

COMMENT

It is evidently Pope John Paul's main concern in Latin America that the Catholic Church should be preserved as a disciplined organised body. Catholics who live in western Europe or North America, where a sociologist might well class religion amongst entertainments or at least amongst spare time activities, can quite easily miss the importance of such a concern. In Britain, for instance, the Christian religion, of whatever Church, makes little difference one way or the other in public life. There are a few specialised issues, such as abortion or euthanasia, in which Catholics may be expected generally to take a particular stand, but the Church as an organisation is of no political significance. This is very nearly as true of Northern Ireland as it is of Britain.

In this country this is by no means a matter for regret, since so far as they have shown any political leanings at all, the leaders of the organised Churches have shown no sign of challenging the ideology of our society. The latest joint statement, for example from the Anglican Bishop and Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool on the subject of industrial relations and strikes shows the kind of subservience to the Prime Minister's views you would expect of an eighteenth century Erastian of the Church of England; the government's pay guidelines are treated as some kind of norm for Christian morality and the question becomes simply who is to 'blame' for breaking them. Happily no good Catholic or Anglican on the picket line in Liverpool is going to pay any real attention to this document; he may be interested to hear the opinion of these gentlemen but will have no tendency to agree with it. To Christians who live in this sort of world the idea of a strong disciplined Church with political significance as an organisation seems repellent. Memories of the days when Archbishops as such did have political power are not encouraging. The Irish have, perhaps, rather more complex political memories; for while the political influence of the Church in fairly recent times has been almost uniformly disastrous, there was an earlier time when the Catholic Church played an important part in preserving the national consciousness.

All this makes it difficult for British or Irish or North American Catholics to understand and sympathise with the position of the Church in, say, Paraguay today. Here there is just one organisation that has not been crushed or dominated by a ruthless military dictatorship and that is the Catholic Church. Not by its preaching, not by any extreme concern for human dignity or human freedom, but simply by its institutional structure it presents an obstacle and even a threat to the government. I do not say that there is not prophetic witness and protest in the Paraguayan Church, but even if there were not, even if it were simply the presence in Paraguay of an international organisation with communications open to the outside world and with massive support amongst the pop-

ulation, it would still be a major hindrance to the fascist state.

Now just as tyrannical regimes which use the rhetoric of socialism propagate an image of the Church as reactionary and counter-revolutionary, so the right-wing regimes of Latin America sedulously campaign through government press and radio to present the Church as taken over by Marxists masquerading as priests and no more than a part of the communist conspiracy. A Church which presents merely a political challenge to the regime presents no serious political threat. By a curious paradox, the political effectiveness of the Church in a Latin American context depends on the degree to which the Church can be seen to transcend politics. If the Church were to present a purely political gospel she would be crushed (with the aid of the CIA and sophisticated torture techniques from the United States) as easily as the left wing political organisations. Of course the government has not been prevented from imprisoning, torturing and murdering individual priests and leaders of Catholic organisation who can be represented as simply political activists, but the strength of the Church is in her roots amongst the people which involve far more factors than the political.

It seems clear that this is why the Pope at Puebla was so insistent on what he called the 'vertical dimension' of the Christian life and why he condemned a reading of the New Testament which would reduce Jesus to a political activist and nothing more. This over-simplified version of Jesus is not, of course, to be found in the writings of 'liberation theology' but it is what the military dictators would like people to believe that the left-wing Christians believe. We must not, said the Pope, confuse Jesus's own view of his mission with the view put about by his enemies; nor (by implication) should we confuse the real role of the Church in Latin America with that attributed to it by the military dictators.

The political significance of Jesus, and the reason why he died the death of a political subversive, was not that he was concerned simply with politics but that politicians had to be concerned about him, because his teaching and his presence was of itself subversive of the untruths, the violence and the forms of domination upon which their world was based. Like Jesus, the Church challenges all forms of human domination and exploitation but can never be reduced to the current political form of that challenge. The current form of challenge to the inhumanities of our capitalist world takes the political form of revolutionary socialism, and this is a good reason for a Christian to be a revolutionary socialist but not a reason for reducing the gospel to socialism. To do this from our armchairs in this country would be to make a theological mistake; to do so in Latin America would be to destroy the force of the Church's witness.

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