

## SURVEY

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# Christianity and Politics: Historical overview and the Contemporary Challenge

### I

#### Historical Overview *(Robert Fastiggi)*

#### **Introduction**

The question of the relationship between politics and Christianity can take on a number of different nuances. In one sense, it can turn on the question of how involved should the Christian community be in the world of politics. Should Christians try to exert political pressure on governmental leaders in order to insure a moral society? Is there a "Christian position" on various political issues? Is an individual not fully Christian if he or she is not involved in the political arena?

These questions have come to the forefront in recent years. The issue is certainly not a new one. There has always existed a tension between the Christian community as a spiritual, a-temporal and eschatologically oriented body and the Christian Church as an historical, temporal and socially transforming reality. The history of Christianity is a study of variety and contrasts when it comes to the question of political involvement. On the one hand, we have the image of the monk: steeped in the numinous and transcendent, absorbed in liturgical timelessness and interior meditation. What has the monk to do with the world of princes and battles or congresses and treaties?

On the other hand, we have the image of the socially active Christian: the crusader for human rights, the worker for the poor and the

lobbyist for peace. Where does true Christianity lie? This is a question that defies easy solutions and even simple characterizations. The image of the other-worldly monk is sometimes more romantic than realistic. Any historian of the Middle Ages knows how politically and socially active some of the monasteries were. In the modern era, we need only look to the number of monks, not the least of whom was Thomas Merton, who have been acutely aware and also deeply involved in political realities.

The issue goes even deeper than the mere question of balancing contemplation and action: It touches on the question of the very nature of Christianity itself. Is Christianity primarily a religion of social struggle and political transformation? Was Jesus really cut in the mould of a social reformer or political revolutionary? Does the Gospel definitely make a categorical imperative to side with the poor and their struggle against oppression? Or is perhaps the Gospel somewhat ambiguous and non-committal on these matters? Does Jesus show any genuine hope for a successful social and political transformation of the world? Or is He perhaps more soberly realistic in His statement that "the poor you will always have with you?" (John 12:7).

This touches upon the whole question of the eschatological and transcendental dimension of the Gospel in tension with the temporal and historical aspect of Christian living. Certainly, the Kingdom of Heaven is not of this world. But does that reduce the Christian Church to the liturgical and sacramental vehicle for preparing for the next world? Is one genuinely a Christian if one ignores the social evils of the world by a pious cover of other-worldliness? The tension is a real one, and an overview of some of the major historical epochs of Christian history might help to elucidate the matter.

### 1. Christianity from the Time of Jesus to Emperor Constantine (313 A.D.)

The Gospel is often used as a reservoir of quotations to support any number of political causes ranging from absolute pacifism to militant revolt against the forces of injustice. Employment of the Gospel for such a purpose is not entirely useless, but it does carry with it the danger of viewing the Gospel statements out of their historical and social context. The central political issue of Jesus' time was over what manner were the Jewish people to look for liberation from Roman rule.

There were a number of political alternatives open to the Jewish people at the time of Jesus. One alternative was the political activism of the Zealots who wanted a military overthrow of Roman oppression. Another alternative was the eschatological and apocalyptic expectations of Jewish spirituality exemplified most clearly in the Essenes. In between, there were any number of more moderate positions ranging from compromise with the Roman rule to a more subdued hope in a Messianic liberator.

Where did Jesus fit in among these political alternatives? Jesus' famous statement: "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17) might initially seem to reflect a moderate position of compromise with the existing political situation. Indeed, some have taken St. Paul's admonition to obey state authorities "because no authority exists without God's permission" (Romans 13:1) as a simple reiteration of Jesus' teaching. However, the statement of Jesus can be seen in a much deeper light. What Jesus was saying is that the things of God are not on the same level with the things of Caesar. The Christian is not meant to seek salvation by trying to capture the things of Caesar. Jesus was making a revolutionary statement but not in the way the Jewish Zealots would have found to be acceptable revolutionary rhetoric. If Jesus can be seen to reflect any Jewish political movement of His day, He would probably be closer to the eschatological communities of the Essenes than to any other. The only difference between the eschatological teaching of Jesus and that of the Essenes is that Jesus spiritualizes and interiorizes the notion of the Kingdom of God. He was not so earthbound as the Essenes nor, for that matter, as temporally and historically focused as later Christian apocalyptic movements. Jesus makes it very clear that His Kingdom "does not belong to this world", (John 18:38).

What followed the death and resurrection of Jesus was a continued apocalyptic and eschatological consciousness that gave impetus to the growth of the early Church and helped to shape the initial political consciousness of the Christian communities. A hope for an imminent return of Jesus was one of the most common features of both the primitive and the early Christian Church. It was a tremendous inspiration for the courage needed during the first three centuries of Christian persecution. The political alternatives faced by the Christian communities during these centuries of persecution were basically those of martyrdom or precarious survival. The Christian Church never

preached a forcible overthrow of the Roman government. Perhaps this was due in part to the numerical implausibility of such a venture in consideration of the power of Rome. However, it was also due to the transformation of consciousness ushered in by the coming of Jesus. There was now a confidence and a trust in God. Rome was not eternal but God is, and therefore God would prevail and eventually Rome would fall. As Charles Norris Cochrane points out in his *Christianity and Classical Culture*, the Church regarded the Roman order "as doomed to extinction by reason of its inherent deficiencies," and the Church "confidently anticipated the period of its (Rome's) dissolution as a prelude to the establishment of the earthly sovereignty of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

The apocalyptic flavour of early Christianity is understandable when viewed in the context of persecution and struggle. The history of Christianity shows that there is a parallel between the intensity of political persecution and struggle and the re-emergence of apocalyptic themes. The early American colonists who were fleeing Europe because of religious persecution were immersed in the apocalyptic notions of founding a new people and a new age of righteousness. What happens often, though, is a confusion between the spiritual kingdom of Christ and the earthly, historical effort to embody that kingdom in the political or social order. For the early Christians, suffering under Roman persecution, this posed no problem. One cannot hope to shape an earthly embodiment of the kingdom of God if one is removed from political power and influence. But with the acceptance of Christianity as a *religio licita* by virtue of the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., the question of a Christian shaping of the political order becomes a genuine possibility. With the decline of the Roman Empire in the West and the imperial acceptance of the Christian faith in the East, the nature of Christianity changes. Now, the things of Caesar become increasingly involved in the things of God, and the people of God, the Church, find themselves increasingly involved in the affairs of Caesar.

## 2. The Emergence of a Christian Culture : Europe from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Modernity

The acceptance of Christianity as first a *religio licita* and gradually as the religion of the culture created a question of who would be the most influential leader: the emperor or the Church hierarchy. Some

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1. Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (London: Oxford Univ. Press 1940; 1974 reprint), p. 177.

people incorrectly see the rise of Christianity as the dominant religion in Europe as the simple replacing of the old, pagan Roman rule with a new Christian or ecclesiastical rule. In point of fact, it was more a case of the emperor, especially in the Byzantine East, trying to control the affairs of the Church.

We cannot doubt the sincerity of Constantine and other emperors who thought it necessary for the well-being and order of the empire to make certain that orthodoxy was upheld. To some extent, this was a carry over from the attitude of pagan Rome which thought it essential that religious unity and conformity be upheld for the sake of imperial order. In a similar manner, the Germanic kings in the West regarded themselves as the leaders of the Church in their realms following their conversions to the Christian faith. It was the Church and not the State which promulgated the theory of the separation of the two orders. Great thinkers like St. Ambrose and later St. Augustine insisted that the emperor is "within the Church and not above it (*imperator enim intra Ecclesiam, non supra Ecclesiam est*).<sup>2</sup>

The Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. is often seen as the symbolic turn in the history of Christianity. The Christian faith changed from a community in persecution to the dominant force in the culture. What developed was the formation of a Christian society. Christianity was now confronted with the necessity of becoming political. Some Christian purists insist that the politicizing of Christianity led to a distortion of the true nature of Christianity. But this opinion fails to see that the Christian faith had by necessity assumed the responsibility of giving structure and order to a society left in political turmoil by the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West. In a different historical development, the emperors of the Byzantine East saw the need to protect the Church from heresy and increase the Church's moral and spiritual dignity. As a consequence, the reality of "caesaro-papism" evolved with the emperors appointing and dismissing bishops, calling councils into session and, in general, overseeing the affairs of the Church.

The emergence of Christianity as a socially and politically active force is an expression of a different form of Christianity than that which existed prior to the Edict of Milan. However, it does not by necessity follow that a Christian empire or Christian monarchy is a distortion of Christianity. The Christian faith is of such a nature that it can adapt

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2. Ambrose, *Sermon Against Auxentius* (36).

itself to varied modes of existence. Christianity in persecution assumes certain heroic traits that help to keep the faith vibrant, courageous and pure. Christianity in power contains within it the great dangers of being corrupted by power and worldly concerns, but this does not mean that the emergence of a Christian culture in Europe was a complete antithesis of what Christianity is all about.

The complexity of the political and ecclesiastical orders that developed in early Medieval Europe do not permit us to make broad, simplistic statements like "now the Church took over where Rome left off." As the historian Charles Wood points out: "The Church and State were so organised that it was impossible to say where one left off and the other began."<sup>3</sup> The convergence of political and ecclesiastical structures during the Middle Ages was in part conditioned by the historical necessity of giving order and purpose to a continent still suffering from the cultural and political collapse of the Roman Empire. However, it was also motivated by the sincere desire of Christians, both lay and clerical, to see society governed according to the truths of the Christian faith. One need only study the literature, art and architecture of Medieval Christian Europe to understand how much of the culture was dominated by the symbolic archetypes of the Christian creed and the Bible. Some historians, most notably the American historian Henry Adams, have looked with nostalgic admiration on the "Age of Belief" as the expression of a society unified by a common love for Jesus and the Blessed Mother.

This Romantic image of the Middle Ages captures only part of the reality that actually existed. In point of fact, Christian Europe was as much dominated by political scheming, power struggles and corruption during the Middle Ages as during most other periods of history. The insight of Lord Acton that "power corrupts and absolute power absolutely corrupts" can be applied both to Medieval monarchs as well as the papacy. This is not to deny that there were not sincere Christian kings and popes during the Middle Ages, but it is to suggest that there is something intrinsically corrupting about the nature of human politics. The need to preserve political authority almost always involves one in defending oneself against political adversaries. The struggles for power and the maintenance of power creates an environ-

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3. Charles T. Wood (ed.), *Philip the Fair and Boniface VIII: State vs. Papacy* (New York: Rinehart and Winston 1967), p. 1.

ment where princes, whether secular or ecclesiastical, must be ready to take up arms and fight battles. The image of the pope, the human vicar of the Prince of Peace, ordering an army into battle against fellow Christians, is most certainly an affront to the Gospel of Jesus. However, this was the reality forced upon the papacy when it went too far in claiming secular, political authority.

The theoretical justifications for the Church assuming political, temporal authority are historically very tenuous and ambiguous. Pope Gelasius I (492–496) laid the foundation for Christian thinking on the two separate powers of the Church and State when he laboured to make clear their two distinct orders of authority. The Church's power is called the *auctoritas sacra pontificum*; it is meant to have authority over spiritual matters, the priesthood and the sacred mysteries of the Christian faith. The temporal power (*regalis potestas*) is meant to have authority over the civil order and temporal affairs. Both authorities receive their sovereignty from God. However, it was gradually realized that when the earthly ruler was not ruling according to the moral law of God, the Church had the duty to intervene and correct the abuses of the temporal ruler. This realization created the idea of the "two swords"—theory, as St. Bernard of Clairvaux called it. The two swords mentioned in Luke 22:38 were seen as the analogy of the two powers, the earthly and the spiritual. In the ideal society, both swords would belong to the Church, making sure that both the clergy and the state were working for the glory of God and the welfare of all citizens.

This theory met with gradual acceptance among the canon lawyers of the Church, but it met with continual problems and struggles in the world of real politics. Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085) was successful, to some extent, in the implementation of papal authority as a counterforce to the excesses of monarchical rule. In the investiture controversy, Pope Gregory wished to purify the Church of the practice of secular control over clerical appointments. The Pope's excommunication of Emperor Henry IV led to the memorable spectacle of the monarch, Henry, doing penance at Canossa in 1077. During the following two centuries, the papacy would be able to employ its spiritual and moral force on politics with similar successes. From roughly 1077 to 1305, the papacy was at the height of its secular prestige and influence. It was a period of history when the continent of Europe came closest to being united as a Christian Commonwealth or

a *Respublica Christiana*. For some historians, it was an epoch of genuine Christian faith and unity. For others, the rise of papal authority was a most unfortunate distortion of the Christian faith. Jesus did not intend his people to form an earthly kingdom but a spiritual one.

Pope Gelasius' initial distinction of the spiritual authority of the Church and the temporal authority of the state was open to a variety of interpretations. The same was also true of St. Augustine's monumental work, *The City of God*. Just as the dualism of Gelasius evolved into the "two swords"-theory, so also did Augustine's notion of the two cities become an inspiration to establish the City of God as a unified, Christian Empire. However, St. Augustine's thoughts on the matter are much deeper and more subtle than a mandate for a Christian Commonwealth. St. Augustine had a very profound sense of human weakness and sin. Because of human sinfulness or concupiscence, any attempt to establish the City of God on earth is doomed to failure. Some theologians believe St. Augustine had hopes that the earthly city could be at least a partial embodiment of the heavenly city. However, it seems that Augustine was generally somewhat pessimistic about the prospects of establishing a totally Christian society. The society could be officially Christian, but the true city of God was a spiritual reality not a political one. The two cities are distinguished by the opposing loves present in human hearts: the love for God and the love for self. As St. Augustine puts in:

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter, in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God.<sup>4</sup>

St. Augustine provided a genuine goal for all Christians to work towards: a society based on a common love for God. However, this type of love is impossible to legislate. The most that any Christian government can do is to provide protection for the truths of the Christian faith, but it cannot insure that human hearts will not turn to the glorification of self rather than the glorification of God. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find that corruption has existed even in those

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4. Augustine, *The City of God* (Marcus Dods, D.D. tra.), (New York: 1950).

political regimes that were officially Christian. The same is true even in the internal politics of the Church. There have been many bishops, cardinals and popes who certainly seemed to enjoy the prestige and influence that their position automatically grants them. This is due to human weakness, and we should be careful about judging even the most corrupt ecclesiastical prince because only God's judgement can penetrate to the very heart of a man.

The secular power of the papacy began to decline during the fourteenth century especially with the exile of the papacy in Avignon (1305-1378). It is interesting that the decline of papal authority was immediately preceded by the greatest theoretical claim of papal authority, namely, the bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302) of Boniface VIII. In this proclamation, the theory of the two swords residing with the Bishop of Rome reaches its zenith. However, when Boniface flung this theory of the two swords at Pierre Flote, the minister of King Philip the Fair, Flote responded: "True, Holy Father, but where your swords are a theory, ours are a reality."<sup>5</sup>

The decline of papal authority also combined with an increasing secularization of many ecclesiastical officials. The Renaissance produced many deeply spiritual figures, but it also produced some of the most corrupt bishops and popes the Church has known. The corrupting influence of politics provided ammunition for the Protestant reformers to attack the hierarchy of the Church. However, the Reformation itself became corrupted by politics when the German princes began to take sides and confessional states were set up. Instead of purifying Christianity from political involvement, the Reformation made the relation between politics and Christianity more complex. The wars of religion and the reality of monarchs and princes persecuting Catholics and Protestants (depending on their allegiance) led many thinkers during the Enlightenment to despise organized religion especially when it became politically involved. This led to the formation of the totally secular states.

### 3. Christianity and Politics in the Modern Age

The term "modernity" is hard to define exactly; but for many historians the Modern Age began when people began to think more on the realities of economics and politics and less in terms of faith and

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5. Wood p. 3.

religion. The formation of the secular states certainly began earlier than the American and French revolutions of the late eighteenth century. But the new republics set up by these revolutions marked the end of the historical need for a state to either defend or adopt a religion. The separation of Church and State now meant that the churches should not have any temporal authority. Before, the Catholic and Eastern Churches were concerned about emperors and kings not having any ecclesiastical authority.

The role of Christianity with political realities in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries is complex and varied. At times, it takes on the form of trying to establish a totally Christian community on a local scale as was the case with the Puritans in early New England. At other times, it takes on the form of Christians struggling for their freedom to worship publicly and believe freely, as is the case in some totalitarian regimes where freedom of religion has been suppressed. Most frequently, though, the church in the Modern Age has taken on itself the role of a prophetic witness to truth and prophetic criticism of injustice and immorality.

The almost total loss of temporal jurisdiction has in many ways freed the Catholic Church from the political worries and problems that arise with secular power. Many Catholics now feel that the Church is better able to be a true spokesman of the poor and a defender of justice when it is no longer burdened with political power. However, there have been times when ecclesiastical officials have perhaps abandoned their role as prophets to the modern world and sought instead the prestige and power of their position. This is the inevitable temptation of anyone in power whether it be secular or ecclesiastic. Nevertheless, it seems that the Church in the modern world, as a whole, is in a better position to speak out as a true prophetic witness to justice and truth.

The problem with being a voice for justice in the midst of a secular state is that the pleas for justice will fall on deaf ears. Some people have criticized the Church for only being a voice and not doing more to stop tyrants like Hitler and other dictators who violate human rights. There have even been some Christians who say that the Church should take sides on political matters and indicate which political party is more sympathetic to the needs of the poor and the oppressed. The Church, however, must be cautious in taking her stands on political issues. If the Church were to lend its support to one particular party or ideology there would always be the possibility that that party or ideology, as a

political reality, might become corrupted by the internal weakness of all human institutions. As Karl Rahner, among others, has pointed out: "Christianity is not a ideology."<sup>6</sup> By this is meant that the Christian message of eschatological hope cannot be reduced to the confines of a this-worldly hope. Moreover, Christianity must be tolerant of differing political opinions and systems in a pluralistic world. It cannot identify itself with one particular ideology nor become an ideology unto itself because no ideology or political theory can contain the fullness of life that Jesus promises to the members of His kingdom.

What then should be the role of the Church in the modern world? The Second Vatican Council gave some direction on this matter in its far-reaching *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* entitled *Gaudium et Spes*. In this document, it is made clear that the Church is not to "be confused with the political community, nor bound by any political system. For she is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendence of the human person."<sup>7</sup> The political community and the Church are "mutually independent and self-governing. Yet by a different title, each serves the personal and social vocation of the same human beings."<sup>8</sup>

The growing political and spiritual recognition of the radical interdependence of all human beings on the earth has brought about a very real convergence of the political and spiritual dimensions of human life. The Church is now faced with the contemporary challenge of trying to awaken the consciences of all people to pressing problems of the threat of nuclear destruction, hunger, poverty and the loss of respect for human life. The contemporary situation is one in which Christians must join forces with people of good-will to seek solutions to the horrible possibilities that now face the human race.

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6. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. VI* quoted from *A. Rahner Reader* (Gerald McCool, ed.), (New York: 1975), p. 341.

7. *The Documents of Vatican II* (Walter M. Abbott, S.J. ed.), (N.Y. Guild Press, 1966), pp. 287-288.

8. *Ibid* p. 288.

## II

### The Contemporary Challenge

(Wayne Teasdale)

In the second part of this survey, the aim is to elucidate the Church's prophetic role by indicating the areas of her immediate, profound and sustained concern. There is here, in her prophetic function, a convergence of politics and religion, because the Church assumes the responsibility, in her fidelity to Truth, to speak out and give leadership on issues of extreme importance. In doing so, she becomes the "eyes" of politics, since she is applying moral and spiritual criteria to the conduct of political and economic activity, something which is desperately required. These principles together represent the transcendent value that ends in contemplation, the person's realization of the Divine which is the final goal and good of each member of the human family. It is this value that must ultimately guide nations. The areas of vital concern to Christians and all religious people, in this moment of history are three: planetary survival, hunger and poverty, especially in the Third World, and respect for life. These issues will be considered in some detail. There will also be a brief discussion of the limitations of Marxism and Capitalism, chiefly their foundation in materialism. It will be shown that this factor has aided the development of the "status principle", which is the motivating force behind the world's many ills, as individuals and groups seek identity in things, power and position, rather than in the true self immersed in the Divine. It will also be suggested how both Marxism and Capitalism together possess half the answer to humanity's plight, while religion, in the contemplative value, has the other half. Finally, we will consider a solution to the crisis, which involves fostering an attitude of *solidarity*, and the convocation of a congress of spiritual leaders to discuss, disarmament, hunger, poverty and the contemplative value. The purpose of this meeting would be to spark an awakening of mankind to the present and growing danger to our planet, and to present a solution in the form of a world founded on contemplation and co-operation. The goal is to build a civilization based on *love, sharing and spirituality or contemplative experience*, a world at peace in which hunger and destitution have been removed, and each person has the opportunity to discover the absolute reality of the Divine *experientially*.

In order for the Church's prophetic role to be effective, indeed even authentic, it is essential that she be *free*, free from the control of

the power of the state today, and free from the limitations of having state power, which she did have in the Medieval period. When the Church had state authority, when she controlled governments and claimed temporal sovereignty, she was limited in her moral and spiritual voice, for the exercise of power placed constraints on her effectiveness, making her vulnerable to the taint of corruption, and the need to view events and reality from the perspective of temporal politics and the limited or selfish interests of states.

The present situation of Christianity and religion generally, in which it does not control the power of the state, frees it to be itself. Religion, Christianity, the Church must stand in relation to a culture which is often neutral to the imperatives of faith. It is surrounded by a cultural milieu frequently hostile or in opposition to its influence. This is the unavoidable facticity of the modern, secular world. This is the atmosphere in which the Church must operate, often as a "voice crying out in the wilderness." This world is a wilderness, a waste land, because it is not focused on the Truth, on the Divine, the one thing necessary. For states follow policies based on the limits their ideologies impose, and these often determine their interests, especially if they are aggressive in aim. Nations pursue interests that, in some instances, are really opposed to the universal good, which is the peaceful development of each individual. States, misguided by ideologies, attempt to dominate individual consciences, in order to realize the ends their misconceived systems demand. They are trapped by their own logic and their own ambitions.

In the present historical epoch, two systems, Capitalism and Marxism face each other in mutual distrust, hatred and barely subdued hostility. They are locked in an ideological fight to the death. And so, they are arming themselves for the final battle with arms of terrible proportions. The bows are being stretched, and the arrows are ready to fly. Religion generally, Christianity and the Church in particular stand in between these two spiritually blind giants, who are leading the world along a perilous road, which could precipitate the end of our planet. They are leading the world toward a horrible war. The words of Pope Pius XII are frighteningly accurate when he said in August 1939: "Nothing is lost by peace; everything may be lost by war."<sup>9</sup>

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9. Pope Pius XII, Radio Broadcast, August 24, 1939, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 31:2, vol., 6 p. 334.

In the contemporary situation, neither side of this struggle for power and domination tries to look at the larger picture. Each asserts its own interest. It is into this situation that the Church and religion generally enter as a *prophetic voice*, warning of the consequence of war, and working for the advancement of *peace*. In relation to politics, which has run up against the hard reality and logic of ideology-and has led to the present crisis the world finds itself in Christianity offers a sure counsel of peace, and points the way out of the trap the planet is in. Religion must now become the "eyes" for the political realm, since nations are blind to the greater good of the world, and it must provide the political sphere with the necessary moral and spiritual principles to see humanity safely through the danger of this hour. The aim is to create a world order in which such a dangerous situation will never occur again.

In this prophetic function of Christianity, of the Church and of the world's other spiritual traditions, politics and religion *converge* upon a new relationship in which religion informs the political with its moral and spiritual criteria. Since the good of humanity and the planet is not being pursued by the nation states, it is incumbent upon the Church to proclaim this universal interest in the realm of politics, along with her proclamation of the Gospel. These moral and spiritual principles, taken together, represent the transcendent value, which is ultimately fulfilled in contemplation, the final good of each person, the path to lasting happiness and the actualization of the vocation of being human. This will be explored further when we come to it. It is the urgency of the war and peace, coupled with concern for the plight of issue three-fourths of humanity living in near destitution that has defined the prophetic function of religion in general, and the Church in particular in our time. The Church, because she is the servant of Truth, which transcends every nation, culture and age, but is relevant to each, is compelled to speak out on the issues so pressing in their scope and in their dire implications for the entire planet. In the next section, we will explore a few of these issues.

### Three Areas of Special Concern

Planetary *survival* tops the list, since it is the *sine qua non* for maintaining life in all its forms on our globe. This concern, which grows more urgent with time, has two dimensions: the threat of nuclear war, referred to above, and the harm being done to the ecology of the planet. This dual question is what we can call the *survival concern*.

It is a source of great anxiety for all of us, and so also for the Church. Indeed, the survival of the earth *is* the most urgent priority of the Church's prophetic activity *vis-à-vis* politics. The modern popes since Pius XII and other spiritual leaders have again and again addressed themselves to this issue and voiced their alarm about the possibility of nuclear war and the devastation of the world consequent upon it. Speaking for all of mankind, on the occasion of an address to the United Nations General Assembly in October 1979, Pope John Paul II gave this sober warning on the nuclear trap:

...being ready (for war) means *being able to start it*; it also means taking the risk that some time, somewhere, somehow, someone can set in motion the terrible mechanism of general destruction. ...It is therefore necessary to make a continuing and even more energetic effort to do away with the very possibility of provoking war, and to make such catastrophes impossible...<sup>10</sup>

In this present moment of history, we are witnessing the proliferation of this concern and fear in various movements in Europe, but we must remember that the continual declarations from spiritual leaders, beginning some years ago, have prepared the way for the effectiveness of these contemporary movements. For even in these groups, it is Christianity which provides the leadership, galvanizing public opinion.

In moments of history when humanity and the planet itself are threatened with extinction, when the principle that must govern our actions is this: all morally conscious and responsible individuals must unite in their efforts to remove the threat, which, in this instance, can only come through disarmament. This danger has to be eliminated totally! All nuclear arms and armaments must go! This is the most urgent focus of Christianity's prophetic leadership, as has been mentioned above. A concrete proposal on disarmament will be presented in the final section.

The second level of the survival issue, that of the ecological threat, although it is not as immediate as the first, is no less serious. The wilful attacks on the natural world, and the destruction they bring, confront the international community with the actual possibility of a severe breakdown of the processes and cycles of the earth's ecological systems. These systems sustain all life on our planet, and we have

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10. Pope John Paul II, Address to the XXXIV General Assembly of the United Nations Organization, October 2, 1979, 10-11.

taken them for granted far too long. This aspect of the survival concern requires of the Church greater efforts, for she has not exerted as much leadership here, as she has so eloquently on the nuclear threat.

Leadership in this area has come primarily from farsighted thinkers like Thomas Berry of Fordham University. His influence has been such that the United Nations has formulated and promulgated a *World Charter On Nature*. This significant document, for the first time in human history, recognizes the rights of the natural world and all its creatures. The revolutionary insight here is that the entire realm of nature has rights just as humans do. And these rights are *Intrinsic* to nature itself and to all creatures, including the forests, mountains, lakes, oceans and deserts, the fish, the birds, plants and animals etc. These rights do not arise because of natural world's utility for human life, insofar as it sustains us, but have their origin in the existential reality of nature's own being. Because it exists, it has a *right* to be.

The second area of special concern for the Church in her prophetic capacity is that of poverty and hunger. Here the aim of her teaching is to shake the rich nations out of their slumber, and point out emphatically their responsibility to the poor, the homeless and the starving of so many developing nations in the Third World. The recent popes, namely, John XXIII, Paul VI and now John Paul II, have dealt extensively with this question in encyclicals, most notably in *Pacem in Terris*, *Populorum Progressio*, and in their speeches. And again, in his U.N. address, John Paul II calls attention to the glaring gap between the rich and the poor, and refers to "the frightful disparities between excessively rich individuals and groups on the one hand, and on the other hand the *majority* made up of the poor or indeed of the destitute."<sup>11</sup>

This "majority" is between seventy-five and eighty per cent of humanity. Furthermore, at this time 1.4 billion people are living in a state of hunger, and in 1980 alone, 8.5 million children died of starvation. In the face of deprivation in the range of this magnitude, we cannot remain silent. It is because the wealthy, industrialized nations turn their backs on their very responsibility to the poorer countries that the problem exists and continues to get worse. Vast expenditures on armaments use up needed resources that could be channelled into international aid and development programmes for the Third World.

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11. *Ibid.*, 18.

So many people in the rich countries live "high on the hog," having a living standard that is excessive, and without thought for the poor, they indulge themselves with more and more consumer goods. The injustice present in this situation is that the possession of these goods, especially in excess of actual need, reduces what is available to the poor in the Third World. We must learn to live with a sense of our *solidarity* with the poor, rejoicing in it, and a realization of how our economic practices have a negative effect on their welfare. We must emphasize *need* rather than luxury. Gandhi expressed so well this insight when he said: "The earth can sustain all of mankind's needs, but not its greeds." This is a principle that the West may have to learn the hard way. Furthermore, the only justification for wealth, power and property is to *serve* the needs of others, especially the poor.

Now some, seeing this exploitive relationship between rich and poor, have turned to violence, supported, by an ideology of economic and social liberation. In the process, many of these people have become poisoned by hate, and so their service to others is reduced in value, while their interior life is totally barren. The Church, Christianity, and religion as such reject this myopic approach. It is understandable, but not excusable.

John Paul II, in his Puebla speech, explicitly dissociates the Church from violence and from a political interpretation of the Gospel. The point is to change hearts and minds through the formation of conscience. John Paul says in that speech: "She (the Church) does not need to have recourse to ideological systems in order to love, defend and collaborate in the liberation of man. . ."<sup>12</sup> To get involved in such systems, limits the role of Church to a political, sectarian level, and thus she would not be free to fulfil her larger mission, that is proclaiming the Gospel and prophetic witness, nor would she be free to serve all of mankind.

It is crucial to remember in this regard that Christ did not give in to the temptation to seize political power. He rejected this approach (cf. Mt. 4:8-11). He was not a political revolutionary. He was, however, a *spiritual* one, and he preached the most radical form of libera-

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12. Pope John Paul II, Discourse to Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, Puebla, January 28, 1979. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, February 5, 1979, p. 4, III. 2.

tion, liberation from sin and egocentricity, and this in order to have *salvation*, which is intimacy with God, the ultimate goal of contemplation.

The third area of vital concern to the Church, and of which at times she has been virtually the sole defender, is that of *respect for life*. Christianity has all along proclaimed the sacrality of life and the precious dignity of the person in virtue of man's supernatural destiny: to be *one* with God, which is the essence of *salvation* or true liberation. As the attacks on life have become more numerous and diverse in kind, the Church has raised her voice in clear terms again to defend life against these assaults.

These assaults range from genocide on a mass scale by a number of governments, the gross practice of abortion, to more subtle forms, such as economic, social and spiritual injustice (suppression of conscience and persecution), exploitation, manipulation, torture (mental and physical), and the reduction of the person's value to the social function he or she has. Both capitalism and Marxism are guilty here. Both have encouraged the reification of man, making him an object among other objects, rather than the subject he is, and so causing him to pursue a form of life almost exclusively in the mode of externalization, with little regard for the inner reality of his being. Existentialism was itself primarily a reaction to this tendency of modernity and mass culture.

The weakening of society's appreciation of the absolute value of life, and the abuses following in its train, have their roots in a materialistic conception of man or in a cultural residue thereof. The attacks on life exist because the two currently dominant ideologies, Marxism and capitalism conceive of man, his happiness and reality too narrowly, that is, they reduce human life to the material or structural level. And there can be no final solution to the world's problems as long as this is the case.

Human dignity has its basis in the ontological truth that man is the image of God. Referring to what should guide the life of nations, their political, social and economic activities, John Paul says in his Puebla speech: "Primacy must be given to what is moral, to what is spiritual, to what springs from the full truth concerning man."<sup>13</sup> And then he goes on to say, "We cry out once more: Respect man! He is the

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13. *Ibid.*, III. 4.

image of God!"<sup>14</sup> Most of the problems of the world stem from the fact that nations follow policies that are blind to this truth. If governments adhered to this deeper view of man, then there would be no survival problem, no hunger, less poverty, and the value of life would be respected.

Furthermore, deriving from the materialistic notion of man is a psychological compulsion that often motivates people. This compulsion is a drive for recognition, and it has been rendered "acceptable" in all societies and institutions, including the Church. We are referring here to what we can call the *status principle*. It is a false value which the Gospel severely censured. The status drive takes different forms in different people. It can be a desire for power, popularity, prestige, money or position. These desires are based on a need for acceptance, which the materially oriented world ignores. For because self-worth or value is denied as an intrinsic attribute of the person, people try to create self-worth by seeking the illusory values of the status principle. In pursuit of the goods of this false social goal, they are actually striving for what is an ontological *given*, although not fully appreciated. This *given* is the innate dignity of the human estate, which has its ground in man's supernatural end as a creature of God.

### Toward a Solution

Ironically, if Marxism could be freed from its tendency to pursue policies that are spiritually unjust (persecution and suppression of freedom), and Capitalism could be freed from its pursuit of self-interest (economic injustice), then both Marxism and Capitalism could be said to possess together half of the answer on the social, economic and political levels: Marxism in its appeal to collective responsibility, and Capitalism in its commitment to democratic values or freedom. But this is only one side of the coin. These two positive elements must be united with the *definitive* element, the contemplative value.

The contemplative value requires the establishment of a new world order that is directed to the spiritual growth of all people, including the intellectual and moral dimensions of such growth. The focus of this value or its ultimate aim is to approach the Absolute or God *experientially*. This is the actual purpose of human life; it is the vocation of man. Contemplation is the beginning of that life of intimate

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14. *Ibid.*, III. 5.

knowledge and unity with God that reaches its eternal fulfilment in Heaven. Of course the approach to contemplation will differ from one society to another depending on the culture. Naturally, a Buddhist will have an understanding of it different from that of a Christian or a Hindu, but the end is the same: an *experiential* awareness of and union with Ultimate Reality, with the Divine.

There are two concrete, practical steps the Church can take, in concert with the other world religions, in order to begin the long process of implementing this more human and spiritual vision of man, of which the first requirement is *global* disarmament. These measures include fostering an attitude of *solidarity* with all of humanity, and convoking an international congress of spiritual leaders.

The first step, that of fostering an attitude of solidarity with all of humanity, means that we are committed to a genuine sense of our *unity* with each member of the human family, that we take responsibility for all others, and leave no one out. Solidarity with all of mankind cannot become a mere slogan, nor even less so a platitude, but has to be a living *symbol* of our resolve to work for the amelioration of the planetary situation, in the three areas outlined above, in the name of mankind and the planet as a whole. This attitude is in opposition to that which claims a love for mankind in the abstract, but then encourages a hatred for individual member and groups of humanity. How can we love the whole of humanity whom we do not see, if we cannot love its members whom we do see? We have to begin undoing that attitude and the negative kind of thinking expressed in the slogan: "It's us against them." It is this latter attitude that perpetuates the hostility and confrontation between and among people, groups and states.

In this spirit of solidarity, the Church should encourage and work towards the convocation of an international congress of spiritual leaders from *all* the traditions and nations of the earth. The purpose of such a meeting would be to emphasize, first of all, the utter gravity of the global situation *vis-à-vis* the arms race, and to set the stage for disarmament by generating the psychological climate of *trust* necessary for such a momentous course of action.

The point is that if the spiritual leaders of humanity can meet and thrash out the nuclear issue as it relates to planetary survival, and deal with the question in all of its complexity, reaching a *consensus* on dis-

armament, then the congress can promulgate its deliberations, thus, accenting its profound concern. This will demonstrate to all the nations involved, that the masses of humanity, embodied in their religious leaders, *do not* support the arms race, and in fact, vigorously oppose it. This would be an important giant step forward. It could very well set in motion massive opposition to nuclear arms in *all* nations, for the proximate goal of the congress has to be *total* global disarmament, and the rejection of war as an instrument of securing the interests of states. Such a congress would be the planet's attempt to plead for its life, and to *demand* a change, before it is too late.

Here the immediate aim is to alter the present climate of the world by stressing the welfare of our planet as a whole and the common ground that exists, which must be identified. This insight is prophetically mentioned in *Pacem in Terris*, in which Pope John XXIII says: "There is reason to hope that by meeting and negotiating, men may, come to discover better the bonds that unite them together, deriving from the human nature which they have in common. . . (moreover). It is not fear that should reign but love."<sup>15</sup>

This great spiritual congress could make three significant proposals for the agenda of the founding of a new world order. Two of these involve man's life in the world and his relations with others, and the third concerns his ultimate destiny, which is begun in contemplation.

The first proposal is that the negative urge to resort to war be *transmuted* into the outward desire for the exploration of the universe. Both superpowers have an interest in this possibility. This represents tangible common ground. This would be an enormously positive and creative use of human energy and talent in which all the nations of the earth can share. This is not a frivolous idea, since only the *passion* to know, which is the basis of all true adventure (with a bit of fun as well), can substitute for the equally, though harmful passion for war. Both tendencies require the same kind of intensity. The competitive impulse of nations must be converted into co-operative efforts for cosmic exploration and global management. This introduces the second proposal.

It is this: that the bellicose propensity of nation states be further transmuted into an internationally co-operative programme to rid the

15: Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, ed. William J. Gibbons, S.J. (Glen Rock, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1963), 129, p. 43.

earth of starvation and extreme poverty. This is not only a matter of justice, for it is also a practical necessity. The hungry and poor of our planet are the lepers of the international community. And they are in the majority!

When my brothers and sisters are starving, homeless and naked, when they are ill, exploited and persecuted, and when the planet itself is threatened as it now is, then these economic, social and political conditions become and *are* spiritual concerns. The distinction between religion and politics collapses in the profound and disturbing realization of the necessity to *act* in order to save them and the earth. These two proposals represent the outward movement towards a solution to humanity's problems, combined with the need for disarmament.

The third proposal on the agenda for a new world order, and the very "heart" of it, which the congress can tackle, is the inward movement of contemplation. The congress could offer contemplation as the supreme value of the future global society, as opposed to the current values of consumerism and power, the very step-children of the status principle. The world must be reordered around the contemplative vision of things. The task is to achieve a *new* focus of valuation in the ultimate goal of each member of the human race. For contemplation *is* the final revolution in which the *definitive* awakening of man occurs, the awakening into the ineffable bliss of the Divine Presence.

The above proposals can be the values of a new world order. They maintain a balance between collective responsibility and individual development, or the outer and the inner, the external and interior life. These inner and outer movements, moreover, are product of man's search for the Absolute, especially the first and third proposals. The task of the future for all of us is to be globally oriented, but centred in a deep relationship with God.

If we would save our planet, and create the conditions for the possibility of a brighter future embracing all of humanity, then the political and economic ambitions of the superpowers, and all ideologies must be superseded. We must lock hands together, and build an enlightened civilization founded on the constructive values of *love, sharing and contemplative experience* or spirituality. In such a new society, each individual can achieve the actualization of his or her innate potentialities for growth in these values and activities. In this process of establishing a more human world in harmony with the Divine, we

can bypass the states and go directly to the people, if it should be required. In this way, true to her prophetic vocation which God and history have given her, the Church, united with the other spiritual forces of mankind, can, indeed must *seize the initiative of history*, and alter its course, so that it will not be too late for the world. Let us work towards this. Let us find the way to realize Pope Paul's exhortation given at the United Nations on October 4, 1965, when he pleaded, "No more war; war never again"!

If world leaders, if all of mankind can only learn, in the profoundest sense of *to learn, to will* and really pursue the first line in the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, "Lord make me an instrument of your peace", then there can be no doubt that the planet *will* survive. What a great tribute to St. Francis, in the eighth centenary of his birth for him to see the power and truth of his vision triumph in human history, because it is God's vision. Perhaps, Francis, that gentle, blessed little man, that spiritual giant and living witness to the "peace that passes all understanding", may yet teach the world how to attain this true and lasting peace, so illusive to our age. Let St. Francis become the symbol of our prophetic activities, for that is why God has raised him up.