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The Christian Churches in Europe 1918–1996*

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Various factors have determined the approach I am adopting in this talk: my lecture title is extremely general and broad and the time allotted me will allow for only a brief exposition of the subject. It would not do to paint even a broad outline of the history of the last three-quarters of a century or embark upon a description of the different situations created in Europe by the pluralism of the churches or the breaking up of the continent into thirty or so separate entities each of which has its own character and form of government. The only way of dealing with the theme is to focus on several major ideas, underline some constants and highlight the most radical changes which have left landmarks in history. Given these limitations, I hope that you will forgive the necessarily summary nature of my talk.

My title makes an important point: it is the juxtaposition of the geographical entity of Europe with the pluralism of its churches that makes for the uniqueness of our continent. Europe is the only continent which has had the gospel spread throughout its length and breadth for centuries. This is one element in its distinctive character and one which could make for unity. But Christendom is divided into churches which have fought each other relentlessly. So even today, Europe is divided into several regions as a result of the two great schisms in history: first the separation of the Latin West from the Greek East, then the establishment of new churches at the Reformation. The question is whether, in our century, the Christian churches have on balance striven to unite or divide the continent.

The lack of harmony between these different forms of Christianity has a profound effect not only on such issues as the formulation of faith and the definition of dogma, liturgy and spirituality but also on the relationship between church and society. These churches do not share the same idea of the relation between the church as an institution and the way society is organised. Some think they can draw moral teaching from Revelation and make it a duty of conscience for their congregations to act in accordance with a code of collective behaviour. Others hesitate to intervene in the problems of society and leave it to each Christian to act as he or she freely chooses. Certain churches have a long tradition of submission to the power of the state in which they humbly recognise the workings of providence. Others have kept their independence either because history has helped them to emancipate themselves or because they have been able to bend political power into the service of their own mission. These differences are as old as the hills: the outcome of different theologies

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and different historical situations. They partly go to explain the behaviour and outlook of churches in the course of this century as great events have occurred – particularly the establishment of totalitarian regimes. It is quite out of the question, therefore, to talk of relations between these regimes and the Christian churches as if the church has spoken out at one time and with one voice. The key to understanding this relationship is a careful study of the chronology of events as well as a consideration of the plurality of the churches and their political experiences.

Of all the Christian confessions represented in Europe, the Catholic Church is certainly the most given to intervene in the social field. Since the late nineteenth century it has never stopped formulating its policy towards society and extending the field of its commitment: after it had delivered its teaching on the social question in the sense that it was understood then, that is the relation between work and capital and the condition of the workers, the Magisterium formulated doctrines on international relations, the building of a peaceful world order, and the reduction of the inequalities between the rich and poor nations. Besides the fact that it has at its head an authority whose primacy is not just honorary and who has a very real, and indeed growing, power over the local churches, it is the only confession which is in a position to conceive and put into practice a general strategy. It defines itself both in doctrine and in coherent practice. This unity should not, however, be overestimated for there are huge historical differences between one national Catholic church and another. Both the content of documents from the Magisterium and the way fundamental principles are applied lay themselves open to widely different interpretations: disparate elements run through the structure of the Catholic Church and are often at odds with each other. This frequently results in markedly different, even contradictory responses to different issues and has been the case particularly in response to totalitarian regimes. Membership of the same confession and a unity of faith does not preordain a uniform analysis of the nature of political, social, cultural and ideological phenomena nor necessarily involve a shared attitude of mind.

The difference between the cohesion of Catholicism and the fissiparous nature of other faiths has probably diminished between 1910 and 1996 because of the ecumenical movement, which in minimising stumbling blocks and dispersing prejudices has made dialogue possible and pointed the way towards reconciling different points of view. Meanwhile the non-Catholic churches have come together in the Conference of European Churches and related organisations. On several issues the churches have adopted common positions. The totally different ways in which the Catholic and the Protestant churches tackled social problems were quite evident in the nineteenth century, but twentieth-century developments have clouded such distinctions and effaced confessional boundaries: on the one hand divergent views are emerging or reemerging within Catholicism; and on the other hand every church whatever its confession finds it has things in common with others. To take a political example: not long ago in most countries of Europe Catholics were almost always conservative when they were not staunchly reactionary, and the majority of Protestants by contrast were of a liberal and democratic persuasion. Today, as far left as one likes to look one finds Catholic activists, while some Protestants are occupying territory previously held by the most hard-line Catholics. Catholics and Protestants have fought national socialism side by side, often in the same organisations. Members of both faiths have embraced or rejected communism.

In the space of three-quarters of a century the European churches, like the peoples of Europe, have had to take up a position in conflicts which have torn Europe apart: the two World Wars, and the Cold War which had just as decisive an impact on

ideological choices and courses of action.

The overlapping nature of religion and nationality is always a grave problem. In the First World War the churches in general unreservedly endorsed their government's line in each of the belligerent countries. In some countries such as Spain, France and Poland this was because of a very long-standing identification of church with nation. Moreover, members of minority confessions in countries like these had their loyalty cast in doubt because their faith did not directly identify them with national unity; they had to allay suspicions of this kind and prove that their religion did not make them any the less patriotic. This identification of confession with country created a gulf between the countries which fought in the war and those which remained neutral. On occasion it also discredited the Christian churches. The problem reemerged in the Second World War. If in enemy-occupied countries religion and patriotism found themselves on the same side against the invading force, German or Soviet, it was a different matter for German Christians obliged to make heartrending choices between obedience to a vile regime and defence of their country.

After the First World War most churches maintained a tradition of reverence for the state and obedience to governments, and their influence was supportive of the established order and conservative values – the Catholic Church possibly more than most. After the upheavals of the French Revolution the Catholic Church made itself into a complete and intransigent system in total opposition to the principles of 1789 and modern society. It held liberalism chiefly responsible for all the ills of society and the instigator of measures to oppose it. The Magisterium denounced liberalism as the modern heresy. In reaction, the church had more sympathy with regimes which limited or resisted the application of liberalism, and this sympathy helped to blind it to their faults and crimes. Thus the support of the church would be won by any regime offering the slightest evidence of rendering homage to religion and its social function and posing no threat to confessional freedom. This explains why the papacy was not opposed at the outset to the setting up of authoritarian regimes; and it was not sparing of its praises for some of these as soon as they made reference to the church's social teaching. Salazar's Portugal or the corporatist Austria of Dollfuss fulfilled the dream of a Christian social state. It must not be forgotten, however, that the German bishops forbade the faithful from joining the National Socialist Party until its head became chancellor of the Reich. A critical attitude towards individualism, a fear that freedom might cause error to flourish, an inveterate distrust of the way in which man might use his liberty, a pessimistic outlook on human nature and an attachment to the notion that order is identified with stability all contributed to the slowness of the Magisterium to discern the menace to Christianity and society which the totalitarian regimes represented.

Short of putting the churches in the dock, historians must choose their words very carefully so as to avoid reference to totalitarianism between the wars and even beyond the end of the Second World War. Now that time has passed since the fall of these regimes and in particular now that more open access to information has led to the revelation of their crimes, the existence of a certain kinship amongst them in their behaviour and even in their inspiration appears to be evidence of their essential similarity. But this was not the case for people living at the time, especially as national socialism and communism were then situated in opposing political camps. The term totalitarian, when it was used then, had a very different sense from the one it has today; it signified aspiration to unity in a person through reaction against individualism and the distinctions introduced by liberalism: the term which today would

probably be its nearest equivalent is 'integralist'. Though it denies a clear separation between public and private, it does not necessarily imply the abolition of all freedom. Before all the wrongdoing of such regimes and especially national socialism was uncovered, people could in all good faith have the feeling that they were joining battle against the errors of liberalism.

The perception of the danger for freedom of conscience inherent in these regimes, which caused problems for the churches too, has certainly been a determining factor in winning them to democracy. The Catholic Church played a prominent part. A key date was 1944, with a radio message by Pius XII. The experience of regimes which were based on the rejection of democratic principles did much to mitigate fears which dated from the French Revolution; there was a perception that on balance the application of democracy would prove to be less dangerous for society and for the church.

The Cold War should have laid emphasis on the reconciliation of Christianity and democracy. Christians have not been of one mind, however, in their attitude towards communism. A delicate problem of conscience was posed for Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, in so-called people's democracies where communism was the state ideology and held all the political power: if it was clear that Christians could not espouse philosophical materialism, could they not nevertheless associate themselves with the patriotic effort to construct a more just society? Was there not also a duty to participate in the defence of the peace which the Soviet world laid claim to represent against American imperialism? Certainly Christians are divided between those who chose absolute resistance and those who were prepared to cooperate. In other countries, if the great majority of Christians had no desire for communism, minorities might hold the balance of power between the two blocs and might refuse to see in the 'free' world the expression of an authentically Christian society. The Catholic Church has put all the weight of its authority behind the fight against communism, above all in Italy, but not all Catholics have approved of this activity, which seemed to them to mix religion with politics. There has been even more of this kind of distancing in the Protestant churches. As for the Orthodox churches, the majority, being under the strict control of the various Communist parties, neither had the means, nor could find in their traditions cause, to resist the pressure of the political authorities.

Just as dissociation from fascist and national socialist regimes opened the way to support for democracy by the Catholic Church, so resistance to communism encouraged its reconciliation with the idea of human rights, a process which was completed with the papacy of John Paul II. It was a substantial change of direction given that the break with the French Revolution took the form of the condemnation by Pius VI in March 1791 of the declaration of the rights of man and the citizen, as well as the civil constitution for the clergy. With the affirmation that the notion of human rights does indeed have a Christian origin, that the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity are also Christian ideas, and the Council's recognition that religious liberty is required by the very nature of the act of faith, a rift of more than one and a half centuries has been healed: the corollary is the rejection of all totalitarianism, even that inspired by religion.

No one doubts that the constancy of the Christian churches in holding fast to certain principles alongside the courage and heroism of clergy and congregations in their resistance to oppression and persecution played a role in undermining support for these regimes and in the collapse of communism. How great a role in all this should be attributed directly to the action of the churches is an open question for

historians; but no assessment would call it negligible.

In another sphere too the role of the Christian churches has helped turn the course of history: in the relationship between peoples and in the unification of the continent Christians have often played the role of forerunner in bringing together people who were each other's recent enemies. In the reconciliation between France and Germany, and between Germany and Poland, the action of the clergy, the commitment of the laity and public declarations by the bishops offering forgiveness have made substantial contributions to replacing resentment and a desire for vengeance with the will to seek understanding.

The churches have also contributed to the process of European unification. They have done this partly through the initiative of statesmen who shared the same faith and belonged to democratic Christian parties; certainly the role of a Robert Schuman, an Alcide de Gaspari, a Konrad Adenauer have been decisive in determining the principle of the construction of a united Europe. But the Christian churches have acted in another way too. Firstly, by giving the example of unanimity: the setting up of the European Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Conference of European Churches, and then from time to time the convening of both these conferences together, has anticipated the actions of governments. The churches' teachings have perhaps made an even greater contribution. In this respect a great change has taken place in the attitude of the churches: during the First World War they identified themselves unreservedly with their nation, taking a patriotic stance; nationalism was inseparable from religion. Three quarters of a century later, without dissociating themselves at all from the fate of their nation, they are giving voice to a language of unity; they encourage whatever promotes unity and condemn whatever tends towards exclusion, separation or opposition.

One fairly difficult but important question remains: what influence do the churches in our time in fact have on the behaviour of individuals and social life? Since there are no reliable instruments to measure it, the question is open to the widest possible interpretation. On the grounds that, since 1918, secularisation has made great progress everywhere, privatising religion, evidence seems to point to the fact that the influence of the churches has declined greatly and that their effectiveness has been relatively negligible. We sometimes jump too quickly, however, to the doubtless premature conclusion that the churches have only a minority role these days. One should not lose sight of the fact that in most countries, if asked about their beliefs, the majority of people still call themselves Christians. What is the degree of their conviction, what is the content of their faith? It does not matter much: is not the important thing that they see this frame of reference as a part of their identity? On the other hand, if it is true that the churches have lost their privileged position in society and are today mostly reduced to 'common law' status, they have thereby gained in independence. And they make use of that independence: they speak out more on all the subjects important to society. Not long ago the churches, especially the Catholic Church, took an essentially, sometimes exclusively, confessional angle on things: they protested against the actions of governments only if they infringed the liberty which they judged vital for the accomplishment of their mission – or what they saw as that liberty. As for infringements of human rights, they hardly ever bothered except when their own faithful were victims: there was a time when the ecclesiastical hierarchy got excited about the application of antisemitic discriminatory measures only when they were applied to baptised Jews. Since then, the point of view has widened out: the churches speak for the whole of humanity and defend the rights of all, Christians or not.

The real change is that in the past they acted in an authoritarian manner, resorting to compulsion: they used interior moral constraint with recourse to spiritual weapons, and external constraint inasmuch as they often had recourse to the assistance of the civil authorities. Today they address themselves to autonomous people and question consciences; they behave more as educators of personal liberty. This does not exclude, here or there, some regret for a time when they were heard more and the temptation, where they think they are able to do so, of turning again to authoritarian solutions; but such attempts have recently ended in resounding failure. Who can measure the respective impacts of these two modes of intervention? Can the historian go much beyond stating the essential difference between the alternative ways of proceeding and conveying the importance of the change which the passage from one to the other represents?

(Translated from the French by Anne Walters)