

Documents

“The Curse of Social Equality”

Czech Catholic philosopher Václav Benda was born in 1946. After being dismissed from his post as an assistant professor of philosophy in 1971 he studied and worked as a computer programmer, but lost this job after signing Charter 77. He is a founder-member of VONS, the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted, set up on 1 May 1978, and became a spokesman for Charter 77 in February 1979. On 29 May 1979 he was arrested with nine other members of the Committee. The following October he was sentenced to four years' imprisonment for "subversion of the Republic". Upon his release, he completed his term as a spokesman for Charter 77. In 1985 he founded a new samizdat philosophical journal, Paraf (Alternative Philosophy).

In this essay, "The Curse of Social Equality", Benda examines the nature and effects of false ideals, among which he takes social equality as a particularly dangerous illusion and challenges its basis in terms of New Testament teaching. The text published below is an abridged version of the document, which originally appeared in a collection of seven essays dedicated to Czech Catholic theologian Fr Josef Zvěřina on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. The collection was produced by the samizdat publishers Nove Cesty Mysleni (New Ways of Thinking) under the title Polis a Religio. Benda's essay has also been published in Rozmluvy (Colloquium). London, No. 3/1984.

In this article, I propose to argue against two serious misconceptions which, because

of their persuasive power, are often passed off as the truth. I refer to the following propositions: a) that socialist or Marxist ideals are essentially good and right, but have been corrupted by misapplication; b) that the socialist notion of equality is a common goal for all mankind, and that only the means employed to achieve it are open to serious discussion. Such assertions are often made by Christians, and supported by references to the Gospels, and it is to them that I wish to address my argument.

First, let me consider some of the Marxist and socialist ideas which have — it is often said — been the foremost moral and intellectual initiatives of the past hundred years. My own education and upbringing makes me all too familiar with these ideas, and I would like to offer one or two observations for the benefit of those who are prompted to defend them. Since life is brief, and excess facts are a notorious obstacle to truth, it may be useful to adopt one simple criterion of thinking. When someone promises you heaven on earth in reward for human endeavour alone, you need read no further: the author is at best a fraud, or at worst a dangerous lunatic. Both revelation and historical experience show that every claim to "improve" society, or to "remove a particular human tare which mars the beauty of the overall plan" has only ever led to the death and enslavement of millions. Of course, the Gospel also offers a further *a priori* objection: "by their fruits shall you know them". The corruption of ideas is an age-old phenomenon. It goes back as far as the fall of the angels and the days of original sin. If

evil gets a hold, it invariably grows from the seed of pure intellect and pure ideas, to which man in his weakness is so prone to yield. The fruits of man's exploits are bitter and imperfect; but if they are poisoned, the poison is born of the intellect. God surveyed his creation and "saw that it was good". It is evil ideas which have corrupted men and given them the capacity to perform evil deeds. The source of evil, then, lies not in creation, not in nature, but in the free spirit.

Of course, one can point to many aspects of this teaching which make it inevitable that it should have become a source of temptation, ruin, and indeed dreadful punishment for man's accumulated offences — reflected all too clearly in the socialist doctrine. There has been the sin of pride against God and His Creation, best illustrated by the saying: "Philosophers merely interpret the world. The problem is how to change it." (It is important to bear in mind that Christ's notion of "changing the heart" was precisely the opposite of this. It was the beginning of listening, not of destructive mastery.) There has also been the sin of despair or nihilism, which contradicts everyone and everything with the term "alienation", or applies rigid historical determinism to overturn all traditional modes of thought and existence, and ultimately destroys the sinner himself and his own freedom. There have been many sins against truth, which has become an object of possession (belonging to the revolutionary vanguard and its "objective" interests), and has been transformed into something dead and ontologically neutral. Socialist ideas also contain many elements which have their roots in Old Testament tradition or within the historical framework of the Catholic Church. These are changed only slightly at the superficial level, but are very different in their ultimate purpose. Here, I would wish to express my objection to just one socialist idea, so confusingly defended by many Christians: the ideal (or curse) of social equality.

First, it must be emphasised that so-called "socialist" societies have succeeded in establishing a system of social inequality on an unprecedented scale — as a logical consequence of the enforced application of human ideas to created reality. But alas, like all glaring truths, this fact never fails to become the object of discussion and doubt. Second, it must be said that, as all socialist primary sources will confirm, the ideal of

social equality may be made fact only by the use of violent means, the elimination of political and civil equality, and the denial of the dignity and freedom of the individual. It leads, in short, to a practical regression to a pre-Christian past. Neither of these points are, of course, sufficient to discredit the ideal itself; at most they may be said to discredit its application. For is not social equality something that the Christian church should strive for? and is it not the case that inequality presents a serious challenge to the Christian conscience? There are a number of different aspects to this problem, and so much writing has been devoted to it that we must restrict ourselves to just a few specific references.

Poverty is a gift, one of the greatest gifts allotted to us all: as a form of Christ's presence, it is a gift to the poor — who are like their Lord in their poverty — and to others who encounter and recognise Him in the poorest of their fellow men. If the concept of poverty is morally and ontologically clear, and if poverty has often rightly been presented as an exemplary path to follow, the issue of possession is considerably more double-edged. Of course, possession may be an obstacle and a threat to salvation (it is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven), but it can also be something good and right. The Christian understanding of possession is in fact much in line with that presented in the Law of Moses: justice and generosity towards the poor is rewarded by increased wealth in Heaven. One might also say, perhaps, that wealth is "that happy fault" which permits us to recognise the glory of our Redeemer. It is a stumbling block for many, but also a great and necessary school which teaches responsibility and reverence towards the Lord's work and His Sovereignty. For we belong to God. Christ came to "His own" in order that we might truly live as creatures made in God's image; and therefore, so that we may be true to our estate, it is necessary that we should have something of our own and learn to love and care for our charges. Like freedom, wealth is an inviolable token of God's love towards us, which we are in a position to abuse; and our responsible control of wealth is a prerequisite of our salvation.

Corresponding to the dual nature of wealth is a dual directive which the Christian receives in revelation: on the one hand he is urged to give alms, to be generous and share all that he has with his brother, and on the other he is categorically forbidden to

covet his neighbour's goods. Any effort to achieve social equality without respect for this commandment lays open the way for contravention of the entire Decalogue. Truth is transformed into falsehood as wealth ceases to be a resource for generosity and creative investment, and poverty is no longer a source of hope and a gift, but a veritable curse.

However, something should also be said about those rare cases where social equality is sought without ulterior motive, by peaceful and morally irreproachable means. Our Lord said that the poor would always be with us, and sharply repudiated the proposal that he should turn stones into bread. This is a clear indication of the scope of our discipleship, and the limits beyond which our efforts become misdirected as, in our pride, we seek to frustrate God's plan. Of course, we should work towards the elimination and mitigation of social inequality; of course we should give alms and share our wealth; but the emphasis should be on the act, not on the ideal. The road to hell is paved with ideals as much as with good in-

tentions, and the social equality ideal is particularly dangerous if only for the reason that it contradicts Christ's promise to be with us until the end of time in the shape of the poor and those who suffer. Far from being a neglected Christian duty, social equality is one of the great temptations which the Father of Lies places in our path. "You have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, now eat also of the Tree of Life", he would say. "Then you will be like gods. You will eliminate poverty from the earth, and you will become greater than God, for you will show that you have the power to correct His creation and redeem it from the curse of original sin."

Ideals are universally respected, and the ideal of social equality appears so unarguably praiseworthy that it might seem a scandal to discredit its validity. Nevertheless, since Christ was crucified it has been a Christian prerogative to do just that, and two thousand years on we should surely have learned to do so without resort to a language which caters to the public appeal of the day.

"Deep Calleth Unto Deep" — A Dialogue About Faith

We publish below a few abridged extracts from a lengthy correspondence between Fr Josef Zvěřina and the writer Eva Kantůrková. Fr Zvěřina, a signatory of Charter 77, is a Roman Catholic priest and theologian who spent 14 years in prison in Czechoslovakia during the repression of the 1950s and later; the parochial duties which he assumed on release are now prohibited to him by the authorities, and he is often harassed and publicly attacked. The dissident novelist Eva Kantůrková was detained "for investigation" in 1981 and held for 11 months without trial in Ruzyňe prison before being released without any retraction of the charges against her; proceedings can thus be renewed whenever the authorities see fit.

This correspondence began soon after Kantůrková's arrest. As is clear from several passages in the letters, they were incorporated into those written to or by her husband — otherwise they could never have reached their destination. The correspondence continued after Kantůrková's release in 1982.

Starting as philosophical questions put to a respected friend (using the polite "you" form) the letters gradually assumed a more personal and affectionate note, and the "thou" customary between close friends replaced the "you".

The correspondence circulates in Czechoslovakia as a samizdat booklet under the title Deep calleth unto deep . . . A dialogue about Faith. It was published in Czech by Opus Bonum (Munich) in 1985. The full text in English is available from Keston College for the cost of photocopying and postage.

Ruzyňe 15.10.81

. . . It occurred to me during the night that people who do not believe in God have the wrong idea of him. They think of him as a moral or philosophical concept, a commandment personalised — and this personalisation is just what seems naïve and a bit ridiculous — a commandment with an independent existence quite detached from