

(Part II)

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Editor's note:

In the previous part, the author pointed out that in discussing China's present attitude towards religion, certain questions are raised: 1. Will China's religions return to the same status they had in the past? 2. Will China retain a strong Marxist criticism of religion? 3. Is the present claim of independence on the part of China's religions a real breakthrough? In answering the first question, the author in the previous section introduced China's present religious policy and the concerned government structures and corresponding religious organizations. He also compared the traditional Chinese government policy towards religion with the present situation. In this section, the author gives his answers to questions two and three.

Communism and Religion

Atheistic communism has arrayed itself in the trappings of religion - and here lies both its strength and its weakness. In China, communism survives today by integrating itself into the ritual order of the Chinese world. It does so in a secular and, officially, in an anti-religious manner. Moreover, because Confucian tradition is fundamentally humanist, it is not surprising that communism has adapted to this new phase in its history, in a world devoted to productivity and to economic development. Some aspects of Chinese communism can help us better understand its relationship with religion and its evolution throughout the 20th century.

Marxist Scientism

If the Chinese had had a Christian tradition, they would have perhaps invented a positive religion analogous to that of August Comte. In China, study, knowledge and technology have always had great prestige; the Chinese have bestowed on them a high moral value and an almost magical power.

One of the founders of Chinese communism, Chen Duxiu, long banished from the history books because of his Trotskyite orientations, is today called back from the shadows because, at the time of the May 4, 1919 movement, he knew how to brandish the blazing banners of "science" and "democracy." In a journal called New Youth, his collaborators saw in modern science an ideal instrument for criticizing the old society, Confucian morality and popular religion.

Another hero of the period, Hu Shi, was also enthusiastic about the scientific method and its virtues. "Science," he wrote, "is deserving of worship." But with his interest focused on its method more than on general theories, Hu Shi refused to adhere to a global ideology for social transformation. On the occasion of the visit to China of Professor John Dewey, he stated in 1919: "More study of the problems, less palaver about the 'isms' ".(10)

On the other hand, Li Dazhao defended the interests

of Marxism as the science of history and of society. Historical determinism, he thought, liberated man from belief in exterior supernatural forces and permitted him to work to transform society. Marxism appeared to him to be excellent as a scientific law of history. This law of history called for the indisputable victory of the proletariat.

Because Marxism combined great humanist and popular inspiration with the merits of science, young Chinese wanted to adopt it as a revolutionary theory suitable for the transformation of China.

Studies undertaken in China today on the humanism of Marx will perhaps lead the Chinese to reflect on the Christian origins of certain fundamental themes of Marxist thought: the dignity of man as subject and not as object of his work and the redemptory mission of the proletariat inherited from biblical prophecy which is critical of all religious hypocrisy. Could Marxism have arisen without the Christian tradition?

If Marxism is only science, why does it demand faith and self-sacrifice? And if Marxist science absorbs religious attitudes, can it preserve its critical and pragmatic method which is indispensable to a revision of past theories in terms of new facts? Religious belief is a human fact. Condemned as illusion, religious belief now reappears in a secular form which is much more dangerous because it bestows an absolute value on that which is human and, by nature, limited and transitory.

The Materialist Ideal

In the past, certain missionaries have been subjected to brainwashing because they refused to recognize the merits of materialism. In their minds, taking such a position was equivalent to rejecting the spiritual and denying God. In fact, these attitudes probably were overlooked by their Communist torturers, who saw in materialism an incomparable ideal. For them, materialism appeared to be primarily the attainment of science. The reflections of Baron Holbach and the Encyclopedia retained all their authority in China, even if this materialism, called "speculative," was later

revised by proponents of dialectical materialism. But even more than scientific attainment, materialism was a faith in human progress, economic development, and the well-being of the people.

To reject materialism was to be the victim of idealism and of religious illusion.

How can the Communists of today affirm as they do that material civilization must share an equal footing with spiritual civilization? This discovery is most interesting. Unfortunately, Marxist theorists scarcely have the means to characterize the contents of this "spiritual civilization." They describe it according to the economic perspective of the sacrifice of an individual for the good of the community.

Where does this spirit of sacrifice come from? Are there resources of truth, of love, and of justice in the human person which permit him or her to work for the common good in a disinterested way? Nothing in Marxist thought allows for an appeal to spiritual values rooted in human nature.

Perhaps socialism "with Chinese characteristics" has at its command a new version of materialism, which makes room for the great Chinese tradition of the perfectibility of the human being. The opposition of material and spiritual is thus partially reconciled. Only partially, because the spiritual as a transcendent call remains unrecognized. The exigency of going beyond one's self and the spiritual destiny of humanity spring from religious experience. Marx saw only a distorted expression of this in the Christian society of his time. He condemned it and reclaimed it, disguised scientifically, within his revolutionary ideal.

The expressions "materialism" and "idealism" are very foreign to Chinese thought. Why not "rectify the terms" (zheng ming) following Confucian tradition and use words which correspond to the realities that they express?

Revolutionary Activism

The Marxist theory of class struggle and of the

proletarian revolution has provided a banner for all kinds of conflict and bloody wars of which the following are some examples: the agricultural reform early in the regime, the surge in the cooperative movement, and then communes in the name of the advent of socialism, and the animosity toward intellectuals and religious in the name of a new popular culture containing nothing but demented antagonism.

Were these bloody hecatombs required by the so-called "scientific law of history"? They recall, instead, the popular surges of messianic inspiration which periodically reoccur in the course of Chinese history. Mao Zedong called on them to support the Communist peasant revolution. He had faith in the creativity of the people, but wagered on the destitution of the peasant masses as a necessary condition of their fighting spirit. In the course of these struggles of the poor peasantry and the Red army, the victory slogans of the proletariat, of the classless society, and of the defeat of the imperialists replaced the traditional ideals of the great peace or harmony. Without doubt, they had a different meaning in the minds of Party theorists. But, in the popular mentality, they retained a magical power of religious inspiration.

Marxist historians who study peasant wars have emphasized economic causes of the rebellions and underestimated psychological factors and religious motivations. A more objective evaluation of these elements today would allow for a better understanding of certain aspects of Communist activism itself. What place did religious fanaticism have in the Mao cult and its hysterical devotion to the "little red book"? Here also, Marxist rejection of religion and its relegation to the illusory world entails a misunderstanding of certain realities of the religious order. What is the use of pretending to overcome an illness if you still have its symptoms?

Ideology of the State

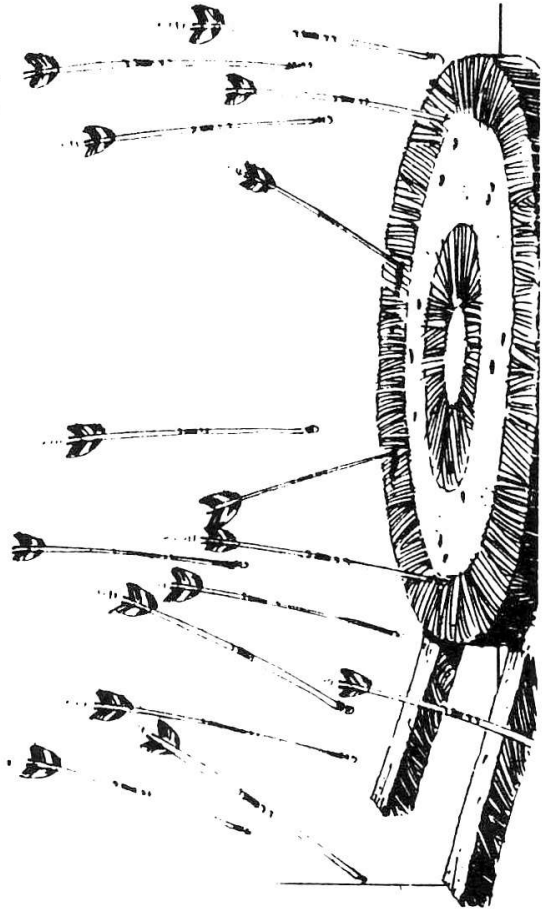
It is all to the good that since the death of Mao and the fall of the Gang of Four, the Chinese Communist Party has set itself on a more rational and pragmatic course. Maintaining a policy of modernization in order to develop a powerful and prosperous socialist state, the Party becomes

the servant of economic growth and productivity, whether it be more centralized or more divided among the intermediate levels of bureaucracy. Like political parties in power in non-socialist states, it upholds the cause of exploitive power, with the difference that, being a "popular" power, it is said to exploit the people for the profit of the people. Besides, it is supposed to have already suppressed all exploitation. Whatever may be the intentions of the shackled leaders after years of thankless work to reform the Party's cadres, it is a fact that numerous middle and local cadres profit from the advantage of their power. Many articles in the Chinese press cite their corruption on a smaller or larger scale. The fault is often placed on unfortunate Western influences, although it is probably much more attributable to the old "feudal" habits which the Party had boasted of having eliminated.

Assuming the ideology of a pragmatic power anxious about order and discipline and judging everything according to its usefulness for modernization, the Party was led to reintegrate the large religious bodies into the political system, while stripping them of all that appeared to be dangerous or of no help. Since 1985, while continuing to proclaim the strict independence of religion under the control of the state, the Party even allows these different religions to use their foreign connections to bring back foreign currency needed for modernization. Christians, in particular, after years of persecution for their previous contacts with foreigners, are now invited to obtain support from their founding churches for educational and hospital services. On the other hand, it is clearly understood that Christian personnel who are invited to China are not supposed to evangelize. And, as benevolent Christians, they should not plan on a salary from the state, at least for the first year.(11) The Amity Foundation, charged with channeling this foreign aid, is already functioning for the Protestants. On the Catholic side, certain services are already offered by Caritas. The principle of disinterested assistance for human development is part of conciliar and papal teachings. But up to what point can Catholics encourage a system which cuts them off from the Roman sources of their faith and which deprives them of an open religious exchange with the universal church? A French diplomat well thought of in China said with reason that: "Over there

they take the children of God for ignoramuses."

The United Front and the local police pursue Catholics in China who respect the authority of the pope, refuse the separatist position of the Patriotic Association, and establish contact with foreign Catholics. The Patriotic Association, subject to the state which protects religion, plays the same role as the Inquisition in medieval Europe and turns the guilty over to the secular arm which throws them in prison for civil disobedience. These methods can only gain the people's sympathy for the Christians and encourage a conversion movement. The leaders complain of a crisis of belief in the Party and in socialism. In effect, the people are disillusioned about what was presented to them as a realistic expectation.



Popular Christianity

The spectacular reopening of hundreds of churches is a gesture which causes Christians to rejoice in appreciation. Deprived of the sacraments for two decades, the faithful were moved to tears when they could finally chant the Mass and receive communion in their restored churches. Many overlook the fact that these churches have been reopened under the auspices of the Catholic Patriotic Association. In order to insure peace in their community, the pastors make their little speeches of thanks to the Association, the government and the Party. Others who are more recalcitrant, abstain from placing the Patriotic Association plaque on the main door. The faithful come in crowds if a "good priest" is among those in charge. Sometimes the only priest is a married priest, or a well-known "patriotic" priest who was formerly forced to inform on his colleagues or lay people. In this case, few of the faithful enter the church. The others, that is to say the large majority,

continue to pray at home with their families and sometimes secure the ministry of clandestine priests.

Generally speaking, the most active Christian communities are dispersed throughout the countryside where the control of the Association is less troublesome and where the local cadres close their eyes. Moreover, the application of the policy of religious freedom can be rather flexible according to local conditions. When an entire village organizes a procession or a pilgrimage in the name of religious freedom, it is difficult for an isolated Communist cadre to rise up against the common voice. Some cadres have gone so far as to join in the common prayer, in which case they are sharply reprimanded by their superiors. The astonishing thing is that among these non-"Patriotic" peasants, the Chinese Mass is beginning to spread, while the "Patriotics" in the cities still use the old Latin Mass. Although they keep their traditional prayers "during the Mass", which they know by heart, the faithful want to be in harmony with the universal Church. They do not take into consideration the directives of the "Patriotic" bishops which reject the authority of the pope.

Fervor is intense in Catholic communities which have been stripped of everything. Schools, orphanages, convents and various works were transferred to the government long ago. Books were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Never did the Christians of China find themselves so close to the cross of Christ and to evangelical poverty. Confirmed in their faith and their hope, they reorganized themselves by means of the new policy and they have no intention of repudiating that for which they have suffered for so long. Among them, religious and priestly vocations are numerous. Nevertheless, they prove themselves to be excellent citizens respecting the laws of the country and, at times, are singled out as examples of efficiency in production. Their economic and social services are well described in official literature.

Among the Protestant evangelical groups, there is an intense activity of witnessing and conversion. House meetings have multiplied and with them biblical instruction, the baptism of the young and the formation of community leaders.

If the Church suffered substantial physical losses in the course of the last 30 years, it gained spiritually from the simple fact that it was divorced from power and wealth. Communist criticism in the past was correct in denouncing the collusion of the Church with the exploitive powers. But the communists have since replaced them. Following on the same logic, they risk alienating the popular masses. Aware of this danger, they now force themselves to work for the "unity" of the Church. But they do not make progress among the Catholics because of their rejection of the authority of the pope, an unacceptable meddling in Catholic doctrine itself.

Independence and Universality

Today Chinese society has opened up considerably to the contemporary world. This opening, for the sake of modernization, is pragmatic. The old slogan of the nineteenth century still haunts the intelligentsia: "Learn the Western for usefulness; the Chinese for substance." The moral and cultural universe reinforced today by Communist ideology still remains closed in many ways. Recent attempts to emancipate thought and freedom of expression have been quickly repressed in the name of the four basic principles of the ideology of power.(12)

The refusal to allow Chinese Catholics to establish church relations with the pope is without doubt a concrete sign of this closure to anything which might threaten the ritual order of the Chinese state. The political argument of relations between the Vatican and Taipei is a weak and invalid excuse; nothing would be more useful to the reunification of China than the free movement of Catholics between Taiwan and the mainland. Officially recognized ties with the Church would also create an exchange that could not be stopped at the customs barriers.

Thus, on the one hand, we must examine what is the substance of this fear of foreign interference and, on the other hand, the interest which would be created by an opening to the life of the universal Church.

Fear of foreign interference

The Vatican is seen as a foreign power which inter-

feres in an abusive manner in the internal affairs of China. This accusation is based on the experience of the present regime and on a study of the history of the Church in the West.

Condemnation of communism

Various condemnations of atheistic communism by the Church are well known to the Chinese. We must add the more specific condemnations of Chinese communism which were included in the three encyclicals of Pope Pius XII during the 1950's. Catholics were prohibited from participating in Communist campaigns and from joining the Catholic Patriotic Association. Consecrations of bishops without the sanction of Rome were condemned as illicit.(13)

Since the regime acknowledges believers under the new policy of religious freedom, the pope advises Catholics to be good citizens. He recognizes, in addition, the accomplishments of the present regime in its efforts to modernize China. Thus, he makes a distinction between an atheistic doctrine that believers cannot accept and a system of government which they must support if it works for the common good of the people.

Is the Vatican imperialistic and reactionary by nature? We can scarcely see what China, which is so immense, has to fear from a small state whose boundaries are the same size as the park surrounding the Heavenly Temple in Beijing. But there is, undoubtedly, an implied reference to the so-called collusion between the spiritual power of the pope and the imperialistic powers. It should be noted, however, that China maintains excellent relations with those American and European powers which were previously labeled "imperialistic." Also ignored by the Communists is the tremendous progress of the Catholic Church in the Third World. The receptions given the pope in Africa and Latin America greatly surpass those given to any political figure.

The reactionary aspect of the Vatican is scarcely perceptible today when the pope supports large international bodies working for education, science, labour, the world struggle against hunger, justice and peace.

The conflict of power in Western history

The history of the papacy such as it is presented in China demonstrates unilaterally the establishment of a Church power which sees itself as superior to temporal authority and displays an accumulation of the riches of the nations in its pontifical court. They should be more objective and include in that history the martyred popes of the early centuries who were victims of imperial cults. The Byzantine wish for combined civil-religious power is analogous to the imperial Confucian order of ancient China. Medieval theocracy included a faithful Europe where spiritual and temporal powers were equally submissive to the law of a transcendent God. Thus Christianity is theocentric, while the Confucian state is more anthropocentric, despite its worship of Heaven.

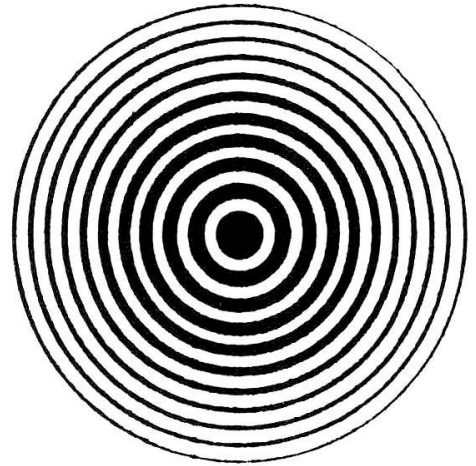
At the time of the French Revolution, the civil constitution of the clergy was favourably welcomed by a certain number of priests anxious to see the Church lose its privileges that it might rediscover the spirit of the Gospel.(14) The Concordat of Napoleon in 1801 brings us close to the Chinese situation: the French secular state tightly controlled the Church which it needed to safeguard order and morality. We note that this compromise became impossible when the secular state became too aggressive, and led in 1905 to the separation of Church and state. Modern nations tend to seek this kind of solution. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, "Josephism" in Austria was a last burst of the "Holy Roman Empire," more or less secularized. This seizure of power over the Church was expressed in the closing of monasteries in 1783.

The attitude of European secular powers during the Enlightenment or after the French Revolution should be understood in a context of post-Christianity. Here China can see some analogies with her religious policy; but religious power never existed in Confucian China. Relations with the Vatican is a different matter altogether. Catholics are a small minority in China, and today the Church has greatly evolved in its relations with civil authorities. The concordats between the Vatican and different nations respond to different situations that should be analyzed separately. They are all designed to regulate the status

of the Church in a manner which is in accord with local powers and which assures religious freedom. A variety of solutions are possible concerning, in particular, the nomination of bishops. Monsignor Achille Silvestrini, Secretary of the Council on Public Affairs of the Church, has recently brought these arrangements to mind when discussing China. (15)

The Catholicity of the Church

The pope is a spiritual leader with whom all the bishops of the Catholic Church are in communion. His task is to maintain the unity of the Church and the purity of its doctrine. If he makes statements on matters concerning the family, work or society, it is to show how faith in God and a spiritual inclination can contribute to total human growth and to true peace. Thanks to its union with the pope, the Church is "catholic" or, in other words, universal. Protestants also believe in the universality of the Christian message, but their churches are more often linked to national powers, at least by their origins.



Respect for papal authority is translated today in a manner which does not pressure civil authorities and which, on the contrary, can give them support in the work of human development.

Respect for moral and political autonomy

In a work entitled Integral Humanism, the philosopher Jacques Maritain thoroughly analyzed the evolution of ancient Western Christianities toward an affirmation of temporal values which are visible in a general secularization of society. He considered this recognition of man's autonomy as positive, on the condition that the man remains open to his transcendent destiny. Faith in God is not shown by oppressive laws imposed from the outside, but as an appeal to go beyond the steps of the heroes and saints who have advanced mankind. In this aspect, Maritain was the heir of Henri Bergson's explanation of the creative evolution of the universe caused by a vital spark whose nature

is both material and spiritual. A society closed in on its own formal customs tends to fossilize. A society which is open to a spiritual call is inventive and capable of renewal.

The Confucian moral tradition consecrating ritual order has the effect of favouring the integration of a society, but also contributes to its closing, its lack of creativity and its formalism.

Chinese tradition and Christianity can complement each other. The Chinese humanist tradition offers Christians a valuable moral basis for the perfecting of man and the ordering of society. Faith in a transcendent God can free the Confucian order from its tendencies to withdraw into itself and into formalism. A fertile dialogue can thus be established among Christians, Buddhists and Daoists to purify religious attitudes.

Service of man and his total growth

The conciliar constitution Gaudium et Spes and various papal encyclicals underline the role of the Church as one of service to all humanity. Many non-Christian countries appreciate the abilities of Catholic schools to form responsible citizens open to progress. Education of the total person remains an essential perspective of the Church, even if Christian schools must also incorporate in their curricula subjects which are primarily utilitarian for the development of modern nations.

The services of training the handicapped and providing medical care correspond to a respect for the dignity of peoples and a concern for their physical and moral well-being.

The contributions of Christians to cultural and political life are a service for the common good, and represent a wide variety of different means as they adapt themselves to local political and cultural situations. A document of the French bishops entitled "For a practical Christianity of politics" shows that Christian faith gives a great freedom of political choice. The positions taken by Christians are due to their personal responses to the exigencies of

the Gospel: respect for people, justice, freedom with respect for the interests of the community, responsible self-sacrifice, understanding, and patient, and disinterested love.

Prophecy of transcendent values

Biblical prophets denounced the injustices and the exploitation of man by man. They attacked hypocritical religion which only cloaked egotistical, oppressive attitudes. This prophetic role culminated in the person and the message of Jesus Christ. His "Kingdom of God," a kingdom of justice and peace, is, without doubt, not of this world. But neither is it an illusory dream because the disciples of Christ must prove the sincerity of their faith by working in this world for the coming of that Kingdom.

Christians must work effectively to transform the world and never be satisfied with the results accomplished, because the realization of the Kingdom of God remains their firm hope. They thus preserve a critical attitude which is not injurious to political power if that power is truly working for the common good of the people.

This prophetic responsibility must begin within the Christian community itself. Liturgical periods of penitence, retreats, the witness of saints, and the activity of spiritual and evangelical movements are all there to remind the Church of its mission and to require from her a lasting conversion.

Conclusion

The cultural originality of the Chinese world does not allow the Church to resolve rapidly and neatly the problems of relations with the Chinese nation. Twenty centuries of experience in the Western world can provide analogies and assist reflection, but there can be no ready made solution.

On the Chinese side, it is no longer possible to make pronouncements on the nature of Christianity and its contributions to society by referring only to the limited perspectives of Marxist criticism of religion. In-depth studies should gradually lead to a recognition of the realities

of the religious domain, the different levels of religious experience, its contributions to political life, to culture, to morality, and the type of liberty essential for man's creativity, his poetic sense and which can inspire constant renewal. The dialectic approach familiar in China should help in recognizing what is positive in religion for the development of mankind and what is negative - fanatical and obscure deviations.

Since the Chinese Communist Party seeks to reform rather than to reduce participation in political life, it will undoubtedly be led to examine its real ideological status. Has its repression of religions led it to absorb a certain number of religious attitudes? Has not its method, which strives to be scientific, become a belief in dogmas denied by facts? Its present dedication to state control and its practical enjoyment of the advantages of power are alienating the State from the masses. The people who suffer from discrimination and injustice lose faith in an ideology which reveals itself to be misleading, and search for a creed which does not deceive. The Party does give service to Christianity by criticizing its deviations and its infidelities. Unintentionally, the Party thus plays a prophetic and liberating role for the Church. But by ignoring the spiritual force of its faith while focusing only on its temporal usefulness, the Party disregards the deep motivations of its believers.

To the extent that the Communist Party rediscovers the scientific, democratic, and humanist inspirations of its origins, its role in the workings of the Chinese state becomes more benevolent. Relations between the government of the universal Church and the Chinese nation become easier and signify for China a more balanced opening to the outside world. An opening which is strictly utilitarian, for material interests alone, can only bring to China the fruits of basic material interest: the love of money and pleasure which corrupt cadres and disorient Chinese youth. The spiritual orientation of the Church unceasingly draws attention to that which is destructive of human dignity and peace. By being able to receive these teachings of their Church, Chinese Catholics would be better able to contribute to the development of the "spiritual civilization" of their country.

By renewing relations with Rome, The Catholic Church in China will find a legitimization and a reinforcement of the autonomy which it seeks, because Chinese believers would no longer have reasons to reject its leadership. Unity would slowly be reestablished among them in the spirit of reconciliation demanded by the Gospel.

NOTES

10. See Jean Charbonnier, "Ethique et science en Chine contemporaine," Dossier Echange France-Asie, No. 41, January 1979, p. 5.

11. Amity Foundation offers an initial salary of 500 yuan per month to teachers sent by the Protestant organizations which finance the Foundation.

12. The four basic principles are as follows: to persevere in the socialist way, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the direction of the Party, the Marxist-Leninist thought of Mao Zedong.

13. These three encyclicals are: Cupimus in Primis (1/18/52), Ad Sinarum Gentes (10/7/54) and Ad Apostolorum Principis (6/29/58).

14. See Jacques Loew and Michel Meslin, Histoire de l'Eglise par elle-meme, Paris: Fayard, 1978, p. 511-513. Quotation from a speech of the pastor of Choisy-le-Roi on January 16, 1791: "Because all legitimate power comes from God, I therefore adopt the law proposed to me because...it respects my religion, its beliefs and mysteries, it gives back to the priesthood its original dignity, it purges the sanctuary of the innumerable abuses which dishonor it; it strives to make saints of its ministers by curtailing temporal goods which, too often, make them sinful.. Regenerators of the French Empire, legislators of a free people, you limit yourselves to the sphere of man's rights and a civil constitution, your law is thus purely civil; you thus respect the work of God, my faith and my beliefs.

15. Interview of July 27, 1985, published in the Italian Newspaper, Il Sabato, on July 27.