Religion, State and Society, Vol. 20, Nos 3 & 4, 1992

Christianity in the Post-Communist Vacuum

JÓZEF TISCHNER

The confrontation of Christianity with communism in Poland made a most interesting spectacle. Two opposing theories, brought down to earth from the world of ideas, were now to have their true worth put to the test in the process of being put into practice. As long as both remained in the heavenly realm of abstract ideas both managed to radiate a certain attractiveness and develop an appeal. However, as soon as both descended into this vale of tears and became the driving force for human actions they were seen very differently. Ideas which claimed that they would judge reality at the bar of justice, in order then accordingly to transform reality, were themselves summoned to the court of reality and condemned.

However, it would be a simplification to work from the premise that in recent decades it was only these two ideas – Christianity and communism – which confronted one another on the stage of time. From the beginning there was a third player in this confrontation: the idea of freedom. Admittedly freedom at first stood on the sidelines in this arena. For a while it looked as if it was the communists who should be regarded as the true champions of freedom, and this brought a lot of kind-hearted liberals under their spell. Then the church stepped forward as the mainstay of freedom, and this brought the liberals over to the church's camp. But now doubts are spreading in the church's camp as well. Before our eyes there is a turning away from the church – both Christianity and religion in general have to accept a sharp drop in the number of followers. Might it be that liberalism will prove to be the only idea that is victorious?

The penetration of the social fabric with ideas is described by the not altogether felicitous term 'acculturation'. We have in mind a mutual enrichment of cultures as a result of their contact and interpenetration. We can conceive of an idyllic development which begins with the encounter of cultures–two cultures penetrate each other, enrich each other and as a result bring forth undreamed-of fruit on either side: highly prized works of art and literature. This beautiful, idyllic dream was dispelled, however, by the reality of the confrontation which we experienced at first hand during the era of communism. The struggle between ideas soon turned into a full-blooded struggle between people, which brought forth quite different fruit: prisons, labour camps, new atrocities and new forms of martyrdom. The ultimate criterion of truth should have been the obvious validity of the idea, but as ever what counted was the steadfastness of the martyr. The whole tragedy of the conflict was laid bare in the martyr's death: the idea could put its viability to the test only by finding people who were prepared to lay down their lives for it.

Let us turn to some basic questions. What did communism mean for man? What change did Christianity undergo in the confrontation with communism? What were the most important consequences of this conflict?

The rivalry of communism and Christianity has had a decisive impact on our age. This period is now coming to an end. On this giant battlefield, as far as the eye can see, there are no more heroes, only the starving still wandering around. We are all surrounded by a feeling of emptiness. One looks back nostalgically to the time when there were motivations other than rapaciousness.

In the Communist Element

What did communism mean for Christians? Depending on the situation different elements were emphasised. The deeper Christians were immersed in the communist element, the stronger was their impression that communism is not a negation of Christianity, but rather a parody of it. It is true that communism fought vehemently with Christianity, but at the same time it wanted to imitate it in everything, and thus ended up as a parody of it. Communism bore within itself a great envy of religion. What was it actually that communism wanted? It wanted to take possession of man, it wanted to have man absolutely, undivided and exclusively for itself – in the way that, in the communist perception, God has man. Communism is a power that is greedy for man.

As early as 1959 Leszek Kołakowski wrote about the way that communism parodies Christianity in his article 'The priest and the court jester' on the theme of 'the theological legacy in modern thought' (*Twórczość* no. 10). For part of this legacy was also to be found in the Marxist stream of thought. The fundamental questions of Marxism were in origin and content questions of Christian theology. Belief in the ultimate meaning of history, the question of the relationship between freedom and necessity, the principle of the unique significance of the working class, dialectical thinking and many other elements were of theological provenance. Communist power – and here it is like religious power – wants to keep a tight rein on everybody with the 'bridle of the catechism'. Ultimately the most important Marxist guidelines for the process of decision-making were in the theological mould. Kołakowski mocked: 'At the burial of one god who has outlived his time [new] gods are raining down from heaven. The godless have found their own saints and the blasphemers are building themselves new chapels.' Kołakowski thereby provoked a wave of indignation among the Marxists. Catholic intellectuals felt so flattered by this daring criticism of Marxism, all the more since it came from the pen of an until recently important Marxist, that they were blind to the corollary of this criticism: namely to the conclusion that follows from it that, seen in this way, communist absolutism can ultimately be nothing else than a continuation of religious absolutism.

So we found ourselves confronted with a parody. Between the parody and its subject there is a point of contact, for without contact no spark would cross over. This point of contact between communism and Christianity was the community. Both communism and Christianity made men the offer of entering into a community with other men; but their starting points were opposing ideas of what community is. '*Religio*' means 'union/communality', '*Kommune*' also means 'community', but they denote opposite poles. The difference is not only that '*religio*' means a community with God and '*Kommune*' one with other men, but the understanding of interpersonal relations is also fundamentally different.

What kind of relationship is meant by '*Kommune*'? Our starting point must be that communism from its origin was more than just an approach to solving the economic and political problems of the early capitalist era. Alongside the economic and political content there was also a 'new ethic'. This ethic was like a light which illuminated the

path of the revolution and which justified its bearers, i.e. absolved them of guilt. Communism was striving for a 'transvaluation of values, a revolution in the realm of values', as a consequence of which the meaning of good and evil would be newly defined. From then on it became clear that the exploitation of man and the root of all evil was to be seen in private *property*, and especially in the private ownership of the means of production. Communism launched a frontal attack on private ownership and praised to the skies 'socialised', 'state' and 'collective' property.

At this point the taking up of Christian ideals was unmistakable. After all, we read also in the Acts of the Apostles that the early Christians shared everything with one another. Were not Ananias and his wife Sapphira punished by death for keeping back for themselves part of the proceeds from the sale of a piece of land, although they pretended to have placed everything at Peter's feet? The abolition of private ownership of the means of production seemed to be a way of realising Christian ideals, namely justice, equality and brotherhood. It was to be hoped that under the influence of communism Christian societies would become more Christian.

The criticism of private property had varying consequences at different periods and in different countries. The boundaries between what was allowed and what was forbidden were not always drawn in the same place. But the principle stood, and was summed up in the following question: is man as man also 'collective property' or can he be regarded as 'the private property of himself'? Thus man as such was at stake. Communism insisted that man in his totality was a 'product of society' and as such 'collective property'. Man is at his own disposal only to the extent that the '*Kommune*' permits it.

Here too there were parallels with Christianity. Unlimited surrender to God – the love of God 'before all else' – was replaced by unlimited surrender to the community. The community thus took on the role of the absolute. There is nothing higher than the community. Just as the Christian was to subordinate his will completely to the will of God, so too the communist was to subordinate his will completely to the '*Kommune*'. And therein freedom was supposed to lie. To be free meant grasping the inner logic of history and getting in tune with it. For the Christian does not freedom also mean unity with the grace of God and following God's directions?

From a certain point the differences become clear. Communism was accompanied by atheism, materialism and the idea of revolution. One could certainly find intellectuals who would object that the above-named elements became part of communist teaching purely by chance, or that they are also among the less important contents of Christianity; for one could conceive of communism without the atheist and materialist components, just as Christianity would be feasible without renunciation of the theory of revolution. Those intellectuals would furthermore assert that negative theology in fact contains some elements of atheism and that the universal understanding of creation as the 'raw material' for human work is to be found to some extent already in the book of Genesis. These and similar ideas became the theoretical basis for the movement of 'progressive Catholics', who were prepared without great reservations to support the social policy of the communists and to enter into an alliance with the communist party. In return they were allowed to practise their religion in very narrow parameters – and in fact as a 'private matter'.

Finally, what was communism? It was an ideal, a never-realised idea of community which, however, had an effect strong enough to destroy existing social relationships. According to this ideal the whole came before the part and only the whole gave meaning to the part. At the same time everything was based on power and force. Power – understood as the capacity to perform work – was the most important

bond in the construction of society. Power was also to be seen in action: he who acts, is. But one might act only within the limits set by the '*Kommune*' and only in its interests. Within the communist state structure totalitarian might reigned. It had two important distinguishing features: firstly, it believed that the compulsion it exercised was an expression of the Power that governs the whole of reality; secondly, it worked on the premise that it could control the whole of man, because there is nothing in man which he did not first receive from might. In this way the communist desire 'for the whole man' could be satisfied.

The communist ideal could never be fully put into practice because society (social matter) and man as an individual resisted it. There was no lack of attempts to put it into practice, and each one was inaugurated by force and each one claimed new victims. This developed into the tragedy of whole peoples and states. In parallel the experience of evil grew – in breadth, height and depth. And this evil returned again and again, spreading horror mixed with fascination. Was it possible for one person to plan such a fate for another? If after the Enlightenment people asked how it was still at all possible to believe in God, after these immense crimes of communism – after Kolyma – one wonders whether and how it will ever be possible again to rely on man. Doubt in man was a significant factor in the destruction of social bonds and finally undermined communism itself. And today this doubt is the greatest hindrance in the search for a way to democracy. The communist disease in the post-communist era is based on calling man totally into question – doubt is all-embracing.

Faith at the Crossroads

Confrontation with the parody makes man feel the need to go back to his roots. The first question was: what is Christianity? In this question there was a note of great longing for authenticity. Where can one find an answer to all these problems? In the gospel, of course. And so in Polish Catholicism there was a growing tendency to return to Christianity. People made a pilgrimage back to the gospel. At first only academic circles were affected; but after the Second Vatican Council other circles were drawn into the movement. This return was no simple process. But the obstacles were overcome and the goal was reached: on several levels in varying degrees the identity of Christianity was affirmed.

However, if one wishes to identify the main motive for this search one must bear in mind the context in which the search took place. And this was the direct, living and constantly recurring experience of evil – the picture of fallen man. Man proved to be extremely unreliable, a being capable of treachery at any time. This tendency was not a fully developed Manichaeism with its belief in the ultimate triumph of evil over good, but rather a Manichaean fear of evil, which is constantly and everywhere lying in wait and which after even the longest absence will inevitably return, so that one must for ever tirelessly search for new hiding places, for good is like a flower in premature bloom which will be killed by the frost. Manichaeism also cast its shadow over thinking about freedom. On the one hand man's right to freedom would soon turn into brute tyranny. This thought gave rise to a certain conception of power. Power is ambivalent: it is evil when it offers the force it has available in the service of evil; but it can also be good when it devotes itself to good. Manichaeism mostly accompanies the cult of absolutism.

What is the first fruit of this return to the roots of Christianity? Within the framework of Catholicism there was a polarisation – there were two currents, one 'evangelical' in character, the more strongly orientated towards 'catechism'. It was

not a matter of dogmatic differences, it was merely that the path to the roots seemed to have a varying length. Take the example of human value. In the catechism-oriented current it was based on the dogma of creation: man is the image of God. In the evangelical current of the other hand it was derived from the fact of redemption. 'What value must man have had in the eyes of the creator to deserve so mighty a Redeemer, for God to give his Only Begotten Son, in order that man might not be lost' (*Redemptor hominis*, 10). This varying perspective is also clearly seen in the attitude to the crucifixion: in the catechism-oriented view it was a further proof of how wretched man is that he did not shrink from nailing his God to the cross; the gospel-oriented view discovered man's greatness in it. The first viewpoint is a breeding-ground for Manichaeism, the second places grace in the foreground. As a consequence catechism saw a point in religious education: if you believe then behave according to God's law; the gospel directed attention to participation: if you have a part in the mystery of Christ then you will know yourself what you have to do. Some are of the opinion that one can derive faith from good works – put it into practice and you will find your faith; others nurture their faith in order to be able to do good as a result. If the former are intent on making a show of their convictions, the latter are constantly striving to deepen them. The perspective of the gospel brings us new perceptions which can become the foundation of a religious renewal. The following are the most important ones.

First and foremost is the discovery of the heroic dimension of the gospel – there is quite simply no faith without heroism. Christianity is strong through the blood of its martyrs, for the testimony of blood is far more important than any instruction. We do not mean martyrs for abstract ideas, but martyrs for love of one's neighbour: my neighbour is an absolute value for me. Thereby my attitude to human rights is predetermined: the rights of man are thus first and foremost not *my* rights, but my *neighbour's* rights. My right is in the form of an obligation to my neighbour – I should make a sacrifice, any sacrifice, for his freedom, his dignity and his wellbeing and constantly overcome anew my own egoism. In heroic love there may be the 'danger' of loving one's neighbour more than oneself, but not in the liberal countries of Western Europe, where for the present the rights of man are perceived as *'my'* rights, which furthermore are often used against the church. We are in an age in which one set of Christians is engaged in a determined struggle for the loosening of church discipline, while the others accept persecution and years of imprisonment for faithfulness to the church and her discipline. With the same dogmatic position and the same textbooks on ethics the gospel is lived in quite different ways.

Evangelical heroism, however, contains within itself a certain ambiguity which has only recently come to light. The question is whether this heroism is ethical or religious in character. What is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount? What is the parable of the Good Samaritan all about? The return to the gospel brings out the ethical dimension of the gospel. The strictly religious element remains in the background. Does the gospel thereby lose something? The gospel does not lose out, because as an ethical text it achieves a far wider effect, and consequently appeals not only to those consciences that have found faith in 'Christ as God'. Each one of them is and can be a Samaritan. This realisation is of enormous significance.

Certain consequences flow from it. From the point of view of ethics communism must take particularly hard criticism. One cannot emphasise forcibly enough that communism appeared 'amoral' to Catholics – despite all the features in common with Christianity that were highlighted by the 'movement of progressive Catholics'. Communist morality approved things and forms of behaviour which were unaccep-

table for Christians and Catholics – for example, abortion, divorce, the use of force. And yet for a while it looked as though the communists would be able to lay claim to universal ethical justification. In the last analysis in this world you have got to help justice to break through. Killing the enemy on the way to a just order is after all right and proper if we are all property of the community. Communist terror, ever increasing and with no end in sight, and coupled with absolute economic inefficiency, showed clearly enough how absurd such a view is. The communists wondered how many more millions of people would have to be sacrificed before the survivors understood that they did not belong to themselves. Under the influence of Kolyma the realisation gradually dawned that the origin of all evil is a fatal contempt for man, and not any form of private property. First comes the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' and only then 'Thou shalt not steal'. These facts brought about a rejection of the transvaluation of values. The Christian principle of love for one's neighbour came back into favour. The communist ethic gradually dwindled to a painful and bloody myth.

Christianity found a common language with those dissident groupings which broke away from communism. The throng of good Samaritans grew and the church felt duty bound to take them all under her wing. In a world shaped by Kolyma the Samaritan, for whatever reason, was ready to accept the Christian *ethos*, but not yet the Christian *logos*.

This circumstance was bound to provoke controversies which seemed to be a distant echo of Pelagianism. It had to be decided who the *true* Christian is. Was this question a consequence of returning to the roots? Let us proceed from the assumption that everybody who knows who his neighbour is should be regarded as a Christian. The dissidents saw their neighbour above all in every victim of totalitarian oppression. The dissidents took up a struggle against the system in power. Many were imprisoned; it cost some their lives. This heroism was treated with wonder and respect. Against this background those Catholics – like the 'progressive' group – who were able to make an accommodation with the regime looked really pathetic. Of course, they were only a handful, by no means all Catholics. To generalise from them would be totally out of place. After the fall of communism, however, the question of one's neighbour returned, for example in the discussion on abortion: 'So who is my neighbour?' And it happened that many a hanger-on of yesterday pushed the dissident into a corner because the latter had quite a blurred conception of the matter. Isolated exceptions apart, do we not recognise here a struggle of ideas that have not been properly thought through?

In the midst of the argument about the meaning and the scope of the gospel *ethos* one constantly meets the problem of the community. What is a community? Putting this question at all is an expression of protest against the recent past. In any case the experience of communism teaches what a community is not. But in positive terms what is it? The answer to this question requires a still more important decision on whose property man is. In this we touch on the problem of the 'greed (of power) for man', to which two opposite attitudes are possible.

One attitude has the premise that man belongs exclusively to himself and no community or neighbour can lay any claim to him. The community always has a tendency to suppress. Other people are my hell. Man's freedom presupposes freedom from the community. From this arose post-communist individualism, which has thrived on very different soils and has developed very diverse forms. If it rejected the national community, then it was out of fear of nationalism; if it opposed the religious community, then it was because it was afraid of the inquisition. It accepted the state

only as a guarantee of individual freedom. This individualism does not oppose religion, but keeps its distance from the church. Religion is acceptable to it only as a relationship with God; one's neighbour – especially in church – gets in the way and is perceived as an obstacle on the path to redemption. A characteristic of the flight from community is a sense of pain, which is significant for any kind of romantic religiosity: man bears suffering for millions, but holds it against those millions that he has to do it. Rejection of community is a distant echo of Manichaeism which has thrown its shadow over community.

On the other hand, the second position was determined to make man part of a community again. In this instance it was the Manichaean attack on individualism which brought about the turn towards community. The dominant idea here was solidarity. The experience of Solidarity as a movement constituted the context. This integration in the community is no easy process because first of all the irksome legacy of communism with the monster of 'pseudo-community' has to be overcome. So, what should a national community be like if it does not want to foster nationalism and xenophobia? How should a state be designed so that it cannot degenerate into a totalitarian structure? The same concerns accompany any reflection on the model of an authentic political party, a trade union or a form of local government. How can all these institutions be established by people who are highly allergic to words like 'community', 'cooperative', 'team' and 'collective'?

The role of the church in this process requires especially great sensitivity. Hegel once said something which must also be worthy of note for a non-Hegelian: 'Religion is the place where a people defines for itself what it holds to be the truth.' Later he writes: 'but torn apart in this way from innerness, from the last shrine of conscience, from the quiet place where religion has its seat, the constitutional principles and institutions no more come to a real focus than they remain in abstraction and vagueness' (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Suhrkamp Verlag), vol. 12, pp. 70 and 72). What the communists were about was building a state of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' without or even against the 'principle of conscience'. Should anybody who wants to rebuild the state even consider this way again? Is it sensible to ignore historical wisdom and the experience of the church with community? The role of the church should not be confused with the 'leading role of the party'. What has already been a parody cannot become the subject for another parody.

A key position must be accorded to the consciousness of power. In the time of persecution it was obvious that the church achieved a position of power only when it was robbed of all power. In the soul of every man there is a deep-rooted religious restlessness and a need for God. And this is where we find the origin of the power that the church has over man; but this power has nothing to do with force. Just as illness gives a doctor a certain power over the patient, so the human longing for God opens the way into man's heart for the church. This longing is original, everything else is secondary. Do then the representatives of the church need any other power over man than the one that they have as a result of this natural original longing? Should the church succumb to the temptation of the 'other power', then doing so will deprive the church of the power which it has. The church has power only when it has none. The 'other', worldly, power of the church could all too quickly completely undermine its real position of power.

One More Formulation of the Question

I have repeatedly indicated that post-communist consciousness is accompanied by a certain Manichaeism, which has penetrated from the world to the sphere of religion. What does this mean for Christianity?

We urgently need a renewed consciousness of *grace*. Grace overcomes evil. However, one cannot think about grace without touching on the problem of freedom. In this connection one must pose the question of freedom – what actually is freedom, sin or grace? Seen from the first point of view it is a victory of man against God, from whom man has managed to 'wrest' something. Then freedom must remain directed against God. To be with God then means to sacrifice freedom, as the Manichaean view of freedom, and of man who is the bearer of freedom, would have us believe. According to the other conception freedom is God's first gift, which the other gifts can only follow. St Paul believed that Christ 'gave' us freedom. By following this path reconciliation with liberalism would be possible. Which of the two answers will shape our future?

There is a great deal of truth in the statement that after the confrontation with communism Christianity must enter into a confrontation with liberalism. What until now has been secret is coming to the light of day. Christianity may have a new enemy, but everything goes back to the old question: 'Whose property is man?'