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Catholics and Communists in France
Phases of Dialogue, 1936-1958

> *"To cooperate in the revolution is to make possible through socialism the full flowering of the supernatural and Christian life."* –Terre Nouvelle[1]
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> *"To choose between Nazism and Bolshevism…means denying Christianity and the presence of God in this world. It means giving up the vocation of a Christian civilization on earth and the abandonment of the French role in this vocation."* –Cahiers du Témoignage Chrétien[2]

Politically and religiously, prewar France of the 1930s was divided; although the threat of fascist tyranny emanating from Germany, Italy and Spain provided the much-needed incentive to unite in defense of *liberté*, Frenchmen remained divided and stubborn as to how that unification could be possible. On the one hand, Communists of the Popular Front argued that collaboration with Catholics was not only beneficial, but desirable. On the other, the Vatican and outspoken clerical officials denounced the atheistic materialism of Marxism as directly opposed to Christian dogma. In between lay the vast multitude of Frenchmen with differing opinions and loyalties: sympathetic Catholic intellectuals, virulently anticlerical Marxists, working class priests with left-wing tendencies, and the numerous Socialists, Radicals, and ultra-Rightists. The question of cooperation was addressed, though never definitively answered, and it would take the Nazi invasion to bring about the next phase of dialogue between the Church and the radical Left.

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[1] Murphy, Francis J.. *Communists and Catholics in France, 1936-1939: The Politics of the Outstretched Hand. Monographs in Social Sciences.* 76, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989. Pg. 46

[2] Vignaux, Georgette. "The Catholics of France, from the Autumn of 1942 to the Invasion." *The Review of Politics* vol. 6, no. 4 (1944): 523. The Cahiers du Témoignage Chrétien were a series of articles published throughout the occupation by anonymous Catholic authors, espousing peaceful resistance against the Germans and the Vichy government.

The French Communist Party, or PCF, did not come to the forefront of French politics until the mid-thirties, when fascism presented a clear and very present danger. In an effort to quell any potential right-wing threat – either internal or external – the forces of the left united on Bastille Day, 1935, creating the Popular Front government; those who had succumbed to petty factionalism for so long finally found cause to unite, despite political and ideological differences: "Fascism, especially in its German form, was viewed no longer as merely 'proof of capitalist instability,' to be overcome by the immediate struggle for the proletarian revolution and the overthrow of capitalism. The defeat of fascism was now considered a victory to be won in its own right, in collaboration with whatever forces might help."[3]

These "forces" included Catholics, whom the PCF saw as a potentially revolutionary group, with social goals similar to those espoused by communism. Although the Socialist Léon Blum led the Popular Front government as Prime Minister, Maurice Thorez of the PCF was one of the Front's most vocal members, and enacted the outreach to sympathetic, socially-conscious Catholics known officially of the Policy of the Outstretched Hand, or *le main tendue*. "We are proud of our record," said Jacques Duclos, Thorez's assistant, "because we prefer to see believing workers united with nonbelievers, rather than see them fall together under the mocking eye of the great capitalists who burden both."[4] Although skeptical Catholics were wary of the PCF's intentions, knowing full-well that their orders came exclusively from Moscow, Thorez and his associates insisted that the Policy's intentions were genuine, and directed chiefly

[3] Murphy, pg. 9
[4] *Ibid*, pg. 17. Excerpt from a radio speech delivered from Strasbourg on April 18th, 1936.

towards the preservation of France in the face of her foreign enemies, as well as towards the betterment of man that both the Church and the Left longed for.

While *le main tendue* enjoyed success among several workers' groups and certain Catholic intellectuals, it suffered criticism from Rome. Catholic journalist and Communist sympathizer Robert Honnert, author of the controversial article "Faith and Revolution," wrote that although "he was a believer and that he anticipated the unlimited happiness of the next life, he still held that the best preparation for the next life is to develop the welfare of man in this life."[5] Pope Pius XI, however, in speeches and encyclicals such as "Divini Redemptoris," or "Encyclical on Atheistic Communism," decried revolutionary Bolshevism as the principle evil threatening the world, especially that which presented itself as peaceful and tolerant towards Christians. Thorez and the PCF's publication *L'Humanite* returned their own criticisms, questioning the Pope's silence on the issue of Nazism and compliance with the policies of Mussolini.

For the French Left, fascism and Nazism were the two principal threats facing their democratic culture ("Democracy is in great danger when the ruling class prefers anything, even Nazism, to the Popular Front"[6]), and even Left Catholics were bewildered at the Pope's condemnation of communism when "pagan fascism" was persecuting Catholics in Germany, corrupting the Vatican in Rome, and massacring Christians in Ethiopia. The fact that so many of Catholicism's social implications mirrored those of the Communists' also tore at the consciences of many Christians, who sincerely wanted to grasp *le main tendue*, but were ordered not to by Rome.

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[5] Murphy, pg. 25
[6] Micaud, Charles A. "The "New Left" In France." *World Politics* vol. 10, no. 4 (1958): 547.

The Nazi invasion of 1940 brought an abrupt end to the tenuous dialogue between the Church and the PCF; both sides spent so much time comparing doctrines and debating the possibility of collaboration that they were ill-prepared for the eventual German onslaught, which came to be seen pessimistically as inevitable; "The fast-moving world events of 1938 and 1939 produced not only frenzied, futile diplomatic efforts to salvage peace and to appease Hitler but also a psychological fatalism that war was inevitable."[7] The PCF's support of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, as well as Thorez's defection to the USSR to avoid military duty, struck a hard blow to the party's credibility in the eyes of many Frenchmen. Most Catholics who had enthusiastically embraced the idea of *le main tendue* became disillusioned with what had apparently just been "propaganda of Soviet origin." Although the PCF suffered these setbacks, it did not cease to exist; it was officially banned by the parliament on August 26, 1939, but continued to operate secretly under the repressive Vichy regime, playing a key role in the Resistance.

By providing some of the fiercest and most persistent resistance against the Vichy regime and the German occupiers, the Communists regained the respect they had lost prior to the invasion. In fact, they reached a level of popularity not seen before the war; in the legislative elections of 1946 the PCF won 28.6 per cent of the vote, the most they had ever received. "Through their prominent role in the Resistance, French Communists were transformed into a popular, national political force."[8]

In the Haute-Vienne, where there was a tradition of left-wing militancy, Communist resistance was most prevalent, and the area has become to the French a symbol of violence and resistance. Since the PCF was outlawed, members were forced to

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[7] Murphy, pg. 110
[8] Farmer, Sarah. "The Communist Resistance in the Haute-Vienne." *French Historical Studies* vol. 14, no. 1 (1985): 89.

reorganize in secrecy, and thus the Communists already had underground networks in place to fight the occupation long before other Resistance groups had needed them. The *maquis*, or bands of resistance fighters, linked themselves to local problems so that the peasantry would associate with the communist cause. Since Party organization was loose and inefficient since its banning, local militant Communist leaders such as Georges Guingouin carried out clandestine acts of sabotage, despite the PCF's support of the Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggression Pact. Since the acts were carried out in the PCF's name, the Party took credit after the war and thus rebuilt its reputation.[9]

Many elements of resistance were at work throughout the countryside at this time, alongside the independently-operating Communist *maquis*. Socialist and Christian saboteurs, as well as pockets of Free French who had been supplied by de Gaulle with arms, were carrying out similar acts against the Germans and the Vichy, such as identification forgery, the hiding of refugees, and the stockpiling of weapons. Bridges were destroyed, as well as telephone lines, and on one occasion Guingouin and a band of partisans blew up hay baling machines: "On December 13th, 1942, the group blew up the baling machine parked in the market square of Eymoutiers. Two months later the machines brought in as replacements were also destroyed. Such acts of sabotage slowed down German requisitions in the region and built a reputation for the *maquis* under Guingouin."[10] All the groups "were keenly aware that a new France would be built out of the Resistance; each group's future role in postwar France would depend on its position within the Resistance at the end of the war."[11] Even with the Socialists as the prevalent

[9] Farmer, pg. 96
[10] *Ibid*, pg. 99
[11] *Ibid*, pg. 105

party throughout France at the time, the Communists stood out as the most active during the Resistance, and at the end of the war French Catholics acknowledged them for this.

Throughout the occupation and Resistance, Catholics played an integral role as well. Georgette Vignaux's "The Catholics of France, from the Autumn of 1942 to the Invasion," published in October of 1944, summarizes aspects of Catholic resistance, and calls for a continued social activeness on the part of the Church in the postwar years.

For Catholics, the German occupation took on a certain religious connotation: "Nazism is a religious revolution, a pagan myth…It cannot restrict itself, it cannot conform, it cannot divide itself. You cannot share with it, consent to a limited cooperation. It is all or nothing…It wants our very selves, it wants our human substance: our bodies and especially our souls."[12] Two underground Christian newspapers, the *Cahiers du Témoignage Chrétien* and *Le Courrier du Témoignage Chrétien* circulated throughout the occupation, addressing issues of resistance in a Christian light. Anonymous authors, most often priests, contributed articles concerning the morality of resisting forced labor, as well as the Christian right not to submit to the supposed "authority" of the Vichy regime. Bishops like Liénart gave radio speeches comforting young men and women singled out for labor duty in German camps, assuring them that resistance was not sin. All these positions were argued from a Christian, not political, perspective: "In their protests against deportation, and in order to leave liberty of conscience to the faithful, the bishops rely on the following arguments: forced labor is a violation of natural law; deportation breaks up the natural unity of the family; deportation exposes young people to serious moral and religious dangers."[13]

[12] Vignaux, pg. 522
[13] *Ibid*, pg. 520

The *Cahiers* and the *Courrier*, from the outset, took on a non-political outlook as well, stating "We are and will remain completely independent of every political movement whatever it may be. The spirit which animates the Courrier is the same as that of the Cahiers: a spirit of French and Christian fidelity."[14] For them, Bolshevism represented as great an evil as Nazism, since it "debased and enslaved" mankind. Christians found themselves attacked on the right by occupying fascists, and on the left by atheist, totalitarian Marxists; hence, for the time being, the publishers of the *Cahiers* and the *Courrier* put their faith solely in the Church, as the only true guiding force.

The relationship between French Communists and Catholics throughout the Resistance progressed much like the relationship before the war. After a period of strained dialogue and tense competition, there began a period of gradual, mutual understanding: an agreement to cooperate, if not collaborate. Seeing that, once again, both groups were working towards the same goal – in this case, the liberation of France from a foreign, anti-Christian power – Bishop Saliège stated "There is in the whole world and even among the communist troops (I do not say among their leaders) an aspiration towards justice which is part of the human patrimony and which will remain as long as there are men."[15] Just as the PCF criticized the Vatican but not Catholic doctrine, the clergy directed its criticism towards the Marxist leadership and not the individual French Communists.

Towards the end of the Resistance, the Left saw socially active Christians in a new light as well; the Socialist newspaper *Populaire* stated "For our part we have learned much. We know Christians of the resistance whom we were fighting yesterday and who

[14] Vignaux, pg.521
[15] *Ibid*, pg. 524

now appear to us not only as true patriots, but likewise as unquestionably courageous and loyal revolutionaries, and what is and will be even more precious, of a morality beyond reproach."[16] Once again, both sides seemed willing to take the dialogue a step further, except this time they were celebrating their liberation, as opposed to wallowing in the despair of an imminent invasion. This new atmosphere, dominated by a profound sense of patriotism and cooperation, saw a distinct shift in the attitudes of French Catholics in relation to their Communist comrades in arms.

After the war, the French Church enacted its own policy towards militant Communist workers in the industrial towns and cities of France: whereas the PCF had *le main tendue*, they announced the policy of *d'être avec*, or "to be with." For this ambitious experiment, priests were called to not only live amongst the working poor, but to actually work with them in the factories, dockyards, etc.; "they were viewed by their bishops as specialized missionary priests designated to be a presence (*présence*) of Christ and his church in the midst of the unbelieving and even Marxist-oriented proletariat."[17] In this way, clerical criticism of Marxism wouldn't be the theoretical polemic it had been in the past, but rather "a criticism born of solidarity and the 'grass-roots' sharing of daily work, squalid living conditions, mutual suffering, and the tedium of proletarian existence."[18]

Most bishops assigned the task of relegating priests to different working class communities approached the experiment with the mindset that the Marxists were no different from the barbarians of antiquity; they retained the critical anti-Marxist thinking of the 1930's, and in their eyes the missionary worker-priests' duty was to replace the

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[16] Vignaux, pg. 526
[17] Arnal, Oscar L. "A Missionary "Main Tendue" toward French Communists: The "Temoignages" of the Worker-Priests, 1943-1954." *French Historical Studies* vol. 13, no. 4 (1984): 530-531
[18] *Ibid*, pg. 534

"pagan mystique" of the proletarian world with a Christian mystique. Many of the worker-priests initially approached their mission with the same attitude, although some were less critical in their approach; "before they became worker-priests a number of them had spent time in German factories and concentration camps during the war. They had been victimized by either a prisoner-of-war status or the forced labor requisition program called the Service du travail obligatoire. In these environments contacts with Communists were inevitable."[19] These priests had already coexisted with Communists during the Resistance, and treated *d'être avec* more as a mutual struggle than a conquest. Some even admired the Communists' zeal and hoped to apply it to their own faith; Henri Perrin, a Jesuit and prisoner-of-war in Germany, wrote that communism might serve as "an instrument to help us rediscover…the basics and perhaps the fervor of our Christianity."[20]

The worker-priests faced initial hostility, seen as "parasites" and even spies for the factory employers. After a few daily interactions, however, and the acceptance of the priests by important Communist union leaders, they were welcomed into the communities as fellow workers. Some priests noted that the gospel was put into practice more fully in Marxist households than in bourgeois "Christian" households. Soon, the previous policy of mission work was "reduced to a secondary concern by the worker-priests. Factory life and its rhythms had come to dominate their sense of vocational incarnation by the late 1940s, and it was in these factories that the proletarian clergy came to intensify their already growing friendship with local Communist militants."[21] The priests immersed themselves in every aspect of working class life, even going so far as to run for office within the Communist labor unions, presenting grievances to employers on behalf of the

[19] Arnal, pg. 536
[20] *Ibid*, pg. 536, Henri Perrin, *Itinéraire d'Henri Perrin: Prêtre-Ouvrier* (1914-1954) (Paris, 1958)
[21] *Ibid*, pg. 540

workers and giving speeches at Communist rallies. Even the most anti-Marxist worker-priests like Jacques Loew, who had approached their mission in the hopes of combating Marxism, admitted that the Communist party was "the only working class party, and he regretted sincerely that his Christian principles would not allow him to vote for it."[22] Some priests, moved by the giving lifestyle of the workers, saw the Communists as a part of the "invisible community of the church which consisted of all who, consciously or unconsciously, work under the Spirit's action within the historical evolution toward a most just world."[23] These perceptions of Communists in the eyes of the clergy, even compared to the sympathetic views held by some on the Catholic Left in the thirties, are radically different from anything seen before coming from the Church.

It was in the worker-priests' policy of *engagement* that they finally came under public scrutiny from both the Vatican and the French Right. The priests' were sent to live with the workers, work with them, and preach the gospel; no one predicted that they would represent Communist labor unions, or give speeches alongside Marxists at anti-NATO rallies. They were criticized for going too far, but they in turn criticized their superiors for remaining too "enmeshed in juridical and theoretical distinctions," whereas they "faced these questions in every instant, in a lively trade union debate, in a friendly conversation after work."[24] In order to truly "be with" the workers, they had to take part in the most important aspects of the worker's lives, and these included the political struggle: "The working class movement," they said, "including politics and trade-union

[22] Arnal, pg. 543
[23] *Ibid*, pg. 543
[24] *Ibid*, pg. 548

activity is the soul of the working-class world, and our essential spiritual mission consists in baptizing a soul."[25]

The worker-priests did continue their criticism of Marxism and its principal tenets, such as its material atheism and acceptance of violent revolution. Their criticism was now more finely shaped by the reality they had experienced while living with the working class. The experiment met its end in 1954, however, when the Vatican prompted the Church in France to withdraw the worker-priests. Catholic clergy could not, under any circumstances, partake in militant communist activities. Once again the policies of Rome undermined popular Church opinion in France; about half of the worker-priests chose to remain in their communities, losing their status as priests, while the other half despairingly left the communities and the work they had grown so attached to. The worker-priests would not be reinstated until the convening of Vatican II.

By the time the worker-priests were expelled from their communities in 1954, the Left in France was radically changing. Although the PCF and the Socialist Party were still the two dominant parties of the Left, the younger generation of university students and contemporary intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, found neither group satisfactory: "To them, the present party system is both inefficient and incapable of furnishing adequate answers to the problems raised by modern technology, the cold war, and the revolt of colonial peoples. The Republican ideology of the prewar period is meaningless to them. The Socialist and Catholic parties have betrayed their principles. They see no way of making politics fit their ethics."[26] This is what Charles A. Micaud wrote in his 1958 article "The 'New Left' in France," published in the periodical

[25] Arnal, pg. 550
[26] Micaud, pg. 538

World Politics. The term "New Left" itself signifies the desire to break away from the outdated, "old" Left.

Although many young people expressed their dissatisfaction with the Left as it was, they still looked to the PCF as the only revolutionary party at work within the government. Claude Lanzman wrote "It is not a question of remedying the distresses brought about by capitalism, but of suppressing capitalism…It follows that a Left that does not recognize the PC as its central pivot is but a camouflaged Right."[27] This acceptance of the PCF as the guiding force in French politics was a drastic shift from the ambiguous attitudes previously held by even liberal Frenchmen before the war, and was a direct result of the Party's work in the Resistance. Intellectuals, students, and even white collar workers were possessed by a sense of Gallicism, however, which prevented full acceptance of the PCF. The Party's Marxist doctrine, influenced so much by Soviet policy, was a severe turnoff to many Frenchmen who feared that with the desired revolution would come undesired tyranny.

The *Mouvement de Liberation du People* did their best to assuage these fears, and appealed to Gallic sentiment in their support of revolution: "For France has a long democratic tradition, an advanced economy, the necessary technicians and, above all, will not have to go through a catastrophic situation such as a foreign or civil war to bring about the revolution."[28] The MLP, a "Christian Progressist" organization, provided the alternative atmosphere many left-wingers were looking for. It bridged the gap between workers and intellectuals, opposed the imperfection of neo-capitalism (which prevents

[27] Micaud, pg. 544
[28] *Ibid*, pg. 549

the perfection of socialism), and struggled for the Socialist Revolution founded on French democratic ideals and Christian social justice.

Although Christian militancy in the workplace was nothing new in France, this desire for revolution was unheard of before the war and the struggles of the worker-priests. It developed over time, the long-awaited result of both the *main tendue* and *d'être avec* policies. Wrote Micaud, "They believe that the revolution is necessary not because it is inevitable, but because it is ethically superior and, one could almost say, because it is esthetically desirable. It will bring about not only justice, but order, not only equality and self-realization for all, but peace, harmony, the absence of struggle and of chaos."[29]

While the revolutionary left in France was broken down into two groups, the MLP and other Christian Progressists fell into the category of "non-Marxist but pro-Communist Christians," and their struggle took on spiritual undertones (much like the Christian struggle against Nazism had a decade earlier): "One may find in the Progressist's attitude an obscure desire to pay for the sins of capitalism by working for the triumph of justice through the sacrifice of the just…so that the new society will be built through purification and the elimination of the last vestiges of bourgeois religion."[30] The workers' struggle became a Christian struggle, with the proletariat acting as Messiah, and revolution as redemption.

In only three decades, the relationship between the French Left and Catholic workers shifted in amazing ways. The Catholic proletariats of the 1930s retained, for the most part, the same mindset of the Christian *ouvriers* of the late 19th century; one of suspicion and mistrust towards their Marxist counterparts, with only occasional, tenuous

[29] Micaud, pg. 552
[30] *Ibid*, pg. 557

support. Dialogue between the two groups became more common in response to the disturbing rise of fascism across Europe, and eventually blossomed into necessary cooperation during the Resistance and in the German work camps. The missionary work of the worker-priests signified an attempt on the Church's part to converse with the Marxist working class, and led to a deeper understanding between priests and Communists who shared the same struggle. And finally, the rise of groups such as the *Mouvement de Liberation du People*, who championed the cause of revolution, heralded an entirely new way of Christian thinking in France. This interpretation of Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, as a struggle for the Kingdom of God on earth, continues to influence resistance and social justice movements throughout the world.

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