

of the correct use of power and authority. It must avoid creating a new oppressive system and rather aim at creating a dynamic social structure which guarantees a continuing renewal. Hence it is necessary to allow for creative criticism so that the original revolutionary inspiration will be maintained and constantly renewed in a living and progressive way. A Christian must always remain open to the coming of Christ and aim at preparing for it by establishing his kingdom on earth. Christianity is an explosive religion, incarnate but always transcending the *status quo*.

A MARXIST'S JESUS

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Prague was once, and in time no doubt will be again, a cross-roads of ideas, a *carrefour* of cross-fertilisation between Christians and Marxists. The effect upon such theologians as J.B. Metz and Jürgen Moltmann would not be difficult to demonstrate. In many respects now, so pervasive have a certain basic Marxist agenda and vocabulary become, Christians can no longer formulate their ideas or decide their course of action without more or less explicit reference to Marxism. This is particularly true in Latin America. It is noticeable also in Vatican documents on social policy—for example in the paragraphs on liberation in Pope Paul's lengthy statement "Evangelii nuntiandi", published some three weeks before the Declaration on Sexual Ethics, but, in contrast with the latter, destined to drop immediately into that oblivion of indifference reserved by conservatives and radicals in the Catholic Church for all utterances from Rome except those on sex. On a wider front, however, through the spread of sociology and allied disciplines as well as in response to urgent political situations, Christianity—and certainly Catholicism—has, willy nilly, absorbed a considerable amount from Marxism in the past twenty years, and sometimes even shown great critical resilience in the process. Doubt has remained, on the other hand as to how much a Marxist loyal to his atheism could learn from dialogue with Christians, or indeed as to how much serious work a Marxist would be ready to put into the study of Christian source-texts, in comparison anyway with the mushrooming industry of Catholic Marxologists.

In an important book, which leaves the ruck of paperback books on Jesus far behind (Muggeridge, Lord Longford, etc.), Milan Machoveč, a Marxist philosopher in Prague, now provides what Peter Hebblethwaite rightly describes in his introduction to it

as a “minor but indispensable Marxist classic which will replace Kautsky as a study of Jesus”.¹

While Engels himself retained until old age a certain interest in the nature of Christianity, it fell to Karl Kautsky to write the books on Christian origins which have framed Marxist thought on the matter for the past sixty years. For Machoveč however, Kautsky’s picture of early Christianity reduces it to no more than a social revolutionary movement—“a sort of communist movement of antiquity”.² He criticises Kautsky’s presentation of Jesus as a politically active dissident and a social revolutionary: “this view does not go to the heart of Jesus’ position, and it betrays a total lack of understanding of what his eschatological thinking really was: it contained socio-political elements but is not reducible to them”.³

One of the advantages which Machoveč enjoys over Kautsky is clearly the ability to make use of modern techniques of biblical exegesis such as we owe to the generation of Dibelius and Bultmann. Great advances have been made in the study of early Christian literature and Machoveč has not been as slow to learn as most Christian theologians. Nor is he afraid to commit himself on matters which are open to controversy which would always block the kind of synthesis which he is attempting in this book.

For example, Machoveč takes for granted the existence of Q, even as a *text*. While anybody who takes the trouble to compare the first three gospels with one another will soon notice that Matthew and Luke have a substantial amount of material in common which is lacking entirely in Mark, it does not follow that we need postulate some now lost document as their source. Machoveč, however, being familiar only with current German exegesis, goes with the consensus obtaining there, which is that the Q material represents the theology of one of the earliest Christian communities.

The knottiest problem about the Q material is that it contains no reference to either the passion or the resurrection appearances of Christ. The standard solution to this, which Machoveč adopts, is that the Q material must have been an optional extra to the original proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus. From Dibelius and Bultmann onwards, as also in B.H. Streeter and T.W. Manson, “the central thing is the Cross on the Hill”, and its absence of interest in the passion and resurrection is taken as proving the secondary and supplementary character of the Q material. Machoveč believes that it is essentially “memories of Jesus which had not been filtered through the sieve of the Easter faith”, which Paul and Mark assumed that everybody

¹ *A Marxist looks at Jesus.*, by Milan Machoveč. Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1976. 231 pp. £2.95.

² *Ibid*, page 217.

³ *Ibid*.

knew so well that they could leave it aside, material which is, however, “of considerable value in the attempt to reach back to the oldest and pre-Easter layers of the synoptic tradition— and so to Jesus himself” (page 172). There seems to be some muddle here; the most recent wave of Q studies would have saved Machoveč from this and perhaps in the process opened up for him a more congenial approach to the question of the “Easter faith”.

Recent studies in Germany, particularly a very fine book by a young Catholic scholar, Paul Hoffmann (*Studien zur Theologie der Logienquelle*, 1973), bring out the homogeneous character of the Q material and present it very plausibly as the crystallization of the theology of one of the earliest Christian communities. Bearing out what Heinz Tödt was claiming some ten years ago, in *The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition*, this approach to the Q material makes it out to be a set of wisdom sayings appropriate to the eschatological pause before the return of Christ in glory. The community for whom this collection of sayings was the precious precipitate of their Christian faith would have been eagerly awaiting the Parousia while allowing themselves to be inspired to “wise” conduct by the heavenly Jesus. They would have made the essential Christological identification of the Jesus whom they had followed and seen die as a martyr with the future Son of Man who would come in glory to take them to God—and the lack of interest in his passion and resurrection would simply mean that Jesus could be acclaimed and proclaimed as Lord *prior* to any explicit reflection on the significance of his death, and certainly before any word of his appearances from heaven. In other words, it becomes possible to envisage a Christian community for whom the death of Jesus could have been no surprise; for them he would have been in the line of prophets whose authenticity required martyrdom: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you”, and so on. And the concept of the resurrection of Jesus—a *fortiori* the reports of his appearances from heaven—would then have to be regarded as deriving from the initial perception of him as the one “who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:10). The Easter faith of the Q community would have been their recognition of the martyred prophet from Galilee as the exalted one who would bring in the kingdom of God which he had proclaimed and for which he had died. The concept of his resurrection would thus become a derivative of faith in his exaltation into heaven, while reports of his appearing after his death to privileged disciples would be possible only on the strength of an already sure conviction that he would appear from heaven in glory at the Parousia.

Far from being “memories of Jesus which had not been filtered

through the Easter faith”, then, the very notion of which few exegetes would allow, the collection of sayings in the Q material must rather be regarded as the expression of the Christian faith of a community which had discovered the identity of the dead Jesus and could now acclaim him as the Son of Man who would come at the last day, and so forth, and could direct their lives and frame their prayers in that conviction, without attaching any momentous significance to his death as such, and without treasuring stories of his appearances from heaven. It would not follow, of course, that we could now return to a state of Christian faith which might conceivably be prior to meditation on the Passion such as Mark provides, and to the tradition of resurrection appearances such as Luke and John represent. There is no way back, whether by nostalgia or by form criticism, to a Christian faith sloughed of its subsequent history. On the other hand, and Machoveč would surely welcome this, even the possibility that the concept of the resurrection of Christ might derive from faith in his exaltation, and that the accounts of his appearances after his death might depend on his first being identified as the Son of Man coming in his glory, and so on, challenges the Christian to think again about what the resurrection *means*.

Half of Machoveč's book is devoted to describing the kind of person Jesus was (“he himself was the attraction”, page 83), and outlining his message (“that emphasis on the future which makes a binding claim on man in his present: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’”, page 119). This stress on what Jesus was, and on what he himself said, is an admirable counterblast to that ignorance of the historical Jesus which is professed by the methodological scepticism of the existentialist form-critic and no less successfully preserved by the Christological dogmatism of the credal (cradle) Catholic - the one dissolving Jesus into the kerygma and the other concealing him in iconography. According to Machoveč, on the other hand, faith in Jesus as the Son of Man had already begun during his lifetime. Simon Peter would have been instrumental in bringing Jesus to understand his own role: “it is not Jesus who tells Peter about his messianic mission but rather Peter who announces it to Jesus” (page 127). Jesus's “messianic awareness” would have been constituted, clarified, and confirmed in discussion with those closest to him: “all genuinely mature human life is based on dialogue” (page 128). The famous scene at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8: 27 - 30), like so many other incidents in the gospels, should be regarded as a dramatic and compressed stylization of what must have been a long process of discovery. In a condensed and graphic form the identification of Jesus that must have taken months if not years is visualized as a single episode. But the discovery that the Kingdom of the Son of Man would be

ushered in by the same Jesus as died on the cross - the "Easter faith" - was possible at all, so Machoveč argues, only on the strength of a faith in Jesus that certainly faltered at his arrest but which nevertheless always existed on some other basis than that of the post-resurrection "appearances" (page 166). In other words, for Machoveč, the faith the disciples had in Jesus after his death was not radically different from the faith they had in him before his death: "a radical demand made on man as he stands here and now" (page 167). The resurrection was not originally preached as though it were the reanimation of a corpse and the return to life of a dead man. As Machoveč insists (page 167), it was not by chance that one current in early Christianity preferred to speak of "exaltation" and "glorification" rather than "resurrection"; these terms were much closer to the preaching of the glory of the Son of Man. In the first enthusiasm of their belief that the dead Jesus has been "exalted", so he says, it would not even have occurred to the disciples to look for the grave in Jerusalem - "they did not bother greatly with the tomb and the corpse" (page 168). Certainly, if they believed that Jesus's destiny was exaltation into heaven, it may well be wondered if the empty tomb mattered to the first Christians in quite the way that we usually suppose. In fact, of course, the report of the empty tomb upon which faith in the resurrection of Jesus is often thought to rest as it were empirically and objectively ("after all, the tomb was empty"), is more a celebration of the sacred radiance of the angelic presence in the tomb. The tomb sealed out of respect for the dead was broken open; the rock was rolled away from the shaft to the underworld; and the site of a burial was occupied by angels. Perhaps, after all, it would be better to follow exegetes (Catholics among them) who would rather read the story of the women's dawn visit to the empty tomb as the beginning of veneration for the holy sepulchre ("see the place where they laid him"). Certainly, as Machoveč notes, Paul's faith was based on grounds other than the fate of Jesus's body and the story of what was, or was not, found in the tomb. It is surely clear, for that matter, that the bones of a martyred prophet might well have crumbled to dust in the soil of the Holy Land while his first disciples proclaimed him as the Son of Man coming in his glory. It was not the miraculous disappearance of his body but their faith in the man he was that bade them acclaim him as the one in whom all things would be made new.

This confidence in the person of Jesus, as already indicated, is much stronger than most Christians today can manage. What Machoveč refers to as "the spiritual and moral power of a truly mature personality" would not suffice to attract their homage. The gap between the Marxist and his Christian readers will widen when they find that he deplores the triumph of "realized escha-

tology” in Christian thought. That is to say, Machoveč likes the stress on Jesus as the one in whose name all things will be made new *tomorrow*; what disconcerts him is the belief that all things were made new *yesterday*: “If anyone is in Christ he is (already) a new creation” (II Corinthians 5:17). As he says, a movement which originally saw its radical renewal somewhere ahead in the future, in the Jesus who would come as Son of Man bringing in the Kingdom of God, became gradually and almost imperceptibly the institutionalization of those who believe in one who had already made all things new. The vision of the exalted Jesus who would come was re-located as “appearances” of a risen Jesus who had already come, in the past, three days after his crucifixion. The vision of the future Son of Man coming in glory became the apostolic testimony to the appearances of the man who rose from the dead long ago.

In much of the detail Milan Machoveč is fascinating. Three examples must suffice. For instance, he argues that what the bystanders heard at the foot of the cross was in fact Jesus calling upon Elijah (Mark 15:35), and it would therefore be pious Christian interpretation to place, appropriately enough, the opening words of Psalm 22 on his lips. In fact it seems to be true that if Jesus had recited that verse in Aramaic it could not have been misheard as calling on Elijah. It is, of course, not a cry of despair - anything but; it is precisely the prayer of the innocent sufferer, the martyred prophet - the cry of dereliction is preacher’s rhetoric. Jesus died as the son of his people, as the greatest Jewish prophet in the tradition of Moses and Elijah (page 158). Secondly, according to Machoveč, the infancy narratives in Luke should be read as offering a variant of the Easter message written specifically for children: “The Christmas message” is “the projection of Easter joy into the mentality of children” (page 182). Thirdly, the Fourth Gospel, which (not having read J.A.T. Robinson) Machoveč dates towards the close of the first century, owes its strange style to John’s attempt - “not without success” - to give the reader “the experience of a person, of a strong, magnetic person, who was able to use his strength to make men other, better, than they were without him” (page 189). As he says, if Jesus himself had not been able to “change” people, his preaching of radical change - “metanoia” - would have been in vain. What Machoveč plainly regards as the completely unhistorical presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is nevertheless aimed simply at evoking for those who had no direct experience of it something of “his charismatic magic” (ibid). There have been much more inept accounts of the odd language of the Fourth Gospel.

Perhaps one might conclude, and thus settle accounts with Machoveč, by recording that, in his view (page 190), the Catholic

Church would have done better to follow the ascetic Arius from Libya who composed his theology in popular songs, rather than Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria who spent many years in exile, even as far abroad as Trier, for his faith in the true deity of Jesus Christ. In the end, Machoveč is an Arian and an atheist still. But his version of the story of Jesus of Nazareth is no mere celebration of the beauty of a great personality. As he says, (page 49), what is the meaning of the command to love one's neighbour (Mark 12:31) when today—in Prague and in many other places— despite the scientific study of the social and political situation—“and all the factors to which Marx and the movement based on him have drawn attention”—*it is not yet established how a more human life can be effectively brought about?*

The story of Jesus is that there are many occasions when one must suffer injustice rather than contribute to it, and that even if there were only a tormented dying on the cross, Jesus is still the victor. That is the threshold, so Milan Machoveč believes (page 34), “where the deepest mystery of the New Testament appears”. As he says, it depends on Christians whether he, and hundreds of thousands of others, go any further.

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