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State and church

Erich Mühsam

1927

The struggle that Mexican President Calles is waging to free the state from the overwhelming influence of the clergy offers no reason at all for the exuberant enthusiasm with which revolutionaries all over the world celebrate the victory of freedom over the enslavement of the spirit. Certainly the forms of armed resistance in which the clergy are struggling to regain their position of power illustrate very clearly the character of the Church as a secular political organization, and the horror of the terrorist attacks on passenger trains, in which, allegedly under the leadership of Catholic priests, the passengers, including old people, women and children, were locked in the burning carriages and tortured to death, shows the extent to which an originally ethical idea can be distorted by fanatical superstition when it is used as a means by the desire for material power. The fight of the Calles government against the church is, just like Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* 50 years ago and the fight of the French cabinet Combes against the congregations 25 years ago, nothing other than a rivalry between two powers equally hostile to freedom for authority and power over the economically dependent part of the population. The fight in Mexico will end as the quarrels between state and church have

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Retrieved on February 9, 2025 from
<https://www.anarchismus.at/anarchistische-klassiker/erich-muehsam/152-erich-muehsam-staat-und-kirche>

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always ended: with an agreement based on equality, mutual tolerance and helpful support in the exercise of power. The external forms of this agreement will be of very little importance, and it is easy to imagine that the separation of state and church would be carried out without the church's sphere of power in the state suffering the slightest loss.

It is generally doubtful whether the demand of atheists and freethinkers that the state should withdraw subsidies and legal protection from church institutions for their customs and institutions is based on an accurate assessment of the real relationship between the two powers. In many cases, there seems to be a lack of understanding that the state needs the church, since the recognition of its authority, the much-vaunted "state consciousness", could not be maintained in the long term without the church's "pastoral care", that is, the education of people to submit to an imaginary, transcendental authority, to worship an extraterrestrial divine power that consciously controls will and fate. The state needs the church because it could not exist without its shaping of the human soul to believe in authority, to accept the absurd and irrational without criticism, and to humble self-denial; the church does not need the state — it only uses it because it needs it.

The interests of the Church are not necessarily identical with those of the State. The State is the execution machine of capitalist exploitation within national borders. It can be nothing else and will never become anything else. But it is possible that capitalist exploitation will one day, when the national limitations of the State begin to disrupt business, decide to build more suitable execution machines on an international scale, limiting the State's functions to mere police services using the means of armed force and the judiciary. The World Economic Conference currently meeting in Geneva shows this tendency clearly enough. The Church never pursues nationally limited goals from the outset. It is — all this applies equally to the Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, Mohammedan and other deistic de-

nominations — completely uninterested in territorial questions and strives for a different kind of power than the State, but strives for it for itself, not like the State as a representative of a superior authority for a third party. Since the state's striving for power for the superior capital does not interfere with the circles of its own striving for power, the church supports the state in return for appropriate services in the subjugation of the proletariat to the will of the owners of the means of production. In return, the state strengthens the power of the church with the means of its legislation.

The historical materialists are wrong when they attribute economic motives to all striving for power. On the contrary, the struggle for food in all of nature is a simple process of the conversion of life substance, the transformation of materials, and has nothing to do with the desire for power. The tiger kills the horse to eat it, but not in order to exercise power. The essence of power is the subjugation of living will to servitude and surrender, not the killing of life. It is probable that the will to economic enrichment at the expense of others was originally the determining factor in the subjugation of people to the power of others. But it is no proof that the concept of power, which was developed through economic causes, could not become an end in itself in the course of development and use economic advantage over fellow human beings as a means of power. The accumulation of unimaginable wealth in the hands of individuals, cultivated to the highest degree in our capitalist conditions, who use all their energies only to increase this wealth ever more, certainly does not serve to improve the standard of living of multimillionaires, who, despite all their luxury, only know how to spend a minimal fraction of their income, but only to enslave more and more people to their will, thus strengthening the power they exercise by arbitrarily allowing or not allowing workers to use the means of production. The power to dispose of the means of economic exploitation gives them the awareness of unlimited power, the power of tyranny.

The driving force behind their actions, however, is no longer economic self-interest, but economic self-interest is a means to an end for them, to feel master and authoritative.

If the capitalists want to gain personal power, which they increase and consolidate by joining together as a class community and by organizing central state power, and if they consider the monopoly of the economy to be the only real expression of positive power, the Church aims to bring the emotional life of people under its control, to force the mystical and metaphysical needs of the soul into the dependence of its dogmas, to direct the intellect, critical observation, and sensuality of children who have barely awakened to their own experiences into the paths that lead to the abstract sphere of power of its rule. The economic interests of the Church are consciously subordinated to this striving for power through the idea. The accumulation of earthly goods, which the Church certainly does well, serves to expand its organization, its enormous apparatus of influence, and its ability to compete with powers that rely solely on economic power.

An investigation into the extent to which the original religious and moral foundations of the churches have withstood the intrusion of denominational and party-political interests can be ruled out here. The countless religious sects that have set themselves the task of purifying Christianity in particular and who consistently see the fight against the church as a prerequisite for this may decide on this as the closest parties involved. Religious-philosophical disputes are the last thing to be considered in political discussions with the church, and if the deists with their dogmas and attempts at conversion had never left the areas in which free propaganda has room, then any anti-clerical agitation would have had to stay within the limits of the battle of ideas with reasons and counter-reasons. For the revolutionary, the enemy is not the church but the state. But the battle of ideas stops and becomes a battle with political, revolutionary means when the clergy leave their houses of

tionalists. The effect is the same everywhere: the state uses the church, the church uses the state.

The demand for the separation of church and state misses the mark. The revolutionary struggle must be directed at the state, and at the church only insofar as it is identical with the state, or is its determining or executive organ. The faithful may practice their rites in their churches, synagogues and mosques as they see fit; we cannot prevent them from raising their children in the spirit of confessionalism, which seems to us to be very far removed from the spirit of religiosity, which has nothing to do with belief in God. But we must defend ourselves against the church's claims to pastoral office and sin control encroaching on our districts using the violent means of the state. The state will not help us to fend off its best ally, even where, as is currently the case in Mexico, it is trying to free itself from the too tight restriction of its freedom of movement.

We can only wage war against the Church by leaving its organizations and prayer groups, by exposing its ties to the state and capital, by promoting the boycott of the Church and by concentrating our fighting forces against the State and all its institutions. Once the State has been broken up, capitalism has been destroyed, and ownership of land and the means of production has been transferred to the collective management of the workers, then the Church will also be deprived of the means of exercising the material power on which its power over minds and souls is based today. The State needs the Church, the Church uses the State. Its power will be broken when the organization of society is free, no longer needs the help of extraterrestrial forces, and no longer allows itself to be used by speculation on people's bad conscience.

worship, enter the stadium of boxing champions as a secular-political troop and call on the legislative power of the state to assert their claims to power in return for concessions to the exploitative interests of capital, which are not cloaked in any ethical embellishment.

The church is older than the state; but ever since states have existed, it has used their political weapons to consolidate its power. Here we do not even need to talk about the superstitious horrors of the Middle Ages. It is enough to look at the penal code still in force in Germany today, in which the otherworldly God of the Christians and Jews, whose conception is as foreign to us as that of the dragon or unicorn, is protected with earthly punishments against insults to his heavenly majesty. These are concessions from the state to the church that cost nothing and require favors. The situation is far worse when it comes to state protection of what the church likes to call morality, which is nothing more than a pretext for placing the individual's right to dispose of his own body under the control of authoritarian authorities with the help of the murky term "sin". The church works with the fear of the torments of hell after death, and the state offers a real foretaste of the torments of the afterlife in this world. There are all kinds of laws designed to suppress people's sexual behavior, such as the nasty procuring paragraph, which protects the selling of daughters for lifelong enslavement to the highest bidder by making it a punishable offence for landlords to provide accommodation to two people who love each other without official approval. There is the despicable pederasty paragraph, which threatens the satisfaction of a natural urge that is exercised with the free consent of adults without the slightest harm to third parties. This is where capitalist state considerations come into play, of course; for the exploiting class is interested in the birth of as many proletarians as possible, who are not guaranteed a hygienic upbringing or the most basic food, but who must be there so that the exploited labor remains a cheap market commodity. This point

of view is particularly blatant in the prohibition of abortion, which forces poor women to give birth to children of tubercular, syphilitic or mentally ill fathers, in unhappy marriages while drunk, or children conceived by force, conceived in hatred and disgust, for whose infancy there is no cradle, linen and milk to be provided. This is what the morality of the church wants, this is what the labor market of capital wants.

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guaranteed a hygienic upbringing or the most basic food, but who must be there so that the exploited labor remains a cheap market commodity. This point of view is particularly evident in the prohibition of abortion, which forces poor women to give birth to children of tubercular, syphilitic or mentally ill fathers, in unhappy marriages under the influence of alcohol, or children conceived by force, conceived in hatred and disgust, for whom even in infancy there is no cradle, linen and milk. This is what the morality of the Church wants, this is what the labor market of capital wants.

In republican Germany, the political organization of the Church has taken complete control of state power. The fact that it is the Catholic center is irrelevant; the Evangelical League, which also has a say, is no better, and if the Christian competitors let the Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith take the helm, it would be just the same. At a time when terminally ill capitalism must suppress and suppress the resistance of its victims by all means at its disposal, the state needs more urgently than ever the gentle look of piety, the ethos of discipline and morality that only the church can provide. First, the youth had to be protected from filth and trash in speech and writing so that the necks of revolutionary literature and art could be turned. Now the youth must be protected from soul-poisoning entertainment so that revolutionary rallies, which could awaken young people to the awareness of social filth, can be detoxified. Then comes the handing over of schools to the church, and finally, with the concordat, all this is to be contractually regulated for eternity, for which capitalist rule believes itself to be secure. In Bavaria, all these measures are no longer necessary. There, the church has established itself independently as a state power and has achieved what capital strives for, partly through established laws and partly illegally. In Prussia it conducts the business of the capitalists in alliance with the Social Democrats, in the Reich with the German Na-