

## CHRISTIANS AND INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

HENRI DE RIEDMATTEN, O.P.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HERE is no lack of scepticism about international institutions, and it is particularly widespread in Europe. It is a well-known fact that many Catholics subscribe to it. Europeans do not forget the failures of the League of Nations, and Catholics are distrustful of formulas which are often deduced from philosophical principles hostile, or at least indifferent, to Christianity. There are many, especially among the Catholics of the U.S.A., who do not easily overlook the historical links between modern internationalism and the liberal tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The present article does not seek to plead the cause of international institutions; its purpose is merely to provide information. There is no reason for Christians to be ignorant of the facts which explain the ever-increasing interest in international institutions which is taken by the Holy See, as well as the important place which relations with the United Nations and its Specialized Agencies take in the activities of the big Catholic international organizations.

First of all, it will be useful to set out what is original in the existing family of international institutions as contrasted with previous ones.

I. It is evident that the composition of the United Nations is universal, whereas the League of Nations was never capable of becoming so. U.N.O. began more auspiciously. Its universality was assured on two counts: by the part which the great powers played in its foundation, and by the part played by those parts of the world whose political emancipation is either recent or in the act of being accomplished. The League of Nations never counted the United States among its members, and always gave the appearance of being a European club with an exotic element of South American members. U.N.O. was launched by the great powers, and the right of veto stands for more than a desire for

<sup>1</sup> The author is Ecclesiastical Adviser to the Centre of International Catholic Organizations at Geneva, and has during the last five years frequently represented the Holy See at various Conferences and Sessions there.

hegemony on their part: whilst it gives them a guarantee, it makes certain of their constantly taking part in its work. Besides, the political emancipation of so many countries since the war and their immediate acceptance into the bosom of the United Nations tend to give it increasingly the character of being totally representative of all sections of the human race.

Such a universality produces the preponderance of the United States and the U.S.S.R., and at the same time gives a major rôle to those parts of the world which have only recently enjoyed autonomy. This certainly reflects the decline of European influence and political importance, which is also signified by the transfer of the headquarters to New York and the absence of any really effectual relations between U.N.O. and the Council of Europe. However, the decline in importance of Europe is much more than just a fact; it is in line with the political ideas on which the United Nations are based. Today, the theory that there are people who are politically more advanced and therefore naturally equipped to exercise dominion over other territories is generally held to be untenable. The United Nations has unwaveringly fallen in with this current of thought, and pursues a corresponding policy. The enthusiasm which greets the gaining of independence, and which gives uncritical support to any claim for it, may be naive, but the fact that international institutions have become the ideal formula for international collaboration between most nations, especially for new countries, cannot be overlooked. In such a forum, they feel free from any idea of inferiority. Enjoying the right to vote, they are conscious of the importance it gives them. Moreover, they can realize their desire of playing an important part in the fashioning of the world of tomorrow. It is interesting to note that if these new countries receive assistance from numerous sources for their development, they consider the technical assistance of the United Nations to be the most ideally suited, although it is very small. Just recently it was the voices of these countries which brought about the decision of the Economic and Social Council (E.C.O.S.O.C.) to create an investment fund for economic development (S.U.N.F.E.D.), despite the advice of the larger contributors.

II. The universality of its membership may be the most striking exterior feature of the United Nations, but it is the universality of purpose which very profoundly determines its

nature. Again, it is very revealing to make a comparison with the League of Nations. The League was conceived primarily as a political instrument, although a subsidiary place was given to economic and social functions. There were some organizations, notably the International Labour Office, which enlarged the field of international collaboration among Governments, although they were independent of the League. From its inception the United Nations has extended its scope beyond the sphere of politics. Not satisfied with being the highest forum for the settlement of international political conflicts, it took upon itself the ambitious task of stimulating the progress of the whole world towards an ideal standard of living, guided by that of countries reputedly highly developed. It does not just aim at federating the peoples of the world to ensure for them a peace which is universal and lasting; it also unites them in the task of providing a share for everyone in the resources of the whole world, as exploited by the most recently developed means.

This project has produced a conception of what is now called the 'Family of the United Nations'; that is to say, a composition of Specialized Agencies to meet certain urgent needs which are thought to exist. Besides absorbing already existing institutions such as the International Labour Office (I.L.O.), the International Union for Telecommunications (U.I.T.), the Universal Postal Union (U.P.U.), the United Nations have created a number of new Specialized Agencies. The best known are the World Health Organization (W.H.O.), U.N.E.S.C.O., the Food and Agriculture Organization (F.A.O.), and, most recently, the International Atomic Agency (I.A.A.). To these must be added certain other departments of the United Nations, the most important being the Technical Assistance Bureau (T.A.B.). The purpose of this last is to speed up the progress of under-developed countries towards that standard of living which the present state of knowledge and technique ought to assure to humanity.

One would expect that a structure such as this presupposes some particular doctrine and philosophy. Whilst there is a philosophy in the background, it is often more implicit than conscious, and is too imprecise to add up to a well-defined system. We can single out three of its features.

(I) The conception of international institutions is predominantly secular. Everything is seen in terms of this world. Implicitly, but

yet quite plainly, there is an exclusion of any reference to anything transcendent, and to the consequences which the possibility of something transcendent offers as a guide to human behaviour. The conception of health in the definition of the constitution of the World Health Organization as 'a complete state of physical, mental and social well-being' summarizes the fundamental claims which international institutions hope to implement. This is the ideal with which everything must harmonize, and religion must be dealt with accordingly. Militant anti-clericalism is absent, but religion is looked upon as an accidental distinguishing mark like colour, race or sex, which neither affect the fundamental nature of man, nor needs to be considered by the legislator when he makes provision for the rights of the individual.

Seen in this light, religion is just a survival from the past or an expression of liberty of opinion. One must know how to allow for it, even how to make use of it. To illustrate this attitude we can quote a proposal of the Mandates Commission with regard to the Ruanda Urundi. Recognizing the work of missions, especially in schools, the Commission gave their opinion that 'the time had come' to provide the natives with opportunities for a more highly developed education, that is to say, of a secular kind.

(II) As has been suggested, the sociology of the United Nations accepts full responsibility for bringing about the well-being of individuals in every sphere and by every means. The State watches over every citizen to see whether he is looked after and whether he looks after himself to his own best interests and those of the community. However, it is up to the State, and not the individual, to determine what those best interests are. Without there being any question of the Marxist doctrine of subordinating the individual to the community, responsibility for the individual is handed over to Society, and he finds himself firmly caught up into a network of agencies and directives. The most striking case is that of health services: not their nationalization, but the right of State supervision and control over the nation's health, and its task of providing the citizens with advice (especially if it can force them to follow it). There is, also, an opening for intervention in the spheres of insurance and careers guidance. We are not going to discuss here whether such a conception may be justified. We merely point out that it reflects itself in the constitution of the Specialized Agencies, all of which, excepting the International

Labour Office, are purely 'governmental' (that is to say, their only members are Governments). The Governments exercise sovereign authority themselves in the various fields with which the various Agencies are concerned. A number of disputes have made it clear that the private organizations to which these fields had been entrusted are regarded today as insufficiently competent. Although the Consultative Statute allows non-governmental organizations to be represented, international institutions now have this really dominant and decisive governmental character.

(III) But we must go more deeply. The United Nations wanted to define human rights. They were seeking an ideal which, as has often been pointed out, is a kind of substitute for religion for those who claim to have none. We can find this ideal set out in the Declaration of Human Rights, whose tenth anniversary will be celebrated next year. This Declaration (and all its attendant declarations) is a compromise which fairly represents what would find universal acceptance as the fundamental rights of the individual with regard to Society. Its principles are easily identified: they come from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the humanism of the eighteenth century. Just when its weakness seems so proven in the field of national policy, this humanism makes a surprising reappearance as the foundation of international morality. It is no accident that a *Rapporteur*, appointed to investigate the question of religious discrimination, chose John Locke as his basic authority.

We can scarcely be accused of having attempted to conceal the weaknesses of international institutions, and of having turned a blind eye to those developments which must disturb Christians. We must not forget the sinister equivocity which allows the Communist world to profess a whole-hearted adherence to the fundamental principles of international institutions; the worst enemies of their principles often manage to use them against their opponents. What, then, should be the position which Christians ought to take up with regard to this complex international machinery? What use should they make of opportunities which allow them to influence it from within?

It is true that it was created by men who hold very different convictions from our own. Yet, it is no less true that the principle that the resources and efforts of all should be put at the service of the greater good of each is the very purpose which the heaven

of the Gospel has introduced into the heavy dough of this world. Every man is our brother. Some may have thought that the assertion of the liberty of the individual is opposed to all 'dogmatisms', but this claim owes its existence to the restoration of man which Christianity achieves. Next year, the Commission of Human Rights is going to celebrate at Paris the tenth anniversary of the Declaration, in order to acknowledge its connection with the French Revolution. An honest historian knows that the Mount of the Beatitudes would have been the appropriate place. A Christian can never afford to forget this. He may see in the United Nations' formulas a greater measure of truth than certain of their expressions, taken in isolation, would suggest. He knows that the Declaration on Human Rights has not been derived from a trustworthy moral philosophy, and that the international institutions do not concern themselves with man's supernatural end. Yet, he can be satisfied that, even if their formulas go no further than what would be found acceptable to all men's consciences, they give an account of human nature as made by God, with which he can concur—even if he does not approve of everything.

Everything that we build in this world suffers from some limitations. There is no need to reject an existing structure provided that structure does not threaten the basic personal rights and the rights of conscience. We have to work in the world which we find around us, not in the world as we should like it to be. Too many Christians are anxious about what *might* happen, and what the morrow is going to bring. However, when people long for a morrow when nothing will be wrong, they ought not to forget that we are in the process of living through today. Christians would do well to consider the words of the Holy Father in his allocution of last Christmas, in which, without disregarding for a moment the weaknesses and limitations of international institutions, Pius XII affirmed that at the present moment, the United Nations 'alone' (the word comes twice in the allocution) has the capacity to set up an authority for international control and agreement which 'is based on a programme which, in order to rule the common life of peoples, seeks to hold fast to absolute values' (cf. A.A.S., XXXIX, pp. 20-1). This is also the theme of the Holy Father's recent important address to *Pax Romana*.

Everything suggests that Christians ought to co-operate. The over-all movement of contemporary history is towards finding a solution to our problems at an international level. Setting aside the Communist answer, international institutions, despite their deficiencies, show us the general direction in which the world is travelling. The presence or absence of Christians in these international institutions manifests their awareness or indifference to this. Though, politically speaking, national rivalries are greater now than they have ever been, the problems have today increased to such an extent that their solution requires action on a world-wide scale. In view, for instance, of the need for developing atomic energy it is striking that so highly developed a country as Holland should have to admit that in this respect she is wholly dependent on international assistance. Admittedly this is a very special case, but it is not the only one. It is agreed that the only effective weapon against malaria is a campaign of total eradication; yet how can this be achieved except by international co-operation? There are other wider questions. We are witnessing the disappearance of differences between cultures and peoples; it is a process almost as regular as clockwork. Most people believe today that as progress has gone on in the way that science has laid down for it, men need only to work together to reach a standard of living equivalent to that of the United States.

This is not necessarily pure idealism. One may criticize it, one may even deplore it. What is important is that one should not act as irresponsibly in the present concrete situation as if one were dealing with some hypothetical state of affairs in the future. It is the actual present which is being worked out in this particular way. We have a duty to be present in this concrete situation so that we may bring our Christian inspiration to bear on it. Of course we must work to improve it and to reform it, and here and there we may have to do away with something. Yet those who contract out are always in the wrong, for there are so many things that take place at an international level that it does not do to be left behind. Perhaps this puts the matter in too negative and utilitarian a way, although it is true. To express ourselves more carefully: it will surely be agreed that any movement which claims to propagate the truth, and says that nothing is alien to it, must take account of every other movement with which it may have dealings. Thus those engaged in hospital, social or teaching

work in the Church will find it indispensable to know something of the work of such organizations as W.H.O., I.L.O., or U.N.E.S.C.O.

How can we carry out this deliberate policy of taking part in international institutions, and what has been achieved up to now? The most important way is a consequence of the predominant rôle of Governments. If Christians know what they can achieve in national affairs, they will discover how to play a similar rôle in international life. There are many Christians who take a leading part in their countries' affairs, yet who only see in international institutions means of obtaining advantages for their own countries. The lack of interest in international institutions, especially in Western countries, creates the situation in which questions which concern everyone often become in practice the affair of a few. Christians must be aware of this state of affairs, and do what they can to prevent it. Firstly, Christians who want to play their part in politics must always keep an eye on international life. Secondly, they must gain the necessary qualifications to make a valuable contribution to the various organizations. That does not mean penetration or invasion, but a contribution such as the world has the right to expect from us, and which we have not the right to refuse.

But Catholics have another means of making their voices heard and of taking part in international activities. Though U.N.O. is principally dependent on Governments, it cannot do any useful work without the support of public opinion. The slightest experience of politics shows what happens when the State has not sufficient support to attain the ends it sets for itself. Therefore a place has been allowed in the machinery of U.N.O. for private international organizations which are officially titled 'Non-Governmental Organizations' (N.G.O.). The statute they are given varies according to the sessions which they attend, the agencies involved, and the nature of the N.G.O.s themselves. Enjoying the highest standing are the Trades Unions at the International Labour Office, where they are in some measure on a par with Governments, and the big welfare organizations working for refugees—which are actually the executive body of the High Commissioner for Refugees (H.C.R.). In some agencies, N.G.O.s take part in seminars and surveys; in others they have hardly any rights other than access to information. Speaking



in general, the statute gives the right to attend meetings and the right to speak under certain conditions. A N.G.O. which takes full advantage of what its statute allows can play an important rôle by putting forward its ideas, and by showing that it can act competently where the official body is unable to do so.

A dozen Catholic international organizations, all members of the Conference of International Catholic Organizations, have so far obtained a consultative status in one or other of the organs of the United Nations. Some are big mass movements like the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, *Pax Romano*, and the *Jocistes* (J.O.C., known in England as the Young Catholic Workers). Others are exclusively professional movements, like the International Catholic Committee of Nurses and Social Workers. Others are institutions pursuing specialized ends, such as the International Catholic Union of Social Service (U.C.I.S.S.) or the International Catholic Office for Child Welfare (B.I.C.E.). The value that U.N.O. sets on such collaboration can be shown by many examples. Recently a number of conferences on the condition of women have been held in Asia, and the U.C.I.S.S. has been invited to them all. When in February of this year, Mgr Cardijn (the founder of J.O.C.) was at Geneva, he was given a cordial reception at the *Palais des Nations*; and the International Institutions were either represented at, or sent messages to the recent J.O.C. Conference at Rome.

Two things are needed to make the best use of a consultative status. Firstly, the organization must be really familiar with the work of international bodies. It will show its familiarity by sending competent representatives to the sessions which are open to it. This is not always easy, for there are numerous sessions and the questions which are debated are complex. The organization must show itself really competent in meeting the various requests which are made to it, especially in connection with the surveys which are undertaken for the United Nations. The Conference of International Catholic Organizations has set up centres near the headquarters of the most important international organizations at Geneva, Paris and Rome, to ensure that its action is well-informed and well-concerted. At New York there is a similar centre, administered directly by the N.C.W.C. These centres are under the direction of a general secretary with the assistance of an ecclesiastical adviser, who is appointed

Nothing shows better the part which Christians have to play in international institutions than the place which has been given to the Holy See. Although, at the beginning, there was some diffidence about seeking the co-operation of the Holy See, there are now few institutions which have not sought the presence of a representative from Rome, at least as an observer. The Holy See has replied favourably to these requests. Today it has permanent observers at F.A.O. and U.N.E.S.C.O. It is regularly represented at various other sessions, notably those of W.H.O. It has taken part in most of the big conferences of the last few years, with the exception of those which are purely political. Seven years ago the United Nations invited the Holy See to join the Committee of the United Nations Refugee Emergency Fund (U.N.R.E.F.), which has the task of advising the High Commissioner for Refugees in all his activities. We must add that the Holy See has contributed token gifts to the various funds which have been launched under the auspices of the United Nations. We may mention that it has made a contribution each year to the Technical Assistance Fund. This shows that as well as the unequivocal declarations of the Holy Father, the authorities in the Church favour the policy of being represented at international institutions, and of a sincere, if cautious, collaboration in their work.

---

#### NOTICE

There will be a BLACKFRIARS afternoon at the Aquinas Centre, St Dominic's Priory, Southampton Road, N.W.5, on Saturday, December 14 at 3 p.m. Renée Haynes will speak on 'The Problem of Communication' and a discussion will follow. All readers and friends of BLACKFRIARS are cordially invited to attend.