

EDUCATION OF THE AFRICAN CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

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Introduction

One of the evangelical tasks of the early missionaries in Africa was the formation of the Christian Conscience. Using the available methods at the time, they set out to evangelize the people and to form an African Conscience that was capable of making an authentic moral response to the Christian message. But a critical reflection on the outcome of their missionary endeavours, especially in their methodological approach to Christian moral education, reveals some deficiencies. After so many years of conversion, Christianity has not sufficiently penetrated into the fabric of the people's culture and responsibility.¹ In the moral life of many African Christians there is a clear dichotomy between 'what they believe and do as Africans' and 'what they practise as Christians'. It is my contention in this paper that the methodological approach of the early missionaries has been largely responsible for the dichotomy that exists in the Africans' religious and moral life; for their superficial and conformist response to the Christian message manifests a certain disintegration in the African personality.

The aim of this paper is therefore to critically examine some of the moral educational methods and to point out their shortcomings. This paper advocates an alternative method which is based on African Anthropology. It is hoped that this African Anthropological approach would lead the African Christian to give a more personalistic moral response to the Gospel message. In order to achieve this objective, the article will be discussed under the following sub-headings:

- (A). Clarification of certain concepts.
 - (B). Some shortcomings in the Missionary Methodological approach to the formation of the African Christian Conscience.
 - (C). African Anthropology in the formation of the African Christian Conscience.
 - (D). Christian Education of the African personality.
- The methodological approach in this work will be mainly analytical. For example it will be necessary to analyse and clarify certain concepts and categories, such as Conscience, Reciprocity of Consciences, Liberation Theology, all within the context of African Anthropology. Such an analysis is important if one is to understand certain elements which are necessary for the education of an African Christian Conscience, that would be capable of making an authentic response to the Christian message. The other terms such as "African Anthropology" will be discussed within the main body of this work. The methodology will also be thematic: Some of the common themes that help to express the true nature of African Anthropology will be applied to the education of the African Christian Conscience.

(A.) Clarification of Certain Concepts

It is important here to clarify certain concepts which are used in this work. This is to avoid misunderstanding or confusion in the sense in which they are used. Such clarification will assist the readers to appreciate the usage of certain terms which grew up because of the interdisciplinary nature of Moral Theology today.

- (i). *Conscience*: Conscience is a key term in Christian ethics.

It is a foundation of traditional moral theology.

In popular usage some regard it as an intuitive "voice of God within us". But traditionally Christians do not consider this to be true. It is not just a special faculty in man, but it is a judgment of the practical reason at work on matters of the rightness or the wrongness of the human act. The Scholastics called it "Synderesis"—that disposition which enables and even urges man to make correct moral judgments. It enables him to determine whether a given human act is right or wrong.

Considering Conscience from the religious point of view, it could be said to be the "fundamental capacity of man to determine and experience dynamically his obligations towards God and to respond to it"² Such an ability to recognize, understand and respond to God's call demands the use of the intellect, will and affectivity. In short, it involves the whole of man's personality in all its psycho-somatic aspects. In a personalistic manner, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council consider Conscience in the following way:

Deep within this conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God, his dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. *His conscience, is man's most secret core and his sanctuary.* There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. By Conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of neighbour.³

Such an understanding of conscience is closely connected with its etymological meaning. *Etymologically*, the word "Conscience" comes from two Latin words "Cum" and "Scientia" which imply "knowing together". Through loyalty to conscience the Christian is invited to join the rest of mankind in the common search for solutions to so many moral problems, especially those of our age. This calls for participation and co-responsibility. This will be further explained and elaborated within the context of "reciprocity of consciences". Although the above understanding of conscience is common to all men, the African Anthropological vision is bound to modify and perhaps enrich such an understanding.

(ii). *Reciprocity of Consciences*: In our present pluralistic age, it is no longer safe and sufficient to consider conscience in an individualistic context. This is because we all are now witnessing the birth of a new humanism "where man is defined before all else by his responsibility to his brother and at the court of history."⁴ All men of good will, especially Christians are being called upon to be responsible for one another in their common search for the truth and in making moral judgement. The Christians have to educate their consciences, especially when they are at variance with what the Magisterium has to teach. Their consciences have to be trained to be responsive to what others consider to be the will of God especially in a given socio-cultural set up. It is in this context that I speak of reciprocity of consciences. Thus reciprocity of consciences means that the individual is called to a life of *co-responsibility and participation* in the common search for the truth and for the will of God. This is because no one individual has the monopoly of what the will of God should be in any given circumstance or situation.

An authentic understanding of Conscience must therefore include total self-understanding and radical self-realization in the individual's relationship with others. In other words, the individual's conscience should lead him to understand and express his identity through his participation and responsibility to and for others.

(iii). *Liberation Theology*: In this paper, some references will be made to *liberation Theology*. It is therefore necessary here to explain and analyse what this term means and in what context it could be used in the formation of the African Christian Conscience.

It must be immediately remarked that all types of liberation theology stem from trying to make sense out of human suffering when those who suffer are victims of organized oppression and exploitation, when they are deceived and treated less than what they are: human persons created in the image and likeness of the Triune God, redeemed by the One Saviour Jesus Christ and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. This is the origin of all liberation theology, including the Black Theology of Liberation which would be the focal point in this paper. And so, African Liberation Theology must extend to cover all these areas if the liberation which Christ brought would be meaningful to the African sense of wholeness of life.⁵

It is with this understanding that this paper will be making particular reference to liberation theology as an indispensable aspect of the formation of the African Christian Conscience. In other words, the African Christian Conscience must be so formed that it becomes *sensitive* and *responsive* to all the above mentioned dimensions of liberation which should dynamically bring about the integral and holistic liberation of man in Christ.

(B). Some Shortcomings In The Missionary Methodological Approach To The Formation Of The African Christian Conscience.

(i). *Law-Centred and Conformist Approach*

The various Societies⁶ which tried to evangelise the Africans came with the aim of "converting" them through education. "Thus the beginnings of Education in West Africa were in the hands of the Christian Missions."⁷ Their method of evangelization at the time was through education and most of the schools were in the hands of the missionaries. The Mission Churches ignored the cultural religiosity and the spirituality of the people. Presuming the absence of true culture among the people, they tried to establish their religio-moral education on a "Tabula rasa". But since education must be built on one type of culture or another, they tried to implant European culture with Christianity. Consequently, religious education became almost identical with westernization. People were led into asking certain questions like:

whether the aim of religious education was to make Christians or to "westernize" the people, whether, in fact Christianity and westernization are not synonymous in their evangelical vocabulary⁸

Such a question demonstrates the type of moral response which some of the African converts are now beginning to give. With very sceptical and critical minds, they ask whether to be a Christian means to live and behave like Europeans? Does it mean *conforming* to the western way of life?

Until recently, especially until the birth of the African Independent Churches⁹, the answers to these questions have been positive. An attempt has been made at least in theory to *equate Westernization with Christianity*. The African moral response to the Christian message meant *conforming to the European way of life*. To be a Christian meant to abandon African culture and to possess the ability to think like the Europeans, to speak like them and to act and relate to others as they do. This has for a long time led to a type of *moral conformism*.

The consequence of this is the gradual formation of a Christian moral conscience which is only on the instinctive level. Conscience is not based on the personal, free and fundamental choice, but on "material transgression" of the laws¹⁰. With the *legalistic approach* to the presentation of Christian morality¹¹, the early missionaries worked hard to discipline African converts—"to make them obey" even some western and manipulative laws—all in the name of Religion. The African Conscience was then trained to conform to the "Christian" rules and regulations. Conscience became therefore something *impersonal*, and this is a tragedy because a true Christian conscience should be personal and responsibly

make moral judgments under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and according to a given people's ethical cultural experiences.

(2). *Abstract Speculative Approach*

Another missionary approach to the presentation of Christian moral teaching is abstract and speculative. It involves a type of *intellectualistic* approach to moral knowledge. Every attempt was made to get people to read and memorize the Bible or Catechism. The Roman Catholics concentrated on training people to recite the catechism while the Protestants aimed at training people to read the Bible. Thus for the missionaries,

A good Christian was expected to have knowledge of the Bible, ability to sing hymns and recite the catechisms. He must be able to communicate orally and written. Rote-learning predominated, and the teacher taught practically everything from the text book. The Bible, "... was the Master text-book and every subject has to be connected in some way with it" ¹²

This type of Religio-moral Education made out of many Africans what might be called "*The -Bible-says-so-Christians*" or the "*Catechism-says-so-Christians*". Thus the African Christian Conscience became a type of an abstract and speculative Conscience, an impersonal conscience—a conscience that obeys moral norms, not out of conviction but because the 'Law says so'.

(3) *Sin-centred Approach*

Closely connected with this law-centred approach to Christian morality is the "*Sin-centred Approach*". Since the conscience of the African Christians is trained to conform to moral laws, their morality depends on whether they conform or fail to conform with the laws. If they conform, they have not committed any sin and if they do not conform, they have committed sin. Consequently, their consciences were educated always to be on the *defensive*. All efforts are made to *avoid sin*. This negative approach is incomplete and could be misleading. But sin is not just a breaking of the law, but it is a total and radical break away from the relationship that exists between the sinner and God. Since a sin-centred approach deals only with the negative aspects of Christianity, it is static and guilt-centred. With this type of attitude the Christian Conscience cannot be oriented towards the goal of Christian Morality which is an *on-going conversion*, which is principally the work of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 8:2). Even the evolutionary approach of vatican II calls for a change of the static vision for a more dynamic one (cf. G.S. no. 5).

It is this kind of approach that has given birth to the Africans' negative and static approach to Christian life. They have developed a type of *minimalistic attitude to their Christian life*. They see Christian moral demands as a law that must be obeyed and as a call to avoid sin and

nothing more. So they try to measure how far they can go in performing a moral act so that it will not become a sin. No wonder then that this Christian moral life has become bankrupt. It has become unsatisfactory even to themselves because it does not reflect or satisfy their traditional sentiment and religiosity which has a holistic vision of man and integral vision of human morality.

The sin-centred and the law-centred approaches to Christian morality have consequently led the African Christians to what might be termed *merit-centred morality*. They feel that through their moral action they can merit grace and even merit salvation. Even the different roles and positions in the Church are seen as rewards for good moral life. This has led to a type of power struggle in the Church of Christ, with particular reference to Christian Churches in Africa.

It must be noted that salvation which is preached and offered to man by Christ should not be reduced to mere merit. Man has no right to it. It is a free gift from God and cannot be merited. Salvation is through the grace of God and not through man's actions. (Cf. 2:8-9; Rom. 3:9-20; James 1:17; Titus 3:4-6; Ex. 20:2; Jr. 13:36f; Ez. 16:3ff; Is. 49:4; Mat. 2:1-16).

Since "merit" is a legal term and only leads to *legal* righteousness, it is quite inadequate to express the concept of salvation in Christianity, which deals with Creative righteousness in the Holy Spirit. No wonder then such an approach has so far failed to educate the African Christian Conscience to embrace the totality of the good news of Christ. It has consequently resisted or minimised its capacity to make a holistic moral judgment within the context of the people's moral life. Thus this approach has only succeeded in producing a "minimalistic" or one-dimensional type of Conscience which is incapable of making an adequate and authentic response to the Gospel message.

(4) *Individualistic Approach*

There is yet another approach worthy of mention. This is the *individualistic approach* to the study of moral theology and to the formation of the African Conscience. This approach emphasizes the necessity for individual salvation almost to the exclusion of communitarian salvation. The people were urged to become Christians and to lead good moral lives, so that they could save their souls for God. So the motive why a person becomes a Christian then is that "*I may save my soul*". Thus the individual saving of soul becomes the motivating force for one's moral behaviour. The people gradually grew indifferent to the need to cooperate with others for their own salvation too. Such a self-perfectionistic and ego-centric approach is individualistic and dangerous to the Spirit of Christ which advocates moral co-responsibility. It is also foreign to the African communitarian vision of salvation. This individualistic morality should give way to the communitarian morality

because it creates and encourages the formation of a *selfish and individualistic conscience* which is not sensitive to the moral demands of justice and love, and so fails to respond to the needs of others and to the common good. I am therefore proposing a *Morality of responsibility and co-responsibility*. This type of morality requires responsiveness, sensitivity to the needs of others and accepting the responsibility to help in satisfying these needs. It involves total self-commitment to the needs of others and to the common good. This is the type of morality that is capable of forming an African Christian Conscience that could be responsive to the needs of others—a type of morality that could meet the needs of African Anthropology.

(C). African Anthropology In The Formation Of African Christian Conscience.

With particular reference to the formation of an African Christian Conscience, the understanding of Christian morality includes *African Insights*. This is because the cultural insights of any nation are indispensable in the formation of Conscience.

An authentic appreciation of the African original cultural insights into the knowledge of man, calls for a clear understanding of *African anthropology*. In general, "Anthropology is concerned with basic loyalties, beliefs and values which help to realize personality"¹³ So African Anthropology has the main task of discovering that traditional African heritage which has to do with African loyalties, beliefs and values which make the people authentically Africans. This "Science of man" within the African milieu tries to discover and accentuate what the people believe about man and what value they place on human life in relation to his origin, orientation and ultimate end.

The Africans consider man as the greater creature of God. For them man is the best manifestation of the goodness of God. He is not just a creature but a "child of God, who is sustained by God all through his life. Man's final destiny is everlasting communion with God and the Ancestors in the Spiritual world that will have no end"¹⁴

In more concrete terms some of the unique characteristics of African Anthropology should be outlined here since they could form indispensable ingredients for the formation of the African Christian Conscience. The first is *African religiosity* which is concerned with the people's subjective attitude towards the objective truth of their Traditional Religion. Their religiosity affects all spheres of their activities to the extent that they are said to be people who eat and bathe religiously.¹⁵

Their *religious sense of community* is so strong that their philosophy of life is oriented to serve as an adequate answer to the paradoxes of the individual existence and daily experiences. The Transcendental and the eschatological nature of the *African sense of the family*¹⁶ is quite

unique and essential in the formation of the African Christian Conscience. The *Sacredness of human life* and the spirituality of *African insight* cannot be ignored without being inauthentic in the education of the African personality and Conscience. The final characteristic of African Anthropology is its *unique symbolism*. African attitudes to the mysteries of life and death are manifested in symbols. This could form the basis for building up a type of "African Sacramental Moral Theology." This could help to enrich the formation of the African Christian Conscience because it would emphasize the sacramental effect of any moral education of the individual.

(D). Christian Education Of The African Personality

The concept of personality here is seen in the context of Humanistic Psychology. Unlike the externalistic or internalistic or positivistic concepts, the humanistic psychologist considers personality in a holistic psychosomatic way. According to him,

Personality is the organisation within the individual of those psycho-physical systems that determine his characteristic behaviour and thoughts¹⁷

So these psycho-somatic aspects of personality include man's intellect, will and affectivity. (Affectivity is all generalized emotional experiences resulting from stimulus and response). In the past, the training of conscience has been restricted to the intellect. This was why—as we indicated in the earlier part of this work—most missionaries who evangelized Africa had an intellectualistic and abstract approach to religio-moral education. But affectivity must also be trained for it acts as the unifying factor between the moral intellect and the moral will. B. Haring strongly emphasizes this when he says:

The formation of conscience, therefore cannot be restricted to instructing the intellect. *Formation of Conscience* involves the formation of an *entire personality*, a personality which, through its internal unity, will pay witness to the mystery of Unity in God Himself. The emotions, the affectivity, cannot be neglected in this formation. Affectivity fosters the unity between the moral intelligence and moral will.⁽¹⁸⁾

The education of the African Conscience, therefore, involves the education of the African personality; and the will, intellect and affectivity are aspects of personality that constitute the "capacity" of conscience. These three constituent capacity aspects of Conscience are necessary for a sound moral judgment. They must be unified in giving a holistic response to God in Christ.

In the education of the African intellect, there is need to recall the anthropological aspect of African knowledge. This will include the

characteristics of African Anthropology and the African concept of God, the world of the spirits and the physical world. The intellect helps the African to know how to orientate the whole of creation towards the service of God and the glory of God and the good of his neighbour as he judges everything as gifts of God, which gifts must be offered back to God¹⁹. The African concept of Evil should also be studied. The concept of Satan, witchcraft and all forms of evil spirits that prevent people from enjoying the security, peace and freedom of the children of God should be studied and the Christian means to overcome them provided.

In the education of his will, the African Christian's motivations and motives for action are called to mind. The African *existential* and *eschatological motives* for moral actions should be evoked. The existential motive or goal for moral action is to maintain social equilibrium, human perfection and community solidarity. So the African Christian Conscience should be orientated to carry out the ethical demands with this existential goal. From the eschatological point of view, the Africans generally believe that the ultimate motives or goal for their actions is their final communion with God and their ancestors in the next world²⁰. This motivation is necessary as a point of departure in presenting the Christian motivations of seeking union with the Trinity and with the saints in heaven. Thus, this three-fold capacity of conscience is coordinated to make all one's moral aspirations and decisions and indeed all one's conscious life a response to God within the obedience of Faith.

The *having of an African Affectivity* is also very necessary. As has been mentioned earlier, affectivity is a generalised emotional experience resulting from stimulus and response. It includes *disposition* and *attitude*. So the basic questions are these: (a) How do the Africans dispose themselves towards Christian morality?

(b) Why do they respond the way they do?

The education of a person's disposition is a significant aspect of moral education because

moral maturity involves the *gradual acquisition of a number of feeling dispositions like a sense of justice and an abhorrence of the unnecessary suffering of any sentient creature and . . . there ought to be a kind of harmony or fit between moral understanding or reasoning on the one hand and feeling disposition on the other hand*²¹.

So in the training of the African Christian conscience the fundamental disposition of *African religiosity*, the people's sense of *justice and hospitality* should be sharpened and orientated towards a greater manifestation of Christian charity. Their basic attitude of tolerance, especially religious ethical tolerance should be appreciated. This is very important in many pluralistic countries of Africa, where there are so many ethnic groups with so many religions. For example in Nigeria where there are

three major religions—African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity—tolerance should form a key point in the education of conscience. Speaking of the importance of tolerance in the formation of conscience today, B. Haring has this to say:

Looking primarily at the sincerity of choices, modern man succeeds more readily in appreciating those who belong to different faiths and religions. The fundamental attitude of tolerance so valued today is appropriately based on a firm respect for conscience. Unless there is evidence to the contrary, modern man is little inclined to doubt the sincerity of the convictions of others, whether or not they coincide with his own²²

So the African basic attitude of tolerance should be encouraged. It has so far helped the Africans to share their traditional life of independence even within the context of their religious differences. For example in a given family of about ten, the members could freely profess their various religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, African Traditional Religion. So even when there are religio-moral differences, they should see that the African Christians be trained to accept the universal brotherhood of Christianity which is the foundation of the virtues of tolerance and respect of conscience. Such an attitude should create a favourable atmosphere for a "dialogue of love"²³ with the people of other faiths. Through loyalty to conscience, African Christians should be joined to other men in search for truth and for the right solutions to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of the individuals and from social relations.²⁴

Another aspect of the African attitude that needs education is the agonising attitude of fear and anxiety over health and security. There is a strong feeling of fear, insecurity and a pitiable sense of guilt. Among the causes of this fear are evil spirits, witchcraft and even their ancestors who have to punish them when they go against the laws and customs of the land. Even some psychological problems are attributed to these spiritual powers.

This actually reveals the influence of African cosmology on the religio-moral attitude of the people. It also shows the aspect of their culture which needs liberation and salvation.

In the education of their conscience the African attitude of fear, guilt-feeling and anxiety should be given an important consideration. This is because Christians should express their solidarity with this people. As Vatican II puts it:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of men of our time, especially the poor or afflicted in any way, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. . . . This is why the Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.²⁵

The understanding of their anguish shows the Christian interest and readiness to assist them. The African's idolatry and superstitious way of handling these problems should be studied to see how compatible it is with the Christian ways. The result of this investigation should be presented to the African Christians to help them understand the loopholes in their African vision. The positive aspects of their remedy should be recognized, appreciated and Christianized. The Christian alternative remedy should be sought.

In a sincere search for such a remedy, recourse to the healing ministry of Christ and His Church should be made. I do not personally feel that the remedy lies in blatant rejection of the people's belief in the causes of fear and of their traditional remedy. Some missionaries and some of our indigenous Church leaders have an attitude of outright rejection. For them it is all superstition. One should be afraid of playing the fool—of trampling where angels fear to tread. I say this because there are many supernatural or spiritual phenomena that man does not know much about. The prudent attitude should therefore not be an outright denial of the existence of these causes of fear and anxiety. The effects of their traditional remedy should also be carefully studied as a part of the formation of conscience which impels the Christian to remain faithful to the sacramental means of guaranteeing peace and security.

Since Christ presented himself as the one who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18-19), the first healing remedy is to strengthen the people's faith in Christ. Their faith-knowledge in the healing and saving power of Christ should be nurtured.

In the case of psychological and religious disturbances, faith healing has in my experience proved a lasting remedy. An attitude of faith and absolute trust in the power of Christ still operative in the Church today should be cultivated. In the case of guilt feeling which causes serious tension and anguish, the Sacrament of Reconciliation has proved a very powerful remedy. I am by no means denying the efficacy and the usefulness of modern medical facilities. There should be a collaborative effort of all these remedies but above all faith in Christ cannot be dispensed with. I therefore strongly advocate that the healing ministry in the Church be studied with greater intensity as a possible remedy to the African attitude of fear, anguish and anxiety. African theologians should consider studying intensively authentic African Medical Ethics which could influence the public morality of the people.

In the context of African Liberation Theology, already discussed earlier, it is necessary to recall other forms of liberation such as psychological, socio-cultural, political and economic liberation.²⁶ This is very relevant for the formation of the African Christian Conscience, because the theme of Salvation features so strongly in African Religion.

Conclusion:

The inability of many African Christians to make an adequate moral response to the Gospel message has provoked the writing of this paper. It is the contention of the writer that this lack of sufficient response was partially caused by the manner in which the early missionaries tried to educate the consciences of the Africans. Certain methodological approaches used in the formation of the African Christian Conscience were defective. For example, the law-centred and the sin-centred approaches used by the missionaries have produced a type of conformist morality among many African Christians. In their attempt to conform to the moral norms and the foreign culture that came along with them, the African Christians developed a kind of conformist and instinctive conscience. Their moral response to the Christian message therefore became abstract, speculative and legalistic. Also with the individualistic approach to the formation of conscience, the people became so self-centred in their quest for salvation, which should be communitarian and universal.

Without condemning the early missionaries for their failure to educate the African conscience in the proper way, the paper maintains that the above approaches are deficient and therefore incapable of forming an authentic Christian Conscience that could give adequate moral response to the Christian message. It goes further to propose an alternative approach. In order to eliminate the crisis of identity among the African Christians and the dichotomy between faith and practice, the paper advocates a personalistic formation of the African Christian Conscience based on African Anthropology. Using the various characteristics of this people's anthropology, the Christian Conscience should be so formed that it liberates itself from all forms of manipulation and exploitation so that it could respond freely to the good news of salvation in Christ. Applying the principle of reciprocity of conscience, the African Christian Conscience would thus be disposed and urged to accept the invitation of Christ in the Spirit to a life of collaboration and co-responsibility with others in their common search for truth and for the right solutions to so many moral problems of our age. Using the African Anthropological insights, the intellect, the will and the affectivity of the African personality should be so educated that it is able to give an authentic response to the Christian message of salvation at all times and in all circumstances.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Vat. II Documents, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.
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22. B. Haring, *Faith and Morality in the Secular Age*, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York, 1973, p. 232.
23. Vatican II Documents, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 11.
24. Cf. M. I. Mozia, Op. Cit. pp. 138—170.

25. Vatican II Documents, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 16.

26. Cf. M. I. Mozia, Op. Cit., pp. 112—121.

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