

**Bernard Margueritte**

## **The End of Materialisms and the time for the Social Christian Teaching**

In the “good old days” of communism a joke and a popular saying were circulating in Poland. One, mocking the party’s propaganda, said: “capitalism is on the edge of the abyss...and socialism overtook it!” The other pretended that “the difference between capitalism and socialism is that the former is the exploitation of man by man and the other...the exact opposite”. Years later one is very much tempted to admit the validity of this popular wisdom.

Indeed the former socialist countries are an excellent spot to assess the value of both systems. Poland for one has developed tremendously and, as a free and capitalist country, has seen the impressive liberation of human initiative. At the same time the inequalities have reached scandalous levels, the state of law has not been created, corruption and moral depravations of all kinds have ruined the frame of the social body. Money-making at all costs for the happy few has become the only goal. To the point that when public opinion polls are taken a majority says that people had a better life during the communism of Gierek!

What happened? Former socialist countries and Poland in particular were supposed to bring back to Europe a new spirit, a new sense of spiritual and ethical values. It seemed that whereas Western Europe was in a state of clinical spiritual death, losing inner strength and vision, paradoxically Eastern Europe in its fight against communism, with the Church allowing the flame to burn high, was able to keep alive moral and spiritual values. The great symbol of this achievement was the Polish pope, John Paul II, now sanctified. The renewal of Europe depended therefore- one could think- on what Eastern Europe could do for the whole continent.

Indeed John Paul presented early and clearly the challenge ahead. He said for example at the Warsaw Castle (8/06/1991): “the Poles may either simply enter the consumption society, taking in it- if they are successful- the last place, before it shuts for good its doors to newcomers, *or they can also contribute to a new discovery of the great, profound, authentic tradition of Europe, offering to her, at the same time the alliance of the free market and solidarity*”. Moreover, according to John Paul II, Eastern Europe, liberated from communism was somehow paradoxically in a better shape than the West. He wrote in his book “**Memory and Identity**” (2005): ““The countries of Western Europe are at a stage that we can characterize as one of ‘**post-identity**’ ... The nations of Central-Eastern Europe, in spite of all the transformations imposed by the communist dictatorship, were able to maintain their identity, and even managed to reinforce it. The fight for identity was for them nothing else as a fight for survival... The fundamental danger facing Eastern Europe today is a kind of dawn of their own identity. The fact of the matter is that at a time of self-defense against the Marxist totalitarianism this part of Europe experienced a spiritual maturation, thanks to which certain values essential for human life did not lose their significance as much as in the West... If so what is the risk today? It is **to succumb in an uncritical way to the influences of the negative cultural models popular in the West**. For Central-Eastern Europe, where those tendencies may even be regarded as a kind of ‘cultural promotion’, this is currently one of the greatest dangers. I believe that indeed from this point of view we are witnessing today a battle, which will determine the face of Europe at the beginning of this century”.

This was a way to deny in a sense the superiority of capitalism over communism. Both obviously were bad but the later was after all less dangerous since the nations were able to react against it, fight hard and in the end better maintain their identity. Indeed for the Polish pope the Social Teaching of the Church was also a call to reject both materialisms, capitalist or communist. In fact in the Encyclical Letter “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis” (1987), we read: ““*The Church's social doctrine is not a "third way" between liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism, nor even a possible alternative to other solutions less radically opposed to one another: rather, it constitutes a category of its own.*” Four years after that in another Encyclical Letter (Centesimus Annus), John Paul added: “**The Marxist solution has failed, but the realities of marginalization and exploitation remain in**

*the world, especially the Third World, as does the reality of human alienation, especially in the more advanced countries...* The historical experience of the West, for its part, shows that even if the Marxist analysis and its foundation of alienation are false, *nevertheless alienation — and the loss of the authentic meaning of life — is a reality in Western societies too.* This happens in consumerism, when people are ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratifications rather than being helped to experience their personhood in an authentic and concrete way. Alienation is found also in work, when it is organized so as to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern whether the worker, through his own labor, grows or diminishes as a person, either through increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive competitiveness and estrangement, in which he is considered only a means and not an end.”

In the same text, the pope goes further: *“We have seen that it is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called "Real Socialism" leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organization... The crisis of Marxism does not rid the world of the situations of injustice and oppression which Marxism itself exploited and on which it fed...”*

Why is that so? The point of the matter, reminds the pope, is that the affluent capitalist society “seeks to defeat Marxism **on the level of pure materialism** by showing how a free-market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than Communism, **while equally excluding spiritual values.**” Therefore John Paul II warned the Cubans in 1998 to fight for freedom but to reject “neoliberal capitalism, which subordinates the human person and the development of societies to the blind forces of the market” and beg the people of Slovenia (Ljubljana, 1996) to be careful enough, just liberated from the communist ideology, „not to replace it by another ideology, not less dangerous, the ideology of unbridled liberalism”.

It is interesting to see that in this regard Karol Wojtyła was on the line of the teaching of the Polish Church. Curiously, this Church, often regarded as extremely conservative, was in fact always sensitive to social values. The great Primate of Poland, Stefan Wyszyński, asked strongly at the time of Second Vatican Council that the Church condemn at the same time Capitalism and Communism, placing them **„on the same side of the barricades”** and this remarkable leader of the Polish Church said: „today, after many experiences, we are reaching the conclusion that we are still far away from the liberation of the workers... We have been able to liberate ourselves from the influence of the **pagan capitalist economy** but we have fallen under the influence of the **pagan materialist economy**. And as far as the human person is concerned she was a slave and is still a slave”. As a matter of fact Primate Wyszyński speaking in November of 1980 to a delegation of Solidarity leaders under the leadership of Lech Walesa reminded them that he had a long past of dealing with social problems. He created before the war a Workers Christian University, where as a young priest and professor he was teaching about capitalism and communism. During this meeting Cardinal Wyszyński confessed that after hearing his teaching a young worker came to him and said: “Father Professor, you showed us that capitalism is awful and that communism is awful. So what has a worker to do: go and hang himself?”

As we see anyway, the leader of the Polish Church was in a sense sharing the views of the popular wisdom we mentioned at the beginning.

Now it seems indeed that capitalism, liberated from the pressure of communism and the need to remain a bit human, has made also a step forward and jumped into the abyss, following communism. The two materialisms are disappearing one after the other before our eyes. It is a time of great tragedy. But also of great hopes. Malraux used to say that the XXI Century will be the century of the spirit or will not be. He was probably right.

Recently one of the most articulate economist of the young generation, the Czech Tomas Sedlacek, said that the current crisis has a theological dimension. Half-jokingly, he argued that everything started to go wrong when Adam took the apple from Eve. “It was the beginning of the sin of over-consumption. Indeed in the Genesis there is no mention there of sex but- and for that matter 14 times- of simply eating”. He believes that the sin of over-consumption started then. As a matter of fact, in his book “The Economy of Good and Wrong”, he sees the sin of unhealthy development, based on artificial growth and unmanageable debt, as the main culprit.

One good thing about the fall of communism is that everyone can now speak freely about the failure of capitalism without risking to be accused of being pro-communist. But the Catholic Church said the truth about it long ago, as early as the *Rerum Novarum* of pope's Leon XIII in 1881. Nevertheless, moving in the footsteps of Saint John Paul, pope Francis has spoken bluntly about the need for a global change, for example in His speech in Bolivia on July 9. The Holy Father condemned the "new colonialism" prevailing in today's world, saying that **"at times it appears as the anonymous influence of mammon: corporations, loan agencies, certain "free trade" treaties, and the imposition of measures of "austerity" which always tighten the belt of workers and the poor."** Curiously the media did not pay a lot of attention to this historic speech. Maybe that's because, as said the pope, we are experiencing **"the monopolizing of the communications media, which would impose alienating examples of consumerism and a certain cultural uniformity"** and which is "another one of the forms taken by the new colonialism. It is ideological colonialism..."

A capitalism reduced to a materialist and consumerist approach to the world is intolerable, said the pope: **"once capital becomes an idol and guides people's decisions, once greed for money presides over the entire socioeconomic system, it ruins society, it condemns and enslaves men and women, it destroys human fraternity, it sets people against one another and, as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home, sister and mother earth..."** Pope Francis went on denouncing **"the many forms of exclusion and injustice"**, adding: "Can we recognize that invisible thread which links them? I wonder whether we can see that those destructive realities are part of a system which has become global. Do we realize that that system has imposed the mentality of profit at any price, with no concern for social exclusion or the destruction of nature?"

Can we accept it any longer? The answer of the pope is a resounding "no"! Listen to His words: "I would insist, let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural change. This system is by now intolerable: farmworkers find it intolerable, laborers find it intolerable, communities find it intolerable, peoples find it intolerable ... The earth itself – our sister, Mother Earth, as Saint Francis would say – also finds it intolerable..." And in which direction should we go? Here also the answer is given by the Holy Father: **"The first task is to put the economy at the service of peoples. Human beings and nature must not be at the service of money. Let us say NO to an economy of exclusion and inequality, where money rules, rather than service. That economy kills. That economy excludes. That economy destroys Mother Earth.** The economy should not be a mechanism for accumulating goods, but rather the proper administration of our common home..."

**A truly communitarian economy, one might say an economy of Christian inspiration, must ensure peoples' dignity and their "general, temporal welfare and prosperity"** (John XXIII *Mater et Magistra*, 1961)." Therefore we should move away from a system "which, in addition to irresponsibly accelerating the pace of production, and using industrial and agricultural methods which damage Mother Earth in the name of "productivity", continues to deny many millions of our brothers and sisters their most elementary economic, social and cultural rights. **This system runs counter to the plan of Jesus, against the Good News that Jesus brought...** Working for a just distribution of the fruits of the earth and human labor is not mere philanthropy. It is a moral obligation. For Christians, the responsibility is even greater: it is a commandment. It is about giving to the poor and to peoples what is theirs by right. The universal destination of goods is not a figure of speech found in the Church's social teaching. It is a reality prior to private property."

So the time for change is now. All the materialisms of the XX Century, communism and capitalism alike, did badly fail. We see it every day. This should be the golden age of the Social Teaching of the Church. This is not the end of history but certainly the end of materialisms.

