

THE CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION

IT must not be thought, because the Christian Church condemns Marxist Communism, that she thereby identifies herself with those who attack it because it seeks to uproot the 'existing order.' The Christian's case against Communism is not that it is revolutionary but that it is counter-revolutionary; that it is, in theory and practice, diametrically opposed to the principles of the Christian Revolution, to the Christian conception of Society, to the Christian conception of human personality and destiny. The Christian Church has a long memory, and she cannot fail to recognize in salient features of the Hegelian-Marxist philosophy a resuscitation of the pre-Christian and pagan conceptions from which the Christian Revolution delivered civilization. This reactionary re-paganization of society is by no means a peculiar or distinctive feature of Communism, but it is in Communism that it finds at present its most explicit, logical and ruthless expression. A sincere and authentic Christianity will not oppose Marxism by joining forces with liberalism, individualist-capitalism, bourgeoisism and suchlike representatives of the 'existing order' (which it finds hardly less abhorrent), but by reasserting the principles of the Christian Revolution and by revitalizing its forces. In these pages we shall attempt, so far as space permits, to sketch the basic conceptions of this Christian Revolution, as a concrete and dynamic historical reality, with a view to suggesting how it may again become a real, positive and dominant factor in social reconstruction.

Because the Christian Revolution was bloodless; because its action was so unostentatious that even contemporaries were scarcely aware of its existence; because, finally, it was so thorough and far-reaching in its effects that it has left us with no standard of comparison with which we could adequately contrast post-Christian with pre-Christian society (for subsequent social philosophies, even the most expressly anti-Christian, have been impregnated with many of its ideals—Bolshevism itself is in many

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respects a 'Christian heresy'), we are apt to forget that such a revolution has ever taken place. Yet the study of the social conditions of pagan antiquity, as set forth in such works as Fustel de Coulange's *La Cité antique*, reveals the immensity of the transformation which Christianity effected in civil society; a transformation so profoundly revolutionary that the ephemeral upheavals which we dignify nowadays with the name of revolutions pale by comparison. We are not here concerned to detail the corruptions and misery which, beneath the magnificent administrative efficiency of the Greek City-states and the Roman Empire, infected pre-Christian society; we are concerned only with the *source* of all those corruptions, the underlying naturalistic conception of Society, with its corollary of the omnipotence of the secular collectivity, which we rediscover, in a new form, in Marxist theory and Soviet practice: the conception which in effect repudiates the intrinsic value of human personality and reduces it to a mere functional utility in the political-economic machine.

The very idea of the Graeco-Roman State was saturated with naturalism, that is to say with the doctrine that visible and temporal realities are the sole end of all human aspirations and efforts. Except in a few esoteric philosophical and mystical circles, which exercised little or no influence on public life, it was impossible to conceive anything as superior to the State. The State sufficed in all things and for all things, It absorbed or tended to absorb every human activity, and the individual **had** no rights except to serve it. **In** theory the State was an Absolute, in practice an all-devouring Moloch.¹

This view of society was, **if** we make exception **of** some **of** the later Stoics, fully accepted by the best minds **of** the time. The absolutism of Plato's conception of the State is familiar to all. For him Ethics and Politics were identical: the 'good man' and the 'good citizen' were synonymous terms. Aristotle fully imbibed his master's

¹ Prof. E. Magnin : *L'État : conception païenne, conception chrétienne* (Paris, 1931).

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teaching and indeed, as Archbishop Temple has shown,² accentuated rather than modified it. Religion was yet more powerless than philosophy to deliver men from the crushing power of the State, for it was itself a State-concern. The apotheoses of the Caesars were not so much an empty sycophantic adulation as the formal recognition of a *fait accompli*; embodiments of the deified State, the secular rulers were, when compared with the remote divinities of Olympus, the real and ever present Gods of classical antiquity. 'The State was everything; the individual nothing, for there was no norm of human life and conduct independent of the civil sphere.'³

It was the teaching and influence of Jesus Christ that changed all that and instigated the most thorough-going revolution in history. Not that He Himself was directly concerned with the political, social or economic order. On the contrary, He insisted that His Kingdom was not of this world. He was no pretender to the thrones of Herod or Caesar. He fled earthly rulership; His concern was with the sanctification and salvation of the souls of men. He expressly declined to take sides in political controversy—Render to *Caesar*—or economic dispute—Who has made Me a judge *or* divider over you? But precisely because Christianity is not concerned with the government of civil society, it completely revolutionizes it.⁴

For Christianity did not seek to overthrow pagan social theory and conditions by attacking them on their own ground. It did not concern itself with them. *Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven.* It was frankly and unashamedly other-worldly. But just because it was other-worldly it induced a state of mind, an atmosphere, in which the old conditions could no longer exist. It did not attack slavery; but it revealed to the civilized world a new conception of human nature and destiny, gave a new transcendental

² William Temple : *Christianity and the State* (pp. 6, sqq.).

³ Philipp Funk : *Der Einzelne, die Kirche und der Staat in Mittelalter*, in *Hochland*, Nov., 1933, p. 8.

⁴ E. Magnin : *op. cit.*, p. 21.

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significance to the idea of Service, in which slavery died a natural death. It did not attack the social degradation of woman or the political degradation of the family; but these things could not breathe the same air with it. It did not attack Caesar; but it put Caesar in his right place precisely by emphasizing the divine sanction of his authority. *The Kingdom of heaven is like to leaven*

It was the *supernatural* and *religious* doctrines of Christianity which effected such profound changes in *civil* society. It was, above all, the revelation of the Divine transcendence which displaced the divinized collectivity :

Hitherto Religion and the State had been one and the same thing; each nation adored its own gods who in their turn governed their respective peoples. The same code regulated human obligations to the gods and to the civil authority. Instead of which Jesus Christ taught that His Kingdom was not of this world. He separated religion from secular government. Religion, being no longer a temporal affair, intervened as little as possible in earthly matters. *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's*. It was the first time that the distinction had been strictly drawn between God and the State . . . Jesus proclaims that religion is no longer a State-run concern and that to obey Caesar is no longer the same thing as to obey God.⁵

It was this, to the pagan world utterly new, conception of God which set free the individual from the constraint which the omnipotent State imposed upon him and which had consequently suppressed and atrophied the noblest potentialities in human nature. Without this conception there can be no Christian Revolution and no 'Christian Social principles.' As Mr. Maurice Reckitt has finely written :

Jesus in His teaching undoubtedly 'revealed principles,' but what He primarily revealed was the nature of God. He came to the rescue of the world with a power from outside the world, and established a Divine Society through which that power should henceforward be available. This is the basis, in miracle and in grace, upon which every challenge of the Church to the

⁵ E. Magnin : *op. cit.*, p. 22.

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false values of the world must be clearly founded. Not 'When wilt Thou save the people,' but 'Praise to the Holiest,' because by Him 'a second Adam to the fight and to *the* rescue came,' is the true hymn of the social revolution.⁶

Christianity, in revealing the true nature of God, thereby held a new mirror up to human nature. It revealed that a human being was something more than a *homo politicus* or a *homo economicus*; that human destiny was something higher than temporal and civil well-being. It showed, consequently, that there was a higher norm of human life or conduct than secular authority; that integral human nature had higher exigencies than Caesar could or should supply; that, in fine, the secular collectivity was not absolute, but itself derived its rights and its authority from a divine authority which transcended it. Thus Christianity introduced to the world the new and revolutionary idea **of** the individual conscience as independent of and ultimately superior to the political authority. 'The text from the *Acts of the Apostles*: "We must obey God rather than man" proved to be the basic principle of an entirely new constitution of human society—the principle of the liberty of conscience and the primacy of its rights."⁷

Thus baldly stated, the principles of the Christian Revolution might seem indistinguishable from those of liberalist individualism if not of anarchism. Liberalism, in fact, undoubtedly derives its distinctive philosophy from Christian ideas, but it is a complete distortion of them—the inevitable outcome of the endeavour to retain specifically Christian ideals whilst rejecting Christ and His Church. For, in the first place, Christianity did not overthrow the secular authority; on the contrary, it established it, and repeatedly recognized its divine sanction, no matter how unworthily it was exercised. Christ expressly recognized the imperative nature of the obligations due to Caesar; He only asserted that they were not co-extensive with the obligations due to God. He recognized Pilate's

⁶Faith and Society, p. 31.

⁷P. Funk : *op. loc. cit.*

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power to put Him to death; He only asserted that Pilate would not have this power if it were not given from on high (Jn. 19, 9-11). It was precisely this reservation which was new and revolutionary: the idea that the authority of the secular collectivity was not absolute but derived. It was this hitherto unheard-of doctrine that was constantly reasserted by St. Paul and the Apologists of the Second Century; by the martyrs before the magistrates; by Augustine, Aquinas, Suarez. The Christian conception of the authority of the political organism remains constant and unchanged whether it is wielded by an Augustus or a Nero, a Constantine or a Julian, a Charlemagne or a Stalin.

But the fundamental reason why essential Christianity is incompatible alike with the secular absolutism of pagan or neo-pagan collectivism and with liberalist individualism is that it is itself embodied in a social organism which claims absolutism and totalitarianism. There can be no mutual recognition or tolerance between two entities which claim absolute totality. There can, on the one hand, be no reconciliation between the Catholic Church and Communist collectivism so long as they both remain true to their respective faiths and claims. On the other hand, there can be nothing but contradiction between Catholicism and the liberalist philosophy which makes an absolute of the individual.⁸ For Christ emancipated the individual, not in order to make him an end and a law to himself, but by revealing that he was called to membership of the Kingdom of God by incorporation in its earthly and temporal organization, the Catholic Church.

More exactly, by calling us to His Kingdom, 'Christ made us free.' For the fact that man is called to citizenship of a transcendental Kingdom, to adoptive sonship in the family of a heavenly Father, is not only the central doctrine in the preaching of Jesus, it is the basic dynamic principle of Christian social revolution and regeneration. In the Church was brought to mankind a Society of an

⁸ Cf. Prof. D. v. Hildebrand : *Die korporative Idee und die natürlichen Gemeinschaften in Der kath. Gedanke*, Jan., 1933.

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entirely new sort: a Society not political or economic or national, but spiritual and transcendental. Every society, every organized collectivity, is, reduced to its simplest terms, a *coadunatio hominum ad unum aliquid peragendum*—a union of men for the achievement of a common object. Christ not only revealed that the common object of human existence and of each individual is something supra-political, supra-economic, indeed supra-temporal and supra-mundane; He formed the social organism wherein and whereby that object was to be attained. He showed the true nature of the ultimate destiny which God had prepared for man, a destiny which was to be the aim of all human strivings and to which all temporal aims and objects must be subordinate. He did not emancipate the individual from the omnipotence of temporal society in order to relinquish him in anarchic individualism; He gave him freedom, not to do as he pleased and become a law and an absolute to himself, but by incorporating him into a Society, a Kingdom, a Family, a Commune, a *Koinonia* which could rightly claim the dictatorship of his every thought, word and deed, because by it and in it was he to attain the ultimate purpose of his existence, the common heritage of the sons of God no less than the full realization of his own personality.

It is just *that* that the purely secular collectivity can never do. The noblest human society can never achieve more than temporal well-being. To the extent that it does that, it has, not only its rightful existence, but its own important part to play within the scheme of the Kingdom of God. The Christian Ecclesia is absolute and totalitarian in the sense that it claims to be the supreme *societas perfecta* because it is the organization whereby man attains his last end to which all other ends, and so all human activities however 'secular,' must be subordinated. But it does not seek to absorb or to substitute itself for secular organizations. On the contrary, the Christian view of Society and Societies is rightly represented graphically as a series of concentric circles in which the circumferences of the greater exceed and include, but do not touch or

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absorb those of the lesser.⁹ Indeed, the distinctive aims of the totalitarian Church postulate the perfect conservation in their own proper ambit of secular collectivities, whether 'natural' or 'artificial,' especially, as the Popes have often reminded us, of the Family and the State. But in the political or economic sphere *as such* the Church has no desire or right to interfere. As Pius XI has said: 'The Church believes that it would be wrong for her to interfere without just cause in such earthly affairs.'¹⁰

But when the secular collectivity seeks to transcend its own appointed ambit, when it not only ignores but repudiates the transcendental claims of the Kingdom of God on the souls of its members, when it tends to make its own temporal aims the ultimate object of human existence, when, in consequence, it strives to substitute itself for the Church and make itself absolute and exclusive with unlimited authority to subordinate every human activity to its own policy and purposes, then it violates the first principles of the Christian conception of Society and of the Christian Revolution. To the Christian such a programme is a programme of reaction and counter-revolution, an undoing of the redemptive work of Christ, which he will uncompromisingly oppose with every means at his disposal. For if such a programme triumphs it is as though Christ died in vain. To accept it is to reassume the shackles from which He freed us. For the secular collectivity which claims such exclusiveness and absolutism *cannot*, from the very nature of things, be other than an oppressive tyranny. Human personality is such, human destiny is such, that it cannot be satisfied by any purely temporal welfare however utopian. The secular collectivity supplies only a part, and a minor part, of human exigencies; if it makes itself the all-in-all and seeks to subject every human activity and potentiality to its own ends, it stunts human personality and frustrates human destiny; all that is most spiritual and noble in human nature is

⁹ Cf. P. Funk, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Encyclical *Ubi arcano*, repeated in *Quadragesimo Anno*.

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either atrophied, or materialized by being subordinated to material ends. As grace perfects nature; as, through Christ, human nature finds its fulfilment and realization in something which transcends nature and natural exigencies, so the mystical Body of Christ, His Kingdom, the Christian Commune perfects natural society. Only in this Society can the human personality find the liberty of full realization, a social organism which supplies, directly or indirectly, all human exigencies, both individual and social, in the act of transcending them. For it alone is orientated towards man's last end and the ultimate purpose of his creation and has the right to direct the totality of his aspirations and activities.

Marxist Communism has been adversely criticized from many angles—economic, sociological, political, metaphysical, logical, ethical. The Christian may and will criticize it from those points of view. But it needs to be emphasized that the specifically and distinctively *Christian* case against it is *theological*, because it is a violation of the divinely appointed order of Society, a contradiction to the divinely ordained destiny of man as revealed by Christ. Marx and Lenin both had the perspicacity to see that Communism and belief in a transcendent God were logically incompatible.¹¹

Though the original Constitution of the United Soviet Republics recognized theoretically the liberty of religious conscience, the subsequent teaching and practice of the Soviet regarding religion may be regarded as a more logical expression of authentic Marxism.'? Professor Mac-

¹¹ Thus Lenin : ' To draw a hard and fast line between the theoretic propagation of Atheism, between breaking down the religious beliefs of certain sections of the proletariat and the effect, the development, the general implications of the class-struggle of these sections, is to reason non-dialectically ; to transform a variable, relative boundary into an absolute one.'—*The Little Lenin Library, Vol. VII.*

¹² It is of no consequence to this argument whether or not we call Communism a 'religion.' It is true, as a recent writer in BLACKFRIARS has said, that 'Communism is an economic cause

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murray in his recent book on *The Philosophy of Communism* has reminded us that a consistent Marxism will be subject to its own Hegelian laws of dialectic evolution, and the intense realism of Lenin himself was always prepared to bend hard theory to harder facts. It is not, therefore, entirely impossible that Communism will undergo, in the course of time, a transformist evolution which will involve the discarding of its absolutist claims and its theory of the primacy and exclusiveness of the economic collectivity. But so long as it persists in regarding an earthly and material utopia as the sole aim of human endeavour, and in regarding man as no more than a 'worker,' a function in the economic scheme, it cannot receive from Christians any other treatment than such as is due to counter-revolutionism and to large-scale sabotage of the actual achievements of the Christian Revolution, in spite of much that may be truly illuminating in Marx's analysis of the ills of society and much that may be valuable and suggestive in the results of the 'Russian experiment'—all of which may well be absorbed in a truly Christian Society.

If we have spoken of the Christian Revolution as an event of past history and one which profoundly changed the face of civil society, that is not because we can look back upon it with complacency as a fully accomplished fact. Its achievements, great as they are, are indeed infinitesimal when compared with its dynamic potentialities, its resources and its ideals. Even the so-called 'Ages of Faith' certainly cannot be held up as the triumph of the Christian Revolution. Not until the whole human race is, not merely externally but wholly and unreservedly, subject to the sway of Christ's Kingship can we claim that it has

. . . . is altogether on the economic plane.' But our case against Communism is that it recognizes no other plane, that Marxism universalizes economics and equates the economic sphere with the totality of reality. Though an 'absorbing enthusiasm for a cause does not make that cause a religion,' it does certainly make that cause occupy the place which should be occupied by religion, and if it is to be really 'absorbing' it must logically exclude true religion.

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obtained its objective. If much has been gained, much too has been lost, and gains have not always been followed up and consolidated. The Christian has no illusions of an earthly utopia; he is too acutely aware of human perverseness and of his own shortcomings in continuing the revolutionary mission of Christ in Society. But it is unpardonable when he forgets his own distinctive mission to Society, makes light of his own position in the Christian Revolutionary Commune, the only collectivity which has the right to bestow on him the joy of absolute and unreserved allegiance, and ignores the demands and the sacrifices which it imposes upon him. Before we speak too harshly of the Communists, it is well to remember that it is the apathy and infidelity of Christians to their social mission which has made Communism possible and plausible.

The participation of Catholics in secular studies and enterprises, political, sociological and economic, is highly laudable and often necessary. But it needs to be remembered that not in these alone is to be found the dynamic of specifically Christian social regeneration, which is, in the last analysis *theological*. On this point the words of Mr. Maurice Reckitt (an Anglican) are not entirely inapplicable to ourselves :

The entanglement of Christian reformers with 'practical' programmes emanating from secular sources, and their desire to **work** alongside 'men of good **will**' of every kind, attachments often entirely justifiable in themselves, have tended to obscure the essentially distinctive and transcendental character of the Christian's ground for claiming, *as such*, a voice in the organization of Society. The effects of this tendency have been in several ways deplorable . . . ²³

For us Catholics, the Christian Social Revolution is not a matter of 'private judgment' or 'private enterprise.' It is a matter of corporative participation in international Catholic Social Action, the continuation by the Christian *Koinonia* of the revolutionary social work of Jesus Christ.

¹ *Faith and Society*, p. 30.

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Of this, the Archbishop of Birmingham has recently had to remind us that

. . . . up to the present time there is little or no real Catholic action in this country. Catholic Action does not mean **any** grouping of organizations that promote charitable works ; but it does mean special organizations of the laity organized by a special mandate of the ecclesiastical authority. It is a participation **of** the laity in the apostolate of the Hierarchy of the Church ; and the first condition for Catholic Action is a commission from the Hierarchy. **If** we study the problems we shall be able to see in what respects present remedies are defective or un-Christian ; and we may then be in a position' to suggest a solution which is in conformity with the teaching of Christ¹⁴

We may indeed be thankful for the reawakening **of** corporative consciousness, the sense of our oneness in the Christian *Koinonia*, with its already remarkable repercussions on social conditions, which characterizes present-day Catholicism on the Continent and elsewhere. In England, the significance and importance **of** this ' corporative ' trend in modern Catholicism, seems to be more clearly realised by ' Marxists ' such as Mr. John Strachey¹⁵ than it is by Catholics themselves. **If** Communism does no more than shame us into a fuller realization of the distinctive character of the Christian Revolution, of our solidarity within the Christian Commune and our mission in it to Society, it will have achieved something, at least, of its providential purpose.

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

¹⁴ Pastoral Letter, Advent, 1933.

¹⁵ In *The Coming Struggle for Power*.