

# *Revolution, Crime, and Sin in the Catholic World*

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THE OLD AND unquenchable problem of brigandage and the *Mafia* continues to preoccupy the Italian press. Shots fired at the car of a high official and the debate about the big pilgrimage of the *Madonna di Polsi* in Calabria brought the matter once more forcefully to public attention. The government wanted to forbid the pilgrimage because it offered an ideal opportunity for the members of the *Mafia* to meet with the local brigands. But fear

of a wholesale rebellion, in the end, prompted the government to withdraw its prohibition; and the pilgrimage took place.

The press of Northern Italy treats these conditions as a national disgrace, but the Southerners shrug their shoulders and patiently pay "protection" fees to the *Mafia* and/or to the brigands. They do not believe that Marzano, Italy's number one crime-buster, will be able to change

conditions in the South. The North, on the other hand, is convinced that economic reconstruction will succeed where Marzano is bound to fail.

The roots of the problem lie far beyond the reach of either, deep down in theology. A country riddled with secret societies, indifferent to banditry, with no respect for the state and no civic sense, with little interest in technology or higher living standards, with a highly individualistic and 'indolent' outlook on life, is commonly considered "backward" — and bad. The societies of, let us say, Norway, England, or the United States, by the same token, will be rated "progressive" — and good. Although popular in the Western World, such terminology, obviously, is totally unscientific. There is no evidence to prove that people in Palermo, Syracuse, or Reggio di Calabria lead a life less full and happy than the inhabitants of Aberdeen, Copenhagen, or Kalamazoo. We can well imagine that a tourist from Kalamazoo, perhaps, may cherish the memory of a visit to Palermo.

We will find ourselves on much safer ground if we exchange the terms "backward" and "progressive" for "archaic" (ancient) and "modern", thus substituting chronology for a somewhat moralizing nomenclature. In spite of the revolutionary temper of the Catholic, and the conservative (but evolutionary) character of the Protestant and post-Protestant world, the mind and outlook of Calabria have changed less than that of Denmark, at least in the past three or four centuries. A Jutlander today will have whims and tastes, concepts of honor, happiness, disgrace, beauty, or joy entirely different from those of his remote forebears; whereas the Calabrese will show a much greater resemblance to his ancestors. And there is little doubt that a gentleman from Aarhus in 1450 was closer to a Calabrese gentleman than are their respective present-day descendants to each other. It required several weeks to make the trip from Aarhus to Reggio which today, by

plane, takes several hours; but the fact remains that today the *Mafioso* from Reggio and the shopkeeper from Aarhus would not see eye to eye on most questions. Five hundred years ago a common Faith united Aarhus and Reggio. Denmark no less than Calabria had a violent tenor of life; the colorful ways of the Middle Ages were common to the entire Occident — piety, brutality, hate, passion, love, robbery, jealousy, deviltry and a frequently flamboyant form of sanctity swayed that "primitive" world.

Why, we ask ourselves, did the Danes and the Calabrese live in "One World" five centuries ago, and why are they so different today? For, undoubtedly, the Calabrese have changed little. Who, then, is modern man and where does he come from? Why do Germans "make such good citizens" whereas South Italian emigrants so frequently engage in 'asocial' activities? Even if one dislikes generalizations, it is difficult to reject outright certain notions cherished by North Europeans and Americans: i.e., that the further South one travels in the Old World, the less punctual, reliable, cooperative, industrious, clean, efficient, honest, and truthful people become. To make matters worse, statistics tell us that crimes and felonies flourish in the South (and East) far more so than in the North (and West), a phenomenon present even within the boundaries of certain countries, for instance in Germany and Holland.

Why this curious difference between North and South? Racial, climatic, and ethnic elements certainly account for some of it, but more important than any of these elements is the religious factor, because religion alone can explain to man the "why", the "wherefrom", and the "whereto" of human existence. In Europe denominational boundaries rarely are identical with either political or ethnic frontiers. There are regions where Catholic Teutons live contiguously with Calvinist Latins, providing an object lesson in the distinction between national and religious

psychology, clearly showing which traits are "racial" and which come from a specific creed. Again, there are ethnic entities with one national conscience but with divided religious allegiances, creating different outlooks, cultures, and behavior patterns among one people.

The intelligent reader will have guessed that "North" and "South", as used by us to simplify the line of argument, should not always be understood in the strictly geographic sense. The terms may apply to what really is East and West — as in the case of the English and the Irish — or they may be reversed as is between the Rhinelanders and the Swiss. The key to this situation, as we said before, is religion. The Protestant world is based on discipline, hard work, cooperation, law and order; it is modern *par excellence*, bourgeois, reliable, communitarian, pragmatic, and evolutionary, as against the Catholic world which is revolutionary, personalistic, colorful, which believes in absolute values, and is ruled by the strong ties of personal affection. This means the 'modernization' of any country — Catholic, Schismatic, or pagan — implies the acceptance of Protestant or post-Protestant behavior patterns. Seventeenth-century Spain showed the greatest tolerance toward any kind of crime, while Britain hanged a man for appropriating an article worth more than forty shillings and this until the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In the eighteen-twenties whole Spanish provinces went into rebellion when the already powerless Inquisition was replaced by a police force. People took to arms with the shout: "*Viva la Inquisición! Muera la policía!*" The Inquisition was merely after doctrinal deviations, but the police embodied the menace of "law and order", the spectre of Scotland Yard.

Much has been written about "Protestant Man" and "Catholic Man", but I feel — and this includes my own writing — that another important if synthetic type has been neglected — the "atheist-agnostic". His negative creed which spread

all over the Occident could enter into a more organic symbiosis with the "North", where it could come easily to terms with "liberal Protestantism, than in the "South". It is an important, but frequently overlooked point, that the antithesis between the Catholic and the Protestant "worlds", which was considerable during the first century and a half after the Reformation, became even more substantial with the "liberalization" of Protestantism and the subsequent extension of Deism, Pantheism, and Agnosticism. Until the end of the Seventeenth Century, the Protestant world remained revolutionary because it believed and extolled absolutes as fervently as the Universal Church did. The notion that either Luther or Calvin defended "private interpretation" is a fairy tale believed by Protestants and Catholics alike. Only after 1700 Protestantism became gradually secularized and, having lost its religious fervor under the impact of relativism, it also lost its revolutionary temper and became evolutionary. George Washington headed no revolution like Oliver Cromwell — or Maximilien de Robespierre.

In the light of these facts it must be understood that the phenomenal rise of the Protestant nations actually came *after* their religious emancipation, *after* the enthusiasm of the Reformation and Protestant orthodoxy had fizzled out. A hundred years after the disaster of the Armada, Spain still was a great power; and even at the end of the eighteenth Century, Charles III decided to join Louis XVI in his Aid-to-America program. Spain's downfall is a nineteenth century tragedy. The Industrial Revolution was facilitated not only by Calvinist notions, but, above all, by a materialism which is the concomitant to all conscious withdrawals from the supernatural. The Protestant spirit of cooperation and discipline merely served as a basis for the achievement of material improvements. "Progress" in the form of wealth, a longer life, painlessness, security, comfort could be reached only by hard

work, organization, thrift, and frugality. Yet it need hardly be pointed out that "Progress" (including the H-Bomb) does not necessarily lead to a happier mankind. Fun is not joy, and Swedish gym teachers or senior executives in New York's suburbs (or "exurbia") do not necessarily look much happier than Calabrian bandits.

While the Catholic nations (and certain "retarded" Protestant ones) remained 'backward', they continued to lead a more colorful life in an ambiance of beauty, savagery, and 'primitiveness' with few neurotics and many criminals. But even if Sicilians were as well off as Danes, it is doubtful whether the stream of Sicilian tourists to Denmark would be very great. The beaten track of American tourists in Europe, significantly enough, leads almost exclusively through Catholic regions.

The higher Catholic (and Schismatic) crime rate is a sore subject for all those who are not Catholic Christians, but merely 'Catholicists', i.e., mere 'partisans' of the Church afflicted with an inferiority complex. 'Moral' statistics, we should admit, must be read in their sociological context. In countries where the Catholics have a lower living standard than the non-Catholics, temptation must be taken into consideration. Yet in this connection it is worth remembering that Continental legal practice respects the right to 'expropriate' in the case of dire need. Cardinal Frings of Cologne, following the teaching of St. Thomas, told his faithful in 1946 to take fuel where they could find it. (Hence the humorous expression *Kohlen fringsen* for 'stealing' coal.) For us the positive law (*ius gentium*) is binding only in a relative way, and it is by no means accidental that legal positivism rose contemporaneously with the emergence of totalitarian tyranny. Adam — man — precedes the Leviathan State as well as the Behemoth of Society. The deification of the state, significantly enough, is an Anglo-Prussian (Hobbesian-Hegelian) revival of pagan notions in antiquity. Conversely, there al-

ways has been a suspicion in the Protestant world that Catholics are not 'ideal citizens' and *if* blind obedience, subservience, compliance, and trembling respect for the written law are the measuring rods, this suspicion is justified, because the Catholic adheres to *reason* and is subject primarily to his *conscience*. (The French verb *raisonner* not only means to reason, but also to oppose with intelligent arguments.) For Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., State and Society were ultimate coercive realities, but to us they are not.

Recently an interesting debate took place between some editors of *The Commonweal* and the diocesan weekly of St. Louis about the Catholic as a citizen. Now it is quite true that our theology can provide us with valid reasons for being a good citizen whereas the agnostic cannot be 'reached' by similar cogent arguments. For him, however, the state represents the ultimate. He is impressed by the (debatable) fact that "crime doesn't pay", and beyond the state he sees no other tangible authority. For us, God's Will and conscience come first. Hence also the shining example of Catholic resistance against tyranny. In tyrannicide, from Charlotte Corday to Stauffenberg, we always have been leading.

Yet at the same time we have to admit that a look at the criminologist's map of Europe shows a pretty bad Catholic record. It is true that certain Protestant regions in North-Eastern Europe are not much better, and that devout Lutheran Finland compares most unfavorably with progressive Sweden. Even if the 'Catholicist' considers all sociological aspects as well as the fact that the surplus population from Catholic regions with a high birth-rate migrates to Protestant parts and there swells the lower layers, this will not diminish his irritation at our higher criminal rate which thwarts his worldly and petty efforts to let his religion compete with Protestant and secularist environments on their own terms. We always ought to remember the Irishman who, teased by his English friend about the fact that

three-quarters of the Royal Constabulary had to be stationed in Ireland and so few in law-abiding England, replied: "Of course; it's no use muzzling sheep."

A tree, no doubt, shall be known by its fruits, but it would be most erroneous to use the findings of law courts as spiritual indicators. There is no reason to believe that there are more lost souls in penitentiaries than in highly restricted apartment houses or in smart summer resorts. The sinner and the criminal are not necessarily the same person. The ideal picture of man as conceived by religion (the Saint), by society (the Hero), and by the state (the Good Citizen) are by no means identical, except, perhaps, in times of great religious fervor when the Faith also 'colors' the Hero and the Citizen. Not only in the Soviet Union, nay, even in the United States or in Switzerland, I could imagine a Saint being hauled before the courts . . .

The law, everywhere in the world, protects a specific material and external order — nothing else. It will severely punish a man who in an uncontrollable fit killed another man (perhaps, before God, only a venial sin, since there is no premeditation), but it remains perfectly neutral towards a "good citizen" who, for years, nourishes a glowing hatred against some fellow man. I am certain that there are gangsters in the United States who, eventually, will be found among the saved, and "good citizens", without a single conviction on their driver's license, without any blood on their hands, but with undiluted poison in their hearts, who will run the danger of dying unredeemed. The mind and outlook of a gangster (or of a Mediterranean brigand) occasionally resembles that of a robber knight, and it is not surprising that a modicum of religion sometimes enters his life — religion, and not only superstition. (Remember the startling conversion of "Dutch" Schultz Fleggenheimer!) On the other hand there are those who arrange their lives in such a way that whatever luxury or fun they enjoy, is deductible from their taxable in-

come, and others yet whose existence is designed to avoid all "conflict with the law". For them disgrace is not God's wrath (or Christ's tears), but the disdain of society or condemnation by the state. They remain "on the right side of the law." They have sinned only in their thoughts, with carefully selected words or with perfectly legal actions. Adaptation towards their environment has "kept them out of mischief." They commit their crimes vicariously — by reading detective stories.

Yet the study of criminal statistics based on denominational backgrounds still leaves some questions open. I grant that the sinner should be distinguished from the criminal; but often they overlap. In pre-war Holland, Catholics had the highest rate of criminality, followed by the Protestants, the Jews, and, finally, by those without religious affiliations. In the mixed areas the pattern follows a sociological gradation, but the fact remains that solidly Catholic areas have a higher criminality than purely Protestant regions. In Germany, it is interesting to note, the maximum of Nazi votes in 1932 were cast in Lutheran districts with a particularly low criminality rate, a very important sidelight on our problem.

Thus not only the criminal "belongs" to the Catholic scene, but also the *sinner*. Whereas morbid concentration on sin is definitely Jansenistic and alien to a healthy Catholic attitude, the sinner no less than the criminal is an integral part of the Catholic world. Religion is not primarily ethical action. The Catholic, above all, is Christocentric man — believer, worshipper, lover of God (and of His Image); his religion, before being anything else, is faith, charity, and liturgy — and not "public service" or a community organization to train docile taxpayers. Even the rejection of divorce, of artificial birth-control, or of shoplifting belongs to the conclusions, not to the very essence, of our Faith. With God's Grace and the inherent strength of his "royal priesthood", the sinner, overnight, can become a saint.

Hence sin saddens and depresses, but it does not 'shock' the real Catholic.

It is interesting to note that Protestantism originally overemphasized the transcendental and theocentric character of Christianity. Luther's *Faith Alone* was an exaggeration of St. Augustine's *Love (God) and do whatever you like*. Calvin put forth his *Glory to God Alone*. The dialectic and evolutionary character of Protestantism, in this as in so many other of its domains, has resulted in a complete reversal of the original attitude. Luther's *By Faith Alone*, coupled with the rejection of good works, produced, in our times, the 'Social Gospel' and the emphasis on "deeds, not words". If Luther were alive today I think he would feel a much greater kinship with some of our mystics than with certain "enlightened and broadminded" ministers of community churches.

Crime and sin, undoubtedly, have assumed a "new" character in the secular, post-Protestant world. They have transcended the framework of the ordinary law-book or the penny-catechism. On one hand we have the personal crime of a coldness and monstrosity which makes one wonder whether the perpetrator is, at all, human; he no longer is a mere sinner, and therefore a potential saint, but only a medium of evil, a denier of creation. Like the man who brutally murdered his mother and forty-three other innocents on an airliner, he moves resembling a phantom in a society of otherwise well-behaved, 'orderly' citizens, as a grim reminder that even in their pharisaic self-centeredness they have to choose between God and the Devil.

On the other hand, there are the great impersonal and legally "perfect" crimes of the masses in the "North". In the "South" wickedness always is of a strictly personal nature — one joins the brigands or one doesn't; one violates a nun and cuts her throat, or one sides with the angels and is executed onself. The blood orgies in the

Spanish Civil War; the terrors of the Commune; the horrors of the Russian Revolution — they all are unknown to the "progressive North", where sin and crime are demoted to the level of mere 'mental disease' or 'band social conditioning'. Headlines like "R.A.F. and R.C.A.F. Slaughters 150,000 in Dresden" or "Operation Killer: Thousands Roasted in Napalm" diabolically gladden the hearts of patriotic housewives at the breakfast table listening to 'light' radio music. The truly modern sinner lacks all the redeeming features of the Christian called upon to repent. A member of a huge *Société Anonyme*, parroting coined phrases, thinking and "doing what comes naturally", he engages in the vicarious and sadistic pleasure of the "good citizen" watching patriotically what his State dishes out to others. (Remember the West Coast beauty queen who had the privilege of making a cross with her lipstick on the map of Tokyo to mark the place where a bomb should be dropped?) Often feeling insecure and feeble as a person, he finds refuge in a collective 'patriotism' which, as Dr. Johnson plainly told us, is the refuge of scoundrels. The modern sinner would not even understand us, if we'd ask him to go down on his knees. He was quite regular, wasn't he? Statistics bear it out, don't they? Yet the teaching of Scriptures on this point is entirely clear: "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil!"

Centuries divide us from the spectacle of King Henry II walking in a torn shirt and with ashes on his head to do penance for instigating the murder of St. Thomas à Becket. His subjects saw this with awe and understanding: there was a repentant human being, there was a forgiving God, there was the endless drama of old Adam. They also remembered that the Lord dying on the Cross promised eternal bliss to a thief, and that at his feet wept Mary Magdalen, a saint and former harlot, and that for this reason there always will be hope for the Christian sinner and criminal.