

Who says Christianity and communism are incompatible?

Sunday, 18 October, 2015, rev. Don Mader

Scripture lessons: Deuteronomy 7:7-10; I Corinthians 1:26-31; Acts 4:32-5

The answer to the question in the title this morning, at least, is quite easy: the Facebook page of the Catholic News Agency, as reported on the BBC website in their 10 July, 2015, story on the presentation of the so-called “Communist crucifix” (depicted on the cover of our bulletin this morning) to Pope Francis by President Evo Morales of Bolivia, where a Vatican spokesman is quoted as saying, “One simply cannot combine Communism and Christianity!” That’s who.

Several obvious observations in response to that:

First, I get a strong feeling that somebody in the Vatican – possibly a hold-over from the days of Pope John Paul II, for whom this would have been an entirely acceptable sentiment – is not singing from the same song sheet as the present Pope.

Second, what does one expect of a Roman Catholic? For centuries we Protestants have sniped at them for placing the authority of the Church above the authority of Scripture. Have they never read the passage from Acts 4 which was our third reading this morning? “Not a man of them claimed any of his possessions as his own, but everything was held in common.” That sure sounds an awful like communism to me.

And third, and more thoughtfully: I do have to wonder if anyone has bothered to really consider the object that set off all of this kerfuffle. I suspect that the reading, the meaning, of the artwork (for it is that, as well as a crucifix) are a lot more subtle than most people, particularly in the media, are assuming when they call it a “Communist crucifix”. The same BBC story reports a statement by Bolivia’s communications minister, Marianela Paco, who told Bolivian radio: “The sickle evokes the peasant, the hammer the carpenter, representing humble workers, God’s people.” Yes, the hammer and sickle is a Communist symbol – but before that they did represent workers, the sickle for agricultural workers, the hammer for industrial workers and craftsmen. That is why they were chosen by the communists.

Now, knowing the ideology behind liberation theology (as I do go back to that day) – particularly Roman Catholic liberation theology – I would suggest the thought expressed in the crucifix is quite other than combining “communism” and Christianity. Roman theology for centuries has held that human suffering has a salvific purpose, that it joins with the suffering of Christ to achieve our salvation. Now, we Protestants, with our doctrine of “sola gratia”, that salvation comes solely by the grace of God, through the work of Christ, reject that. But the thought behind the Roman Catholic position is not a bad one: it seeks to give human suffering a meaning, so that those who suffer on earth – whatever the nature of that suffering, be it disease, or persecution, or poverty or whatever – can understand that their suffering has a purpose, indeed has a divine purpose – they suffer with Christ, their suffering is taken up into His – and that perhaps that knowledge makes their condition more bearable. Espinal, as a Jesuit and intellectual, would have known that, and I think a first thing that his crucifix is saying, taking the hammer and sickle in their “pre-communist” symbolism for the workers of the world, those who live by the sweat of their brow, is that the suffering of the poor, the humble “salt of the earth” among whom he worked, is taken up in the suffering of Christ. But conversely, liberation theology, as a late, post-Holocaust current, also drew on the answer given to the question of where God was during the Holocaust: namely, “In the camps” - suffering with the sufferers.

Espinal would have known that too, and the second thing which I believe his crucifix is saying is that even as the suffering of the poor is taken up into Christ's suffering, that Christ suffers with the poor and oppressed: His suffering is theirs, and their suffering is His. And that combination makes this a very powerful devotional symbol, which has nothing at all to do with communism as a theory or ideology. And that remains true whether or not we share all of Espinal's theology; I, for one, reject the whole of the blood atonement theology as at best a symbol of the suffering of God, while wholeheartedly embracing the suffering of God with His people. But that makes the crucifix no less moving as a devotional object, or work of art.

But let's return to my original question in the sermon this morning. Are Christianity and communism compatible? At one level, there seems to be no denying that they are. Acts 4:32 alone is enough to establish that, not to mention the history of the church. What, for instance, are all of the monastic experiments, if not a form of communism, where the community holds its possessions in common, sharing its work – where frequently everyone from the abbot down takes their turn rooting around in the garden for the common food supply, and everyone contributes their specialist work, whatever that may be? Or, at quite another end of the spectrum, there was (in fact, still is, though much smaller than in the late 19th and early 20th century) the American Shaker communities, famed for the simplicity of their communal life style and the functional beauty of the objects they created. I think there can be no question that Christianity and communism – with a small “c” – are compatible.

At the same time, we had best recognize that these Christian experiments in communism – or perhaps communal living would be a better term – are also quite different from the political ideology of Marxist communism. Quite basically, they do not attempt to organize all of society on the basis of common property. They are voluntary, and they are limited. That is quite aside from whether Jesus (or for that matter Paul) ever conceived of a “Christian society” or a “Christian nation”, or whether the so-called “Constantinian compromise”, when the Church assumed official status as a state religion at, some would say, the cost of its soul, was the “downfall of Christianity”, as the Dutch (Remonstrant!) theologian and church historian G.J. Heering concluded. The communism practiced by the church was never intended as a blueprint for all of society.

And that is perhaps because our Christian solidarity has an entirely different foundation from political, ideological communism. It is not based on one's identity as a worker - “Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!” – or, in the words of the old Industrial Workers of the World song, “When the Union's inspiration through the worker's blood shall run / there can be no greater power anywhere beneath the sun / But what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one? / But the Union makes us strong...” (ironically, sung to the tune of the American Civil War hymn, The Battle Hymn of the Republic!).

Our solidarity as Christians is based on the gospel, or rather, even, on the premises for the gospel: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and God's response to our failure. It is not based on our common strength, but our common weakness.

Let's think more closely about the idea of our common weakness. Our solidarity

being based on our weakness and on God's response to that weakness is a very old theme in the scripture. It is first explicitly stated in Moses' final address to the newly minted people of Israel, in Deuteronomy, chapter 7, just before they cross the Jordan, where he tells them, "It was not because you were more numerous than any other nation that the Lord cared for you and chose you, for you were the smallest of all nations..." (7:7), and later, in the formula for the first-fruits offering, "My forefather was but a wandering Aramaean..." (26:5). God's grace, and not their strength, was the basis for the solidarity of the people of Israel – and specifically, the fact that they were strangers in a strange land, asylum-seekers if you please, becomes the basis for a key part of their communal ethic: the annual reminder that you were once in their dusty shoes of the wanderer, the refugee: so don't you dare close your hearts and doors to the outsider in your midst today!

Paul says something remarkably similar to the newly minted Christians in Corinth: "Brothers, think what sort of people you are, whom God has called. Few of you are men of wisdom, by any human standard, few are powerful or highly born..." (I Cor. 1:26). Now, one might want to make a distinction between the newly constituted nation of Israel, addressed by Moses, and the church addressed by Paul: the one is a collective, the other a collection of individuals whose lives have been changed. And indeed, our modern evangelical brethren do make this distinction, with their question about "Do you know Jesus as your personal Saviour?" and their hymns about "I come to the garden alone, when the dew is still on the roses".

But they are wrong: we are not saved alone, we are not alone in the garden with our personal Jesus. Years ago, when it was not uncommon to be approached on the street by a Bible-toting evangelical who was using the "Can I ask you a question? Do you know Jesus as your personal saviour?" method of evangelism, if I was in sporting mood I would shoot back, "No, I know Jesus as the redeemer of the world: 'For God so loved the WORLD he gave his only-begotten Son (John 3:16)'" which usually got rid of the pests rather quickly. We are not in the garden alone with Jesus: it is not a one-on-one encounter, but much more like a garden party, to which everyone is invited (the parable of the Wedding Feast, Matt. 22:1-10!). The church is as surely the chosen people of God as the chosen people of Israel were – and are; those wanderers collected in the Church are as surely a community created by the grace and love of God. That solidarity of God with us, in forgiving our failures and restoring our weakness, unites us with one another; as we are reconciled with God, we are reconciled with one another. And that solidarity with one another, created by God's reconciling us with Himself, is the basis for our charity – certainly for our sharing with one another in the church. But because God's grace potentially reaches to all humankind, with the poor and hungry and imprisoned everywhere (as the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25) reminds us). Sometimes, in manageable communities, that solidarity may extend to the sharing of property and labour; but it certainly must be expressed as charity and ethical economic behaviour in every circumstance.

As for the question with which I began. I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you. I'm not going to answer the big question the media asked: are Christianity and Communism (with a capital "C") compatible? I'm not going to answer, because I frankly don't know. What I do know is this: if you have not yet seriously considered your response to God's invitation in the Good News, to be reconciled with Him and with one another,

you should do so. And if you have done so, you should be constantly engaged in examining what your solidarity with others in the grace of God means, in charity, and in the search for economic and political justice for your brothers and sisters here and throughout the world.