

The Revolutionary Church in Latin America

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by Christopher Roper

When thirty tons of stolen dynamite were recovered by the police in the Argentine province of Santa Fe in February, the local police chief told journalists that the entire responsibility for subversion in Argentina could be ascribed to 'those cursed Third World priests'. He was exaggerating, but it is true that members of the Movement of Priests for the Third World along with other young Catholics in other parts of Latin America—both priests and laity—have become increasingly deeply involved in revolutionary activities. This does not just mean that many Catholics now accept the need for radical change in the structure of Latin American society and sympathize with the aspirations of the extreme left. An Uruguayan professor of sociology, writing last year of contemporary trends in Latin American Catholicism,¹ has suggested that the old antithesis of Christianity *or* Marxism is disappearing, and that a new revolutionary synthesis is emerging: 'Latin Americans have no time any longer for the parlour discussions that are so popular in Europe. They want a dialogue in action and for action, focussing on the political and strategic future of the Latin American revolution. They do not consider either Christianity or Marxism as immutable, self-sufficient or mutually exclusive options.'

This assumption that there is indeed a Latin American revolution which will lead sooner or later to the building of socialism in Latin America is central to a great deal of Christian thought in the region today. This is perhaps the first great political upheaval of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which Christians as Christians are in the vanguard. Priests and laymen and women, in increasing numbers, are now members and leaders of revolutionary movements which are prepared to consider the use of violence as a political weapon, not merely in self-defence, but as a legitimate part of the war they are fighting against defenders of the existing order throughout Latin America. They argue that unless one is a pacifist and actively involved in non-violent forms of struggle against the use of repressive violence by the state, one has already accepted the moral legitimacy of violence. This does not necessarily establish its political validity but, to quote Professor Aguiar again, 'violence is today a matter for political strategy, not ethical justification'.

Priests who accept the need for radical change in Latin America are no novelty, but the present generation of politically committed priests seems to be taking the process further and faster than ever before. The new departure is the product, to a certain extent, of earlier experiments with Social Christianity which had their

¹GICOP Position Paper V/pc/70, Professor Cesar A. Aguiar, also published by IDOC International, North American edition, 14.11.70.

principal expression in Christian Democracy. Many of the most ardent Christian Democrats of the 1950s and 1960s, and to an even greater extent their natural successors in the universities and trade unions, now believe that the all-embracing gradualist formulae of Christian Democracy cannot achieve the fundamental structural changes which they believe to be necessary. For example, party politics in Chile now push the Christian Democrats into opposition, into opposing many of the policies they supported when in power, because opposition offers the best road for regaining power at the next elections. But thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of young Catholics, feel they should be participating in the experiments of the left-wing front of President Salvador Allende. If the Christian Democrats make the mistake (and this has not yet happened explicitly) of suggesting that they have a claim, as of right, on the votes of all Chilean Catholics, then the frustration of a once bold experiment in Social Christianity will be complete. As it is, the Chilean Christian Democrats are deeply divided and the party is moving steadily to the right and may well emerge as the major conservative party, representing the interests of a privileged middle class.

The relative failure of Christian Democracy in Chile is part of a larger failure by the movement to come to terms with Latin American realities. Perhaps the trouble is that its roots lie in the cold-war politics of post-war Europe, which are totally irrelevant in a Latin American context. If anyone doubts the latter statement they need only consider the complete failure of Moscow-dominated Communist parties in Latin America, whose ideas too are rooted in an irrelevant historical context.

It is almost certainly true that revolutionary Christians are contributing more to the cause of socialist revolution in Latin America than either the Chinese or the Soviet-line Communist parties. Basing their arguments of *Populorum Progressio*, the declaration of Latin American Bishops at Medellin, and the theological defence of a just war, the 'Third World' priests in Argentina, the Golconda priests in Colombia, and similar groups in Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Paraguay and Uruguay, are arguing that a socialist revolution is not merely justified but necessary.¹ Such priests are now discussing means rather than ends. They agree that they have a Christian duty to help build socialism, and that this is impossible within the existing structure of society. They accept, in one form or another, a post-Marxist analysis of Latin America's problems, deny any absolute right to private property, and look on the United States government as the greatest single obstacle to change in the region. Unless an outsider reacts sympathetically to this view of the world, he is very unlikely to be able to understand or communicate with

¹The best coverage of the statements of the revolutionary church in Latin America for those who do not read Spanish is to be found in the North American Edition of IDOC, obtainable from 432 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016.

revolutionary Christians in Latin America. Likewise, they would not have the slightest sympathy with the Archbishop of Canterbury's opposition to grants by the World Council of Churches to liberation movements of Southern Africa.

There were very good reasons for the radicalization of the Christian Democrats. Once they became involved in the organization of trade unions—and therefore strikes—and elections—and therefore intimidation of the voters by their opponents, they were forced to confront the fact that the established order in Latin America has been and is maintained by the systematic use of violence. Working within the system is a very sick joke when applied to the Indian peasants of Peru or Guatemala—it's as if the Jews in Hitler's Germany had been advised to work within the system. Social Christians found themselves having to make a choice between accommodation to a violent and unjust system, and revolution. Under such circumstances it was almost inevitable that the most vigorous elements of the movement should choose revolution.

Once a Latin American priest accepts the need for revolutionary action—by somebody—then he is soon likely to take the view that he must give active assistance to the revolutionaries, and accept the risks and responsibilities of such action. (The first time that such activities came to the notice of Europe was when the Colombian priest Camilo Torres joined the Ejército de Liberación Nacional of Colombia in 1965. However, he accepted lay status before joining the guerrillas, and a more typical case was that of the three young Maryknoll fathers who were expelled from Guatemala in the latter part of 1967 for assisting the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes.) The commitment by priests to the idea of revolution—that is the forcible taking of power by popular forces—has found its clearest expression so far in the declarations of the Movement of Priests for the Third World. The movement was formed towards the end of 1967. At the conclusion of a conference held in Brazil in August of that year, seventeen bishops from developing countries issued an open letter addressed to their priests, their people and all men of good will, applauding and elaborating on the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*.¹ Noting the lack of an Argentine signatory, a group of Argentine priests circulated a document supporting the bishops' initiative. They soon obtained 400 signatures from priests all over Argentina.

They came to the forefront of public attention in Latin America when in August 1968, they sent a carefully worded statement on violence to the conference of Latin American bishops meeting in Medellín, Colombia. This included the following remarks:

'In examining the problem of violence in Latin America, it is necessary to avoid by all means the confusion of the unjust violence of those who maintain a system of oppression and the just violence of the oppressed.

¹An English translation of this letter was published in *New Blackfriars*, December 1967.

'It is necessary to denounce clearly and unambiguously the state of violence to which the powerful—individuals, groups, nations—have subjected for centuries the peoples of our continent. The right of these peoples to their legitimate defence must be proclaimed.

'We are by no means making ourselves the standard-bearers of indiscriminate violence. On the contrary, we lament and regret that it is necessary to resort to the use of arms to re-establish justice.'

The priests for the Third World did not stop at statements, they began to work actively in the working-class suburbs of Buenos Aires, Córdoba and other Argentine cities, bearing witness to their revolutionary faith, encouraging strikers, organizing co-operatives, and trying to arouse their parishioners to a true understanding of the structural causes of their plight. They were soon deeply involved with illegal revolutionary movements, and their open advocacy of socialism led to increasingly noisy calls for their suppression.

Suppression was not possible but the Argentine hierarchy did issue a very strong statement last August, which did not name the Third World priests as such, but was clearly directed at them:

'To adhere to a revolutionary process . . . opting for a Latin American socialism which necessarily implies the socialization of the means of production, of economic and political power, and of culture, is not the business of and is not licit for any group of priests, neither in the name of the sacerdotal character, nor in that of the social doctrine of the Church to which it is opposed. . . .

'It is impossible to opt for a "Latin American socialism" . . . and the "necessity to eradicate, fully and definitively, private property . . ." without denying fundamental principles of the social teaching of the Church. . . .'

There is very little room for compromise here and this takes us to the heart of the difficulty. Christianity has in the past tried to avoid such political confrontations within the Church by denying the reality of the class struggle as a fact of history, and by denying the revolutionary content of the gospels. This is not to say that the New Testament is explicit in advocating revolution—in fact one may easily argue the very contrary. It is to hold that the relationship between men in Christ described in the gospels, the epistles and the other books of the New Testament, is inconceivable under the dispensations of modern capitalism.

Catholic revolutionaries are likely to play an active part in alternative governments which could emerge in Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Guatemala and Uruguay. In all these countries the Church is already beginning to be faced by the reality of persecution. In some cases, individual priests are singled out for their activities and imprisoned or deported. In Bolivia and Guatemala, leaders of specifically Catholic organizations have been assassinated. To date, Rome has responded with relative vigour in defence of imprisoned and tortured priests. But what attitude is Rome going to take if

Latin American governments can show that priests are playing an active part in revolutionary movements, and that bishops are defending, if not encouraging such priests? There will undoubtedly be pressure on Rome to denounce the revolutionaries, warnings that the need for reform may excuse but not justify recourse to violence. The Church is relatively immune from persecution for historical and cultural reasons in Latin America, but the contradictions are sharpening and the day may not be far off when Rome, and European Catholics generally will have to decide what attitude to take.

The danger is that we shall either suppose that the revolutionaries are a tiny minority who can conveniently be sacrificed in order to preserve a reformist majority, or that the priests' attackers are exaggerating, that they cannot really be calling for armed revolution. Either view would be dangerously misleading.

Bodies and Other Minds: the Mind-Body Problem in the Last Twenty Years

by C. J. F. Williams

To the generation of philosophers brought up in England in the years immediately succeeding the Second World War it seemed as though the Mind-Body problem had been (in the current jargon) not solved but dissolved. Where the previous generation had toiled at the old Cartesian task of constructing a material world out of, or on the basis of, mental entities, our generation discovered that the mental entities themselves had been eliminated. The notion of *sense-data* used by Moore and Russell had been shown in Ryle's *Concept of Mind* to be incoherent. 'J. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*' appeared on the Oxford lecture list in Trinity Term 1948. Austin's principal target was just that dichotomy between sense-data and material objects from which the whole problem seemed to be derived. He directed attention to the variety of locutions in which 'look' can figure: 'He looks a good sport.' 'He looks as if he were going to faint.' 'They look like ants.' 'They *look* like Europeans.' It looked as if statements about how things look could not be the record of a subclass of mental events called visual experiences.

Mental events as such were gradually being eliminated. Wittgenstein's views, already rumoured before the publication of *Philosophical Investigations* in 1953, seemed to require that, where Ryle had taken