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The Christian-Marxist Dialog: Spurious  
or Authentic?

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# The Christian-Marxist Dialog: Spurious or Authentic?

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THE AUTHOR OFFERS A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE MARXIST-CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER to date, raising the question whether or not the stage has been set for authentic dialog to occur.

The incompatibility of communism and Christianity has long been assumed. From its inception atheism has been an integral and inseparable part of Marxism. Both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism have almost unanimously anathematized the antireligious theory and practice associated with revolutionary forms of socialism.

As early as 1846 Pope Pius IX condemned communism as contrary to the natural law which upholds the right of private property.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-two years later Pope Leo XIII defined communism as "the fatal plague which insinuates itself into the very marrow of human society only to bring about its ruin."<sup>2</sup> In 1937 Pope Pius XI assailed communism because it "strips man of his liberty, robs human personality of all its dignity, and removes all the moral restraints that check the eruptions of blind impulse."<sup>3</sup>

American Judaism, cognizant of the per-

sistence of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, has remained critical of communism. "No truly religious person, whether Christian or Jew, can possibly accept Communism" has been a verdict frequently reaffirmed.<sup>4</sup> Conservative Protestants have often been most severe in their indictments of communism. A popular study guide prepared by the National Association of Evangelicals in 1961 offered a Bible-centered antidote to the contemporary crisis evoked by the "strong materialistic and totalitarian attack upon our way of life, neither of which is in accord with the basic tenets of a working democracy and a vital Christianity."<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, usually regarded as a spokesman for neo-orthodoxy, stressed the incorrigible perversity and pride of man and warned against the truculent utopianism of communism which could and did result in the ruthless suppression of all dissenters.<sup>6</sup> John Bennett, who taught social ethics at Union Theological Seminary, concurred with Nie-

<sup>1</sup> Encyclical *Qui Pluribus*.

<sup>2</sup> Encyclical *Quod Apostolici Muneris*. See Henri Chambre, *Christianity and Communism* (New York: Hawthorne, 1960), for a full explication of Roman Catholic opposition to communism.

<sup>3</sup> Encyclical on atheistic communism, in *Five Great Encyclicals* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1939), p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see *The Profile of Communism* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1951), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas O. Kay, *The Christian Answer to Communism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> See *Christianity and Crisis* (Feb. 2, 1948).

buhr and went on to fault communism for its "practical idolatry" in absolutizing its own claims.<sup>7</sup> At least until recently, virtually the entire religious community has disavowed any affiliation with or attraction toward communism.

Several factors combined in the late 1950s and early 1960s to alter this negative situation. The death of Stalin signaled the possibility of change. Gradually a thaw in the Cold War diminished international tensions. Titoism and Castroism became deviant forms of Marxist socialism. The "satellites" in Eastern Europe became increasingly restive and attempted to exercise more independence in their decision-making. The monolithic structure of a Moscow-dominated communism was undermined by defiant rumblings in Peking. As the Sino-Soviet split deepened, the prospect for a limited detente between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. brightened. Khrushchev spoke of peaceful coexistence, and his successors acted like pragmatic realists more concerned with Soviet security than ideological victory.

Sporadic and clandestine contacts between communists and Christians were legitimized by a drastic shift in the official policy of the Roman Catholic Church. In his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* Pope John XXIII ended the "fortress" psychology of Rome's intransigent opposition to communism. Faithful members of the church were given explicit encouragement to collaborate with non-Christians wherever possible (without compromise of their convictions) in a common struggle for peace and human dignity. Meanwhile, in Czechoslovakia

aversion to the Novotny regime induced concerned Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, to pursue conversations with "liberal" Marxists. Theologians in Prague like Josef Hromadka and Milan Opocensky became convinced that if the church could find a creative role in a socialist society, dogmatic and stubbornly aggressive atheism would eventually disappear.<sup>8</sup>

After 1964 the walls of isolation crumbled with astonishing rapidity. Mutual recriminations were replaced by mutual respect in some sectors of Europe. In Italy in 1965 *Il Dialogo alla Prova* brought together essays by five communists and five Catholics. Similarities were discovered in the professed dedication of both groups to the realization of human values. Communist Lombardo Radici jettisoned the old slogan that "religion is the opiate of the people." Another communist wrote appreciatively of the megasynthesis of the Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In his posthumously published testament the Italian communist leader Palmiro Togliatti urged party members to discard their antiquated antireligious bias. On the grass-roots level the breakthrough became evident when *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, a film version of the life of Jesus directed by the Marxist Pier Paolo Pasolini, received laudatory recognition among both Catholic and Protestant theologians. Early in 1965 a consultation between Marxists and Christians from East Germany was arranged near Frankfurt.

From these relatively meager beginnings

<sup>7</sup> John C. Bennett, *Christianity and Communism* (New York: Association Press, 1960), p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> See Dean Peerman, "Deepening the Christian-Marxist Dialogue," *Christian Century* (Dec. 22, 1965), and Jan Lochman, *Church in a Marxist Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

the Marxist-Christian dialog has gradually taken shape and has expanded into prominence at an accelerated pace during the past five years. Americans became aware of what was happening in 1966 when a book by the French communist Roger Garaudy was translated under the title *From Anathema to Dialogue*. Soon thereafter *Political Affairs*, the theoretical journal of the Communist Party, U. S. A., commented favorably on the "profound changes" which communists detected within the churches.<sup>9</sup>

How spurious or how authentic is this attempted rapprochement? Has the dialog moved beyond an exchange of pleasantries and surface generalities to a probing of serious disagreements? Will the crackdown in Czechoslovakia and the imposition of the Brezhnev doctrine (no secession from the Soviet bloc) be retrogressive factors?

Two weeks after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia a disillusioned Unitarian minister in Prague told me that conversations between Christians and communists had been suspended for the foreseeable future. Two months later four Czechs (two Christians and two Marxists) visiting the United States assured me that the reversion to tyranny in their homeland would compel humanistic-minded communists and reform-endorsing Christians to collaborate even more closely than they had from 1958 to 1968. Presumably common opposition to foreign intruders would induce them to form a strategic alliance of resistance to reactionary policies despite their philosophical disagreements.

<sup>9</sup> Editorial, "Communism and the Church," *Political Affairs* (July 1966). In the same issue Herbert Aptheker wrote: "An attitude of contempt for religion is an anti-Marxist attitude." (P. 48)

As we enter the 1970s, there is little agreement among ecclesiastical leaders about the future course of communist-Christian relations. Three basic positions, however, are discernible: (1) unresolved conflict or mutual repulsion; (2) superficial accommodation or perfidious capitulation; and (3) creative tension or constructive intercommunication. Each of these postures requires amplification and clarification.

# I

In the 1920s and early 1930s the communist press all over the world attacked Christianity vigorously. In the Soviet Union churches were converted into anti-religious museums, parades and pageants displayed atheistic propaganda, and brutal persecution crippled the operation of the Orthodox Church. One widely distributed cartoon depicted believers celebrating the Lord's Supper with cannibalistic glee—sucking the blood and gnawing away at the vital organs of Jesus. Stalin was quoted as expressing regret that not all of the "reactionary clergy" had been "liquidated." "We want no condescending saviors," the Red international anthem defiantly proclaimed. Shocked and angry church-related people reacted impetuously. A fiery feud raged unabated for many years on the pages of militant publications on both sides. The churches were accused of being part of the repressive apparatus of the state—inculcating obedience to capitalist-dictated laws through an appeal to fear of an avenging god. Anticommunist stalwarts like Elizabeth Dilling struck back by denouncing the U. S. S. R. as the "mother of harlots and abominations of the earth" (Rev. 17:5) and by "exposing" all forms of socialism, pacifism, and philanthropy



which she suspected of aiding the "world's first government to raise the flag of absolute hatred and enmity to God Almighty."<sup>10</sup>

Fundamentalist sects and conservative Catholics continue in the forefront of the anticommunist movement. James D. Bales, a minister in the Church of Christ, offers a brief definition of communism as "a Marx-inspired, Moscow-directed, international criminal conspiracy against civilization, based on a God-denying philosophy of life. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, a member of the Mormon hierarchy and the secretary of agriculture under President Eisenhower, stated in 1962 that he could foresee no termination in the hostility between Christianity and communism. In his opinion, communists relentlessly strive to undermine the moral and spiritual foundations of America, so that "no true believer in Christ can be a Communist."<sup>12</sup> The Church League of America has compiled lengthy dossiers on liberal clergymen and major denominations to "prove" that communism has infiltrated ecclesiastical institutions.<sup>13</sup> Billy James Hargis, a radio cru-

sader who espouses a "Christ-centered Americanism," maintains that the churches are captive to Kremlin objectives and that insidious traitors have gained control over much of our government.<sup>14</sup>

Carl McIntire, who fought a losing battle for extreme fundamentalism in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and has served as president of the International Council of Christian Churches, has railed against surreptitious communist machinations in the churches for over three decades.

The bitter antipathy directed toward communists by men who have suffered from religious persecution is quite understandable. Arthur Vööbus, an Estonian refugee and an eminent New Testament scholar, has repeatedly rebuked the World Council of Churches for being "soft" on communism.<sup>15</sup> On the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution Arnolds Lusus, archbishop of the Latvian Lutheran Church in exile, urged a period of mourning for the countless Christians harassed under communist domination. Richard Wurmbrand, a Jewish convert to Christianity who was confined to prisons in Rumania for 14½ years, has written narratives about

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Dilling, *The Red Network, A 'Who's Who' Handbook of Radicalism for Patriots* (Chicago: Published by the author, 1934), pp. 22—23. According to Mrs. Dilling, the New Deal and Roosevelt appointees were tainted with communism. Such prominent figures as Jane Addams and G. Bromly Oxnam are blacklisted.

<sup>11</sup> James D. Bales, *Communism, Its Faith and Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, *The Red Carpet* (Derby, Conn.: Monarch, 1962), p. 24. See also p. 225, where Dean Clarence E. Manion is quoted with approbation: "Communism is Lucifer's last desperate lunge for the conquest of mankind."

<sup>13</sup> See *News and Views*, a monthly release published from Wheaton, Ill. See also Edgar C.

Bundy, *Collectivism in the Churches* (Wheaton, Ill.: Church League of America, 1958 and 1961).

<sup>14</sup> See Brooks R. Walker, *The Christian Fright Peddlers* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 84—111.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter VII, "The Failure at Amsterdam," in Arthur Vööbus, *Communism's Challenge to Christianity* (Chicago: Published by the author at the Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1950). See p. 58: "It should be understood that the very existence of elements of truth in communism constitutes an illusory facade behind which its diabolical character is hidden."

relentless interrogation, attempted brainwashing, and cruel torture.<sup>16</sup> "Communism," Wurmbrand judges, is "the greatest foe of Christianity and the most dangerous. . . . Can Christianity co-exist with communism? [The Communists themselves provide the answer when they announce] 'communism is a death blow to religion.'" <sup>17</sup> Anticommunist sources in the United States claim that as many as 50 to 100 million people have been slaughtered by communist tyrants through beatings, starvation, and shootings.<sup>18</sup> Skeptics may doubt the reliability of these figures. More restrained estimates have indicated a total purge of about 20 million in Stalinist Russia alone.<sup>19</sup> More than a quarter of a century ago Paul B. Anderson, now editor of the semimonthly publication of the National Council of Churches called *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas*, wrote:

The Soviet press and court records will provide any sceptical person with an ample supply of cases where ministers of reli-

gion and religious institutions suffered eradication or destruction at the hands of state authorities.<sup>20</sup>

No knowledgeable person would attempt to deny that long-standing church structures have incurred immense losses in property and membership in communist-controlled countries. Where the factual compilation of depressing statistics ends and divergent interpretations begin is in assessing the blame for these deplorable events. In what instances were the beleaguered clergy culpable because of their identification with the privileged classes and their lack of concern for the exploited peasantry or workers? How often were religious leaders arrested and executed solely because the communists wanted to exterminate the Christian faith? Anti-communist extremists have tended to convey a distorted vision of reality. The factors which have contributed to the anti-religious outbursts of communist regimes have frequently been oversimplified.

Opposition to dialog with communists, however, is not limited to fanatics or individuals who have had adverse personal experiences. Ever since the inception of the cold war late in the 1940s, opposition to communism in all forms has been an integral part of the "American way of life." Loyalty to flag and church for most Roman Catholics and Protestants has implied resistance to the alleged encroachments of atheistic communism. Representative of the caveats that appeared was a pastoral conference paper delivered by Martin H. Scharlemann and printed in the *Lutheran Chaplain* in 1950. He encour-

<sup>16</sup> See Richard Wurmbrand and Charles Foley, *Christ in the Communist Prisons* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1968). Wurmbrand has become general director of "Christian Missions to the Communist World." His circular release, "Jesus to the Communist World," dated December 1969, reports on a secret printing press used by the underground church and on the raping of Christian women and the molesting of Baptists in the Soviet Union.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ: Today's Martyr Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> A set of figures for each victimized nationality is listed in *Washington Intelligence Reporter* (July 1969).

<sup>19</sup> A documented history of the Stalinist purge may be found in Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror* (New York: Macmillan, 1968). Conquest conjectures that about 3 million died in concentration camps during the worst 2-year period of oppression and liquidation.

<sup>20</sup> Paul B. Anderson, *People, Church, and State in Modern Russia* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. 111.

aged Lutheran clergy in New England to be alert in detecting the threat of communism as political totalitarianism, as a menace to morality, and as a pseudoreligion replacing God with the irrepressible dialectic of history.<sup>21</sup>

Many conservative churchmen have greeted the incipient dialogs with frank reservations and considerable suspicion. When French communist theoretician Roger Garaudy went on a speaking tour in the United States late in 1966, the editor of *Christianity Today* queried:

Can there be real dialogue between Christians and Marxists? If the Christian is willing to concede that his position has only a subjective basis, that man is not fallen, that salvation is an evolutionary process, that God has performed no miraculous events in history, and that man's prime concern is to work to create a heaven on earth, he [the Christian] can indeed get along very well with the Marxist.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, the dialog instigated by the Roman Catholic Paulist Society and held in Marienbad, Czechoslovakia, in the spring of 1967 was viewed as a "vague encounter."<sup>23</sup>

Admittedly cordial contacts between Marxists and Christians in recent years have been limited to ideologists and theologians except for a few strategic alliances in the struggle in Czechoslovakia, in Spain,

and in parts of Latin America. Formal religion in Maoist China seems to be almost totally eradicated.<sup>24</sup> In East Germany the survival and perpetuation of the church has been fraught with innumerable handicaps and hindrances imposed by the unreconstructed Stalinist, Walter Ulbricht.<sup>25</sup>

In Poland, where the Communist Party had eliminated all opposition by 1949, there were years of open struggle with the firmly entrenched Roman Catholic Church. After the Posen revolt of 1956 led to a repudiation of Stalinism, the imprisoned Cardinal Wyszyński was released and a tenuous truce was agreed

<sup>24</sup> Communism in China, however, has not succeeded in eliminating vital faith or in compelling all Christians to conform to the party line. See George N. Patterson, *Christianity in Communist China* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1969).

<sup>25</sup> See Friedrich-Georg Hermann, *Der Kampf Gegen Religion und Kirche in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands* (Ulm: Ebner, 1966). "Scientific atheism" has been inculcated through the education system and secular rites have been substituted for the religious ceremonies traditionally associated with Baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funerals. Despite the antagonism which has predominated, Hermann concludes his appraisal on a relatively optimistic plane: "One should not say that communism cannot give up its antitheistic bias and that it must also in the future hold fast to its hostility to the faith. . . . In the last decades it has given up and corrected its earlier erroneous attitudes about the theory of relativity, the theory of language and of genetics, to cite but a few examples. Thus the hope is present that it will also engage the phenomena of religion and the faith in an objective way, unlike what has been happening up till now."

For American observations on the situation in communist Germany and Eastern Europe see the thorough investigation of Richard W. Solberg, *God and Caesar in East Germany* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), and the popularized travelog commentary of Hiley H. Ward, *God and Marx Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).

<sup>21</sup> Martin H. Scharlemann, "The Threat of Communism to the Church," *Lutheran Chaplain* (July—Aug. 1950, Sept.—Oct. 1950, and Nov. to Dec. 1950).

<sup>22</sup> *Christianity Today* (Jan. 6, 1967).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* (May 26, 1967). The editor concedes that "Garaudy has improved significantly upon the old Marxist cliché that 'religion is the opiate of the people' by saying that 'religion is becoming the yeast of the people.'"

upon. A period of uneasy coexistence between church and state was accompanied by a continuing war of attrition—a large-scale effort to augment loyalty to Catholicism was countered by propaganda emanating from the Society of Atheists and Freethinkers; the so-called Pax movement recruited “patriotic priests” to counteract the influence of the “reactionary clergy,” and controversies raged over the issue of religious instruction in the schools.<sup>26</sup> During the decade of the sixties, however, there seemed to be a gradual relaxation of totalitarian controls in Poland, as well as in other parts of Eastern Europe.

While a few open-minded Marxist scholars were reinterpreting the role of religion and participating in the incipient dialog with Christians, many Communist Party leaders repeated clichés about religion as the opiate of the people and remained adamant in their opposition to religion in all forms. An editorial in a Moscow journal in 1969 reaffirmed Lenin’s admonition: “We must fight against religion. This is the ABC of all materialism . . .” and concluded with the exhortation:

The struggle against the religious vestiges of the past demands lively action from all Communists. The Communist Party in the Soviet Union demands that there be no compromise with any manifestations of bourgeois ideology and religious prejudice. Every Communist is a militant atheist!<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Kurt Hutten, *Iron Curtain Christians*, trans. Walter G. Tillmanns (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967), pp. 84–122.

<sup>27</sup> From *Sovietskaya Rossiya* (March 21, 1969), excerpted in *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas* (Oct. 1969), p. 177. See also a letter addressed to the *Komunist* (Feb. 13, 1969) by a dedicated comrade in the Yugoslavian Party: “I maintain that a member of the League of Communists cannot be religious . . .

The president of the Ukrainian Evangelical Baptist Convention, reporting on the fining of 60 parishioners and the arrest of eight preachers in Kiev on April 27, 1968, for involvement in illegal worship, portrays “a captive nation fighting for political and religious freedom.”<sup>28</sup> American Jews allege that their fellow religionists continue to be the victims of vilification and intimidation in Russia.<sup>29</sup> Publications in the Soviet Union accord no recognition to the Marxist-Christian dialogs undertaken in other countries. It would be unrealistic to deny that in most areas where communism wields absolute power there has been little or no receptivity to direct discussions with Christians on theological-ideological questions. While the American Communist Party has softened its line on religion in general, its feud with Fundamentalists has not ceased.<sup>30</sup>

## II

Where and how, then, have some communists and some Christians “buried the hatchet” and formed alliances? Has a compromise of convictions on either side occurred, or has one group capitulated to the other?

I am also for the purging of the ranks.” Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>28</sup> O. R. Harbuziuk in *Reformation Review* (July 1969).

<sup>29</sup> See “Soviet Jewry Today,” *Commentary* (Aug. 1969). Compare Ronald I. Rubin, ed., *The Unredeemed: Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968).

<sup>30</sup> Formidable coalitions, like the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade of an Australian-born physician, evoke rebuttals. See “Fred Schwarz Shakes His Red-picking Finger” in *Daily World* (June 7, 1969), and Fred Schwarz, *The Christian Answer to Communism* (Anderson, Ind.: Great Commission Press, n. d.).

In the U.S.S.R. the Eastern Orthodox Church that survived the Stalinist onslaughts against the church has been granted a grudging toleration by state authorities, and has sometimes been expediently utilized as an instrument for propagating the Soviet version of peaceful co-existence.<sup>31</sup> International conferences have brought together churchmen from Marxist and non-Marxist lands to give expression to their common aspiration for universal global peace.<sup>32</sup>

Over the years it would seem that a few radical clergymen have become so enamored with the Utopian visions of idealistic communism that they have tended to abandon their own Christian heritage. The "confessions" made by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1953 were eye-openers in explaining the metamorphosis experienced by men who were attracted to Marxism in their avidity for social justice. Appalled by the economic dislocations of the Great Depression, they became antagonistic to capitalism and blinded to the shortcomings of

Marxist theory—not to mention the tyranny of Stalinism. Social critics following Niebuhr were inclined to approve Marxist collectivism as preferable to liberal individualism; Marxist catastrophism was used to counter liberal optimism; and Marxist determinism was evoked to challenge liberal moralism.<sup>33</sup> With the advent of "radical theology" in the sixties, the Marxist critique of Christian passivity and irrelevant piety seemed valid to some people in the churches. Unitarian humanism had always seemed quite compatible with Marxist humanism. Finally, some secularizing theologies gave the impression of becoming harmonious with the basic communist critique of Christian otherworldly escapism. If both Christians and Marxists affirm the secular order as exclusively crucial for man's self-fulfillment, has not the fundamental cause of disagreement been eliminated? In the exuberant liberalism of some who were involved in the social gospel movement a generation ago, as well as in more recent "death of God" theologies, we can perhaps perceive the collapse of barriers between Marxist-inspired humanists and religion-tinged secularists who regard Jesus simply as a prototype of ideal man. Many orthodox traditionalists would denounce this sort of fusion as a surrender of Christian verities. Other concerned theologians would at least characterize this kind of Marxist-Christian correlation as a superficial accommodation in which the historic faith has been diluted or perverted to correspond with present-day exigencies and biases.

Almost three decades ago in England the "Red Dean" of Canterbury, Hewlett

<sup>31</sup> In the summer of 1963 the administrative archbishop of Moscow reminded me that from the abolition of the patriarchate by Peter the Great until the Bolshevik triumph the church had been subjected to censorship and domination by the czars. While deploring the atheism of the Communist Party, he professed to be enthusiastic about the economic and social policies of his own government which, he maintained, were more in accord with the teachings of Jesus than American capitalism, which exploited the poor and appealed to selfish instincts, namely, the profit motive.

<sup>32</sup> See V. D. Schneeberger, ed., ". . . and on Earth Peace," *Documents of the First All-Christian Peace Assembly*, Prague, June 13—18, 1961, published by the Christian Peace Conference. Major participants included Martin Niemöller of Germany, (then) Archbishop Nikodim of the Soviet Union, and K. H. Ting speaking in behalf of Chinese Christians.

<sup>33</sup> See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Communism and the Clergy," *Christian Century* (Aug. 19, 1953).

Johnson, exemplified the small segment of Christian opinion which romanticized the Russian revolution of 1917, castigated "decadent capitalism," and magnified the reputed achievements of the "worker's paradise" with its headquarters in Moscow. "Proudly I nail my colors to the mast of the new," the prelate announced as he lauded "the moral results of socialist planned production."<sup>34</sup> Weathering a heavy barrage of verbal assaults which excoriated him as a "communist dupe" or dismissed him as "naive," Johnson was applauded by pro-Soviet radicals, and he stubbornly refused to desist from his provocative assertions about the intrinsic congruity of Marxist thought with the Christian Gospel.<sup>35</sup>

The occasional flirtations of several American churchmen with the Communist Party provide examples of this same type of dubious collaboration. The symposium on Marxism and Christianity edited in 1968 by communist theoretician Herbert Aptheker is dedicated to the memory of Harry F. Ward (1873—1966). Without hesitation it can be said that Ward (for many years a professor at Union Theological Seminary and simultaneously a hero of the communist press) was probably the most famous personality implicated in the

saga of communism and the American churches. Despite his repeated denial of actual party membership, he persevered as a fervent apologist for Stalinist Russia and communist-initiated enterprises. In 1944 he wrote a eulogy, *The Soviet Spirit*, that seems to be totally incognizant of the crimes of Stalin as it exaggerates the accomplishments of the Five-Year plans and endorses an educational system which contrives to produce the "socialized individual."<sup>36</sup>

Ward was a key personality in the Methodist Federation for Social Service and served as chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union. During the thirties the American Communist Party, which had originally echoed the anti-Christian satire found in Russian periodicals, shifted ground and soft-pedaled its atheistic propaganda to gain respectability and strategic advantage in its "united front" endeavors. Consciously or unconsciously, Ward abetted the communist cause by lending his prestige to a number of appeals, especially as chairman of the American League against War and Fascism. Earl Browder, repeatedly the communist candidate for president of the United States, expressed elation over the broad coalitions in which antireligious communists could struggle together with church groups. He assured disgruntled party comrades that no concession to obscurantist theology was intended.<sup>37</sup>

Another prominent personality who was associated with communist-sponsored movements was William B. Spoffard.

<sup>34</sup> Hewlett Johnson, *The Soviet Power* (New York: International Publishers, 1940), pp. XVIII, 185—90.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. XXVI: "The elimination of the profit motive makes room for the higher motive of service." Compare p. 314: "A passionate assertion of atheism no more means that a man is fundamentally irreligious from a Christian point of view than a passionate profession of belief in God necessarily stamps a man as religious." See also Hewlett Johnson, *The Secret of Soviet Strength* (New York: International Publishers, 1943).

<sup>36</sup> Harry F. Ward, *The Soviet Spirit* (New York: International Publishers, 1944).

<sup>37</sup> See Earl Browder, *What is Communism?* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1936).

While heading the independent Episcopal coalition known as the Church League for Industrial Democracy, he was also vice-chairman of the American League against War and Fascism, often cited as a communist front organization. When United States recognition of the Soviet Union was being debated in 1933, Spoffard wrote:

Russia, the avowed enemy of God, has in my opinion, done more to advance the purpose of God to establish here upon earth His kingdom than any nation on the face of the world during the last decade and a half.<sup>38</sup>

In response to questions asked by the editor of the *Living Church*, Spoffard denied that the Church League for Industrial Democracy was communistic, but he admitted that there were two communists on the national board and that other communists might be individual members of the organization. At another time he affirmed his conviction to inquirers: "I see no reason why Christians and Communists should not cooperate in the areas where they agree."<sup>39</sup> Spoffard's uncritical devotion to Stalinist Russia can be seen in a statement made during the Christmas season of 1945: "There is a star in the East. Wise men will follow it as far as its beams cast light and do so without fear merely because its color happens to be red."<sup>40</sup> Spoffard continued to extol the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. In opposing the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, he complained that the United States was "waging an un-

declared war . . . against the development of economic democracy." Subsequent communist-launched peace campaigns were fully endorsed. The "people's democracies" of Eastern Europe were found to be praiseworthy. The purging of Lutheran leaders in Hungary was interpreted as the weeding out of "reactionaries."<sup>41</sup> Spoffard's controversial career becomes another illustration of communist-Christian friendship in which the Christian spokesman, in the judgment of this writer, succumbed to some unrealistic delusions.

Perhaps the strangest episode in clergy-communist relations in this country may be found in the pilgrimage of Claude Williams from his position as Biblical fundamentalist to Fosdick-admiring liberal to labor champion to communist sympathizer. The People's Institute of Applied Religion, which Williams founded in Detroit, was listed as "subversive" by the United States attorney general, although the indicted minister denied that he was an actual Communist Party member, except for a period of a few months in 1937. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Williams displayed an admirable zeal for applying the teachings of Jesus to labor grievances and the achievement of Negro rights. His biographer claims that Williams befriended sharecroppers and social outcasts, while entering into tirades against the sham and hypocrisy of the organized churches. By his own admission he would seem to have substituted the faith and social passion of Marxism for any orthodox understanding of Christianity. A few quotations from his biography illustrate why conservative church members became

<sup>38</sup> Quoted by Ralph Lord Roy, *Communism and the Churches* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), p. 326.

<sup>39</sup> Reprinted from *National Republic* in a publication of "American Women Against Communism Inc." (n. d.), p. 261.

<sup>40</sup> Roy, p. 330.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 331—32.



convinced that communism had made serious inroads into the American pulpit.

I do not care whether He (Jesus) is fact or myth. . . . I have no use for supernatural belief. . . . I have ceased to believe in anything absolute in life. . . . Reading for the first time the whole of Marx's passage about religion, a light suddenly shone on him; the passage actually had a beauty and nobility almost worthy of the Bible itself. It was like reading Isaiah. . . . Claude went back to the manse and sat with Joyce in the little study, surrounded by the books which had led him astray from the God of juries. From the wall Jesus, Debs, and a third face, Lenin, looked down on them.<sup>42</sup>

Right wing fanatics, however, have repeatedly exaggerated the degree of communist infiltration into American church life. Marxists in this country have never launched a full-scale campaign to undermine the churches. Only an infinitesimal number of clergymen over the past 50 years ever affiliated with the Communist Party. What did happen was that in the thirties and forties unwary liberals who were anti-Nazi or critical of capitalism were sometimes lured into communist-oriented front groups. Many of the declared objectives of such groups—peace, racial equality, higher wages—appeared worthy of endorsement. When the deception or ulterior motives were exposed the ministers usually admitted their mistake and promptly withdrew.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Cedric Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People* (Detroit: People's Institute of Applied Religion, 1946), pp. 127, 138, 145, 218.

<sup>43</sup> See Roy, pp. 421–26. Communist maneuvers *did* include a special appeal to Negroes. Most of the black clergy who were temporarily attracted by communist propaganda knew nothing about Marx and little about the Soviet

Union. They seldom abandoned their customary religious beliefs and practices. With the advent of the McCarthy era, churchmen became more careful to safeguard their reputations by abstaining from anything that might be construed as subversive activity. More decisive, though, was the disenchantment that came in the wake of Khrushchev's unmasking of "the cult of personality," the open acknowledgement of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, and the brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolt. Clergymen who were convinced earlier that communism and Christianity might be compatible had second thoughts. Only a few of them persevered in their admiration for communism in action. By 1958 it appeared that the death knell had been sounded on any prospects for improved relations between communists and Christians.

Not so. The partial thaw in the Cold War, the relaxation of controls over the churches in parts of Eastern Europe, and especially the rise of revisionist interpretations among more independent-minded Marxists facilitated new attempts to break down the walls of hostility. In Latin America Roman Catholic priests collaborated in insurrections with Marxists. Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest-sociologist killed in battle in 1966, became a kind of martyr-saint for would-be revolutionaries.<sup>44</sup> In Spain an anti-Franco alliance was forged between radical Christians and new-style Marxists. In Canada *The Quebec*

Union. They seldom abandoned their customary religious beliefs and practices.

<sup>44</sup> See German Guzman, *Camilo Torres* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1969). For comparison and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the revolutionary thought of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara see Regis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).



*Communist Party's Manifesto*, adopted at its second congress in December 1967, affirmed:

The task of all the Communists is to enter much more energetically into dialogue with those Catholics in Quebec who are ready to lead a struggle in the interest of the deprived classes and to strive together against the powers that exploit and degrade our people. The cooperation and the participation of believers together with non-believers in the struggle against the monopolists is a fact of daily life in Quebec. The ideological differences must not prevent us from working together for the emancipation of our people. Believers can become members of our cause.<sup>45</sup>

Gus Hall, national secretary of the Communist Party in the United States, surprised reporters a few years ago by urging a fusion of effort between communism and the church in striving for common goals. "Our fight is not with God," Hall remarked. "It is with capitalism and all that capitalism has done to oppress people." Deploing the antireligious tirades of the past and conceding that some Protestant ministers and Catholic priests had become more "progressive," he pleaded for a common approach to the problems aggravating mankind — poverty, war, and racial discrimination. Coexistence, he said, is both possible and desirable. "We have no argument against God. We can live together in a Socialist nation."<sup>46</sup>

Following the same line, American communist periodicals have rejoiced over signs of a social awakening in the churches. Wherever the pronouncements of church

groups and the aims of communism have seemed to coincide, there is no longer any discernible antipathy. Martin Luther King Jr. was frequently honored in the pages of the *Daily World* (formerly the *Daily Worker*). Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam with war resisters like Jesuit Daniel Berrigan and Yale Chaplain William Sloane Coffin Jr. is extolled for its contribution to peace and its commitment to social change.<sup>47</sup>

One might question, however, at what price this *entente cordiale* has been established. Are Marxists agreeing to terminate their anti-Christian vendettas because they anticipate the eventual demise of the historical church anyway? Will communist governments ever tolerate the kind of religious liberty that implies freedom to express convictions deviating from official communist declarations?<sup>48</sup> Has reconciliation seemed plausible because radical theology has divested the Christian faith of the transcendent dimension which convinced Marxists could not allow? Has the secularization process secured an arbitrary unification by inducing the church to find "a least common denominator with avowedly nonreligious modes of compassion and generosity"?<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Daily World* (July 22, 1969).

<sup>48</sup> Quentin Lauer confronts Roger Garaudy with similar questions in *A Christian-Communist Dialogue* (New York: Doubleday, 1968).

<sup>49</sup> Editorial, "Where Else Is Theology Going?" *Ecumenist* (July–Aug. 1969). A verse-prayer is quoted which demands that we love people "as they are" and not "in Christ." The comment follows: "By insisting that loving friends 'as they are' must exclude loving them 'in Christ,' one breaks off diplomatic relations with virtually all forms of specifically Christian theology."

<sup>45</sup> Quoted by W. J. Ewin in *Christian Heritage* (Oct. 1969).

<sup>46</sup> *Approach* (July 15, 1968).

## III

Evidence accumulates, however, to demonstrate that there is another option in Marxist-Christian encounter which ends neither in mutual recriminations nor in a premature armistice. In some sectors of our strife-torn world it has been possible for avowed communists and professing Christians to meet together amiably for a frank exchange of viewpoints. How has this come about? What has been accomplished?

One of the earliest and best-known exponents of a rapprochement with Marxists from the end of World War II until his death in December 1969 was the controversial Czech Protestant, Joseph L. Hromadka. A professor at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1934 to 1947, he returned to his home country to resume his position with the Comenius Faculty of Theology in Prague and was elected as a member of the Central Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches. Hromadka dismayed many of his American friends by intimating that socialism was the wave of the future and that it would be helpful to listen attentively to the communist point of view, even while challenging communists in a creative way to react to Christian claims. His approach may be understood as preliminary conditioning for the later, direct consultations with Marxists in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere. Already in 1957 Hromadka averred:

We have to understand that the atheism of *dialectical* materialism is a positive struggle for man, for his adequate self-understanding, for a better order of social and political life, for a construction of a society in which all class differences will gradually fade away. The dynamic force of this kind

of atheism is not the negation of the gods, idols, pagan cults, and religious dreams rejected and condemned by the prophets and by Jesus Christ Himself. We, Christians, are responsible for much misunderstanding. And we have to help the Communists to understand their own anti-religious critique more adequately, more constructively, and to free themselves from a purely negative, shallow antireligious propaganda. If a Christian grasps the meaning of Marxistic humanism, and if a Communist penetrates beyond all religious myths and superstitions to the depth of the prophetic struggle for the real God . . . then both of them may establish a firm basis of a fertile, creative controversy. We do not believe in any possibility of an ideological synthesis of communism and Christian faith. Such a synthesis is impossible. They find themselves on a different level. However, a new atmosphere may be created.<sup>50</sup>

Other theologians became precursors of Marxist-Christian dialog. The religious socialism espoused by Paul Tillich was deeply indebted to Marxist insight. No less than Marx, Tillich was repelled by the ruthless urge for aggrandizement which is intrinsic to the capitalistic system. The bourgeois principle, which he defined as "self-sufficient finitude" or "autonomous this-worldliness," degrades nature and society into mere things:

Things become wares — objects whose meaning lies in the production of profits in transactions of buying and selling, not in the enrichment of personal life. They are acquired and disposed of by their masters, not by beings who have some kind of community with them, hence there is no

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Hromadka, *Theology Between Yesterday and Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), pp. 83—84.

limit to their acquisition. Free economy tends necessarily toward infinite commercial imperialism.<sup>51</sup>

A common presupposition in present-day conversations between communists and Christians is a similarly expressed defectiveness in the prevailing economic order in Western countries. Theologians can vie with Marxists in hurling the epithets "imperialistic" and "oppressive" at the actions of the United States government in Indochina or Latin America. Disagreement often comes when Marxists are reluctant or unwilling to denounce the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia or communist penetration into the Middle East or Africa in the same terms. Fear of a massive and manipulative technocracy, as well as concern over the ecological crisis precipitated, at least in part, by profit-hungry corporations have combined to reemphasize the validity of the critique which Tillich offered almost 40 years ago.

Emil Brunner reacted to the teachings of Marxism with an unequivocal "no." In his interpretation Marx's repudiation of the idealist humanism of his predecessors (especially Hegel) resulted in a concept of man which was both collectivistic and materialistic. With a rationalistic approach which denied all possibility of grasping truth through revelation, Marx left no ground for objective ethics. Man is free, according to Marx, only if he is completely autonomous and makes his own decisions without reference to any remnants of theism or metaphysical abstractions. The final consequence of pursuing such an illusory individual-centered hu-

manism, as Brunner expounded it, was to depersonalize man through an untenable egocentricity and to expedite suppression in a totalitarian state.<sup>52</sup> Brunner and his disciples could not envision any prospect of fruitful contacts between communists and Christians.

Nicholas Berdyaev, the profound Russian mystic, did not foresee the possibility of fraternal Marxist-Christian relations, but perhaps he prepared the way by challenging Christians to take communist concepts and expectations seriously. He was one of the first persons to explain communism as a rival religious movement (a heresy) with a design for its own new creation—a radical transformation of this present world. In Berdyaev's understanding the Bolshevik revolution was God's deserved judgment on a corrupt and a decadent society, yet the fatal flaw of communism was its rejection of the Biblical God and the fabrication of its own idols.<sup>53</sup>

More than any theologian of the last generation it was Tillich who offered a positive appraisal of Marxism. Tillich did not renounce Marx as Brunner did or recoil from the "one great lie" of atheism like Berdyaev, but, relying primarily on the writings of the younger, prematerialist Marx, Tillich discovered significant structural analogies between the Judaeo-Christian prophetic tradition and the Marxist analysis of the human predicament.

<sup>52</sup> See Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization*, I (New York: Charles Scribner, 1948), 115.

<sup>53</sup> Berdyaev wrote in *The Origin of Russian Communism* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937), p. 185: "The falsity of the Communist spirit . . . can be condemned only by those Christians who cannot be suspected of defending the interests of the bourgeois capitalist world."

<sup>51</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation*, trans. H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Meridian Books, 1932), p. 72.

To begin with, Tillich found impressive parallels between the Christian and Marxist explication of truth as an indivisible unity of theory and practice. Truth cannot be defined in abstract terminology; it must be actualized as a dynamic reality. For Marx truth is demonstrable when the proletariat undertakes its historical mission. For Tillich truth as response to the new being in Christ is known only to Spirit-filled men who accept the task of reforming the world.

Second, as Tillich perceived it, Christianity and Marxism share a linear (as contrasted with a cyclical) view of history. Proponents of both systems believe that history has a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*. Both sides are confident that history is meaningful and purposeful; the ongoing struggle between good and evil will end in the ultimate victory of justice.<sup>54</sup> New Testament eschatology speaks of cataclysmic events which will precede the final end. Marx anticipated revolutionary upheavals as indispensable for the formation of a new society. Both Marxists and Christians have believed that an elect people or class—the oppressed workers or the new Israel (the church)—is destined to be the instrument for the fulfillment of history.

Third, according to Tillich, there are close affinities between Christian and Marxist anthropology. Both agree that

<sup>54</sup> See Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 254. Compare Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 112: "Both Marxism and Christianity rescue individual lives from the insignificance of finitude by showing the individual that he has or can have some role in a world-historical drama."

man is in a "fallen state"—he is not what he ought to be. There is a contradiction between the authentic being which man craves and the estranged situation in which he finds himself. For the Christian, man is debased by sin (separation from God)—unable to live in love and peace. For the Marxist man is dehumanized by becoming the victim of capitalism—unable to exercise his potential capacity for spontaneous and joyful creativity. Both Christianity and Marxism affirm the necessity for overcoming man's state of alienation.<sup>55</sup> Thus, there is considerable correlation between their respective doctrines of man.<sup>56</sup>

Tillich's theologizing prefigured the encounter between communism and Christianity which became a reality in the 1960s. On the communist side major barriers were removed when neo-Marxists announced their emancipation from doctrinaire Stalinism. In the Soviet Union all official publications continued to follow the "orthodox" Leninist line, but elsewhere deviations became widespread.<sup>57</sup> In Tito's Yugoslavia Milovan Djilas, a Partisan hero during World War II, was imprisoned for

<sup>55</sup> See Oskar Schatz and Ernst Florian Winter on "Alienation, Marxism, and Humanism (A Christian Viewpoint)," in Erich Fromm, ed., *Socialist Humanism* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 288—304.

<sup>56</sup> See Charles C. West, *Communism and the Theologians* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 91—97. See also Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Ungar, 1961).

<sup>57</sup> In Poland philosophers like Adam Schaff, Marek Fritzhand, and Bronislaw Baczko published writings which were not confined to old categories. In Czechoslovakia Karel Kosik, Milan Prucha, Ivan Svitak, and other profound thinkers conceptualized and elaborated new interpretations of Marx.

expressing unacceptable ideas.<sup>58</sup> Even so, philosophers at the University of Zagreb challenged hitherto sacrosanct Marxist dogmas without expulsion or reprisals. While acknowledging the essential validity of the Marxist approach, they were unwilling to categorize the pronouncements of Karl Marx as absolute and unchanging truth. Gajo Petrovic, who argued that there was a fundamental coherence in Marx's thought and that there should be no sharp differentiation between the "young" and the "old" Marx, nevertheless pointed out that it was not an all-embracing and finished system. "What Marx himself regarded as a solution," Petrovic concedes, "may become a problem for us. . . . Every generation has to work out for itself a concrete solution to its own problems. . . . It is the task of followers of Marx to develop his thought in all directions."<sup>59</sup>

If Marx is not infallible, then perhaps his denunciation of religion can also be reconsidered and reinterpreted. Over 120 years have elapsed since the *Communist Manifesto* predicted the demise of religion, which was explained as a mere reflection of bourgeois class interests. Obviously religion has demonstrated more perseverance than its antagonists anticipated. Realistic Marxists now find it necessary to reevalu-

ate the enduring role of religion in human experience.

More crucial has been the recognition that religion is not invariably a deterrent to social progress; it can be an incentive. The French communist Roger Garaudy made this admission with emphasis: "The thesis that religion always and everywhere turns men away from struggle and from work is in flagrant contradiction to the facts of history."<sup>60</sup>

If some Marxists are now prepared to enter into dialog, if they are no longer preoccupied with abolishing Christianity, what benefits do they expect to derive from listening to their opponents? Communists like Garaudy in France and Milan Machovec in Czechoslovakia are persuaded that their own thinking can be stimulated by direct contact with Christian theologians. Marxism, they fear, has been impoverished by its narrow-minded repudiation of everything associated with religious life. Garaudy specifies two themes in regard to which Christianity can amplify Marxism: transcendence and subjectivity. Man can contemplate his own destiny and project imaginatively future possibilities that qualitatively surpass his present constrictions. Karl Rahner, a Roman Catholic theologian, has defined Christianity as the religion of the absolute future, while Ernst Bloch, a German Marxist, has written about the "pull of the future." Bloch's category of the "not-yet-being," Thomas Ogletree observes, "points to the creative impact of the pressure of new possibility on the self's concrete struggle to realize itself in relation to the world in which it has its being."

<sup>58</sup> See Milovan Djilas, *The New Class* (New York: Praeger, 1957), p. 3: "Beginning with the premise that they alone know the laws which govern society, Communists arrive at the oversimplified and unscientific conclusion that this alleged knowledge gives them the power and the exclusive right to change society and to control its activities. This is the major error of their system."

<sup>59</sup> Gajo Petrovic, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor, 1967), pp. 33—34.

<sup>60</sup> Roger Garaudy, *From Anathema to Dialogue* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 100.

What Bloch advocates is equivalent to "a secularized version of the Kingdom of God in which 'God' becomes . . . the messianic openness of the 'end-space' that draws man to creative historical activity."<sup>61</sup>

In his "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" Karl Marx asserted that the "criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism." What he meant was that all illusions must be exposed as futile if man is to concentrate on attaining his full potential. The pivotal declaration affirmed:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opiate of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.<sup>62</sup>

The suffering masses are consoled with false promises of a rectification of inequities in a nonexistent hereafter.

The neo-Marxists continue to voice this same criticism of inherited religion. Yet a man like Milan Machovec expresses admiration for "the boldness and inner sincerity of Christians throughout history" and deplores the neglect of the "rich, Biblical tradition" by his fellow Marxists. In his estimation, Marxist-Christian conversations are helpful in reminding those who have abandoned traditional beliefs that faith is nonetheless indispensable for human welfare. The Bible points the way in requiring "repentance" and in visualizing a more glorious future—the prospect of an im-

provement in the human condition. The Book of Revelation is most relevant when it proclaims: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). Machovec's objection to the Christian church is that it has not brought "its best ideals to fulfillment." It has perverted the commendable virtues of forgiveness, mercy, and patience to inculcate a sense of passive submission in the victims of oppression.<sup>63</sup>

From the Christian side some of the unresolved disagreements were identified 10 and 20 years ago by John Bennett. Atheistic absolutism, Bennett contended, made communists prone to the "practical idolatry" of exalting human constructs as substitutes for God. The irrepressible dialectic of history, the incontestable authority of the communist elite, or even a tyrant like Stalin fill in the gap when the supremacy of God is evaded or denied. There is no transcendent judgment on the pretensions of fallible and sinful human beings. A fallacious optimism leaves the adherents of communism vulnerable to worse evils than those which they are endeavoring to overcome.

Furthermore, Bennett objected to communism's apparent willingness to sacrifice individuals in bloody revolution to achieve an alleged ultimate, collective good. Have Marxists calculated the human consequences of deliberately instigated terror? Will desirable results really emerge after indulging in prolonged, ruthless slaughter?<sup>64</sup> Marxists have often retorted by disavowing responsibility for the "excesses" of Stalinism and by reminding Protestants

<sup>61</sup> Thomas W. Ogletree, ed., *Openings for Marxist-Christian Dialogue* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), pp. 28—31.

<sup>62</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), pp. 41—42.

<sup>63</sup> Milan Machovec, "Marxism and Christianity—A Marxist View" (mimeographed essay), pp. 3—4.

<sup>64</sup> Bennett, pp. 77—89.

and Catholics of the many crimes which they committed against each other as misguided religious zealots.

In many instances the ongoing dialog is blunt and frank both in confessing the blunders of the past and in criticizing one another. But there seems to be more light and less heat—more of a disposition to understand and to illuminate than to denounce. The Polish Catholic journalist Halina Bortnowska commented in 1965:

Condemning atheism . . . seems to me like exorcising the devil instead of doing penance. When we say to atheists that their intellectual attitude is contrary to human nature we do not persuade them that they are in error—we insult them, that is all. Would it not be better to help them examine their hearts; maybe what they hate or despise is not what the Christians believe. Perhaps what they love and cherish has its place in God's scheme of things.<sup>65</sup>

Some grim realities are inescapable: Marxists and Christians alike confront the problem of overpopulation, the threat of a nuclear holocaust, and all the implications of revolutionary agitation in the third world. Some representatives of both positions urge that we move beyond mutual anathemas and arguments about who is guilty for the errors of the past to concentrate on a joint effort to assure human survival and gain a more abundant life.

Assessing the prospects for dialog from the communist side, Konrad Farner, both a Marxist and a disciple of Karl Barth, sets forth the prerequisites of "informed knowledge" and a willingness to listen sympathetically to the opposition. "Missionary propaganda and proselytizing," he assumes,

must be abandoned. Christians will have to recognize that eleemosynary institutions are largely obsolete as a response to poverty:

The time is over now when . . . the charity of the rich could be reckoned as a Christian virtue smoothing their path to heaven. The time has come for the Christian to redeem his promissory notes, presented to him for payment today by the exploited and by the colored races. Today the question is not one of giving the beggar half your cloak so that he may no longer freeze; it is rather to end beggary altogether. . . . Bleeding wounds must be attended to, but at the same time the whole body must be healed.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, some Christians would acknowledge that the call to genuine social responsibility has been a major benefit derived from communication with Marxist humanists. In other words, communists have compelled Christians to rediscover and reaffirm their own prophetic faith which emphasizes social justice. A Roman Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson, impressed by the religious intensity of communism, concluded:

Karl Marx was of the seed of the prophets, in spite of his contempt for anything that savored of mysticism. . . . The Messianic hope, the belief in the coming destruction of the Gentile power and the deliverance of Israel were in the Jew not mere echoes of Biblical tradition; they were burnt into the very fibre of his being by centuries of thwarted social impulse in the squalid ghettos of Germany and Poland.<sup>67</sup>

Farner does not agree that atheism and

<sup>65</sup> Paul Oestreicher, ed., *The Christian Marxist Dialogue* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 25. See Jan Lochmann, *passim* (note 8).

<sup>66</sup> Konrad Farner, "A Marxist View of Dialogue" in Oestreicher, pp. 214–15.

<sup>67</sup> Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Modern State* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), pp. 87–88.



antagonism toward Christianity are integral components of communism. If the Christian message is not tied to capitalism, and if it does not cater to the vested interests of the middle class, it can be compatible with Marxism. When Christians disavow reformism, which is intrinsically and inevitably conservative, and recognize that revolutionary change is desirable, they can presumably become allies of Marxist radicals.<sup>68</sup>

Above all, the contemporary theology of hope associated with men like Jürgen Moltmann and Johannes Metz has been applauded by neo-Marxists as a promising development and as a likely meeting ground for the sharing of common concerns and ongoing dialog. Previously Christian concepts of hope had been construed by communists as socially irresponsible escapism. The only hope offered to the toiling masses was eternal rest in a life beyond the grave. Now theologians are stressing a this-world dimension as they affirm the resurrection of Christ. The power of the Risen One enters into our present existence and motivates us to become involved in the struggle for justice. The Old Testament rhythm of promise and fulfillment, shaped by the Exodus and prophetic testimony, lays the foundation for Biblical eschatology. The covenant community looks forward to a better future in which Yahweh will vindicate His chosen people, alleviate the distress of the oppressed, and usher in the messianic vision of peace and prosperity. The expectations of Israel are confirmed and transfigured in the coming of Jesus. The cross discloses the full horror of evil, but Easter morning

demonstrates the efficacy of divine intervention. Life triumphs over death and all things become possible in the future, which is under God's direction. In anticipation of the ultimate culmination of God's good purposes Christians can denounce and strive against everything which contradicts and resists that final goal. Juxtaposition of the ideal end-time alongside the frustration imposed by immediate ills causes the hope-filled believer to be impatient with and critical of the status quo. Rather than succumbing to passivity, the gap between what is (inequities in the present order) and what will be (universal blessing and cosmic healing in the eventual dispensation) results in constructive (if not radical) action within the present milieu. Accordingly, some Marxists have conceded that Christian faith can become an impetus to courageous action instead of an excuse for pious withdrawal. The theologians of hope express their gratitude to the esoteric Marxist, Ernst Bloch, for some of the insights and emphases that have become functional in their own approach.<sup>69</sup>

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

If Marxism and Christianity are treated as fixed systems of rigid dogmas, they stand in sharp opposition to each other. When communism claims that the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin comprise a body of infallible truth, and when Christians believe that the Bible is a collection of books providing theocratic knowledge, a clash of

<sup>69</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). See also Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* ([Frankfurt am Main]: Ullrich, 1959).

<sup>68</sup> Farner, pp. 216—22.



ideologies would seem to be inevitable. If Marxism is open to repudiate particular historical manifestations of communism like Stalinism or Maoism and revises and reinterprets earlier theories, while Christians find their assurance of salvation in justification by faith as a matter of divine grace and are not attached to a specific or static *Weltanschauung*, if minds are not closed to innovation and change, then perhaps dialog can be helpful and fruitful.

In many quarters of the globe acrimony prevails in contacts between communists and Christians. Old battles continue to be fought. Christians are stereotyped as superstitious and ignorant—obstacles to scientific enlightenment and social progress. Communists are characterized as vicious and immoral—the veritable incarnation of the Antichrist. Christians are derogated as reactionaries and, along with other “counterrevolutionaries,” become the scapegoats for communist failures. Anticommunism becomes a comprehensive and simplistic way of life which identifies socialist economy, godless philosophy, and every departure from familiar norms as part of a mammoth conspiracy against righteousness.<sup>70</sup> Wherever such irrational presuppositions and mutual biases hold sway, it is impossible to arrange for useful discussions between Marxists and Christians.

Some efforts at communist-Christian reconciliation would seem to run the risk of abandoning everything recognizable as Christian faith or Marxist theory. Would-be “Christian communists” are usually repudiated by both sides as inauthentic.

<sup>70</sup> See *Anatomy of Anti-Communism*, a report prepared by the Peace Education Division of the American Friends Service Committee (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969).

Far-out secularizing theologies may seem more palatable to Marxists than inherited dogmas, but one must ask whether or not they retain the basic ingredients of Christianity.<sup>71</sup> “Scientific religion” might overcome many of the objections raised by Marxists, especially reliance on “supernatural” revelation.<sup>72</sup> Secular humanism with a Christian coating would become almost indistinguishable from some types of Marxist humanism.

American communists in recent years have hailed social-minded Christians, especially civil rights leaders and antiwar spokesmen, while scorning evangelicals and pietists. Richard Greenleaf ridicules Billy Graham as “the last morbid twitch of a phony religion which capitalism has been fobbing off on the people since feudalism began to pass away.” He deplores Graham’s refusal to take a clear stand against imperialism and segregation, but admits that Graham is “not openly a fomentor of race hatred.” By predicting an early collapse of the world and the rectification of all wrongs in the second coming of Christ, the popular evangelist discourages people “from attempting to solve their problems” in the immediate present. Greenleaf rejoices that there are activist clergy who disagree with Billy Graham and proclaim a different message, namely,

that Christianity demands a confrontation with the forces of war and hunger; that if Jesus is to be alive again it must be . . . where men struggle for the freedom and

<sup>71</sup> For example, see Paul van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

<sup>72</sup> For example, see H. G. MacPherson, “What Would a Scientific Religion Be Like,” *Saturday Review* (Aug. 2, 1969).

equality which are promised them in the Gospels.<sup>73</sup>

Both pessimists and optimists can be quoted in relation to the prospects for Marxist-Christian consultations. Malcolm Muggeridge, British journalist and television personality, grimly speculates that future historians will laugh "at the hilarious spectacle of Marxist/Christian dialogues attempting to find common ground between the brutal atheism of the Communist Manifesto and the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, an Italian priest like Giulo Girardi offers a positive evaluation of Marxist humanism and Marxist solidarity, even while recognizing the antinomies that remain in contradistinction from a Christian understanding.<sup>75</sup> Individual Marxists continue to display a willingness to listen and learn as actual participants in conferences with Christians. The party hierarchy in most countries con-

tinues to be unfavorable toward friendly approaches to Christians. Roger Garaudy, the French Marxist who has eagerly participated in the dialog and has repeatedly condemned Moscow's invasion of Czechoslovakia, was at first reprimanded and at last expelled from the leadership of the French Communist Party.<sup>76</sup> Yet, the younger communists are in rebellion against their elders and seem less reluctant to reconsider and revise old attitudes toward religion. Herbert Aptheker's most recent book displays an intense eagerness for closer contacts with theologians.<sup>77</sup> Wherever and whenever apologetics and polemics are averted, prospects brighten for the elimination of barriers to understanding and cooperation.

Only future developments will prove whether Marxist-Christian dialog has been and can become authentic or spurious.

Berkeley, Calif.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Greenleaf, "Billy Graham: Crusader Marching Backward" in *Daily World* (July 12, 1969).

<sup>74</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 65.

<sup>75</sup> Guilo Girardi, *Marxism and Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

<sup>76</sup> *Newsweek* (Feb. 23, 1970).

<sup>77</sup> Herber Aptheker, *The Urgency of Marxist-Christian Dialogue: A Pragmatic Argument for Reconciliation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).