

## THE NECESSARY BILINGUALISM OF CHRISTIANS\*

### NOTES ON THE POLITICAL EDUCATION OF CATHOLIC YOUTH

Although philosophers and other intellectuals have always reflected on politics, by which I mean the power-relations existing in all human societies, the need for explicit mass political education was only felt in special circumstances. The major examples of these special circumstances that come to mind are two. In the first place, the need to impart a general political education, which was called 'civics', was felt in countries which received a large number of emigrants from other countries with different political system, e.g. in the United States of America, with its system of liberal capitalism, the political education of new comers from the authoritarian agrarian societies of Czarist Russia or Bourbon Sicily, was felt to be a necessity. In the second place, newly-established regimes which placed themselves in radical opposition to previously established systems, like the Nazi regime or the Communist regime in Germany felt a similar need. But, in other circumstances, where there was a basically uncontested power-structure, explicit political education was not given, especially when there was also an established religion of the State. However, in these circumstances also, a political education was given; only it was not very visible, through its being implicit. The fact that political education is always going on in any society should perhaps be stressed for it to be clear that the choice concerning any education whatever is not whether it should be political or not, but whether it should be explicitly or implicitly political. It is not difficult to see why all education is political. In the first place, the study of any subject be it mathematics, administration, or poetry involves learning a language, in the wide sense of the word. Any learning is never just of brute facts, or of mere skills in doing or making things. It always involves learning a certain mode of communication a special kind of language, a particular system of using signs. The acquisition of any kind of knowledge implies two things: an attitude towards the

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world and a sharing of this attitude with others. A mathematician, an administrator, or a poet is a man who has learned a language which enables him to see the world and act in or upon it in a particular way, and also to communicate in a closer way with a particular group of his fellowmen who use the same or a fairly similar language: mathematicians, administrators, poets. To learn a language is both to adopt an attitude towards the world and to enter into a community of interests; to understand a language, as Wittgenstein said, is to share a form of life.

It is through sharing a language, in this wide sense, that an individual acquires an identity. As Erik Erikson has shown, it is through a sharing process, through relations of both giving and taking, that an identity is established by the child within the family and the adolescent within society. And similarly a group establishes its identity as a group through establishing a system of communication with other groups, through a common frame of reference being constituted by their sharing in the interpretation of things as signs; they can talk together, act together, work together, because they acknowledge the same meaning in what they say, do or make. In other words, they establish a special way of being together, of living together, of constituting a community, because they share the same language, they communicate with similar signs.

However, the sharing of a language has hitherto in human history always been too fragile by itself to hold together a human society. It has always had to be complemented by a power-structure. Through its shared language, or system of communication by signs, a human society establishes its identity; but it is only through a power-structure that it can preserve its integrity in the face of external dangers which often threaten its unity despite the internal conflicts of interest which always arise. Of course, it could be argued that there are cases where it may be better for integrity and unity to be sacrificed; for instance, a society may wish to merge its separate identity within a larger whole; but it can also be argued that in no case should an individual identity be lost through its participation in a larger whole. However, this controversy need not detain us here. The point being made is only that the form of life which is expressed in the language, or system of communication by signs, of any society has always required to be supported by a power-structure, by a system of authority and obedience. These relations of power in human society, which are essential complements of its shared language are the stuff of politics.

The kind of power-structure or political system of a human society is, in fact, best expressed by its patterns of communication, by the language or languages which its members share and use. If

a society is satisfied, whether rationally or irrationally with its political system, its language will be relatively stable. The legitimacy of the existing power-structure is acknowledged as corresponding to the accepted world-picture and to the desired form of life by the consensus to the existing system of signs in use for communication between the members of that society. In such a society, political education can remain implicit, since its purpose is essentially conservative. It is received simply through learning the shared language.

If, however, there is a felt need by the members of a society for changes of a basic kind in the power-structure or political system, this need will be expressed through attempts at modifying the shared language; the established system of signs for communication will be subjected to pulls and pressures. In such a situation, political education is likely to become explicit, both as a defence-mechanism by the powers that be and as an offensive-operation by those who wish to challenge them, in order to advocate or impose another distribution of power. Their success or failure will depend on the extent to which they succeed or fail in maintaining or modifying the shared language. Since education is the primary way in which the maintenance or modification of languages is obtained, it follows that, in the first place, both those who wish to preserve the existing power-structure and those who wish to alter it, will seek to control the media of education; in the second place, that education will always be biased in the direction of either conservation or change. Education is, therefore, always political by implication. But there need not be any explicit political education if a society is quite happy and fairly unanimous in its happiness with its political system. Explicit political education will be necessary, however, either to demand and to respond to a demand for its overhauling, or to counteract the dangers of the loss of identity which arise out of a pluralism of languages and foreign influxes. There is hardly any need to argue that these circumstances which have hitherto been special in history have become today almost universal, and that explicit political education has become a felt need almost everywhere.

It is worth noting here that there is a paradox in the relation of education to politics. On the one hand, the main media of education, from schools to television networks, tend to be most often under the control of governments or established power groups, as is almost inevitable; hence they tend to be used with the purpose of conserving the existing power structure. On the other hand, because of the nature of education itself, this purpose tends to be frustrated and to yield the opposite result. The development of

linguistic skills of its very nature tends to induce people to look at the world in novel ways and to seek new and more comprehensive ways of living together. Education is, thus, most often a weapon in the hands of the powerful who wish to conserve their power, but it has an inbuilt tendency to turn against them in its results. In fact, it often happens that, as happened in the late 1960's, the attempts to challenge the existing power structures do not come from those who are most oppressed by them, but rather from some of those who may be quite well-off within them, but who will have acquired new linguistic skills, and hence new perceptions of the world and new concepts of alternative forms of life. The nature of education is such that it tends to make the young in general and students in particular the most likely group to challenge the established power-structures and demand changes of the political system.

This political bias inherent in all education will appear in a simple form, if the education is, in the primitive sense of the word, religious and in a more complex form if it is Christian.

Primitive religions, as is well-known, divide experience into the sacred and the profane. This distinction is roughly equivalent to that between language and noise. The only way in which primitive man appears to have been able to make sense of at least part of the world around him was by conceiving it as a system of communication between superior beings, such as gods, and inferior beings, such as men, through the constitution of certain objects and events and persons into signs. Parts of nature and segments of human existence became comprehensible to him if seen, or acted upon, as though they constituted a language which gods and men shared. But other parts could not be comprehended by him that way; and hence at all, since there was no other way. Most objects, events and persons could not be related together in a world-picture which could make sense to him. These large areas of experience remained unstructured, chaptic, absurd. The parts which were meaningful were deemed 'sacred', the others 'profane'. For primitive man, there was no knowledge but this vision of parts of the world as media of communication with a higher form of life; no language but that which he shared with the gods. Anything which could not be seen as significant in terms of the relationship between the inferior and the superior beings was senseless. Primitive man knew only one language; he was a monolinguist. Even for him, however, the common language, although a much stronger bond than it is for contemporary man, was vulnerable. It had to be supported by a power-structure for defence against external or internal violation. But no explicit political education was necessary; it was part and

parcel of education in the one shared language: the sacred language. Being the only language, it was untouchable and generally respected as such.

With the Christian fulfilment of the Jewish religion, a radical change occurs. For Jews and Christians, as also for Moslems, God not only speaks through the world, in a succession of *mirabilia*, wonderful happenings, each novel and unique; He also speaks through His prophets who interpret these events. God does not only perform speech-acts; He also informs about their meaning. He thus enables us to see the happenings in the world as a sequence with a direction. Through this new prophetic language, man can discern a little better than the pagans did the meaning of God's doings. Through the new prophetic language, a great deal, although not all, of the obscure and irrational-looking happenings in the world, especially the darkest and most absurd-looking of all, viz. death, become significant. Orthodox Jews believe even today that they have a complete guide in the Thora. Christians believe that the prophetic religion provided an education in God's language for men to be able to accept His Word when it was embodied, finally, in a Man; and that with His life, culminating in His death and resurrection, the prophetic language reached its end. Henceforth, it was Christ's Life in His Risen Body which became the means of communication between God and man. A new system of special signs (called by Christians 'sacraments') was constituted by him to help all men enter into sharing more fully the language and, hence, the very form of life of God Himself.

The institution of this new language has very important consequences for the concept of the role of the power structure. Before the Christian language became available to mankind, the power-structure was the bulwark of social unity expressed in a unique language. This unique language was, at the same time, both religious and political. But for the Christian, his special religious language cannot be the same as the political. The Christian has to become a bilingualist. Without confusing the two languages, he has yet to relate one to the other hierarchically. In order to see the complexity which the political education of the Christian has to assume, it is necessary to consider why bilingualism is a necessity for the Christian.

The Christian's religious language cannot be the same as the political because of its very peculiar nature as a language. A language is generally the perfect expression of the world-picture and form of life of a society; it has to be, since the world-picture and form of life come into being with the language. They fit perfectly because they are made together. The Christian (sacramental) lan-

guage is, on the contrary, the expression of the life of God which he makes available to man for sharing from this life, but the fullness of which can only be experienced in the future. A big gap necessarily exists between the Christian language on the one hand and the world-picture and form of life which Christians have in this world. The Christian can only tend to make the world picture and the form of life which he shares with other members of his society tend and approximate towards an asymptote which cannot be reached in this world.

A corollary of this difference is that a language of the usual kind can be imposed up to a point by a power-structure, but the Christian language cannot. A political group can use the media of education and other forceful instruments in such a way that the language of a society is established in definite ways, inasmuch as departures from the established system can only be due either to an inconsistency which carried to extremes would be described as folly or to voluntary acts directed towards altering the world-picture or form of life. The use of power to cut off the recalcitrant individuals through seclusion in hospitals or prisons is always conceivable and sometimes practised. But no power on earth can impose the total use of the Christian language, in the first place because its total use is unattainable on earth, and in the second place because even its partial use has to be freely accepted for it to succeed in creating the special form communication which is its *raison d'être*.

It is true that attempts have been made in the past to impose the Christian language in certain societies through a power-structure. But such attempts at what has been called 'Christian Theocracy' have always proved to be the most dismal failures. They cannot succeed because a divine language cannot be perfectly spoken under present conditions on earth, and the best which even the best-willed human beings can do is stutter and stammer at it, to the maximal degree granted by God. They cannot succeed because even so to stutter and stammer will only be in the language as long as it is done with at least a good will. The Christian language cannot be imposed by force; but neither can it be used to perfection with the best good will.

It simply cannot therefore, fulfil the role of an ordinary language. An ordinary language is necessarily the expression of an actual world picture and form of life. For the ordinary purpose of participating in a society with an identity constituted by the nexus of a shared system of signs, another language than the Christian has to be used. No Christian is dispensed on earth from sharing his life with a group or groups of his fellowmen, including the implied po-

wer-structure which remains a necessary complement for the group having an identity as a group. He has to share their language, although he may and indeed ought to seek to modify it constantly in the direction of the Christian language, but always in the knowledge that it can change only slowly and will never coincide perfectly with the Christian. At the same time, he must use the Christian language to the extent that has been made available to him. On the one hand He must be a bilingualist. On the other hand he must not be a schizophrenic. In other words, although he has to use two languages, he cannot keep them completely cut off from each other. His problem is how to relate them in the best way.

In order to clarify this problem, it is necessary to take, however briefly, a look at the nature of the Christian (sacramental) language. The heart of this language is the Eucharist. The Eucharist is, in the first place, a meal taken in common, but the ordinary meanings which taking a meal in common has, nourishment and the manifestation of solidarity between the participants, is not its essential meaning in the Christian language. In Christian language, its essential meaning is sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How participating in the Eucharist can mean sharing in the divine life of God remains a mystery, and this mystery constitutes the irremovable difference between the ways in which the Christian language on the one hand and other languages on the other function. However, the Christian language is deemed also to have implications for its user in terms of ordinary language. He is committed to a willing acceptance of those limits on self-expansion, of which the ultimate is death and which Christ willingly accepted; such acceptance is the condition for transcending them, as Christ did. Now, this commitment has political implications, i.e. consequences which will affect his attitude and behaviour towards the power-structure existing in his society. For instance, the Christian will find that the power-structure leaves certain groups of men unorganised, oppressed and exploited. His commitment to sharing in Christ's death and resurrection implies that he has to accept self-sacrifice in order that these groups be integrated into organised social life. Such an integration will imply some, perhaps major, alterations of the power-structure; and, it will imply the correlative modifications of the ordinary language which expressed the world-picture and form of life supported by that power-structure.

The example of the Eucharistic illustrates the need of 'bilingualism'. On the one hand, the Christian language is irreducible to a language usable in politics, for, the Eucharist is essentially expresses a form of life in which death is transcended; but such a

form of life is not perfectly expressible in any man-made language. In fact, the Christian language can only be accepted by a rational man not on the grounds of his being able to understand it, but because it is God-given. On the other hand, the Christian language is related to the language of politics, for the Eucharist implies a commitment to some alteration of the political system and its corresponding language.

The Christian language is only one – that given by Christ. Although there are differences in the ways in which Christians accept it, this only means that some or all of them are more or less mistaken in their mode of acceptance of the divine gift. But the languages used in the different human societies are various, because their world-pictures and forms of life are various. It follows that Christians should in principle share one and the same Christian language, but that their second language, which may now be called, for brevity, their 'political' language, will not be one and the same. The 'political' language of each Christian group or individual is like a function of which one element is a constant, (the Christian 'functor' of change) and the other a variable, (the language expressive of the world-picture and form of life existing in the actual society in which the Christian happens to be living). It is, therefore, inevitable that at different times and places the 'political' languages of Christians will differ without this necessarily implying that there is any inconsistency between any of them and their common 'Christian' language.

Moreover, even in the same historical situation and in the same circumstances of time and place, it is possible for Christians to have differences in their political language without contradiction with their Christian language. This possibility exists because the relation between the two languages has to be worked out and may be worked out differently. Even if it is granted that there is complete agreement about the term of the relation which should be common and unique, i.e. the Christian language, there may well not be agreement about either the world-picture and form of life expressed in the secular language or about the modifications which it is both desirable and feasible to bring out. The differences, in the political language of Christians who find themselves in the same historical context can only, without inconsistency with the Christian language, fall within a certain range. For certain world-pictures and forms of life are clearly incompatible with the Christian language; anti-semitism, for example. But even in these cases, although there should be complete unanimity about the evaluation of the world-picture or form of life, there still can be differences about the modifications to be pressed for. To give two concrete



examples. There should be unanimity among Catholics that divorce is not a good feature of a form of life for any society. But it may be the case that if it is not allowed by law, there would be a very large incidence of illicit unions. Such a situation may not be preferable to not having a law allowing divorce. Since the judgement to be made in cases like this is hypothetical, it is certainly not clear that one line of action rather than another imposes itself. There should also be unanimity among Catholics that justice requires that the rich countries should help the poor countries. But there was a controversy between two well-known English Catholic politicians in which one argued that priority should be given to those countries where the least help would do the greatest good, while the other argued that it should be given to those countries where the conditions were worst, even though the benefit would be less. It does not seem that either side was manifestly wrong in Christian terms. It appears that, even in identical historical circumstances, it is possible to have differences of political languages without there being a contradiction between any of them and the Christian language.

On the other hand, there may well be political issues on which it should be possible for Christians, or at least Catholics, to achieve consensus. On such issues, they may make use of their institutional structures which exist for the proper exercise of the Christian language, which is essentially constituted by the sacramental liturgy, for action seeking to modify those aspects of the world-picture and form of life which can be expressed in political language. Some of these issues could be sufficiently clearly determined. To quote an example, It should be indisputable enough that the strengthening of international organisations to prevent war, protect the environment and redistribute resources more equitably is a presentday implication contained within the Christian language. There is also little room for error in judging that the proposals to declare the oceanbed beyond the limits of national jurisdiction to be the common heritage of mankind are a way of partially moving towards the objective. It may therefore be surprising that, except for the voice of Barbara Ward in a publication by the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, no very vocal Catholic chorus to back this proposal before the United Nations was raised.

This particular example has been chosen in order to illustrate two different points. In the first place it draws attention to the fact that while it is true, on the one hand, that the world today presents such a diversity of situations and political languages, that it is impossible for all Christians or even Catholics to have only

one political language, it is also true on the other hand, that for the first time, from a number of points of view, the world has become a single unit. McLuhan, who says that we are all now living in a 'global village', because of the communication revolution, has also said, in a striking phrase, that the idea of mankind as one mystical body has become technologically realisable today. At any rate, it is clear that a historical situation has been reached in which the major political problems of mankind no longer occur on the national level, but on the global level. Because of the continuing Babel of political languages, which express the noise which still predominates over structured communication at the international level, these are problems which seem particularly to call for Christian action to draw out the clearly universalist implications of the Christian language. The ecological crisis and the demands for a new economic order have, in particular shown the need for major modifications of all the dominant political languages in order to express and re-structure changing world-pictures and forms of life in accord with the realisation that we are all living on a small planet with limited resources and that with our increasing numbers we are increasingly converging upon each other. The proposals on the Law of the Sea appear to be a most striking instance of a possible, positive and concrete Christian response to the situation.

In the second place, the example draws attention to the relative failure to produce similar responses. There are certainly many factors which appear to discourage Christians and Catholics from speaking as such in political language. But the major factor is probably the awareness of the harm done by confusions in the past between the Christian and the political languages. The reaction against this has taken the particular form of liberal secularism. On this subject, Charles Taylor has written:

'This concept of the desacralization of politics fits perfectly, of course, into the liberal, consensus image of politics. Along with democratization, it seems to point to the evolution of a society the culmination of which comes when men will sit down, free of religious or ideological *partis pris*, to the business of bargaining over the advantages that really matter to them. In this open, bargaining society, they will at last be able to see clearly that they have an overwhelming common interest in keeping the system in operation, and thus in settling for what they are allocated by the consensus. A secular, pragmatic, political culture will thus dovetail perfectly with institutions whose main function is to bring an acceptable consensus out of a large bundle of demands. The political process is

a flow from demand-inputs to allocation-outputs – which are ‘allocations’ of valued things between people – and this process works best when its operation is unhampered by ideological rigidity.

But this vision of history is extremely dubious, and is more in the nature of a dream of what history should be. This dream was inspired by the Enlightenment, and persists largely because the alternatives appear too morally objectionable to be given credence. For on examination, this phenomenon of the desacralization of politics turns out to be much more ambiguous and uncertain than it first appeared to be. The sacred, in a recognized traditional form, plays a decreasing role in the world; but when one looks at modern nationalism, at the more powerful revolutionary ideologies, at the attitude of many Americans to their constitution and way of life, one is forced to ask the question whether something very like the sacred is not filling the gap it left.

Liberals who sense the quasi-religious basis of nationalism usually change from optimists to pessimists without altering their view of man and society. They sigh regretfully at the incorrigible irrationality of man, but retain the pragmatic bargaining, consensus society as their vision of the acme of human social development. But can one ever understand modern history or society if one sticks to these eighteenth-century guns?’

The still dominant political language in the Western World, of which our countries are a part, appears to be that which Taylor has summed up, although it is, of course, being increasingly challenged especially by the young. Can Christians arrive at least, at formulating a political language which takes account of the fact that on the one hand liberal secularisation has resulted in the frustration of the universal human desire to live in contact with larger, significant realities, in really meaningful communities, but that, on the other hand, our world today is pluralist, with only a minority still accepting the Christian language, and that all forms of totalitarianism are incompatible with it? Taylor argues the concept of the ‘dialogue society’.

‘This society would start from the fact of pluralism, from the fact that we are of many different faiths, beliefs, and moralities; but it would also start from the fact that we are all less satisfied and dogmatic in our possession of the truth; that we are all therefore in some way searchers; and that the fact of pluralism has entered into the very content of our varied beliefs so that we are already in dialogue within ourselves with

the ideas of others.

A dialogue society is one that would put the fact of dialogue itself in the central position occupied in earlier societies by an established religion, and in totalitarian societies by the official ideology. In what way? Well, let us suppose that the centres of our major cities, instead of being unliveable canyons of polluted air, were reconstructed and made into a genuine living centres of our civilization, like the cities of earlier ages. Only instead of the temple or cathedral, we would establish an environment in which, through the media of architecture, art, music, and film, the most important ideas, preoccupations, and realizations of our civilization could be presented. These buildings, films, exhibits, and the like would be brought into being and constantly renewed and changed by different groups in our society and would thus reflect our diversity. These groups would have the possibility of communicating what they believe, want, and value to society at large in a way without any parallel today. The dialogue, which is now largely a private affair, whose public expression is almost exclusively intellectual, would be given a central place by being woven into our public environment.

The possibilities of the dialogue society are almost completely unexplored. It would mean using our technology and our knowledge of communications to extend greatly our capacity for collective expression, our ability to explain ourselves to ourselves, and to feel what we are as a society. In this way it would be part of the answer to one of our most intractable problems, the design of a new and humanly acceptable form of urban life. For it would restore to our cities what those of previous ages have always had – a living core – so that the geographic centre of our living space would again correspond to the centre of meaning. To get closer to the heart of a major metropolis would be to get closer to the heart of the matter – the paradigmatic expression of our collective hopes and concerns.

At the same time, it would restore in a new and more conscious way a half-forgotten art-form – that of the whole environment as communication. To recover this is of vital importance for us, for it is the only art-form in which a new classicism is possible – that is, an ordered expression of the whole. Poetry, music, painting, and drama are necessarily given over in our time to the jagged intrusion of the partial symbol.

The dialogue society would thus put behind us the paradox mentioned earlier whereby an immensely creative, technologi-

cal civilization generates a collective environment so scant in significance. And it would involve a change in our fundamental idea of what a technological society is all about. Instead of being simply an engine to increase the Gross National Product or to destroy potential enemies with increasing efficiency, it could be seen as an unprecedented way of exploring the questions that matter most to us and of coming to grips with what gives meaning to our lives. We would finally tackle one of the endemic maladies of our civilization — the fetishism of the machine.

The building of a dialogue society would be a positive response to the widely frustrated aspiration to meaningful participation. It would take us beyond our present condition of stagnation, in which apocalyptic attempts to express the ultimate in one great transformation vie with the magic illusion of participation through a modern Rain King. It would involve real participation in the search for common meanings, since it would draw on the contribution of all the varied groups whose ideas and ideals would be given public expression. And it would accept and celebrate diversity. Unlike the dream cults, it would not act as a screen to hide the need for democratization. The dialogue society would, on the contrary, increase people's grasp of their real predicament. The participation in the search for meaning would reinforce and be greater participation in the decisions that affect people's lives.'

To conclude. What should the political education of Catholic Youth consist of, in practice, today? In the first place, it should ensure that the negative political implications of the Christian language should be clearly seen, so that there should be no contradiction between it and any political language that the Christian may choose to speak. It should also be ensured that the positive implications of the language, at the level of general directions to be pursued, should also be clearly seen and accepted.

In the second place, education is needed to generate awareness of the planetary dimension of human existence today, as this is a crucial aspect of the relation between the Christian language and political languages, while always keeping it in mind that even if mankind had a unique political language, instead of the many it has today, there would still be a distinction between the two languages.

In the third place, education is needed for the appreciation of the diversity of situations and the corresponding diversity of appropriate political commitments. From this point of view, no general line of conduct of universal applicability can be deduced from

the Christian language by itself. However, it is possible in given situations that Catholic groups identify desirable changes that could be worked towards in their historical and social context and commit themselves to action about them, while always keeping in mind that no solution in the political field will ever be definite, until the New Jerusalem will be reached. There, as St. John tells us, there will be no temple, no sacraments, and therefore no education, political or otherwise, either. But until then we must be, in St. James's phrase 'doers of the Word' – both in the liturgy and in politics.

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