childhood, the diffuse religiosity of the Cuban people, his education at the hands of the De la Salle Brothers and the Jesuits, the international debt crisis, Church/State relations in Cuba, the radicalization of Christians in Latin America, and the person of Jesus Christ. The book has already had a liberating effect in Cuba, where many Cuban Christians, both Evangelicals and Catholics, have found the era in which they were thought not to be good patriots because of their beliefs drawing to a close; many Cubans did not know much of the autobiographical material about their Head of State's childhood, the religiosity of his mother, and

his respect for the Jesuits who taught him. That, too, has made religious people more at home.

However, the importance of the book is much wider than this: it has resonance from Chile to Moscow, wherever Christians and socialists engage in ecumenism on both practical and theoretical levels.

Fidel y la Religión is divided into two parts: in the Introduction Frei Betto tells how the idea for the book arose from a meeting he and other religious had with Castro in Managua in 1980. The first part—'Chronicle of a visit'—tells of Betto's visit to Cuba in May 1985 in the company of his mother and father and the distinguished Brazilian economist Joelmir Beting. After Betto's mother and Castro have swapped recipes (Castro's love for cooking is a recurrent theme), Castro discusses with Beting and Betto in their first interview the Cuban and Brazilian economies and the rôle of the dollar in the debt crisis.

Owing to Castro's timetable it is not easy to predict when he will be free for interview with Betto, so Betto has time on his hands to give talks in the Dominican Priory in Havana, 'La espiritualidad de Jesús' and 'El proyecto de la Vida en Jesús (both of which are printed in full). Betto notices that his audience are not accustomed to talks in this style—they are slightly perplexed by the novelty of a theological discourse which has hardly penetrated Cuba from the rest of Latin America.

The time comes for a preliminary interview: Castro wants more time to prepare for the interview. He has got hold of, but not yet read, books by Boff and Gutiérrez, Vatican II documents, the Medellín documents and the Papal speeches from the Latin American tour of February 1985; he wants to know what Betto's questions will be so that he has time to think before answering. When he realises that far from a shower of theological questions, the first questions at least are about his early life and Christian formation, he makes it clear that he will go ahead and he and Betto agree to make time for the interview.

The second part of the book consists of the twenty-three hours of interviews in four sessions which followed over the next five days. Castro first says that he feels rather like a student facing an examination who has had no time to study for it, but with this caveat he plunges into talk of his Cuban mother and his Galician father who became, from nothing, a small landowner. There was no institutional religion in their part of the island, yet his mother was extremely religious, with many devotional images. Baptism was an important social occasion, as was the choosing of a godfather (whose name was given to the child). Saints were very important, as were the different advocations of the Virgin. Curiously, unbaptised Cubans were known as 'Jews', though Castro himself had no idea of the true meaning of the word until much later, thinking that it was a large bird!

Castro was sent to Santiago de Cuba and, at the age of six and a

half, went to the De la Salle Brothers' school there, and his first rebellion was against the family he was living with, so as to go to the school as a boarder. The religious aspect of the school was accepted as part of normal life, and the school had many recreational facilities, which meant a new happiness for Castro after the poverty of his early years away from home. He left the school after a row with a teacher over corporal punishment (in the 1930's!).

He then moved to the Jesuit school in the same city, which he describes as incomparably superior owing to the rigour, preparation, discipline and religious consecration of the Jesuits. He appreciated their ethic, the stimulus they gave him and the encouragement he received in his sporting activities. He criticizes the Jesuits (without animus) for a certain dogmatism: they did not stimulate reasoning about faith. He says: 'It seems to me that a religious faith, like a political faith, must be based on reasoning, on the development of thought and feeling.' This gives Betto a chance to indicate the longstanding dispute between Dominicans, who value more 'la inteligencia de la fe', and Jesuits, who emphasize 'la disposicion de la voluntad'. Castro criticizes the tendency to argue for the faith on the basis of reward or punishment, with emphasis on the latter: 'It really seems to me that people's religious faith ought to be founded on comprehensible reasons and on the intrinsic value of what is done.' Fear of punishment should not be at the root of the loyalty of conviction. Castro did not think that the education he had produced many saints. Nevertheless, all this part of the dialogue is much more the mildly critical reminiscences of an old boy of a Catholic school than a tirade against it. Castro is certainly grateful for the privileges of that education, and for the absolute lack of economic interests shown by the Jesuits towards their pupils—costs were kept to a minimum by their abnegation.

At sixteen he moved to the Jesuit college in Havana, the best school in the country, where the teaching was excellent (though the Jesuits, many of them Spaniards, were all strong Franco supporters and anti-communists). However, though he was successful in his exams, at the time Castro was much more sports-orientated. He was popular with his contemporaries. Neither the religious nor the political angles really mattered to him. He describes retreats, prayers, standard Ignatian meditations on Hell; he remembers passages from the Old and New Testaments, but has no memory of having had faith in the religion he was taught.

He became sensitive to the cause of the poor at an early age owing to his own living conditions while a day boy in Santiago de Cuba, and owing to the non-bourgeois expectations of his parents with regards to poor Haitian neighbours at home. This, the discipline of sport, and the influence of the Jesuits, gave him a strong sense of justice which was the

starting point of his political consciousness. He has no religious belief, but a political faith which he forged himself.

At university he discovered the works of Marti and Marx, of which the first was his first great influence in the political field. Marxist literature opened his eyes further towards an exploitation he had already perceived; it was his associations at this time which led him (and others, among whom were many Christians) to prepare a programme for the overthrow of Batista after Batista's coup of 1952, and led him to the assault on the Moncada garrison in 1953. And there, at 3 a.m., the first interview closes.

Later that day Betto and Castro start again. Their attention is focused first on the abortive attempt to take the Moncada barracks; the attack is described, as is the intervention of the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba to try to save the lives of the insurgents who fell prisoner. Tribute is paid to Lieutenant Sarría of the army, who prevented Castro from being killed. Castro tells of his imprisonment, of the rôle of Father Sardinias in the Sierra Maestra during the period before the final uprising. Discussion moves on to the revolutionary period, and the initial support of all the Churches. Cardinal Arteaga at first kept good relations with the revolutionary government. Then, after the agrarian reform, the rich sectors started using the Church as an instrument against the Revolution—an abuse made easier by the scarce existence of the institutional Church amongst the poorer sectors of society. The Churches really depended on their schools for existence.

In response to Betto's questions whether Castro recognizes a diffuse religiosity in the culture of the Cuban people, Castro points out how everywhere there is a diffused religiosity, but in Cuba the tradition of organised religion was much less strong than elsewhere. Betto is keen to find out if conflicts arose with Christians because of the schools: with the Evangelicals, no (apart from the Jehovah's Witnesses because of their opposition to military service), and with some of the Catholics, yes, owing to the nationalization of the schools, and the need to have schools for everybody. (No-one doubts the fact that education is universally available now in Cuba).

Betto moves on to the question of violence against priests or bishops, and Castro and he discuss various conflicts between Churches and political movements—the Reformation, the Inquisition, the persecution of the early Church, the French Revolution and the Spanish Civil War. This is the background to Castro's claim to moral superiority over the forces against which he was fighting; in other words, his efforts to avoid the behaviour of his former oppressors. He took care not to shoot a priest even when priests might have incurred that sanction owing to acts of sabotage (three priests took part in the invasion of the Bay of Pigs). Castro pays tribute to the Nuncio of the time, Monsignor Zacchi,

who helped to avoid conflicts.

Next to be discussed is the socialist character of the Revolution, proclaimed in 1961, and Betto asks one of the key questions in the book: 'The (Communist) Party is a confessional party in the sense that it is an atheist party, which proclaims the non-existence of God. I ask: is it possible that in the future it be a lay party?' (Lay here is being used in opposition to confessional rather than to clerical dominance.)

Castro immediately sees the importance of this question and emphasizes the importance of the Communist Party not being sectarian: he explains some of the difficulties this led to among the parties at the time of the Revolution, then he tells of the great anti-communist campaign starting in the States, the exodus of so many Cubans to the States, and the attacks on Cuban soil. It was this that led the Party to be exigent in its doctrinal demands: 'We were not excluding Catholics as such, we were excluding potential counter-revolutionaries'. This was not done for anti-religious motives but to make sure of the ideological purity of the Party. So it became a norm, determined by the circumstances: 'Does it have to be like that? I tell you it doesn't; I have not the slightest doubt that it doesn't have to be like that.'

Betto presses him: might not the Cuban Congress proclaim the 'laïque' nature of the Party? Castro is sanguine: he doesn't think that the time is yet ripe; they haven't yet worked for this. He asserts that strict respect for religious belief is a 'correct political principle, not a simple political tactic'. The ground isn't yet ready, but it needs working towards by both Churches and Party. Castro is clear that Cuba should not be a model for others to follow in this respect, and that relations between Church and Party should be different in the rest of Latin America. Betto questions the discrimination against Christians in Cuba (they may not enter certain university faculties etc.), and Castro admits that this discrimination has not yet been overcome, but must be, and can only be by the Party members at all levels understanding this and wanting to change it (change must come from beneath). Castro sees that the publication of these interviews might well help this educational process, and with that the second interview comes to an end.

The next day Betto finds time to attend a meeting of the Student Christian Movement, where he is able to learn about the change of attitude towards their government of the Christians of the island. Then he is called to Castro's office for the third interview. He moves from the history of the Revolution to the questions of Church/State relations in Cuba. He asks about Castro's meeting with the U.S. Bishops, and Castro expresses his admiration of their stance on a number of issues. He indicates the number of Christian ethical positions which the Revolution shares, and they discuss the flagrant abuse of the name of God made by Reagan and a number of the Latin American military dictators. This

gives Betto a chance to preach to the *comandante* about the God in which neither of them believe, the god who justifies exploitation, and to explain to him the biblical criteria for the worship of the true God. They agree on the charity and self-abnegation of both missionaries and the many Cuban teachers who go abroad to teach poor people all over the third world. Castro suggests that if the Church were to create a state, it would be very similar to Cuba: no gambling, no homeless children or old people, no drugs, no prostitution—these were the topics he discussed with the U.S. Bishops, as well as subjects of the meetings he proposed to hold with the Cuban Bishops. He talks with high admiration of the Sisters of Charity, who are model communists in their administration of several public health works. Castro tells how the U.S. Bishops and the government came to agreement about various political prisoners—73 would be set free if the Bishops could get U.S. visas for them.

Betto steers him on to the question of the Churches in Cuba: Betto wants to know: 'What interest does the Cuban Government and socialism have in having an active Church, in having a participating Christian community?'

This leads Castro to look back to his meeting with the Christians for Socialism in Chile in 1971, his meeting with Christians (mostly Evangelical) in Jamaica in 1977, and his contacts with religious in Nicaragua. Again he insists that the affirmation of the right to religious belief enshrined in the Constitution of 1975 is not a question of tactic but of principle, and that the meetings he had in the rest of Latin America were steps towards such an opening and it is this which has prepared the ground for a meeting with the Cuban Bishops. Castro insists that the Revolution, as a work of art, will be imperfect while any discrimination of any sort is present, let alone the sort of discrimination which is only useful to the enemies of socialism. 'I think that with these thoughts I have explained what is really at the base of our thought: it shows our interest is for reasons of principle, and in addition to that for political reasons, in the best sense of the word: our interest is that the work of the Revolution, still incomplete in some areas, be freed from these limitations.'

Betto then takes the initiative and tells Castro about Vatican II, Medellín, and the growth of base communities (it is here that he makes the suggestion with which this article opens, that it is a mistake for the Latin American Left to preach atheism), and he goes on to ask Castro what he makes of Liberation Theology. Castro then explains how he understands the contradiction in the politico-religious thought of the Church: the spread of Christianity being linked to colonial exploitation, the slave trade, and all this with minimal criticism from the Church, and mostly complicity instead. Given such a history of atrocity it is scarcely surprising that the Left, seeing no critique of capitalism from the

Church, should see religion as an ally of oppression. It is this which makes Liberation Theology so important. Castro defines the Church of Liberation Theology as a re-encounter of Christianity with its roots—with all that is most heroic and glorious in its past—in such a way as to make the Latin American Left sit up and take a look. He sees that any religious position which re-encounters the best in Christian history is in absolute contradiction with the interests of imperialism.

Betto explains the roots of Liberation Theology as a growth from European liberal theology running up against the massive fact of the status of non-people which is that of the bulk of the Latin American population. He asks whether the polemic about Liberation Theology has interested Castro at all. Castro first rejects the notion that Liberation Theology is a marxist manipulation of the Church: such cannot be the way authentic people relate to each other: 'The faith of a Christian and that of a revolutionary cannot be feigned, and lies cannot be hidden'. He agrees that poverty is the most massive fact about Latin America, that marxist thought is an important contribution to the development of the social sciences, and that no scientific method of analysis is really in contradiction with religious belief either in the social or other sciences. Castro wants to read more deeply on this matter, but feels the need to avoid polemical opinions on discussions within the Church about which he knows so little.

He touches on the question of birth control, asking that the Church think seriously about this, and Betto is able to explain to him the Church's position on responsible parenthood, and the importance within the Church of not yielding to the economic pressures of the rich and powerful nations in whose interest artificial birth control, and particularly enforced sterilization, works. This powerful defence of *Humanae Vitae* takes Castro by surprise, and he asks the Church to reflect on all the ethical dimensions (political, social and economic) which the question raises, but thinks that it is improper to reform the Church, or promote dissension within it. 'It is politically more convenient, for the Church as well as for us, to have the solidarity of a Church which is united to the most deeply felt aspirations of humanity.'

Castro wants to deepen his knowledge of these matters, and expresses his pleasure at the papal discourses which he has read—he looks forward to being able to emit a more profound political (but not theological) judgement on these points. By now it is late, and the third interview finishes with Betto and Castro going to where Betto is staying, where his mother has prepared a Brazilian meal for them.

The final interview is on the next day. Betto picks up from Castro's previously expressed admiration of the Pope's speeches to ask him about the possibility of a papal visit to Cuba. Castro is cautious: such a visit would need the greatest preparation by both State and Church—it would

need to be more than merely a question of protocol: they would want to talk to him not only about the Church, but about the arms race, the debt problem, and world peace—so there is much to be discussed in a visit when the circumstances are right.

Betto then shifts from the Pope to asking the *comandante* how he sees the person of Jesus Christ. The figure of Christ was familiar to him from his youth, and Castro says: 'I have never perceived a contradiction in the political revolutionary field between the ideas I held, and the idea of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure... I rather projected my attention to the revolutionary aspects of Christian doctrine and of Christ's thought.' He quite understands that 'it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven'. Betto then interprets this to show Castro that 'the universality of Jesus' preaching is a universality from a specific social and political locus, the cause of the poor.'

Castro likes this and explains how it is his aim to multiply bread, schools and health. He demonstrates familiarity with many of Christ's parables and with the Sermon on the Mount. He then moves on to compare the persecution which the Early Church underwent with that undergone by Communists in the last 150 years. He sees no contradiction between the early Christian and modern socialist discourse, and admires what is going on now between the two. Whoever betrays the poor betrays Christ.

Betto moves on to ask Castro whether he believes that religion is the opium of the people: Castro says that in his opinion 'Religion, from the political point of view, is not itself either an opium or a marvellous remedy; it can be an opium or a marvellous remedy according as it is used or applied to defend the oppressors and exploiters, or the oppressed and exploited; it is dependent on the way in which one tackles the political, social and material problems of human beings, who are born and have to live in this world independently of theology or religious beliefs.'

Betto asks whether love is mandatory for revolutionaries. Castro replies that it is—solidarity and the spirit of fraternity are keys to socialism; he insists that the most complete material and spiritual fruition of humanity is the key to revolutionary thought: 'A class society where atrocious inequalities exist and where man cannot even be guaranteed the condition of a human being cannot speak about freedom.'

Betto asks Castro to clarify the marxist concept of class hatred which causes difficulty to some Christians. Castro shows that the existence of social classes is an historical reality, and draws examples from Ancient Greece to Cuban Independence to demonstrate that Marx did not invent class struggle; nor, he says, does marxism preach class hatred, it is the fact of class struggle which produces hatred—it is exploitation and oppression. Marxism explains the existing hatred. Castro goes out of his way to

denounce hatred. 'It isn't a question of hating individuals, but of hating an iniquitous system of exploitation.'

Betto asks whether there really is democracy in Cuba. Castro reckons that much of the talk of democracy elsewhere is a fraud. He was recently asked whether he was a cruel dictator, and explains that he himself has little power to take unilateral decisions; he asks which is more cruel, Cuba or the so-called Western democratic powers which have produced so much war and terror in this century. He points out that 'democratic' leaders rarely enjoy the support of half the population eligible to vote, and their support diminishes immediately after an election. He goes on to explain the workings of popular democracy in Cuba, the elections at grass-roots, the fact that delegates can be removed by their constituents every six months if they are unsatisfactory. He criticizes the so-called freedom of speech in the U.S. (which allows no communist easy access to the media), and the so-called freedom of the press (in fact that of the press barons), and ends up by indicating how much more democratic is Cuba than many Western democracies.

Betto asks whether Cuba exports revolution: Castro explains that what makes a country ripe for revolution cannot be exported, though the I.M.F. and the U.S. can be highly subversive in helping those conditions to appear. There is a sense in which European ideas have been exported all over Latin America, but 'It is crises which generate ideas, not ideas crises.'

Betto turns him to the question of the external debt crisis. Castro demonstrates (with figures) why the debt is unpayable, insists that there should be a ten year moratorium on it, why it is important that the Latin American countries unite to bring this about, how non-payment would not destroy the world economy but help to create jobs, and thus demand; this would be to set up the New Economic Order approved by the United Nations ten years ago. In this way the disastrous consequences of a continued crisis in Latin America would be avoided. He goes on to talk of Brazil and its rôle in the world economy, stressing that both Cuba and Brazil want diplomatic relations, but Cuba doesn't demand from Brazil that it should incur U.S. displeasure just so as to have relations with Cuba. Finally the two men talk of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos, and Castro gives his personal memories of these Latin American folk heroes. With this the final interview ends.

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The most important points raised in the interview seem to be that religious freedom is a matter of principle, not tactics, for socialists, and the agreement that, in principle, the Communist Party ought to be 'deconfessionalized'. These certainly have resonance in all socialist ambiances. Betto's probing as to the possible rôle a Church uninhibited by

discrimination might play in a socialist society yields positive results, but Betto did not go on to ask whether the Church, because of its sense of being *in via*, might usefully contribute with its capacity to offer a critique of such a society (from within a basic agreement with it). That is a question increasingly asked by theologians in Latin America (and practised in Nicaragua, where officials are open to the criticisms of church people whom they know to be basically on the side of the Revolution). Obviously the Church/State dialogue in Cuba has not yet reached a point where such questions are relevant.

There have been criticisms of *Fidel y la Religión*. These have suggested that Castro was taking advantage of a sympathetic interviewer for an enormous propaganda coup. No-one doubts the sympathy of Betto for Castro, but it would be a mistake to see the result as a propaganda coup, even if it has been very widely read and discussed. For a start, both parties discuss manipulation in such a way as to show they are aware of what would constitute an abuse (p 294—297). Also, quite simply, sufficient ground is covered at sufficiently great depth (though we are tantalised into wishing the depth had been even greater) for the straightforwardness of both parties to be apparent. In fact, Castro often comes across as the communist equivalent of the very best sort of Vatican official: one whose genuine belief is unmistakable along with all the prudence and sense of balance and ecumenism proper to someone holding so high and responsible an office.

It must be said that if this is propaganda, then it is Christian propaganda: there are at least five sections in which Betto simply preaches the Gospel, to Castro, Cuban readers, and readers all over the world—exemplary preaching before rulers, councils, synagogues and parties; and the ecumenical service he has rendered redounds first to the benefit of Cuban believers, not to the already favoured disbelievers.

The real question is: can it be followed up? Will the Cuban Communist Party agree to 'deconfessionalization'? How soon? Will the Pope go to Cuba, and without the disastrous preparation which led to such unfortunate discourses in Nicaragua? Will 'the work of art', as Castro describes the Revolution, advance so that a number of the more blatant discriminations, other than the religious one, disappear? All those who long for these things will be grateful to Betto and Castro for this glimpse at a more hopeful world.

- * *Fidel y la Religión : conversaciones con Frei Betto* publ. Oficina de Publicaciones del Consejo de Estado, Havana 1985. (384 pp.) An English translation can be obtained by writing to: Pathfinders (Australia), P.O. Box 37, Leichhardt, Sydney, N.S.W. 2040. Further information on Frei Betto (Carlos Alberto Libanio Christo O.P.) can be found in *New Blackfriars* Oct. 1984 (vol 65, No. 772, pp 428—438).