

## SEMINAR PAPER

### THE MEANING OF IDEOLOGY

The topic assigned to me is the meaning of ideology in the Puebla document. My remarks will be somewhat tentative since the only text available to me is the unofficial translation coordinated by the Catholic Committee on Urban Ministry, under the editorship of Helen Volkomener. It is, moreover, by no means clear whether the Puebla document, while constantly speaking of ideology, actually contains a consistent concept of ideology. Conference documents are, after all, compromises. Certain sentences may have been inserted to please one group of bishops while others, though not wholly consistent, may have been included to satisfy the wishes of another group. Still, since the Puebla document will be read and studied all over Latin America, it is important to clarify what it does say about the role and function of ideology.

The first impression gained by the reader is that ideology has a pejorative meaning. Ideology is a set of ideas that directs political action and legitimates the quest for power of a political party or political movement. We are repeatedly told that in Latin America the Church finds itself confronted by several ideologies, mainly three, all of which distort the true understanding of man and society. For this reason, the Church wishes to stay free in regard to these competing ideologies. This was the emphasis of Pope John Paul II's opening address at the Puebla Conference on January 28, 1979. The Church must remain aloof from the conflicting ideologies in order "to opt only for man." The Church is able to bypass the dominant ideologies thanks to its own political commitment to human rights, to justice, to the participation of people in the decisions that affect their lives.

The Puebla document offers brief descriptions of the three competing ideologies. There are the "liberal ideologies" which legitimate the free market economy, a system that has devastating consequences in Latin American society. It widens the distance between rich and poor and puts economic interest before human concern. Then there are the "ideologies of national security" that contribute to the establishing of totalitarian regimes leading to the abuse of power and the violation of human rights. In some instances, we are told, these regimes claim to be defenders of the Christian faith. Finally, there are the "Marxist ideologies" that have spread above all among workers and intellectuals, with the promise of greater social justice. In practice, the Marxist strategies sacrifice many Christian values and encourage unrealistic utopian expectations. Many struggling groups in Latin America, we are told, find inspiration and justification in these Marxist ideologies.

These ideologies promote a false idea of the human which threatens to distort even the understanding of the Christian message. Liberalism

encourages the idea that the Gospel is exclusively concerned with individual salvation and personal growth; the national security approach identifies the Gospel with a particular socio-cultural expression that must at all cost be defended; and Marxist ideologies persuade Christians to reduce the Gospel to political horizontalism and thus curtail its total meaning. Each of these ideologies produces its own one-sided and hence distorted image of Jesus.

In line with the stress of Pope John Paul's opening address, the Puebla document insists that the Gospel has political meaning. It promotes human self-realization, it demands justice and human rights, it has profound implications for the human being's economic life, it asks for the participation of all in the wealth of society. The Church favors human liberation which includes, we are told, the liberation *from* all forms of servitude and liberation *for* progressive growth in being. Recent popes, it is recalled, have strongly emphasized the political meaning of the Gospel: human beings are destined to become the subject of history.

At this point the reader has the impression that the bishops at Puebla recommend the creation of a Christian political movement, a Christian political option, which could replace the damaging political movements now in existence, a "middle way" between capitalism and socialism. We recall that this Catholic middle way stood at one time behind the Catholic democratic parties of Latin America. These parties favored a restrained capitalism, guided by government policies, and promoted a social legislation that was to protect the proletariat and the poor. As we shall see, however, Puebla does not encourage this middle way.

Is ideology always a distortion? In chapter 5 the Puebla document offers a definition which reveals that ideologies can be both oppressive and liberating and that they are in fact indispensable for political life. This definition comes somewhat as a surprise. While there are many definitions of ideology, we are told, the bishops use the term as referring to a set of ideas representing a vision of social life promoted by a particular group or movement in society. Ideologies are associated with political parties and trends. In fact, ideologies are necessary to translate ideals and values into political reality. Ideologies gather people in the same movement, inspire them to common action, direct their thoughts, legitimate their efforts and sacrifices and involve them in the transformation of the social order. How are these ideologies to be evaluated? The bishops propose two principles: they must be in accordance with the image of the human that respects human dignity and, secondly, since they embody the vision not of the whole society but only of a part, albeit possibly the vast majority, they must protect pluralism and leave room for the rights of others.

Ideology has an essential function in the transformation of society. Is Catholic social teaching such an ideology? Are the bishops at Puebla proposing an ideology that suits the conditions of Latin America? The answer is No. We are told that the Gospel of Jesus is not an ideology.

The Gospel is an explosive reality, ever new and ever vivifying and hence transcends the narrow limits of ideology. We are also told that Catholic social teaching is not an ideology. It too is a vital reality, a dynamic, self-correcting tradition of social thought that in its totality transcends the interests of a political party or a political movement. Catholic social teaching is meant to inspire Christians in their political life and guide them in the formulation of policies, but it is not in itself an ideology. The bishops at Puebla, then, have no intention of offering an ideology to the people of Latin America.

What then are Catholics to do? They are in need of an ideology to translate their social ideals into social practice but they have no such ideology available to them. The existing ideologies are sources of danger, but nothing is said that points to the creation of an ideology adequate to people's political and human needs. The ardent exhortation addressed to Catholics asking them to involve themselves in political activity and promote justice and human rights must lead to frustration because, according to the bishops' own teaching, social ideals can become political reality only through an ideology that unites people, inspires and directs them—and there is none. We have here, in my reading of the text, a curious contradiction. The reader gets the impression that the document, following the Pope's opening address and previous ecclesiastical warnings, first adopted a wholly negative view of ideology over against which it outlined the Catholic ideal of justice and human rights, and that only afterwards, due to the influence of some progressive bishops, it introduced the wider notion of ideology and admits the absolute necessity of ideology for political action. This admission in chapter 5 enormously weakens the usefulness and significance of the moral exhortation in favor of justice and human liberation. Unrelated to a specific ideology these moral aspirations remain powerless.

Another surprise comes in chapter 9. It deals with the preferential option for the poor. In this extraordinary chapter the Church commits itself to solidarity with the impoverished masses of Latin America. Pope John Paul himself, in his address to the Indians of Oaxaca and Chiapas on January 29, 1979, declared the Church to be in solidarity with their cause and with the liberation of the masses. "The Pope wishes to be your voice, the voice of those who cannot speak or who are silenced, in order to be the conscience of consciences, an invitation to action, in order to make up for lost time which is often a time of prolonged suffering and unfulfilled hopes." The Pope himself asked for bold and deeply innovative changes. If the common good requires it, there should be no hesitation even in regard to expropriation. In line with this thinking, the Puebla document announced its own preferential option for the poor, made necessary by the scandalous reality of Latin America. What is required are profound changes in the social, political and economic structures of the nations as well as the transformation of mental structures, i.e., a more communal way of perceiving human life, respectful of human dignity and human rights.

This preferential option for the poor is a new principle. Thanks to this principle, the Church's social teaching in Latin America now differs from the social teaching mentioned above, which at one time advocated the middle road between capitalism and socialism and supported the Catholic democratic parties. The critics of this middle road had always insisted that in fact these Catholic parties were no middle road at all since in the long run they always defended capitalism against socialism. The new preferential option for the poor seems to exclude the theory of the middle way. The Church does not face the owning classes and the dispossessed in an even-handed fashion; it rather identifies itself with the cause of the poor.

Since the Puebla document admits that Marxist ideologies promise greater social justice, that they are widely spread among the workers and those who take their side, and that they inspired groups in Latin America that struggle for liberation from various forms of servitude, the reader wonders why Catholics cannot take part in these radical movements. The answer given is quite unnuanced. Marxist inspired movements are out of bounds for Catholics because their ideologies are based on a false concept of human life. In *Octogesima adveniens* (1971), Pope Paul VI had begun to distinguish between various trends among Marxists and suggested that any evaluation of these movements had to take these differences into account. Pope Paul also distinguished between socialist movements guided by pragmatic considerations and others that were wedded to a total philosophy, and clearly recognized that Catholics may well take part in the former: only the latter were out of bounds. None of these nuances are found in the Puebla document.

The reader finds this rather curious, especially since the various liberation movements in Latin America, spread among the poor and dispossessed, while making use of certain Marxist terms are far removed from a consistent Marxist social philosophy. Since in classical Marxism the Proletariat, the men and women earning wages in productive labor, is the carrier of the revolution, this philosophy fits only very vaguely the Latin American situation where the industrial proletariat is relatively small and where the great masses of the poor are the dispossessed in country and cities, situated at the very margin of society. In addition to this, Latin America has a revolutionary tradition that antedates Marx and continues to be a source of inspiration. Here revolution was always defined in terms of expropriation of land to make room for peasants and the expulsion of foreign powers that control the political and/or economic life of the people. The expropriation of the large estates and the expulsion of foreign control remain to this day the basic aspiration of the radical groups. It is worth recalling that when Castro first organized his revolutionary movement, Latin American Marxists ignored him as "a petit-bourgeois adventurist." For these reasons, then, the reader of the Puebla document is more than a little surprised to find an easy and unnuanced identification of the liberation movements with Marxist ideologies.

Under what conditions can Catholics be encouraged to join a political movement that embodies their central demands for social justice?

This is the question that is given no attention. Under what conditions are Catholics allowed to join with others in the same struggle and attempt to modify the ideology uniting these others to make room for a more spiritual understanding of man? There is only one sentence that points towards the formulation of a sound principle, a sentence again derived from the teaching of Paul VI. The risk that Catholics assume when they join others in a liberation movement is that the Gospel becomes absorbed in a political ideology and loses its power and originality. The condition for Catholic participation, then, would seem to be the existence of a reasonable chance that the Catholics taking part in the movement and formulating ideals and policies with their comrades, are able to crack open the narrow ideology and expand it so that it recognizes more clearly the dignity of persons and the need for a certain pluralism.

This, we note, is not the conclusion of the Puebla document. The document is dominated by the repudiation of the three competing ideologies and the Church's determination to remain aloof from them. Chapter 5 and chapter 9 introduce new principles, not wholly consistent with the preceding, which bring to light the fact that, despite the passionate exhortation in favor of justice and human liberation, the weight of the document locks Catholics into inactivity. What will happen is what so often happens with ecclesiastical documents on social issues: different groups will emphasize different aspects. Some Latin American Catholics will make much of the radical repudiation of the competing ideologies, while others will insist on the need of an ideology for political action and the preferential option for the poor which brings them close to the people struggling for liberation.

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