

# Gospel or Religious Language?:<sup>340</sup> Engels on the Peasant War

by John Maguire

Dialogue between Marxists and Christians is no longer surprising. It seems to me, however, that it frequently takes place on far too wide a plane. Marxism and Christianity are juxtaposed as two competitive all-embracing 'philosophies of man', and the discussion is conducted in ultimate, cosmological and metaphysical terms. I realize that this is all very well, and probably very necessary too; it does not, however, seem to me to exhaust all the interesting and important questions that Christians and Marxists, or Marxist Christians, should explore.

I write now for Christians who, in their understanding of society, social change and political controversy, recognize that Marx has made a fundamental and essential contribution to our diagnosis of social ills and our prescription for their cure. Along with these positions, they (probably necessarily) accept Marx's criticism of the repression, physical and psychological, which have at times been perpetrated and justified in the name of Christianity.

I will assume, then, that if my reader has any quarrels with Marxism, it is not on the broad issues that I have just mentioned. We will then be able to look at another kind of question, which I think is equally interesting and important.

Perhaps I can best lead up to this question by quoting a passage from Alasdair MacIntyre's *Marxism & Christianity*:

'the small groups of self-styled humanists . . . present a picture of a pathetic kind, being on the whole less successful than the orthodox churches in gaining a hearing. Only one secular doctrine retains the scope of traditional religion in offering an interpretation of human existence by means of which men may situate themselves in the world and direct their actions to ends that transcend those offered by their immediate situation: Marxism' (p. 10).

It seems to me that interpretations of human existence in this sense have something like the rôle of scientific theories. They suggest questions, and give us broad clues and hints as to how to find the answers. When they are faced with events which they can neither reject nor make sense of, they have to adapt or die. At the risk of sounding very pretentious indeed, I would suggest that one interesting way of looking at Engels's analysis of a particular 'religious' struggle, in the context of Marxism and Christianity, is as a 'making-sense' of the data within a certain theory, one which claims centrally

to contest the Christian one. I shall do this by considering a passage from his work entitled *The Peasant War in Germany*.<sup>1</sup>

### *Engels's Analysis*

Engels begins the passage we're studying by explaining why Germany, as late as the sixteenth century, was still but a loose and even fragile collection of small princedoms. Within these princedoms he then tells us, there were three camps: the *Catholic* camp, or those who wanted to defend the *status quo*; the *Lutheran* camp, whose aim was what we might now call bourgeois reform—the liberation of the rising towns and their burghers from feudal constraints—; and the *revolutionary* camp, supported by plebeians and the peasants. It is important to grasp here a point which anticipates much of Engels's argument: at this stage, the religious names are used to designate *political*, rather than primarily 'religious' groupings. Engels believes, quite rightly, that what is going on is a power struggle between classes, and I would like to begin by looking at this.

The burghers were, as I have said, fighting the power of feudalism, which meant fighting the large princes and the established Catholic church. The position of the third group, the plebeians and peasants, as Engels presents it, is very reminiscent of Marx's treatment of the proletariat in contemporary Germany. Engels tells us that:

'at that time the plebeians were the only class that stood outside the existing official society. . . . They were unpropertied and rightless in every respect; their living conditions never even brought them into direct contact with the existing institutions, ignored them completely. They were a living symptom of the decay of the feudal and guild-burgher society and at the same time the first precursors of the modern bourgeois society' (102).

Six years before this, in his study of contemporary Germany, Marx had written of the proletariat that they were:

'a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, . . . which is, in short, a *total loss* of humanity and which can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society, as a particular class, is the proletariat.'<sup>2</sup>

Engels here uses a model, or theory of the political process, which, emerges also in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and *Class Struggles in France*. It is the central contribution of historical materialism to politics, and merits much attention in its own right. Here, although we cannot trace its development and exhaust its

<sup>1</sup>The passage in question is that reprinted in *On Religion* by Marx and Engels (Moscow, n.d.), pp. 97-118. References directly following quotations are to this source.

<sup>2</sup>Bottomore, T. B. (Ed. and Trans.) *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (London, 1963), p. 58. In development of this and related themes see my *Marx's Paris Writings: an Analysis* (Dublin, 1972) especially chapters one and two.

details, we shall see that the application of this model for the understanding of the political process is crucial to Engels's analysis. The model may be crudely characterized as having two phases. The first is the phase of situation, where the parties to the process are situated in relation to the economic and social structure. The second phase is that of explanation, where the actions and interactions of these parties are made intelligible in relation to their situation. Engels is quite consciously applying this model in the present analysis. He is seeking to situate two camps, the Lutheran/Bourgeois and the Revolutionary, and their leaders, Martin Luther and Thomas Münzer. He tells us that 'each fully represented his party by his doctrine as well as by his character and actions', and goes on to tell us that:

'from 1517 to 1525 Luther underwent quite the same changes as the present-day German constitutionalists did between 1846 and 1849, and which are undergone by every bourgeois party which, placed for a while at the head of the movement, is outflanked by the plebeian-proletarian party standing behind it' (104).

In his essay of 1844, which I have already quoted, Marx tells us that in a 'partial, or merely political revolution'

'a determinate class undertakes, from its particular situation, a general emancipation of society. This class emancipates society as a whole, but only on condition that the whole of society is in the same situation as this class; for example, that it possesses or can easily acquire money or culture.'<sup>1</sup>

This points to a process of attenuation which Engels invokes in the present case. At first, Luther's doctrine and tactics were relatively undefined: he was allied with all opposition groups against a common enemy, the Church of Rome and her supporters in Germany. But after a while, when as much as any thinking man could desire had been achieved, some men unfortunately went on thinking. The plebeian/proletarian group, as Engels puts it, took Luther's declaration of war on Rome as a signal that:

'the day had come to wreak vengeance upon all their oppressors, [whereas Luther's party] only wished to break the power of the clergy, the dependence upon Rome and the Catholic hierarchy, and to enrich themselves on the confiscation of church property. The parties defined their positions, and each found its spokesman. Luther had to choose between them. He . . . did not hesitate a single moment. He dropped the popular elements of the movement, and took the side of the burghers, the nobility and the princes' (105).

<sup>1</sup>Bottomore, p. 55.

Engels allows that Luther had, from his point of view, very good reasons for this decision. Any continuation of the conflict would put at risk the considerable gains already made. A rift between the proletarian and bourgeois elements in his hitherto rather loose coalition opened up the twin dangers of either a crushing of the whole movement, with the restoration of Catholic power, or else the burghers' being outflanked by the plebeian/proletarians.

Luther's turning to the princes was not, however, sufficient to stop the spread of the plebeian revolt:

'a few more successes, and the whole of Germany would be in flames, Luther surrounded and perhaps piked as a traitor, and the burgher reform swept away by the tide of a peasant-plebeian revolution. . . . Compared with the hordes of peasants, the servants of the Roman Sodom were innocent lambs, sweet-tempered children of God' (107).

Luther now sold out completely to the princes. Having previously justified the attack on all established authority, ecclesiastical and princely, from the Bible, he now drew therefrom a quite different moral:

'Princedom by the grace of God, resigned obedience, even serfdom, were sanctioned with the aid of the Bible. Not the peasant revolt alone, but Luther's own mutiny against ecclesiastical and secular authority was thereby disavowed, and not only the popular movement, but the burgher movement as well, were betrayed to the princes' (108-9).

I shall briefly conclude this account of Engels's analysis by referring to his contrasting of Luther's position and actions with those of Thomas Münzer, the plebeians' leader. Münzer's father was said to have been executed by the Count of Stolberg. Thomas himself at an early age became an opponent of the Church of Rome, and Engels tells us that as a young chaplain, while a brilliant theologian, he nevertheless showed great contempt for the sacraments, the ritual of the mass, and other observances. He was greatly influenced by medieval mystics, and near Zwickau he encountered one of those chiliastic sects which Engels calls 'fanatical' and of which he says:

'[their] momentary dejection and retirement concealed the incessantly growing opposition of the lowest strata of society to the prevailing conditions, and . . . , with growing unrest, [they] now came into the open ever more boldly and persistently' (109).

Given the situation-phase of our model and its parallels with Marx's treatment of contemporary Germany, we should not be surprised by Engels's presentation of the peasant-plebeian group as the group sold out by the burgher movement. He goes on to say

that Münzer's continued revolutionary articulation of the position of this group went right beyond even the terms of the kind of society the burgher reformers were as yet only seeking to establish. Engels describes this as a 'sally beyond both the present and even the future' (102) and 'the anticipation of Communism by fantasy' (103); it sought, he tells us:

'a society in which there would be no class differences or private property and no state authority independent of or foreign to the members of that society. All the existing authorities, insofar as they refused to submit and join the revolution, were to be overthrown, all work and all property shared in common, and complete equality introduced' (112-3).

This programme, Engels judges, was less a list of contemporary plebeian demands than a visionary anticipation of the conditions necessary for the emancipation of the proletariat, who would be the class 'in, but not of', the bourgeois society which was still in its birth-throes.

#### *Engels Rejects the 'Religious' Interpretation*

I have already said that where the names 'Lutheran' and 'Catholic', and, indeed, other religious designations, have so far occurred, they are used simply to distinguish what Engels sees as political groups, involved in a class struggle. I have separated out the political analysis and presented it on its own (although Engels himself does not always do this) because I believe that it underlines a fundamental point in the logic of his treatment. This emerges now, when he tells us that:

'In spite of the latest experiences, the German ideology still sees nothing except violent theological bickering in the struggles that ended in the Middle Ages. If only the people of that time, say our home-bred historians and sages, had come to an understanding concerning heavenly things, there would have been no ground whatever to quarrel over earthly affairs' (97-8).

Engels argues, as we have already seen, that the struggles of the sixteenth century were really a matter of what he calls 'material class interests':

'Although the class struggles of the day were carried on under religious shibboleths, and though the interests, requirements, and demands of the various classes were concealed behind a religious screen, this changed nothing in the matter and is easily explained by the conditions of the time' (98).

The 'conditions of the time' amounted to the fact that Christianity held a position of dominance right through the political and intellec-

tual life of the western world. It was 'the most general synthesis and sanction of the existing feudal domination' (99). This being so, the official doctrines, in everything from theology to natural science, were stated in religious terms and on religious assumptions. The result, Engels says, was that:

'all social and political, revolutionary doctrines were necessarily at the same time . . . theological heresies.'

We can now return to see the full implications, within Engels's argument, of his distinguishing the three main camps as 'Catholic', 'Lutheran' and 'Revolutionary'.

### *Engels's Interpretation*

Having analysed what he saw as really a political struggle of economically-located material class interests, and rejected the 'religious' distortion of this struggle, Engels gives us his interpretation of the true significance of the two opposition groups' religious doctrines.

(i) *Luther*: Engels recognizes that Luther did in fact draw much of the justification of his early movement from the Bible, and moreover that this was the most powerful means he could have employed to inflame a mass movement:

'Luther had put a powerful weapon into the hands of the plebeian movement by translating the Bible. Through the Bible he contrasted the feudalized Christianity of his day with the unassuming Christianity of the first century, and the decaying feudal society with a picture of a society that knew nothing of the complex and artificial feudal hierarchy. The peasants . . . made extensive use of this instrument against the princes, the nobility, and the clergy' (108).

As we have already seen, however, Luther was quite capable, after his political decision to abandon the plebeians, of justifying a diametrically opposite analysis and prescription equally well on biblical grounds. 'So much', I suspect Engels would say, 'for his arguing from religious premisses to conclusions about the world; the opposite is in fact the case'.

(ii) *Münzer*: We have already seen something of the career of Thomas Münzer, and of the development of his ideas about religion and other matters. Engels outlines the early impact on him of millenarian and chiliastic schools of thought. At the beginning of his active career, Engels tells us, he was 'still a theologian', couching his argument in religious terms, grounding it on religious premisses. After Luther's change of tack, Münzer continued to appeal to the Princes to root out the idolators and other enemies of God, threatening the while dire penalties for non-compliance with the invitation. It was nevertheless declined, as Engels tells us:

'But these appeals to the princes were of no avail, whereas revolutionary sentiments among the people grew day by day. Münzer, whose ideas became ever more sharply defined and bolder, now broke resolutely away from the Burgher Reformation, and henceforth became an outright political agitator' (111).

He attacked, according to Engels, not just Catholicism but the very basis of Christianity itself. He preached a kind of pantheism, called in question the Bible as the sole or infallible revelation, saying that the real revelation was reason, which has existed among all peoples at all times. Christ was a mere man like us, and the Eucharist is merely a commemorative meal. Münzer preached that there is no hell and no damnation beyond, only 'man's evil lusts and greed'; this last doctrine, Engels presents as the complement to Münzer's teaching that:

'Heaven is . . . not a thing of another world, and is to be sought in this life and it is the task of believers to establish this Heaven, the kingdom of God, here on earth' (111).

Engels thus presents Münzer as growing steadily away from religious terms and arguments, the more he pursues the liberation of the plebeians. This movement can mean at least two different things: either the gradual outgrowing of a hitherto uncriticized illusion, or the casting off of a consciously adopted cloak. That at least the latter is involved in Münzer's case is made clear by Engels:

'the arch-heretical fundamental idea is easily discerned in all his writings, and he obviously took the biblical cloak much less in earnest than many a disciple of Hegel in modern times . . . [He had an impact] on the one hand, on the people, whom he addressed in the only language they could then understand, that of religious prophecy; and, on the other hand, on the initiated, to whom he could disclose his ultimate aims' (117).

### *The Question Stated*

I have now outlined Engels's analysis of the period in question, his rejection of the 'religious' interpretation, and his own interpretation of the data on which the 'religious' interpretation is, as he sees it, based. I would like now to suggest some questions about Engels's argument which seem to me to thrust themselves on the Christian. I have said that I am dealing with a specific bit of historical analysis rather than approaching the question cosmologically. The question arises, however, of whether the specific bit of historical analysis is valid or not; and I am not a historian. This, however, does not seriously upset either me or my argument. We may firstly suspend judgment on the disputes in historical methodology and historiography which such an analysis might arouse, on the grounds

that these relate to precisely the kind of metaphysical and cosmological discussion ruled out at the start: *ex hypothesi*, neither I nor my audience are here calling in question the basis of historical materialism. Secondly, and granted this first point, we are committed to accepting that something very like Engels's analysis and interpretation will apply to some significant historical periods and events in a way in which liberal, bourgeois and idealist accounts have no hope of applying, and also that the general lines of that analysis and interpretation, at the very least, apply in this present case. My concern is not so much with 'the ultimate meaning of the whole of human history' as with the kinds of things we are prepared to say about specific historical periods and events, most notably of course our own, using Engels's account of one specific period as a dramatic focus.

### *Some Questions About Engels's Treatment*

The first question, and really the central one, is one to which Engels would give a negative answer: can Christianity inspire and sustain revolution? We have already seen enough from Engels's argument to find grounds for an answer in the affirmative, and even perhaps for suspecting that Engels himself must be constrained so to answer. But the whole point of Engels's claim is that it is in only a superficial and ultimately misleading sense, if at all, that Christianity inspired the revolution.

This seems at first surprising, when we read the arguments advanced by Luther and Münzer: Christian terms and beliefs seem to be the very essence of their message, rather than mere vehicles for conveying it. But, as we have already seen, Engels explains this by the fact that Christianity happened to dominate life and thought at the time, and that attacks on the prevailing conditions therefore had to employ Christian rhetoric in order to be intelligible and politically effective. Here, I think, it can be suggested that Engels himself misses a point. He tells us in tones of disbelief, that:

'Equality of nobleman and peasant, of patrician, privileged burgher and plebeian, abolition of the the *corvée*, ground rents, taxes, privileges, and at least the most crying differences in property—those were demands advanced with more or less determination as natural implications of the early Christian doctrine' (101).

This passage, and Engels's interpretation of the arguments put to the people by Luther and Münzer based on biblical sources, do violence to the simple fact that people *were* actually looking at the world, and condemning it and suggesting and pursuing an alternative, in the light of their Christian beliefs. At the moment, this is no more than an assertion against Engels; it is the assertion which I would like to spell out.



As I have already suggested, there is a sense in which Engels would accept that Christianity did inspire the burghers to political revolution, and the plebeians to demand even more radical changes. He explains this appearance, however, in the following way:

'the so-called religious wars of the sixteenth century involved primarily positive material class interests . . . although the class struggles of that day were carried on under religious shibboleths' (98).

It is, I think, reasonably clear why both Marx and Engels see it as important, and I believe rightly so, to make this kind of point. One reason we have already seen in the model of the political process: it is that the ideologies disseminated by ruling classes and by particular classes seeking political revolutions are a combination of self-seeking and hypocrisy. They justify the position and aspirations of the class in question, and tend to persuade other classes that this class represents, and can achieve, their best interests. A second reason is the closely related point, basic to historical materialism, that ideas do not govern the world, that, as Marx puts it, our social consciousness is determined by our social being, rather than the other way about.

This line of argument is often tacitly regarded as an extremely effective, indeed a 'knock-down', refutation of what I shall for the moment continue to call the 'religious approach to things', carrying the implicit rider that religious positions are mere cynical cloaks for oppression and treachery. It does not seem to me, however, that if we accept the broad lines of historical materialism as a theory of society, we should reject the notion that religious positions 'reflect class interests'. Given, especially, that recent interpretations of Marx and Engels are beginning to obey these authors' frequent injunctions against a sclerosed and simplistic application of the theory, it seems to me that a Christian quite coherently might not alone *accept* but even perhaps *assert* that religious positions are about societies which are based on classes, and therefore in some important sense 'reflect class interests'.

The point where we might pause is where it is suggested that this acceptance and assertion have fatal consequences for the 'religious approach' to things. This suggestion, I believe, comes near to the crux, as it questions a fundamental claim which the Christian would think it essential to maintain. The suggestion implies ultimately that in all cases where people are speaking from what Engels would call the 'religious point of view' they are accepting something unreal, living in a dream world. It would be accepted that the language of this dream world could provide reasons for acting to the people deluded by it, and even that this language could give us clues as to their real situation (much as a child's announcement that the boggy

man has taken up residence in the bedroom does not preclude, and may be in fact causally connected with, there being a real person, motivated perhaps by a 'positive, material class interest' in the bedroom). Just as the child's world of bogey men can sometimes at least correlate with reality, can even by such correlation prompt the child to action which is rational by real standards, but is nevertheless an illusory language pertaining to an illusory world, so also, in the Marxist's eyes, the fact that religious positions are correlated with real social situations, and can even at times point social groups in the right political direction, does not disprove the fundamental point that religious language is an illusory language, referring to an illusory 'other world'.

It seems to me that Christianity would want to meet head on this claim that while religious views could give clues as to social reality, and even at times inspire people to the right attitude towards social reality, they are in an important sense divorced from reality, and must be rejected if reality as such is to be encountered. I believe that the claim can be met and answered effectively, but not necessarily in the terms in which the question first arises. If Christianity is to meet the claim, it has to be able to give an account of certain data, on the lines of my comparison between interpretations of human existence and scientific theories. It seems to me that Christianity can and does claim to account for these data.

I cannot go into this question in great detail; it might, however, suffice for the moment if I say what I mean by Christians accepting that these are data, and claiming to account for them. It involves the claim that Luther's initial revolutionary (or pseudo-revolutionary?) zeal and his subsequent watering-down of his position, as well as Münzer's continuing revolutionary zeal, can be made sense of by somebody who does not abandon the 'religious approach to things' in order to do so. In fact, it seems to me, Christianity would claim to have a particularly good set of terms for appraising and condemning people whose thirst for social justice is slaked by the first sun shower, who allow their initial demand for a good society to be whittled down until it is co-extensive with the demands of their own group or class, and for people who go even further, and, through self-seeking or cowardice, succeed in betraying not one revolution but two, not just society's cause but their own class's as well. It seems to me that it is vital for Christians, regarding Engels's account, not to concede the point that when we get down to talking about *reality* we must drop our 'religious language' and adopt 'political language' in a sense in which 'religious language' is apart from, and less real than, 'political language'. This point brings me to the fundamental presupposition on which Engels's interpretation rests.

This major presupposition, which Engels shares with Marx, emerges in an argument which we have already noted; it is where Engels attacks the view that:

'if only the people of that time . . . had come to an understanding concerning heavenly things, there would have been no grounds whatever to quarrel over earthly affairs' (98).

It is the presupposition that Christianity is really about 'other worldly things'. Once Christianity concedes this point to Marxism, the Marxist critique is triumphant. Granted that we do not concede this presupposition, we find that Marx and Engels put religion on trial before a rather Kafkaesque tribunal: insofar as religion is sincerely religion, it is a set of abstract platitudes, at best useless, at worst harmful to the advancement of humanity; insofar as it says anything about the social and political reality of its time, it has ceased to be religion. The present study, and Engels's studies of the origins of Christianity, make one wonder just what Marx and Engels want Christianity to be, and to be about; as if, for instance, Christianity could have come about in any manner significantly different from its actual origin among a bunch of outcasts who shared the discontents of the time, in social and political conditions socially and politically explicable.

Thus Engels interprets Münzer as necessarily becoming less religious the more he remains faithful to the revolution. We have seen already Engels's list of the religious articles which Münzer calls in question; the culmination, however, for Engels, is Münzer's notion that:

'Heaven is, therefore, not a thing of another world, and is to be sought in this life and it is the task of believers to establish this Heaven, this kingdom of God, here on earth' (111).

Thus, for Engels, Münzer's becoming an 'outright political agitator' necessarily involves his rejecting more and more of the Christian position, and approaching complete atheism. This raises the problem for the Christian in a new way: the Marxist can grant that in some circumstances religion can indeed *inspire* revolution, but still claim that it cannot sustain a thoroughgoing revolutionary politics, that if such a politics is to be sustained, religion must be whittled down and disappear at a limit. This would validate the major presupposition which I isolated in Marx's and Engels's approach, that religion is ultimately tied to another world, less real than the social and political world.

If this is an erroneous major presupposition, it is not without a foundation. I would suggest that a Christian who accepts the Marxist critique of society must also accept the parallel critique of society which condemns the very notion of a 'religious language', a notion which we have taken for granted up to this point. If Marx and Engels are in an important sense wrong in identifying Christianity with an abstract 'religious language', it cannot be denied that

Christianity frequently presents itself as so identified. Marx and Engels did not invent this 'religious language', they found it ready to hand. It is because of this 'religious language' that the Marxist sees Christians who fight not for a better Church but for a better world as having progressed from religion to politics.

I would suggest, therefore, that the error common to the Marxist interpretation of religion and to the understanding of religion which it criticizes is to use a distinct 'religious language' as the criterion for the application or withholding of the name 'Christian'—whether a person or movement is 'Christian' can be decided by looking at the kind of language they use, at their words for describing the world. Once we adopt this criterion, we must conclude that 'religious' and 'political' language are two quite different things, and that the former only 'expresses', and that in most cases inadequately, a reality to which only the latter is really adequate. We cannot then quarrel with the interpretation which says that the kingdom as Münzer conceives it is a political and not a religious programme.

I do not deny that Christianity has in some sense a distinct 'religious language'—there is clearly the language of the sacraments. What I do deny is that Christianity is committed to describing in 'religious language' what others describe in 'political language'; that it is about life, but only at one remove. Perhaps the Marxist case would be, at the eleventh hour, sustained, if it emerged that Christianity must of necessity succumb to this tendency to reify a distinct 'religious language'; I take consolation in the fact that something very like the critique of 'religious language' comes, within the Christian community itself, from the theology of Renewal. This appears to me to be a vital point: it is important that Christianity, within its own self-understanding, should be able to make such valid appraisal as is made from outside by the Marxist case.

At the root of the problem of 'religious language', alongside the confusion about sorting out sacramental language, there is, I suggest, another confusion. That is the mistake of seeing religion as a segment of the life of a society in the same sense as that in which politics, for example, is a segment of that life. I suppose that this is really the other side of the 'religious language' coin; it issues in religion's finding a furrow which it can plough for itself, rather than affecting our attitude to the furrows which are already present in our social and political reality.

I would argue that the Christian can in fact account for the data of Engels's account along these lines. There is, however, one final difficulty, which must be mentioned. There is one remaining source of tension between the two outlooks, and that is a fundamental and a creative one. In some sense, even granted the large amount of deeply common ground which we have noted, the two interpretations of human existence compete in some essentials. The Marxist still claims that Christianity is positively harmful, an obstacle to

human progress. The Christian believes that there are certain fundamental questions which the Marxist has left out of his horizon.

On the first point, that Christianity is an obstacle to real human progress, I shall still avoid the cosmological treatment, and consider simply the evidence as it emerges from Engels's study and our reaction to it. On this evidence, once we have questioned the major presupposition which entails that Münzer's radicalization necessarily was synonymous with his abandoning Christianity, I believe that there is at least a very good argument on the Christian side; we need not find strange, as did Engels, the claim that the kingdom involves:

'a society where there would be no class differences or private property and no state authority independent of or foreign to the members of that society . . . [with] all work and all property shared in common, and complete equality introduced' (112-13).

Once the major presupposition is questioned, it no longer seems so strange that such a programme should follow as a 'natural implication' of the Christian position.

There remain the points on which the Christian might not wish his position to be taken as in every respect one with the Marxist's. I shall mention just one central point. It relates to Engels's argument that while Münzer drew much inspiration from millenarian, chiliastic, and apocalyptic sources, as well as from the ideal of early Christianity, in formulating his position, this revolution was necessarily only a dim foreshadowing of the Marxist conception of revolution. He allows that:

'even on the eve of the February Revolution, there was more than one modern Communist sect that had not such a well-stocked theoretical arsenal as was "Münzer's" in the sixteenth century' (112).

Nevertheless, he argues:

'this sally beyond the present and even the future could be nothing but violent and fantastic, and of necessity fell back into the narrow limits set by the contemporary situation. The attack on private property, the demand for common ownership was bound to resolve into a primitive organization of charity; vague Christian equality could at best resolve into civic "equality before the law" ' (102-3).

I am inclined to ask where was 'Marxist equality' at the time. Although in some very important senses very valid, Engels's criticism has possibly one flaw, and that is the danger of arguing from too univocal a notion of revolution, of giving our analysis and prescription too much rather than too little content. If Christianity must accept Marxist analysis as the statement of 'the questions of our age',

at least some emphasis must be given to the fact that Marxism is a statement *of our age*. The question of revolution does not become inappropriate merely because at a particular stage a particular type of answer is not forthcoming, or even because there seems to be no clear answer at all. It seems to me that one of the merits of Christianity is its commitment to constantly raising the inappropriate question, calling in question even our formulation of revolution itself.

## **Eucharist: Meaning to Life**

### **by Gerard Mackrell, S.M.M.**

It is now some time since Christians tried to find a point of agreement on the Eucharist. The 'Agreed Statement' was the result of discussion between the Catholic Church and the Church of England. Catholics have always been rather cynical about the idea of the Church of England being able to speak as one body, but in this case it appears that there is some doubt as to whether the Catholic Church, in England—never mind the world, was speaking for the whole Catholic body. But that is not a point I wish to pursue. As I see it the terms of reference were too narrow, and the whole issue totally irrelevant in the context of the needs of the world of today. Both Catholics and non-Catholics could and should have used a broader front which would have led to some statement appealing to the needs of all men, Christian and non-Christian alike. For if the 'Agreed Statement' has a Barchester remoteness about it, the Eucharist has not. Today, more than ever, it can have a meaning and relevance; it can offer to man, if not a solution, then the symbol of a solution, to his problems and questionings. We may group these under three headings: (1) Human Dignity; (2) Love; (3) Hope.

#### *Human Dignity*

Chapter 6 of St John's Gospel begins by relating a miracle of the feeding of 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. It was an action of the kind that would appeal most to the Jews of Christ's day, and the account of it least to men of today. The miraculous element in the Gospel—using 'miraculous' in the strictest sense—is precisely what makes many switch off from what otherwise seems a promising philosophy of life and switch on to Communism, birth control, better means of agriculture; not that these are antithetical;