

Reply to a Priest's Letter

By William Z. Foster

In mid-July, just past, I received a letter from a ranking New York Catholic clergyman, proposing that I resume the affiliation to the Catholic Church which I broke off two generations ago. In my reply on July 27th, I pointed out to him that this proposal was utterly impossible and I explained some of the reasons why. My letter is appended herewith, but as my correspondent requested that I do not publish his letter, I am unable to include it. The text of my letter follows:

Dear Sir:

Please excuse me for not making an earlier reply to your letter of July 7th, as I have been out of the city and it reached me only a few days ago. This also explains my absence when you called at my home.

I appreciate very much your concern regarding my spiritual welfare, and also your sincerity in this matter. The fact is, however, that, as a Marxist, I find that the dialectical materialist viewpoint fully satisfies me in meeting the everyday problems of life, as well as in confronting the perspective of eventual natural dissolution by death. In my outlook on life there is no place for religion.

It is now about sixty years since I parted company with religion. In my book, *From Bryan to Stalin*, I have described at some length how I came to break with my early religious beliefs through a boyhood reading of Paine, Lecky, Draper, Gibbon, Darwin, Spencer and others. The atheist position I developed through this reading has been greatly strengthened by my experience in life, including eventually the reading of Marx and Lenin.

My ideological development, away from religion and toward a materialist view of life, is the expression in me as an individual of the basic intellectual development, in this general respect, that society as a whole has been undergoing during this whole period. Religion, in its thousands of varieties, was first evolved by primitive man everywhere as the most logical explanation he could devise of the complex, mysterious and often terrifying natural phenomena with which he was surrounded, as well as to work out a plausible conception of his own and the world's existence. In this respect religion was, therefore, historically inevitable; it marked a very important stage in man's long and, eventually, increas-

ingly successful efforts towards understanding rationally both himself and his environment.

The advance of science (and also that of industry which accompanies science) has rendered obsolete those metaphysical and legendary conceptions upon which all religions, without exception, are based. Science has long since given irrefutable materialist explanations of all the phenomena which terrified and puzzled the simple hunters and cultivators of the soil of long ago, which caused them to improvise, in one form or another, the supernatural explanations that still provide the basis for all the major religions of today—Christianity, Judaism, Mohammedanism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Shintoism, etc. In the modern world, which is increasingly permeated with science, there is therefore no longer the inevitability, and in the long run, even the possibility, of a religious interpretation of man and the world. Science has provided true answers, which religion could not possibly do.

The progress of science is the major reason why religion, especially in the more developed countries, is now sinking into a profound, incurable, and ever-deepening crisis. One of the most basic ideological changes at present taking place in the world resides in the fact that the peoples are gradually (swiftly, in an historical sense) moving away from a religious to a scientific outlook upon life. To escape this dilemma (which is ultimately fatal to religion) by attempting to "harmonize" sci-

ence and religion, is altogether futile. It has now become virtually impossible for a thoroughly modern person, even if he wants to do so, actually to believe the old legends, primitive philosophies, and imaginary history upon which all religions are founded. However, religious convictions, with a background of thousands of years, are naturally deep-seated. We have seen in the Soviet Union and elsewhere that they continue, although in a diminishing degree, over into the new socialist regimes, where freedom of religious beliefs is an established principle.

Along with the advance of science and industry, one of the many other forces that are undermining religion structurally and at its ideological base is the fact that the Church, as represented by its top hierarchy, has identified itself with political reaction. The Church, of course, has its own great revolutionary and even communist traditions, but these have long since fallen into abeyance. This is not to ignore the fact that in Spain, France, Italy, and other Catholic countries many of the lower clergy have loyally and bravely supported the cause of the workers and the people. The Catholic Church, however as an institution and as expressed by the political policies of its leaders, fought to preserve obsolete feudalism all over Europe; it condoned chattel slavery in the United States and elsewhere despite several Papal pronouncements to the contrary; it bears a very heavy responsibility for the great mass of illit-

eracy, poverty, and tyranny now prevailing in Latin America, where for centuries it was the State Church and possessed not only religious, but also decisive economic and political powers. Characteristically, the Church is one of the basic forces now fighting to preserve obsolete capitalism and its reactionary ruling classes, in the face of advancing democracy and socialism.

This political reaction not only tends to separate the masses physically from the Church, but also, in the end, to undermine their religious faith in Church doctrines: A classical example in this respect was the catastrophe, both organizationally and doctrinally among the masses, that befell the Greek Orthodox Church in Russia as the result of its continued support of ultra-reactionary tsarism and capitalism. Similar mistakes have been made and are still being made by the Catholic Church in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere, where the people have started on the road to socialism. In the long run, the Church is bound to suffer heavy losses in religious prestige and mass support by its present attempts to discipline and coerce the Catholic masses in France, Italy, Spain and many other capitalist countries, not only by political but also by religious pressures, into supporting politically their class enemies.

The *New York Times* of July 18, 1954 reports a characteristic example, in Holland, of such religious pressure for political purposes. It says: "On May 30, the country's seven Roman

Catholic bishops issued a mandate forbidding co-religionists to remain members of the Socialist trade-union group. The holy sacrament would be refused to those who disobeyed and, if the offenders died without repenting, they would be denied Church burial, the mandate stated." Such impermissible coercion of the workers is not only futile in itself, but it reacts strongly against the Church.

Negative consequences for the Church in the United States, too, are bound to follow from the present condoning of McCarthy fascism by the upper hierarchy. The anti-McCarthy stand of some of the lower clergy and especially the speech of Bishop Sheil of Chicago are outstanding exceptions to the general rule among the higher Catholic clerics. The fact that the world capitalist system, now obsolete and moribund, has to enlist the Catholic hierarchy into its active service to help protect it from the justified democratic-peace demands of the masses can only have eventual disastrous effects upon the Church, by putting it athwart the economic and political interests, organizations and struggles of the great masses of the people, including those of the great rank and file of the church itself.

We Communists fully recognize that there are great numbers of honest and intelligent people who still retain, in greater or lesser degree, their religious beliefs, and we would be the last to offend them in these convictions. At the same time, we likewise recognize that these masses

of religious workers, peasants, and other toilers also have the same economic, political, and social interests as ourselves. Like the workers in general, they want to maintain peace in the world; they are also basically opposed to fascism, including its American variant, McCarthyism; and they ardently want to protect and improve their economic conditions and general living standards.

To these broad working masses the Communist Party extends the hand of friendship and political cooperation, regardless of their religious ideology. The latest expression in the United States of this universal Communist policy is contained in the Communist Party's new statement of program, which says:

The Communist Party declares that it seeks no conflict with any church or any American's religious beliefs. On the contrary, we stretch out our hand in the fellowship of common struggle for our mutual goal of peace, democracy and security to all regardless of religious belief. We stand on the fundamental principle of the Constitution which guarantees religious freedom by separating church and state. . . .

That this Communist attitude of fraternal solidarity is increasingly understood and appreciated by Catholic masses is especially demonstrated, among other examples, by the fact that of the more than ten million Communist members and voters in predominantly Catholic France, Italy and Belgium, the vast majority

have a Catholic background. The contention is nonsensical that religion in general, or any particular sect, can successfully bar the progress of the great movements of the workers, peasants, and oppressed peoples, and ultimately the establishment of Socialism. In many countries, including our own, countless masses of religious-minded workers — Catholics, Protestants, and Jews—actively favor the basic issues of the Communists in the fight against war, against fascism, and for protection against economic crises. One of the very greatest political facts of our times is that throughout the world the Communists today stand in active cooperation literally with hundreds of millions of workers and other toilers, of all religious faiths, in the common fight to prevent world fascism and war and to advance their everyday economic and political demands against capitalist reactionaries, and also, in many countries, for the mutual building of Socialism.

The foregoing is my outlook on religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular. I am one of those countless millions who are being carried along in the great ideological progress of our age, which heads away from metaphysical-religious concepts and toward a rational-materialist outlook upon life. The possibility of reversing this trend, so far as I personally am concerned, is utterly unthinkable to me.

Sincerely yours,

WILLIAM Z. FOSTER