

is a further consolidation of political power in the republic.

Coupled with the changed structure of production, the overwhelming share of state-owned enterprises and return to the Soviet-style methods of management and system of administrative punishment, LUKASHENKO's immeasurable presidential authority facilitates good economic results in the republic.

Still, all the economic decisions and programmes in the republic must be approved directly by the president. As a result of increased government interventions in the economy, the level of administrative corruption has increased in Belarus.

Additionally, while more and more foreign investment flows into its neighbour countries such as Ukraine and Russia, foreign investment is virtually non-existent in Belarus. Belarus has lost almost all her trade ties with other European countries and the only remaining partners are the countries from the former Soviet Union, Poland and Germany. Despite all the recent economic changes, Belarus still can be described as an economically and politically isolated country.

A THIRD TERM?

Currently, the possibility of a third presidential term is hardly discussed in Belarus. In September 2004 the president announced a new referendum to be held on October 17, where citizens were asked to remove the existing restriction in the constitution for more than two terms of presidential commission and, particularly, to allow Alexander LUKASHENKO to participate in the third presidential elections

in Belarus in 2006. The current Constitution does not allow the same person to be elected as president more than twice.

The aggressive agitating campaign in favour of LUKASHENKO, infringement of the election legislation, compulsion of citizens to participate in a terminated referendum (before the date of the referendum itself) and mass falsifications resulted in ninety percent turnout for the referendum and eighty-five percent approval of the amendment to the constitution, according to the Central Election Committee.

These numbers are doubtful and uncharacteristic for the atomistic and disjointed Belarusian populace, for whom the rate of attendance does not usually exceed fifty to sixty percent. Moreover, the referendum was held with numerous flagrant violations from the side of the state administration and local election committees.

It is clear that Alexander LUKASHENKO is going to evade the Constitution once again and to find for himself an opportunity to stay in power as long as possible "for the benefit of all Belarus people," according to his own words.

In general, this campaign showed that the opposition did not have the necessary potential to organise mass protests and meetings in order to express an alternative political opinion and to help change the authoritarian regime in the republic.

Ekaterina KOLESNIKOVA is Russian Orthodox and belongs to the Brotherhood of Three Vilnya Martyrs in Minsk, Belarus. She worked as a music teacher for children in the Kruptsy Sunday School in Minsk and participated in theological and gospel readings there. Her major is economics and she studied in the Czech Republic and Italy in Master's programmes. She thanks the help of Natalia BAZYLEWICH in preparing this article.

Manuel QUINTERO

The Ecumenical Movement in Latin America and Its Relation to Europe

In the last decades of the XXth century and this early XXIst century, the ecumenical movement in Latin America was ample, with many forms which developed in answer to real issues and challenges, present both in its most immediate surroundings and in the whole oikoumene.

FIRST STAGE: WSCF

During the first stage, in the forties and fifties, the most significant expressions of ecumenism were the direct effect of the pioneering work of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in countries such as Argentina and Mexico; as well as the consequence of the YMCA presence in some of the most important cities on the continent; and of valuable efforts undertaken by Evangelical youth at the national and continental level: in 1941 the Latin American Fellowship of Evangelical Students (ULAJE) was founded.

Iglesia y Sociedad en América Latina (ISAL, Church and Society in Latin America) gathered young Christian intellectuals — among them the Catholic theologians Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, Segundo GALILEA, Juan Luis SEGUNDO, Lucio GERA, and the Protestant theologians Emilio CASTRO, Julio DE SANTA ANA, Rubem ALVES, José Míguez BONINO — for a critical reflection on the relationship between faith and poverty, the gospel and social justice.

Together with these progressive para-ecclesiastic ecumenical bodies, a series of dialogue and cooperation efforts took place involving Evangelical churches, which culminated in the constitution of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) in 1982.

CLAI basically summoned and included the so-called historical churches: Methodist, Lutheran, Reformed,

Presbyterian, Anglican, Waldensian and Congregational, with a small but valuable representation of Pentecostalism.

On the other hand, other churches related to the American missionary movement were also involved in missionary cooperation and theological dialogue under the auspices of the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL), which eventually developed the theology of *integral mission*.

At the end of the 1960s, specifically in 1969, the first meeting of CLADE (Latin American Conference of Evangelicals) took place in Bogotá. The FTL was organized as an evangelical response not only to the ISAL movement, but also as a response to the dominant North American evangelical conservatism that was reluctant to respond or to get involved in social questions.

Those expressions of a search for dialogue and cooperation between the Evangelical churches were marked by different ideologies. The most radical ecumenical movement, represented since the middle sixties by student (WSCF) and youth para-ecclesiastic organisations (the Latin American Ecumenical Youth Union, ULAJE), organisations of Christian education (Latin American Evangelical Committee of Christian Education, CELADEC), and of intellectuals (Church and Society in Latin America, ISAL), opened to Roman Catholic participation and pleaded for profound changes in social, political and economic structures.

COMPROMISE IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

Militants of these organisations became involved in political processes led by leftist parties and organisations in their countries, and some of them paid with their lives for this compromise "until the last consequences."

An emblematic figure from this point of view was the Argentinean professor Mauricio LOPEZ, a leader of WSCF and later of the World Council of Churches (WCC), who was imprisoned, tortured and disappeared under the military regime in Argentina.

On the other hand, the churches that motivated the initiative of the Latin American Council of Churches were characterised early on by the adoption of a defence line of human rights, at a time when many countries in Latin America were under dictatorial and military regimes and the National Security Doctrine prevailed.

Thus, the CLAI had among its first programmes the “ministry of consolation and solidarity,” under the guidance of Puerto Rican pastor Juan Marcos RIVERA. This pastor developed significant work regarding the denunciation of violations of human rights and of support to human-rights abuse victims, in close collaboration with the Human Rights Office of the World Council of Churches.

Since the end of the eighties, as the recovery of democracy in South America moved forward, the Council concentrated its efforts towards the peace dialogues and negotiations in Central America, in countries that suffered the consequences of long and bloody civil wars.

The final years of the XXth century and the early years of this century were the scene of a new emphasis: the prophetic criticism of the neoliberal model and its negative consequences on a continent where poverty and inequality are increasing.

We must mention in this respect that Jose Luis MACHINEA, executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) of the United Nations (UN), made a statement on 28 September 2004 on the fact that the region had 223 million poor people, figures that reflect a relapse in the fight against poverty and inequality to unacceptable levels.

A JOINT ETHOS

Both the aforementioned para-ecclesiastic organisations (WSCF, ULAJE, CELADEC, ISAL) and the CLAI developed their mission, starting from a joint *ethos* made up of a progressive theology influenced by some European theological movements, and an anti-capitalistic ideology that also found its roots in the philosophical thought developed in Europe.

Equally in their public statements and decrees in the past decades and in their pastoral theology, the para-ecclesiastic organizations pleaded for *liberation*, a key concept that involved the pulling down of oppressive and unjust structures and the building of a more human society — a process that questions the whole prevailing system. Over this period, CLAI strongly emphasized the *struggle for justice*.

The other big sector of Evangelical churches promoted the so-called *integral mission*, a concept that states that God’s salvation affects the *whole* person, both spiritually and physically, and in her or his concrete historical reality. An inte-

gral mission lives out and proclaims both personal and social justice. These churches always argued that historical churches, in their eagerness to add a prophetic voice to injustice, overlooked the spiritual dimension of salvation and evangelical emphasis.

The dialogue and the search for unity between Christian churches happened within the so-called “Cold War,” a context of ideological polarisation that perfunctorily placed the social and political protagonists in one of the two groups, “socialism” or “capitalism”: the ideological option of non-alignment rarely appeared in the Latin American environment. Many times, the most radical ecumenical position was qualified as “communist” and the militants of this prophetic ecumenism were persecuted within the Church and outside it.

EUROPE, ALWAYS THERE

Students and intellectuals in Latin America and Europe — especially those in Western Europe — have always felt a mutual attraction, which was frequently rendered in real honeymoons, although there were also the sporadic and recurrent “bitter moons.”

This mutual attraction is due to concrete historical and cultural reasons. With the “discovery” of America, Europeans could for the first time recognise the peculiarity of their civilization and the fact that it was part of a true *oikoumene*, although two hundred years after this historical event, HEGEL still considered the European human being to be the “universal human.”

The women and men on this side of the Atlantic are the fruit of the ethnic and cultural blend between Native Americans and Europeans, Africans and later Asians. That is why Jose VASCONCELOS (1882-1959), a renowned Mexican philosopher, suggested calling Latin American and Caribbean people “the cosmic human beings.”

For almost five hundred years, Latin America’s fate was linked to the unsteadiness of European politics, and basically to three great powers: Spain, France and England. Although during the world division in the XVIIth century it was Spain that took the lion’s share of the so-called “New World,” during the following centuries, the wars between these powers for the command of the new rich areas of the planet had immediate and profound effects on the colonies in this part of the world.

This is particularly obvious in the Caribbean, the scene of a sharp confrontation between the three powers, dissimulated by the picturesque and romantic façade of official piracy or revealed in all its harshness in cruel naval and inland battles.

BONHÖFFER AND BARTH — IMPORTANT INFLUENCES

The most radical Latin American ecumenical movement that we called para-ecclesiastic needs to be understood in that historical relation. WSCF, the unquestionable pioneer in the continental ecumenical movement, brought the theological debate on the Old Continent to our region.

The Christian student’s thought in the sixties was fed on the positive evaluation of secularisation by Dietrich BONHÖFFER and the dazzling possibility to live in the world as mature women and men free from religious control, *etsi Deus non daretur*. Moreover, BONHÖFFER was a martyr of Nazism, a person of political compromise “until the last consequences,” and that made him a paradigm of faith and action for a generation that was looking for its place in the continent’s convulsed history.

On the other hand, the influence of Karl BARTH on the Latin American ecumenical movement can be seen in the importance given to the Bible, to Jesus Christ as central part of the Revelation, and to the daily and existential contact with social reality.

This influence is also apparent in the criticism of religion



(or of the institutional Church as the expression of this religion), which is one of the main themes of that radical ecumenical aspect; and we must not forget that for BARTH religion “contradicts and neutralises Revelation.” At the background of all this stays BARTH’s own political attitude, which, as BONHÖFFER’s, is to be found in true and brave opposition to Nazism.

THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Who can doubt that the political theology of Johann Baptist METZ influenced the Latin American theology of liberation, especially in its emphasis on the fact that theory and practice feed and need each other, and in the statement that there is no theoretical truth without proper practice?

Or in his statements that there is no orthodoxy but that resulting from orthopraxis? Or even more, that there is no liberation of the human being without the political structures enslaving it being changed?

Similar questions were put by liberation theology in stating that theology is a critical reflection upon practice in the light of faith; in other words, that the compromise, the efficient love, comes first, and only afterwards does the discourse come.

Praxis and reflection address and correct each other, making a hermeneutical circle. And, at the centre of practice and reflection, there is the preferential option for the poor, to whom the Good News of the free and unconditional love of God is given.

In its turn, the theology of hope of Jürgen MOLTSMANN — which arrived on our shores in the first years of the seventies — confronted us with the challenge of an eschatological future that must begin its realisation here and now, while at the same time giving us back the notion that the essence of Christianity is the faith in God’s Reign and the denial of any present kingdoms.

In Latin America the radical ecumenical movement very soon learned the value of hope, especially when the tragic night of protracted military dictatorships delayed the coming of the democratic dawn.

IN SPITE OF THE CHANGES

The fall of the Berlin Wall 15 years ago, which symbolically marks the collapse of real socialism in Central and Eastern Europe and the end of the “bipolar” world, made possible the weakening of the most rigid and dogmatic ideological attitudes, and the concern for social justice acquired legitimacy and stopped being identified with the ideological labels of the great communist conspiracy.

From one day to the next, communism stopped being “that ghost which travels the world” and capitalism emerged as the great winner of the Cold War, surrounded by such euphoria that some ideologists allowed themselves to talk about “the end of history.” Thus Latin America was no longer the battlefield between the two great systems in their search for supremacy. The extinction of the internal and external communist enemy weakened the *raison d’être* of military governments and put the National Security Doctrine into second place.

The return of democratically elected governments and the new international geopolitical reality helped to bring social and economic development issues back onto the public agenda, and the criticism of misery, marginalization and exclusion were no longer deemed “subversive” by the powers in charge.

In the aftermath of these historical changes, Latin American critical thinking

suffered a serious setback and became defensive; quite a few progressive intellectuals abandoned their “old-fashioned” ideals about social justice and joined the group of winners, accepting as unquestionable and “normal” the capitalist social order, as well as the sanctification and idolatry of the market.

THE CHALLENGE OF GRACE

We can say nowadays that a system which emphasizes the values of competence and the pursuit of profit in the economic field, and which promotes so-called “unique thought” in the ideological arena, is the expression of a radical crisis of civilisation. For this system values people for what they have and not for what they are, while neglecting the preservation and care of the environment in its unrelenting pursuit of profits.

A lot of people hoped that the collapse of real socialism would make way for a new Enlightenment era, where it would be possible to solve conflicting interests in a civilized manner, without resorting to war, and where humanity as a whole would move towards a higher stage of integral development.

In practice, we have had the military and economic hegemony of a single country, the deterioration of multilateral institutions and the resurgence of fundamentalisms, phenomena that made the world into a more violent and less secure place.

The ecumenical movement as a whole is now challenged to proclaim and share the gift of God’s grace to a society that idolises the market while sacrificing to it millions of victims. As METZ already said, one has to fight to forge an “*oikoumene* of compassion” that will allow us the practice of solidarity with human suffering within and outside the boundaries of Christianity.

Suggested Reading

- BONINO Jose Miguez, *Towards a Christian Political Ethic*. Philadelphia, 1985.
 CAPELA Juan Ramon: *Los ciudadanos siervos*. Madrid, 1995.
 CHOMSKY Noam, *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance*. New York, 2005.
 DUSSEL Enrique, *History and the Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective* (tr. DRURY John). New York, 1976.
 METZ Johann Baptist, *La compasión. Un programa universal del cristianismo en la época del pluralismo cultural y religioso*. Revista Latinoamericana de Teología. Abril 2002. 25–32.
 SILVA GOTAY Samuel, *El pensamiento cristiano revolucionario en América Latina y el Caribe*. Río Piedras, 1985.

Manuel QUINTERO is an electrical engineer and journalist from Cuba. He is the incoming director of Frontier Internship in Mission (FIM), beginning January 2005. Previously he served as the director of communications for the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAD) in Quito, Ecuador; and as secretary general of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) in Genève, Switzerland. His email address is manuel@clai.org.ec.

