Walesa, Socialism & Christianity

by Jacques Ellul

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Nobel Prize winner Lech Walesa

We must understand that Lech Walesa's *Solidarity* Union is in no way a rejection of socialism, a return to capitalism, a reestablishment of the bourgeoisie. Quite the contrary! Yes, it certainly is *anti-Soviet* communism; but at the same time it is the appearance of a new socialism. The widely heralded socialism which starts from *the base* — with a human face, self-directing, flexible, progressive — will certainly not be put into practice by the Soviets or by the renewed, profound Marxist theories found throughout the world.

The socialism that is being created in Poland by Walesa and *Solidarity* comes out of a Catholic Christianity, deeply lived, exacting, determined and capable of self-renewal and confrontation, with a socialism stripped of its police and its ready-made ideas about economics and administration. This encounter is not a pure and simple spontaneity, heeding all impulses coming from *the base*.

The base is not "in itself" — the people or the proletariat. It does not exist "in itself"! It cannot be objectively defined: it has a past, beliefs, hopes. It lives today

following a specific morality. Its "spontaneity" will differ depending on the components it brings to the crisis. On this point, I believe that the Catholic Christian components explain this remarkable orientation in Poland toward a new socialism.

I believe the role of Christianity — if, alas, this were properly understood by the churches in other nations — provides socialism with the possibility of an evolution which, apart from the *Solidarity* encounter, cannot take place. There is talk about "Christians for socialism." I believe there is only one example and realization of "Christians for socialism": Lech Walesa and his *Solidarity* Union.

In France and the World Council of Churches, the link, even at times the identity, between socialism and Christianity is excessively evident. The opposite, I suspect, is the proclamation in the United States, i.e., the *incompatibility* of socialism and Christian faith. Walesa gives us a very important example. Of course, I am not about to redefine socialism. I will only point out that we must not confuse socialism, Marxism, communism and Stalinism. These are four different orientations and conceptions, and no single one necessarily implies the others. I am speaking of *socialism.*

What is essential to me is that we see in *Solidarity* an encounter, if not a union, between Walesa's socialism and what would seem to be in this respect the harshest, most irreconcilable, most intransigent form of Christianity: Roman Catholicism in Poland. Then the questions: Could Walesa be a bad Christian? On the contrary, his behavior represented a *lived* Christian faith. Is he a bad Catholic? The Pope himself gave Walesa his total approval, blessed him, and declared him to be in the right.

Is Walesa a bad socialist? He is certainly an anti-Stalinist. He seeks to destroy the hierarchical, centralized, authoritarian, police-ridden communist order. But he does this precisely with the goal and perspective that moves to the truth of socialism. He calls into question the deviations, lies, and oppressions of socialism, *not socialism itself.* That is, Walesa does not wish to return the principal means of production to private control. On the contrary, he wishes those involved in production to exercise control (and not a State and Party administration to replace administration by cartels). He does not wish to reopen the question of the path to social justice. On the contrary, he emphasizes it by demanding suppression of the unjust privileges of members of the Party and of the *Nomenklatura.*

He does not reopen the question of union power, but he refuses to let the union be an organ of the State and administration, so that the union can become again a free association defending the freedom of workers. He does not reopen the question of socialist planning. On the contrary, he demands that planning be truly socialist, that is, that it be based on the real demands of people, and not on bureaucratic decisions. Everything he demands corresponds to a truer socialism than that of Stalin. There is nothing anti-Christian in all this.

Moreover, Christians must consider the following: In the past 40 years, only two attempts with genuinely new methods sought to get the world out of its impasse (and not to resolve the economic crisis — the situation is much graver!), to find a new way which belongs neither to capitalism nor communism nor the Third World. They were both made in communist countries: Radovan Richta's in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Lech Walesa's in Poland in 1980.

In other words, these two methods were created from the harsh *communist* experience, as an attempt to go beyond it, to take the greatest advantage of technical progress by placing this progress in the service of the most humble and weak, to balance the excess of power by a return to human values. In the capitalist world in the past 40 years, absolutely *nothing* new has been discovered in the political or economic sphere — neither the reorganization of society, nor the incarnation of Christian values, nor the better utilization of science, nor progress toward peace: *nothing.*

The two fundamentally new methods are linked to socialism. In Richta's case, an intellectual foundation taking seriously humanistic values. In the case of Lech Walesa, the foundation is practical syndicalism and authentic Christian inspiration.

We should think about this. ■

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