

## TOTALITY AND IDOLATRY: REREADING PIUS XI

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*In three encyclicals, Pius XI denounces the abuses of totalitarian regimes: fascism, national socialism, and communism. The Pope argues that the motor of the human rights abuses operative in each regime is idolatry. Totalitarian movements have placed respectively the state, race, and class in the place of God. The prophetic defense of the rights of the persecuted entails a theological critique of the idolatrous substitutes for God and of the counterfeit Christianity fabricated by totalitarian movements.*

In the 1930's Pope Pius XI wrote a series of encyclicals criticizing totalitarian regimes. *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* (1931) rebuked Italian fascism. *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1937) denounced the abuses of German national socialism. *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) condemned Soviet communism, particularly in its Russian form.

The Pope's critique of fascism, national socialism, and communism focuses on violations of rights by each totalitarian regime. *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* details how the fascist authorities assaulted the rights of intermediate bodies, especially the rights of the family and of Catholic cultural associations. *Mit Brennender Sorge* enumerates the violation of the rights of the Church and of the family by the Third Reich. *Divini Redemptoris* illustrates how basic civil rights are systematically destroyed by the communist regime in Moscow.

Pius XI, however, does not limit himself to prophetic advocacy on behalf of those persecuted by totalitarian governments. His trilogy studies the ideological errors that have given rise to the practical violation of rights. These encyclicals unmask the idolatry operative in each of these totalitarian movements. In absolutizing respectively state, race, and class, these regimes have placed a particular creature in the place of the Creator. Unmasking the idolatry embedded in each totalitarian movement identifies the theological source from which the destruction of rights flows. The restoration of a just social order requires a breaking of the religious spell over the counterfeit social order.

## Against Fascism

Written in the wake of a bitter dispute with the Italian government, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* condemns certain activities of the fascist movement. The condemnation operates on two levels. First, Pius XI condemns the fascist destruction of Catholic youth movements. This destruction violates the Church's right to educate her members, the family's right to raise its children as the parents see fit, and the general right of association. Second, the pope condemns the violent methods employed by the fascists to destroy these intermediate bodies. This concerted assault on associative rights is not an arbitrary assertion of power. The purpose of the fascist campaign is the destruction of all social bodies uniting youth except those run by the fascist state.

Behind the fascist assault on rights, Pius XI detects a particular form of idolatry: the divinization of the state:

We find Ourselves confronted by a mass of authentic affirmations and no less authentic facts which reveal beyond the slightest possibility of doubt the resolve (already in great measure already put into effect) to monopolize completely the young, from their tenderest years up to manhood and womanhood, for the exclusive advantage of a party and of a regime based on an ideology which clearly resolves itself into a true, a pagan worship of the State—the “Statolatry” which is no less in contrast with the natural rights of the family than it is in contradiction with the supernatural rights of the Church.

The fascist exaltation of the state turns the state into a divine power. It is now the state that creates and saves the individual. It is the state that decides the standards of right and wrong and that has the power to suspend the moral law for *raison d'État*. Patriotism, shorn to blind obedience to a party's directives, becomes the supreme, indeed unique, virtue.

In this distorted hierarchy of values, where the state gives and takes life, other social bodies must logically perish. Independent intermediate bodies, such as unions and other associations, must disappear. The family's right to educate its children must yield to the state's claim to indoctrinate. If tolerated for prudential reasons, the Church must retreat to the sanctuary - a retreat which Pius XI acidly reminds his fascist opponents that he has no intention of accepting.

Although the idolatry of the state would seem to foster religious indifference, in fact it promotes a heretical religion of its own. Party leadership mimics the ecclesial magisterium. Fascist ritual copies the Church's sacraments. A new moral casuistry, based on the glorification of the state, provides an alternative to the Catholic moral synthesis.

The fascist religion inevitably persecutes Christianity. Despite its

claims of religious toleration, the fascist regime cannot abide the presence of any organization that refuses to worship the state and that proclaims a God and a divinely ordained moral law to which the state must bend:

We have seen in action a species of religion which rebels against the directions of higher religious authority and enjoins or encourages the nonobservance of these directions; an attitude towards religion which becomes persecution and which tries to destroy all that the supreme Head of the religion is known to prize and cherish most; a feeling which permits itself and provokes others to speak insulting words and do injurious things against the person of the Father of all the faithful..

The clash between the Church and the fascist party over a series of rights questions is ultimately a theological dispute. The moral and political battles reflect a confrontation between the gods. Fascist theology, rooted in a divinized state, must reject the Christian claims of truth concerning God. It is a conflict of theological vision that fuels the visible political opposition between the Vatican and the fascist regime.

### Against National Socialism

*Mit Brennender Sorge* condemns the violation of Church freedoms by the National Socialist regime in Germany. The immediate issue is the violation of the terms of the Concordat between the Vatican and the German government, signed in 1933. Pius XI details the Third Reich's persecution of the Church, in particular the destruction of religious schools and cultural associations, whose existence had been guaranteed by the Concordat. The pope's primary concern, however, is to warn German Christians of the religious idolatry that undergirds this persecution. The Nazi idolatry is particularly dangerous inasmuch as it offers a counterfeit of Christianity.

Animating the persecution is a militant idolatry of race:

Whoever exalts race, or the people, or the State, or a particular form of State, or of the depositories of power, or any other fundamental value of the human community—however necessary and honorable be their function of worldly things—whoever raises these notions above their standard value and divinizes them to an idolatrous level, distorts and perverts an order of the world planned and created by God; he is far from the true faith in God and from the concept of life which that faith upholds.

The Pope underlines the particular contours of this racist idolatry. Pantheistic, this ideology confuses God with the biological world, creating a religious aura that only masks atheistic materialism. Neo-pagan, the national socialist idol of race substitutes an impersonal deity for the personal God of Judaism and of Christianity.

To avoid religious confusion, Pius XI urges the German bishops to insist upon the traditional attributes of the personal God:

Our God is the personal God, supernatural, omnipotent, infinitely perfect, one in the Trinity of Persons, tri-personal in the unity of divine essence, the Creator of all existence, Lord, King and ultimate Consummator of the history of the world, who will not, and cannot, tolerate a rival God by His side.

German Christians must avoid the tendency to baptize any spiritual language, especially the materialistic and neo-pagan religious language of the Nazi movement. The political struggle against Nazi oppression requires a strict adherence to an orthodox concept of God, rooted in the dogma of the Trinity and in the economy of salvation.

The national socialist idolatry has clear moral consequences. By replacing the true God with a nationalist idol, the Third Reich has destroyed the natural law implanted God in the individual and corporate heart:

This God, this Sovereign Master, has issued commandments whose value is independent of time and space, country and race. As God's sun shines on every human face so His law knows neither privilege nor exception.

The national socialist code of morality is a species of relativism. All universal laws of conduct are violated in the single goal of glorifying a particular race. Pius XI dwells on the racial elitism of this ethic, where disfavored groups no longer enjoy the protection of law.

At length the Pope details a particular danger of national socialist idolatry: the development of a counterfeit Christianity. Despite its pagan roots, Nazi ideology can snare the Christian because it systematically uses Christian symbols emptied of their authentic content and employed to advance a racist anti-Christian project.

With particular virulence Nazi theology has attempted to create a Christianity divorced from its Jewish roots. Pius XI condemns the anti-Semitic effort to claim that the Old Testament is not divinely inspired:

The sacred books of the Old Testament are exclusively the word of God, and constitute a substantial part of his revelation; they are penetrated by a subdued light, harmonizing the slow development of revelation, the dawn of the bright day of redemption.

The Pope further explains that the Nazi effort to deny the religious validity of the Old Testament makes Christ inexplicable, since Christ fulfills the messianic promise of Israel. The de-judaized "Christianity" of the Nazis is an absurdity.

Not only in its perversion of Scripture does Nazi ideology operate a dangerous counterfeit of the Gospel. Pius XI tartly criticizes the cult of the

Fuhrer, which is nothing other than a false Christology:

Should any man dare, in sacrilegious disregard of the essential differences between God and His creature, between the God-man and the children of man, to place a mortal, were he the greatest of all times, by the side of, or over, or against Christ, he would deserve to be called the prophet of nothingness, to whom the terrifying words of Scripture would be applicable: "He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh at them" (Psalms 2.3).

The national socialist effort to construct a purely national church mocks the universal Church created by God.

An entire theological vocabulary is transformed by national socialism into attributes of racism and nationalism. "Revelation" becomes the wisdom of an ethnic group. "Faith" becomes confidence in national destiny. "Immortality," no longer personal, designates the survival of a particular people. "Grace" becomes the privilege of belonging to an alleged Nordic racial type.

All of these distortions of theological vocabulary turn the tools of redemption into instruments of racist oppression. They also serve to rationalize the gospel: that is, to transform references to the spiritual into biological references to blood and race.

Throughout *Mit Brennender Sorge* Pius XI underlines that the struggle to vindicate the Church's rights against Nazi oppression is an ideological conflict. Successful witness to God requires more than courage and endurance. It demands theological unmasking of the particular idolatry, namely race, fueling the regime's violations of rights. Once the particular features of the idol have been limned, theological analysis must then identify and denounce the counterfeit Christianity flowing from this idolatry, in the light of Catholic orthodoxy.

### Against Communism

In *Divini Redemptoris* Pius XI provides a detailed condemnation of communism. In the opening sections, the Pope dwells on the brutal persecution of Christians in communist regimes, specifically in the Soviet Union, Mexico, and Spain. The violent persecutions engineered by communism reflect a systematic violation of human rights justified by the communist doctrine of class conflict.

Despite its appalling human rights abuses, communism maintains its adherents through its deceptive religious allure. It appeals to the legitimate human desire for redemption. It rightly condemns the moral horrors of laissez-faire capitalism. However, instead of the gospel, it offers a destructive model of redemption. Its distorted messianism is the secret of the destructive movement's popular appeal:

The Communism of today, more emphatically than similar movements in the past, conceals in itself a false messianic idea. A pseudo-ideal of justice, of equality and fraternity in labor impregnates all its doctrine and activity with a deceptive mysticism, which communicates a zealous and contagious enthusiasm to the multitudes entrapped by delusive promises.

By offering a counterfeit of the Christian virtue of hope, communism elicits the sacrifices of its adherents in the creation of a false utopia.

Enclosed in the illusory messianic movement is a doctrine and an ethic completely opposed to the Gospel. Communist metaphysics explicitly opposes the first principles of Christian theology (God's existence) and of Christian anthropology (the immortality of the soul):

The doctrine of modern Communism, which is often concealed under the most seductive trappings, is in substance based on the principles of dialectical and historical materialism previously advocated by Marx. Of which the theoreticians of bolshevism claim to possess the only genuine interpretation. According to this doctrine there is in the world only one reality, matter, the blind forces of which evolve into plant, animal, and man..In such a doctrine, as is evident, there is no room for the idea of God; there is no difference between matter and spirit, between soul and body; there is neither survival of the soul after death nor any hope in a future life.

Atheistic materialism, of course, is an ancient philosophy predating the birth of Christianity. The particular danger of communism lies in its capacity to lend materialism a mystical air. Matter acquires divine attributes: eternity, omnipresence. Immortality becomes the social attribute of revolutionary heroes. Heaven becomes the worker's paradise of the future.

Grounded in this heroic materialism, the moral code of communism simply abolishes all individual rights as an illusion. Since there is no human person, no transcendence of matter, the alleged rights of this fictitious imago Dei evaporate:

Communism, moreover, strips man of his liberty, robs human personality of all its dignity, and removes all the moral restraints that check the eruptions of blind impulse. There is no recognition of any rights of the individual in his relation to the collectivity; no natural right is accorded to human personality, which is a mere cog-wheel in the Communist system.

In this perspective the communist persecution of all individuals and groups blocking the party's construction of a utopian future is neither an aberration nor the result of the violent tendencies of a fanatical minority. It is the logical expression of a system in which all rights, not only property rights, have lost their metaphysical foundation. The abolition of the person as such, not only the prerogatives of wealthy persons, is the suicidal end of communist logic.

In its generation of a false gospel, communism has idolized material prosperity, especially the prosperity of a particular class, by raising this legitimate but relative good to the rank of an absolute. The true object of human happiness, the knowledge and love of God, is downgraded to the equitable manufacture and distribution of material goods.

In Pius XI's perspective the violent idolatry of communism transcends the issue of class. The movement idolizes humanity itself by appearing to make humanity itself the architect of its own moral values and of its own providence. Humanity appears liberated from its debt to a divine Creator, its duties to a natural law, and its need of a redemption rooted in grace. Without a divine origin, a religious conscience, and a hope of eternity, the last shreds of human dignity vanish. The promised utopia, eternally delayed, can only offer human beings two identities: that of worker and of consumer. With human personality effectively abolished, the Gulag becomes possible, if not inevitable. But the messianic veneer of communism lends a seductive appeal to a movement whose suicidal violence manifested itself at the very moment of its triumph in 1917. A counterfeit hope cleverly hijacks the hope rooted in the Gospel alone.

### Critical Evaluation

Pius XI's trilogy against totalitarianism has obvious historic importance. Against the libel of the Church's "silence" or, worse, complicity in the rise of totalitarian regimes, these encyclicals serve as a solemn witness to the Church's condemnation of fascism, communism, and national socialism at the moment of their emergence. Not only do these documents represent the personal opposition of Pius XI; they express the antitotalitarian positions of his Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pius XII), and the consensus of Italian, German, and Slavic bishops confronting their respective national versions of the totalitarian virus.

The value of these documents, however, transcends their historical interest. They trace the lines for the continuing critique of totalitarian social movements and, more broadly, all social counterfeits of the Gospel.

First, these encyclicals elaborate a defense of human rights sensibly different from that proposed by the standard liberal position. Pius XI devotes relatively little attention to individual rights to free speech, free press, and free assembly. The encyclicals place a distinctive stress on the right of intermediate bodies to practice free association. The right of families to educate their families, the right of independent unions to organize, the right of religious cultural associations to operate without state interference—these are the rights emphasized in these works. John Paul II's heroic struggle to defend the rights of the family during recent United Nations conferences represents the most recent step in the Catholic promotion of the rights of intermediate bodies and

in the Catholic refusal of the reduction of the ensemble of human rights to the individual right of self-expression.

Pius XI's corpus of works against totalitarianism also indicates how the Church's witness against disordered political regimes must involve a properly theological critique of the regimes. Part of the prophetic authority of these texts lies in their detailed unmasking of the idolatry operative at the heart of these movements. It is the idolatry of state, race, and class that motivates the human rights abuses of these regimes. The call to respect human rights is radically insufficient to stop the systematic violence of these governments. Only a return to the recognition of the living God and of the natural law inscribed by this God in a correct conscience can reverse the social disorder rooted in these various idolatries.

Clearly related to this task of unmasking idolatry is the task of criticizing the counterfeit gospel promoted by totalitarian ideologies. The Enlightenment critique of Christianity had tended to dismiss Christianity as both untrue and as morally pernicious. Voltaire may not convince, but at least his religious skepticism is clear. Contemporary totalitarian ideologies, however, especially the Nazi and communist varieties, often offer an atheistic philosophy dressed in the symbols and rhetoric of Christianity. As Pius XI repeatedly warns, these fraudulent versions of the Gospel present a grave danger, since they easily seduce Christians into collaboration with the demonic. The Church's careful discernment between orthodoxy and heresy is necessary for the internal vitality of the Church; given the tendency of nominally Christian cultures to acclaim flattering distortions of the gospel, the Church's critical discernment is also crucial for the survival of civil society's order of justice.

The contributions of Pius XI to a Catholic social philosophy should not blind us to certain weaknesses in his critique of totalitarian systems. In retrospect the most striking limitation is the narrow ecclesiocentrism of these encyclicals. Although the Pope speaks of the rights of families and of associations, his primary focus is the freedom of the Church. In *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* the object of protest is the violation of the Church's right to conduct youth groups. In *Mit Brennender Sorge* the brief against National Socialism is centered on violations of rights of the clergy, of Catholic schools, and of Catholic associations. One can only gaze with some astonishment at *Mit Brennender Sorge's* defense of the Old Testament against Nazism's anti-Semitic theology, while it provides no explicit condemnation of the Third Reich's already virulent persecution of German Jews. This ecclesiocentric critique of totalitarianism, tightly centered on the defense of the Church's right to proclaim the Gospel, contrasts with John Paul II's more anthropological defense of human rights, wherein the rights of all individuals and of all religious groups—not only the rights of Catholics—are squarely vindicated in the name of *imago Dei*.

Despite its limitations, the trilogy of Pius XI against totalitarianism provides contemporary guidance for the Church's enduring struggle against communism and for the murkier battle against the Christianity substitutes of the New Age. The Christian defense of human rights requires more than a struggle for "spaces of tolerance." It requires the capacity to name the sins of idolatry operative in totalitarian and other regimes. It demands a concomitant unmasking of the distorted gospel furnished by this idolatry. In defending human rights the Church is not a negotiator in a serene free market of ideas. It is always an actor in a properly theological battle, where the abandonment of the living God leads not to a neutral state, but to a new pantheon of gods notable for their violence and for their deceit.

### Notes

1. Cf. Pius XI, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* ("On Catholic Action in Italy"): June 29, 1931. For an Internet version of the encyclical, cf. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/P11FAC.TXT>. Subsequently referred to as NAB. Numerical references concern the numbered paragraphs in the text.
2. Cf. NAB, 10.
3. Cf. NAB, 52.
4. NAB, 44.
5. Cf. NAB, 52.
6. NAB, 51.
7. Cf. Pius XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge* ("On the Church and the German Reich"): March 14, 1937. For an Internet version of the encyclical, cf. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/P11BRENN.TXT>. Subsequently referred to as MBS. Numerical references concern the numbered paragraphs in the text.
8. MBS, 8.
9. MBS, 9.
10. MBS, 10.
11. MBS, 15.
12. Cf. MBS, 16.
13. MBS, 17.
14. Cf. MBS, 22.
15. Cf. MBS, 23.
16. Cf. *Ibid.*
17. Cf. MBS, 24.
18. Cf. MBS, 28.
19. Cf. Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris* ("On Atheistic Communism"): March 19, 1937. For an Internet version of this encyclical, cf. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/P11DIVIN.TXT>. Subsequently referred to as DR. Numerical references concern the numbered paragraphs in the text.

20. Cf. DR, 18-23.
21. DR, 8.
22. DR, 9.
23. DR, 10.