

Catholic Social Thought as Critique of Ideology

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ABSTRACT: Catholic social thought has often developed a critique of ambient ideologies it considers erroneous and dangerous for the Church and the common good. The decades of the 1970s witnessed a combative version of this ideological critique. Paul VI warned of the dangers of Marxism and neoliberalism as twin manifestations of materialism. The Dominican theologian Chenu warned that Catholic social thought itself had often veered into sectarian ideology.

DURING THE 1970s, ideology emerged as a principal concern among both practitioners and critics of Catholic social thought. In this paper I will analyze the critique of ideology developed by two prominent Catholic authors during the decade.

The first is Pope Paul VI. In *Octagesima adveniens* (1971), an apostolic letter to Cardinal Maurice Roy commemorating the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, Paul VI criticized Marxism and neoliberalism as ideological temptations for contemporary Christians committed to social justice.¹

The second is the French Dominican theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu. In his essay *The Social Doctrine of the Church as Ideology* (1979), Chenu criticizes Catholic social thought as its own species of ideology inasmuch as it attempted, especially in its early phases, to create a sectarian society where the Church would refine the social power and prestige it had lost in the secularizing battles of modernity.²

The two documents are not unrelated to each other. If Chenu criticizes Catholic social thought for its alleged hegemonic strategy of recreating

¹ See Pope Paul VI, *Octagesima adveniens*, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html. Hereafter cited as *OA*.

² See Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La doctrine sociale de l'Église comme idéologie* (Paris: Cerf, 1979). Hereafter cited as *DSE*. Translations from the French original are by the author of this article.

Christendom, he praises *Octagesima adveniens* for its more inductive and contextual approach to questions of social justice.

Paul VI, Marxism, and Liberalism

Paul VI does not provide a definition of ideology in *Octagesima adveniens*. But he does develop a critique of two particular ideologies: Marxism and liberalism. (Liberalism here is to be understood as the Continental version, with its emphasis on individual rights, free enterprise, and free trade.) The focus on these two particular ideologies is shaped by the pope's pastoral concern that contemporary Christians would be tempted by ideologies incompatible with the Christian faith and thus join political movements destructive of basic moral principles. The era's ecclesiastical controversies over emergent liberation theology and the divisions within Catholic Action are never far from the surface of the apostolic letter.³

Both Marxism and liberalism are unacceptable for Christians because both ideologies contradict the Christian faith and the concept of human nature embedded within that faith. Paul VI identifies the errors of Marxism that make it unbaptizable by Christians: "The Christian cannot adhere to Marxist ideology, to its atheistic materialism, to its dialectic of violence and to the way it absorbs individual freedom in the collectivity, at the same time denying all transcendence to man and his personal and collective history."⁴ The Pauline censure of Marxism condemns it on multiple levels: the metaphysical (for its materialism), the theological (for its atheism), the ethical (for its cult of revolutionary violence), and the political (for its denial of individual freedom with its attendant civil liberties). Most emphatically, it condemns Marxism for its false anthropology. The denial of human transcendence grounds the totalitarian politics that springs from the Marxist matrix.

Paul VI also condemns the errors found in neoliberal ideology:

Nor can the Christian adhere to the liberal ideology which believes it exalts individual freedom by withdrawing every limitation from it, by stimulating it through exclusive seeking of interest and power, and by considering social solidarities as more or less automatic consequences of individual initiatives, not as an aim and a major criterion of the value of the social organization.⁵

³ For a representative anthology of Latin American liberation theologians, see Alfred T. Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 1990). For an ecclesiastical critique of liberation theology, see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology* (1984), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html.

⁴ *OA*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Admittedly, this censure of liberalism is murkier than the earlier censure of Marxism. But it does suggest that liberalism errs in exaggerating the value and extent of individual freedom, that it exaggerates the political value of economic self-interest, that it fails to grasp the common good as the telos of political society, and that it fails to perceive how deeply rooted in human nature are such social entities as the family. Pope Paul also seems to suggest that the unbridled individual liberty championed by some liberal ideologies ignores the constraints and asceticism necessary to live virtuously in civil society.

While focusing on the seductive dangers of Marxist and liberal ideologies, Paul VI sketches several dangers of ideological thought in general. Ideological thought is often abstract and overly theoretical, dangerously divorced from historical reality. The pope writes, "Sometimes it leads political or social activity to be simply the application of an abstract, purely theoretical idea."⁶ The terrors of Jacobin or Communist rule spring from an ahistorical model of ideal society that is then imposed upon an actual society through a violent eradication of the past. Paul VI devotes particular attention to the rebirth of utopian thought and experiments in the ferment of the late 1960s. He recognizes the positive value of such utopias inasmuch as social reform always springs from imagining a better future for a given society. But he also recognizes the danger that dreams of the future can become ideological fantasies and divert one from one's immediate moral duties. "The appeal to a utopia is often a convenient excuse for those who wish to escape from concrete tasks in order to take refuge in an imaginary world. To live in a hypothetical future is a facile alibi for rejecting immediate responsibilities."⁷

Ideological thought also bears the danger of becoming instrumentalist. "It is thought which becomes a mere instrument at the service of activity as a simple means of a strategy."⁸ In this context ideology loses the commitment to truth. Its claims of truth are simply tools to bring about the victory of the particular ideology's interests. Truth, as well as history, is ignored in the ideological exercise of power.

The gravest danger of ideological thought is a theological one. It can lead to idolatry, to substituting a social program or a political policy for God. The ideological creature dethrones the Creator: "The Christian faith is above and sometimes opposed to the ideologies, in that it recognizes God, who is transcendent and the Creator, and who, through all levels of creation, calls on man as endowed with responsibility and freedom."⁹ Ideological thought closes the adherent to transcendence. A finite, fallible, and distorted social

⁶ *OA*, 27.

⁷ *OA*, 37.

⁸ *OA*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*

vision is substituted for the living God. When ideological systems ground a violent and totalitarian political society, they become particularly dangerous and inimical to the Christian.

Paul VI recognizes that contemporary Christians rarely confront ideologies in a pure state. Soviet Communism, Italian Eurocommunism, and Tito's nonaligned, decentralized Communism are not identical. The radically individualistic liberalism of Ayn Rand is not the same as the reformist, welfare-state liberalism of John Kenneth Galbraith. Christians must practice a careful discernment of whether and to what extent they may participate in movements inspired by or shared with representatives of Marxist or liberal ideologies. The pope warns his readers that participation in ideologically fueled movements is often dangerously naïve. One cannot practice Marxist social analysis or pursue a just cause in a Marxist organization and maintain the proper distance from the ideology's atheism, materialism, violence, and totalitarian politics. The seductive power of ideology must be confronted and resisted.

While the term "ideology" is relatively recent in ecclesiastical documents, the critique of the ideologies of Marxism and liberalism has been central to the project of modern Catholic social thought from its inception. Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*, the object of *Octagesima adveniens*'s commemoration, condemns both socialism and "the Manchester school" (the leading liberal free-enterprise, free-trade school of the time).¹⁰ As an alternative, Pope Leo champions a neomedieval corporatist reform of society, grounded in the restoration of the vanished occupational guilds of the medieval town. As our next author will point out, Paul VI's alternative to the misguided utopias of the Marxist and liberal cities will not be a Christian utopia or a dream of restored Christendom.

Chenu and Catholic Ideology

In *The Social Doctrine of the Church as Ideology*, Marie-Dominique Chenu criticizes modern Catholic social thought. (In Chenu's perspective, "Catholic social doctrine" is a more solemn and invasive version of Catholic social thought.) Chenu contends that from Leo XIII to John XXIII, the Church promoted a model of social organization that was highly ideological in nature. In this ideological program, truth claims concerning social justice and the plight of industrial workers enhance the power of the Church to direct civil society and to influence civil society through a network of confessional institutions under strict hierarchical control. The ideological character of this thought is also apparent in its deductive, ahistorical quality. Universal

¹⁰ See Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum* (1891), esp. 4 and 42, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

abstract principles, enunciated by Church authority in a neoscholastic framework, are to be applied under ecclesiastical direction to resolve issues of injustice in industrial society.

Rerum novarum's ideology appears in its efforts to reconstruct society along the lines of the medieval guilds. Leo XIII envisions confessional unions and other professional organizations as the ideal instrument for the organization of work in the industrial economy. Nonconfessional unions are to be avoided when possible.

The text on professional organizations provoked bitter controversies concerning confessional unions, considered by many to be a model of Christendom. They are opposed to a declericalization in which the defense of workers is organized on the workers' own terrain and on a neutral professional basis, thanks to which economic and social realities maintain their own autonomy, beyond moral and religious finalities.¹¹

For Chenu, the unionization of workers serves as a locus for Church authorities to confessionalize the workers' movement under the control of the clergy and of the Church's social theories, rooted in neoscholastic philosophy. The autonomy of economic life and the freedom of Christian workers to collaborate with others on works of social reform is suppressed.

Pius XI's pontificate is especially representative of an ideological Catholic social doctrine. His encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) presented a detailed model of the corporatist economic institutions that the pope believed were the only possible antidote to the misery of the Depression. The Church would now provide the blueprint for the political-economic organization of all societies. Although earlier popes had condemned the emergence of confessional parties, prominent ecclesiastics now urged the creation of political parties rooted in Catholic social doctrine. "They sought through a Catholic party the restoration of a Christendom undermined by the secularization of society."¹² The political dream would be fulfilled in the postwar emergence of powerful Christian Democratic parties. If the Church could no longer expect most nations to recognize Catholicism as their state church—even though such recognition remained a political ideal according to the magisterium of the time—it could heavily influence civil society through a thick network of schools, hospitals, social welfare agencies—and now, confessional unions and political parties. Instituted in 1925, the Feast of Christ the King ritually celebrated "the social reign of Christ," in which the Church's claims of social hegemony would be proclaimed. For Chenu, Pius XI's use of concepts of social justice and solicitude for workers was clearly at the service of the aggrandizement of the Church's power to mold and minimize secular society.

¹¹ *DSE*, 20-21.

¹² *DSE*, 28.

According to Chenu, the social teaching of the Church makes a radical change at Vatican II. *Gaudium et spes* (1965) makes only a passing reference to Catholic social doctrine. Its focus lies in reading the signs of the times and summoning the Church to discernment of patterns of justice and injustice in the world. Such an approach places a greater emphasis on history, on the social sciences, and on the role of the local church in discerning questions of justice in its own region. The sources of discernment would now be drawn from evangelical, biblical sources rather than the philosophical principles of natural law. The Church would now encourage her members to join with other people of good will in working for social reform rather than being cordoned off in sectarian parties, unions, and other groups. Inductive reasoning would replace the older deductive reasoning of the social thought of Leo XIII and Pius XI.

In this context Chenu praises *Octagesima adveniens* of Paul VI as a model of the more inductive, collaborative approach to social justice and the abandonment of the more ideological approach of earlier versions of modern Catholic social thought. Chenu writes:

[Paul VI] offers a declaration while, in continuity with social teaching, he reverses in fact the method used up to this point in this teaching. It is no longer 'social doctrine' taught in order to be applied to changing situations; rather, these changing situations themselves become a theological locus to engage in a discernment of the 'signs of the times.' It is an inductive, and no longer a deductive, method.¹³

Chenu further praises Paul VI for welcoming political pluralism, stressing the role of independent lay judgment, and admitting the incapacity of the Church to provide authoritative guidance on every social controversy. For Chenu, Paul VI's model of ethical-social discernment, with its attention to history and change, is far from the ideological models of a restored Christendom offered by his predecessors.

Conclusion

What is to be drawn from this critique of ideology in the context of Catholic social thought? One easy conclusion would be that just as one person's cult is the other person's church, one person's ideology is another person's philosophy or political program. But both Paul VI and Chenu point to certain traits of ideological thought that distinguishes it from more realistic philosophies and political programs.

For both authors, ideology is a type of curdled idealism. The abstractions and ideals promoted by ideological programs are often distant from historical reality. Rather than reflecting reality, ideology attempts to force reality to conform to some abstract ideal of justice. When violence

¹³ *DSE*, 80.

accompanies this coercion, the extermination camp and the Gulag are not far off. This distorted idealism is also present in the ideologue's taste for deductive rather than inductive reasoning. Ideology employs an intellectual command economy where "what must be" according to the ideologue's scale of values is forced onto society. Empirical facts are to be ignored or discounted.

I think that Chenu is correct in his account of a humbler and more inductive model of social analysis in the postconciliar Church, illustrated by the "signs of the times" and discernment model used in *Octagesima adveniens*. But this more inductive approach contains its own perils to which Chenu does not allude.

The inductive approach risks reducing the Church to a type of *tabula rasa*. The Church is exhorted to observe and to listen to the signs of the times within a given society. The Church is summoned to make a prophetic critique of these signs, but the source of this critique is often thin. Chenu's praise of a social theology that abandons philosophical analysis in favor of biblical themes is an odd encomium from one of the twentieth century's eminent specialists in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. If some critics like Chenu praised this inductive version of Catholic social thought, other critics like Xavier Thévenot attacked its vagueness.¹⁴ At best, the theological discernment of the signs of the times leads to a moralizing critique of emerging social movements within a given culture. At its worst, it simply baptizes or censures these movements according to one's political options or, ironically, one's ideology. The danger of reducing the Church to a social mirror emerges.

Such a humbled, inductive approach can lead to an impoverished version of Catholic social thought. If the Church offers only a critical reading of the signs of the times, it has no positive social vision of its own to offer its members or the broader society. Reviving the term Catholic social doctrine and using a more deductive version of it—according to his critics Charles Curran, Kenneth Himes, and Thomas Shannon—even John Paul II often opts for the more modest model of discerning the signs of the times.¹⁵ In *Sollicitudo rei socialis* John Paul II argues that Catholic social doctrine is not

¹⁴ See Xavier Thévenot, *Morale fondamentale: Notes de cours* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 2017), 150-52.

¹⁵ See Charles E. Curran, Kenneth R. Himes, and Thomas A. Shannon, "Commentary on *Sollicitudo rei socialis*," in *Modern Catholic Social Thought*, 2nd ed., ed. Kenneth R. Himes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 429-49.

a third way between capitalism and socialism.¹⁶ That claim would come as a surprise to earlier architects of Catholic social thought, such as the corporatists in France, the distributists in England, and the solidarists in Germany, who thought they were developing an economic alternative to capitalism and socialism.¹⁷

Despite the risks of ideology and nostalgia, the Church has a pressing duty to propose its own positive model of a just society. It can challenge the binary politics of American culture, which reduces society to a tug-of-war between the isolated, heroic individual and the centralized, bureaucratic state. Catholic social thought rightly draws our attention to the centrality of the family, and not the individual, as the cornerstone of the polis. It defends the transcendent origin and rights of the Church vis-a-vis the state. Through the principle of subsidiarity, it defends the integrity of a thousand intermediate bodies, which are neither the creatures of the state nor the creations of one person of genius. At its most robust, Catholic social thought offers an alternative and challenge to liberalism and socialism. It does not confine itself to criticism of their ideological illusions. Offering a critical theological commentary on the passing social parade is not sufficient.

¹⁶ See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 41, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.

¹⁷ Led by François René de La Tour du Pin (1852-1924), the corporatists advocated for the creation of industry-wide “corporations” (unions) in which management and labor would negotiate salaries, benefits, and working conditions. The distributists advocated for the most widespread distribution of private property in society, with particular attention to the capacity of families to own their own homes. Prominent distributist theorists included G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953), and Vincent McNabb (1868-1943). Led by the Jesuit Heinrich Pesch (1854-1926), the solidarists defended an organicist theory of society, in which the state would coordinate various intermediate bodies in service of the common good.