

Documents

Dialogue between the Church and the "Left" in Poland

A Polish book which could not be printed in Poland was published in Paris in 1977. The book is entitled The Church, the Left and Dialogue (Kosciol, lewica, dialog) and was written by Adam Michnik. It has circulated in Poland and during 1978 became the subject of intense discussion among the Polish intelligentsia. Many reviews and articles have appeared in unofficial Polish journals which circulate in typescript.

Formerly a supporter of the Communist Party, Adam Michnik became disillusioned with communism as a student: he took part in the reformist student movement of 1968 and was beaten up by the police. He now calls himself a liberal and a socialist, and is leader of the Social Self-Defence Committee which, under the name of the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR), was formed after the arrests of workers during the strikes of June 1976. Although he is not a religious believer, his book takes seriously the role of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and calls for the reconciliation of the secular "Left" with the Church "on a platform of liberal principles".

The book was reviewed in the unofficial Polish political and literary journal, Zapis (No. 4, 1977) which is now published in Britain by Index on Censorship. The reviewer, Fr Jacek Salij, is a Dominican who lives in Warsaw. A translation (©Keston College) of his review, which in Zapis is entitled "Dialogue is difficult but that doesn't matter", is printed below with the kind permission of Index on Censorship (21 Russell St., London W.C.2).

The basic method of approach in this book is exemplified in the author's sympathetic attitude towards other people. The only occasions on which Michnik tempers this attitude are when he believes that blatant bad faith is involved. The book's great purity and beauty stem from this generous spirit.

I shall formulate my own ideas in a different vein. I should like to express some of the resentments and fears which I believe are subconsciously troubling the Church today. My point of view will thus be characteristic in some ways of people who feel themselves wronged. Over the past few centuries both the Church and Christian thought have suffered – and are still suffering – so much injustice and intolerance that such resentment is justified.

I shall begin by stating that I am not concerned here with the wrongs inflicted on the Church by various totalitarian systems. Rather I am thinking of the way in which Christianity, when it has no wish to be liberal (and in the past Christianity has not been liberal), has been excommunicated from the class of phenomena considered respectable. Such excommunication is frequently confirmed by the most eminent creators of culture as well as by primary school teachers. The non-believer is probably unaware of the pain a Christian suffers when the articles of his faith are subjected to mockery (especially when that mockery is merely expressed in passing by honourable individuals who are not themselves engaged in stamping out religion), when his religion is unjustifiably

accused of obscurantism or when people cut themselves off from anything ambiguous or compromising in the Christian heritage of Europe simply by disavowing Christianity.

The reconciliation between the secular Left and the Church which Michnik proposes is to take place on the platform of liberalism. I am aware that Europe owes a great deal to liberalism. Indeed, Michnik's book is itself an excellent testimony to the intellectual and moral wealth of this trend in modern culture. Nevertheless, liberalism has a negative potential which is not merely theoretical. The Church has often been its victim.

What I fear more than anything else is the intolerance of liberalism, an intolerance which is treacherous because of its refinement, for liberalism's greatest virtue – in its own interpretation – is its universal tolerance. The liberal maxim, "there is no freedom for freedom's enemies" has often meant in practice "there is no freedom for those who do not want to accept the principles of liberalism".

No, I do not intend to judge the activities of the German liberals at the time of the *Kulturkampf*, or the French liberals' suppression of religious orders and denominational schools, or the English Liberal government's administration of the Irish Famine of 1846 which was consciously in accordance with neo-Malthusian principles. I agree that schools of thought far removed from authentic liberalism may hide behind a liberal mask.

I am best equipped to write about the lack of tolerance which I observe today. Christians are accorded the right to have faith in God, but they are not entitled to think that God exists in reality outside of their personal beliefs. If a Christian is not willing to be confined in this way he is labelled an obscurantist, an inquisitor, or a doctrinaire, though I cannot imagine how a consistent belief in God could threaten the rights of people who think otherwise, or how it could represent a limitation of the intellect.

I will give you an example. A so-called "man of our time" who has been brought up on liberal principles (and is also a socialist) tells me: "This is how you see things; I see them differently. Whether or not to believe in God is a question for the individual to decide."

That is his point of view and I respect it. But he expects me to think that way too. If I refuse to do so he classifies me as a fanatic, an enemy of freedom and goodness knows what else.

My point of view is this: "I believe that God really does exist and not only in my imagination. I also believe that both you and I are sinners and that sin makes it difficult for man to identify God. Therefore I believe that you too would see God if there were more good in you. I am not saying that I am better than you; you may be ten times better than me. Perhaps the stage in our development at which we find God lies somewhere different for each one of us. I only want you to know that you too can find God if your entire life is orientated towards that goal.

If I am denied the right to make such a declaration (and I am denied it by a censorship far harsher than that of the police – the censorship of public opinion) I cannot but feel that this is unfair. I realize that I must be carefully watched (I try to watch myself too) lest I should by any chance attempt to divide people into "the good ones" who believe in God and "the bad ones" who do not.

My dear liberals, do not forget to keep a watch on yourselves. You must realize that I am not censuring anyone, that I do not advocate repression or social ostracism, nor do I want to offend anyone. On the contrary, it is just that I do not accept the point of view, or the belief on which it is based, that religious faith ought to be restricted to a person's inner experiences. Why then do those who claim that they respect others' ideas get so annoyed with me? I tolerate different opinions and I do not challenge people's right to voice them. I only ask humbly to be allowed to hold and express my beliefs in peace.

The above reproaches are by no means directed at Adam Michnik. I only wanted to show the sort of reservations that may arise in the minds of Christians when they are invited to take part in a dialogue on the platform of liberal principles. Firstly, Christians would ask for a dialogue between equal partners. Secondly, I have doubts as to the liberals' interpretation of lawfulness and freedom. Christians have traditionally accused liberalism of having gone too

far in loosening the ties between law (which defends and guarantees freedom, or should do so) and morality. True, this coalition is by its very nature not a particularly firm one. St Thomas Aquinas wrote: "The purpose of man's legislation is not to forbid all evil. The law can prohibit only the more serious aspects of evil, those from which most people can restrain themselves and especially those which harm others and represent a real threat to society". (*Summa Theologiae* 1-2, q.96, a2). Even so, liberalism has made the connection between law and morality too weak.

I will try to illustrate this by the example of the different views on the divorce law. Fortunately, the age of sanctions which forced priests to marry persons who had been granted a civil divorce has passed. Such was the practice not only in revolutionary France but even in the Duchy of Warsaw (see the letter from the Duchy's bishops to the King, 3 March 1809). This fact deserves a mention in order to show that the Church's opposition to the principle of separation of Church and State was not as unjustified as we sometimes think. The interpretation of this principle was different in the past to that current in present-day democratic States.

But let us return to the subject, for I have digressed before I have even started to discuss it. Why did liberalism – and the currents of thought which stem from it – become so involved in the introduction of the divorce law? The main reasons were, of course, to promote the freedom of the individual and to spare those who had failed in marriage the ordeal of living together. Those who supported the legalization of divorce liked to interpret the Church's stand on the issue as a heartless defence of principles at the expense of the rights of the individual.

What do I have against the liberal stand? Above all I disapprove of the radical individualism which the supporters of the divorce law profess. Those who advocated the law did not understand, or they underestimated, the social implications of law. The function of law is not solely to give orders, to grant permission and to forbid. Law alters ways of thinking, formulates opinions, broadens or limits society's imagination in a desirable or an undesirable fashion.

The divorce law, while aiming to help unhappy couples, increases the number of unhappy marriages for the future. What is worse, it creates even greater numbers of unhappy children. That which by definition was meant to reduce the amount of suffering in the world leads to more decisions – often insufficiently thought out – which breed injustice and suffering. I cannot see that it is now possible or indeed desirable to abolish the divorce law in this country (although some restrictions would perhaps be practical). There can be no going back to the beginning. We must think now of ways to create institutions, higher than the law, which would preserve marriage and family life. I am amazed at the light-hearted and naïve delight – which I found also in Michnik's book – at the passing of the divorce law. I gather from this that liberalism does not feel guilty about it in the least. I acknowledge this with sadness as I do not have great hopes for co-operation between Christian thought and the liberal trend in our culture in creating institutions, above the law, which would bind the family together.

In Michnik's opinion, the Gospel lies at the base of our culture and every European should acknowledge this fact, whether or not he is a Christian. This opinion allows me to hope that secular thought will now begin to revise its attitudes towards the moral values of the Gospels, which it has so far rejected. I can understand that the element of doubt in secular solutions to problems (such as an unsuccessful marriage, the suffering experienced as a result of someone's unkindness, or the temptation to put an end to the life of someone who is already dying) may have a certain sublimity and appeal. I can understand that, because of their unambiguous nature, the Gospel teachings, unless they are accompanied by deep and spontaneous acceptance on the part of the person concerned, may be interpreted as rigid directives. But despite appearances, the Christian and secular moralities do not differ only over marginal issues or matters regarding the supernatural dimension of reality. Differences which appear to be marginal may involve different scales of values and different conceptions of morality. One of the main issues is whether man's

happiness and his desire to reduce suffering should determine a code of morals or whether they themselves should submit to such a code. Traditional secular morality favours the first alternative. Michnik, aware of the conclusions totalitarianism draws from the belief that moral values are relative, defends the concept of absolute moral values from a secular standpoint. This standpoint puts a new and exceptionally interesting perspective on the dialogue with Christianity. But such a dialogue cannot be restricted to the problems of political morality which are of particular interest to Michnik. The traditional points of friction between secular and Christian moral codes must also be included.

The problem of the relationships between law, morality and the idea of freedom itself should be one of the topics for discussion. It is well known that the liberal concept of freedom is somewhat amoral. This was spectacularly revealed in the principle of *laissez-faire* as applied to economics, which has fortunately been eradicated. The liberal attitude to freedom is characterized by an aversion to all ties and obligations which imprison men and present an obstacle to his development. Liberalism does not give enough thought to those ties which are constructive and without which man is vulnerable to other ties which enslave him. The existence of ties of various kinds is acknowledged by our language; we have the reciprocal human *bonds* of love and friendship and moral *obligations*, for example. I believe that, among other things, a lack of balance in differentiating between these two kinds of tie is the reason why a typical liberal will speak more loudly about the right to break the *bond* of marriage than about the *obligation* of loyalty; he will prefer to talk about a mother's right to kill her unborn child rather than speak of the child's right to live.

Thirdly, one feature common to both liberalism and socialism – and indeed to the whole of European culture – which worries me is their nominalist theology (I use the word "theology" in the sense of a conception of a supreme value). Michnik analyses this theology, but, I think, not thoroughly enough. Fourteenth-century nominalists were the first to use such uncompromising terms in formulating the conviction that God is

not subject to a moral code. As we know, Christian Europe believed until recently that moral principles were a reflection of God's nature, that they were radiated by God just as light is emitted by the sun. God might therefore act in a way incomprehensible to us, but never in disagreement with the moral code which the whole world was bound to follow.

It seems to me that secular thought is vulnerable to the temptation to exempt the highest authority from the moral code which it has itself created. Hence the practical (and very dangerous) conclusion that justice is so exalted an ideal that it may be declared a goal but need not be practised, and furthermore, that an injustice becomes just when it is committed in the name of justice. Similar conclusions can be drawn concerning human dignity, freedom etc. Michnik repeatedly and categorically rejects such a morality. Nevertheless, I am disappointed that his book lacks a sufficiently profound analysis of the behaviour of a large section of the secular Left between 1945 and 1955, all the more so since his account of this period is honest and impartial. By 1945 Poles really ought to have realized many of the system's shortcomings, given the Soviet Union's pre-war record of achievements in increasing liberty and improving social justice. How was it then that so many people – often exceptionally wise, courageous and selfless people – "had eyes to see, but could not see"? How did they become so proud that they could be certain that the whole nation was wrong and that they alone were right? It seems to me that their attitudes should be thoroughly examined, for they may, God forbid, be repeated in the future.

Fourthly, Michnik wants the dialogue between the secular Left and the Church to be founded on truth. With this in mind, he examines his conscience with an objectivity and courage which I greatly admire. One would hope that the Church's reaction to the proposed dialogue will be less reserved than was the German bishops' reply to the famous message from the Polish episcopate.* The very nature of the offer en-

* A letter of reconciliation sent in 1965.

sures that the reply will not be – nor indeed could it be – either an official reply or a broadly-based popular reaction. It will have to be a dialogue between the élites. This is all the more reason for it to aim at intellectual substance and moral integrity. I would like to make one suggestion to which I attach great importance. Michnik's motto in assessing the activities of the secular Left during the period of the Polish People's Republic is this: "We have sinned". In an extremely generous spirit, but without making excuses for her, he

says to the Church: "Ask yourselves whether you too have not sometimes made mistakes and had your weaknesses". This attitude is very appropriate. There can be no real dialogue unless both sides realize that even now, when we want to speak and act in good faith, we are not entirely innocent. Self-canonization and scrupulosity in assessing each other's faults and failures would invalidate any dialogue, however promising it might seem at first.

FR JACEK SALIJ, OP

Lenin Attacks the Church

The following secret letter from Lenin, dated 19 March 1922, was excluded from Lenin's Complete Works and only published in two Russian émigré publications in 1970–71, in Vestnik RSKhD No. 98 (1970) and then in Russkaya Mysl No. 2836, 1 April 1971.

After the Civil War of 1918–21, Russia faced famine and economic chaos. Patriarch Tikhon, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, appealed to all the churches to help the starving first in August and then in December 1921. On 2 January 1922 the VTsIK (All-Russian Central Executive Committee) issued a decree which authorized the confiscation of museum treasures and then on 16 February this decree was made to include all church valuables save those used for the Liturgy. In reaction to this Patriarch Tikhon publicly encouraged Orthodox parishes to hand over any valuable items which were not consecrated. However, on 23 February the VTsIK changed its policy and issued a decree demanding that all church valuables, i.e. including consecrated objects, be confiscated. The government knew that the Russian Orthodox Church would not accept such a demand, and from Lenin's secret letter it is clear that he intended to use the Church's resistance for his own ends. On 28 February Patriarch Tikhon forbade the handing over of consecrated objects, and when the Orthodox faithful refused to obey the authorities' demands their resistance was brutally suppressed. For example, in the town of Shuya, north-east of Moscow, on 15 March 1922, four people were killed, ten seriously wounded and

many arrested when the authorities came to confiscate the church's property. Fifty-four people, including a number of priests, were eventually tried. Eleven of the defendants were executed. In Russia as a whole Lenin's attack on the Church cost many lives: according to Nikita Struve "during 1922, 2,691 secular priests, 1,962 monks and 3,447 nuns were liquidated" (Christians in Contemporary Russia, Harvill Press, London 1967, p. 38).

TOP SECRET

To Comrade Molotov,
for Members of the Politburo

I request that under no circumstances a copy be made, and that each member of the Politburo (including Comrade Kalinin) make his comments on the document itself.

On the matter of the incident in Shuya, which has already been debated in the Politburo, I consider it vital to take a firm decision immediately about the overall policy for the struggle in this area. As I doubt that I shall manage to be personally present at the meeting of the Politburo on 20 March, I am therefore expressing my point of view in writing.

The Shuya incident must be considered in relation to the information which Rosta confidentially passed on recently to journalists: that members of the Black Hundreds* [i.e. "reactionary" clergy and laity. Ed.] in Petrograd

* The Black Hundreds was the name given to a reactionary organization