

# Marxism and Christianity<sup>1</sup>

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As a result of an educational system no longer the prerogative of the clergy, a multiplication of fields of study, a great diffusion of culture, improved communications, and more rapid social transformations, we live in an age in which man is more ready to criticize and to challenge standards hitherto accepted. Individual persons, political institutions, schools of artistic style, humanist ethical movements, racial and national groups, women's and youth organizations, economic blocs—all are more conscious of their differentiations within a highly complex society and demand that their freedom and autonomy be recognized, refusing to be dictated to by religious leaders or state authority. The accelerated pace of change in modern life, the movement of populations to the towns, their lack of social roots or stability, overt and subconscious advertising, heavy work, group pressure, mechanical and psychological noise, the shock to routine thinking consequent upon emigration deprive man of the solitude and peace needed for constructive thinking, while technological advance makes man seem less in need of God's help for his daily bread, and so more ready to pick holes in traditional religion, amidst the heightened fascination and lure of the world.

The present religious choice is not simply between Catholicism and Protestantism, nor between Christianity and Natural Religion. It is a choice for or against God. Open, popular, organized and widespread, atheism is no longer hidden and exceptional, but, buttressed by polity and culture, constitutes the world's most urgent problem. The missionary activity of the Church is compelled to revolve, at least in part, around the solution of the perennial, objective, human problems of which atheism is symptomatic, and to a keener appreciation of which the sympathetic study of atheism, and a just appreciation of the positive values it promotes, is undoubtedly conducive. What an atheist denies flows logically and psychologically from something else he affirms, and affirms for the sake of some positive value he finds in it. Atheism is essentially a rejection neither of theism nor of travesties of theism, but is a complex positive doctrine, of which Marxism is the most common contemporary variety.

<sup>1</sup>*Marxismo e Cristianesimo*, by Giulio Girardi, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi, 1966, pp. 239, preface by Cardinal König; *De l'Anathème au Dialogue*, by Roger Garaudy, Librairie Plon, Paris, 1965—English translation by Luke O'Neill, *From Anathema to Dialogue*, Collins, London, 1967, with an introduction by Karl Rahner and an epilogue by J. B. Metz, pp. 125, 25s.

The desire to help his fellow men find God inspires all Fr Girardi's philosophical writings and leads him to desire genuine dialogue with atheists. The adjective is called for. Fr Girardi does not believe in unilateral dialogue. Some take the view that error cannot enrich truth, that although one can love, one may not esteem persons who are in the wrong—the most one can do is to make terminological concessions in order to help convert one's adversary, naturally for his own good. Dialogue is a modern form of teaching. On the other hand, the Salesian professor does not go all along with those who say that atheism merely denies a non-existent travesty of God such as poor preaching depicted, that all atheists are good and sincere while believers are selfish and hypocritical, that in the concrete atheists are right while believers are wrong. His position is that truth is to be welcomed wherever it is to be found, that it is both absolute and historical, and that its communication is at once a theoretical and a psychological problem. His book *Marxismo e Cristianesimo*, Marxism and Christianity, seeks to show that genuine dialogue with Marxist atheism is doctrinally and ethically possible, but he makes no pronouncement as to its political and sociological feasibility in any conclusive way. He identifies the conditions for sincere dialogue as genuine freedom, equality, mutual esteem and benevolence. And even then dialogue can have risks and limitations.

Social, economic and political factors render a Christian-Marxist dialogue difficult and urgent. For Marxism is more than speculation. Its scientific structure and its status as a philosophy of practice insert it into the climate of modern thought, with its heightened critical awareness, fuller realization of the ineluctability of evil, and increased urgency in the striving after human values. Marxist atheism means selfless dedication to a cause, consecrated brotherhood with an *élite*, mature assumption of responsibility for the shaping of history, belief in the value of human freedom. To present Marxist-Leninism as the cold application of a bundle of highly questionable metaphysical principles is not only to misrepresent Marxism, but to forget that Leninism itself hinges upon acceptance of a pragmatic criterion of truth.

By Marxist practice is meant the proletariat's efficacious, concrete action in transforming nature and society by labour, technology, production, political, military, party-political and revolutionary activity. Whatever contributes to successful practice is true and good; whatever opposes this is bad and false. The practical aims of Marxism constitute not only its psychological and sociological appeal, but also its logical fulcrum. Marxism exists only in the context of action, and it cannot be understood outside of that context. It differs from straightforward Pragmatism by its insistence that truth is not relative, but absolute. Moreover, while success in practice is taken as a criterion of truth, the success of practice is judged by the further criterion of its cohesion with the general run of historical and

scientific experience, and of its power to promote the ethical and economic freedom of man, which is really the key to the whole system. The Marxist believes in the value of human freedom, not arbitrarily, but basing himself, albeit invalidly, on an axiological intuition distinct although inseparable from the historical experience which mediates it. Then, believing in man and in a certain ideal direction for the course of his history, he postulates the ontological vision of reality which is presupposed by the assumption that this ideal can be realized: somewhat as some Christians argue from the fact of moral conscience to the existence of God. The Marxist then proceeds to a critical examination of the actual course of history, and thence to the elaboration of a methodology for the effective liberation of man and for the overcoming of all forms of alienation, including that of subscribing to any merely speculative materialism, such as that of Hegel and Feuerbach.

In *From Anathema to Dialogue* the distinguished Marxist Roger Garaudy, who defines Marxist humanism as the methodology of historical initiative for the realization of the total man, makes his diagnosis of the situation. Against the background of the threat of total extinction by atomic warfare, human living is, by and large, motivated either by Marxism or theism. Despite some uneasiness, resistance and anger, Catholics now tend to favour dialogue with Marxism. The demythologization of Christianity and the elaboration of a Teilhardian theology which fully recognizes the value of work and of human effort, of scientific research as well as technical invention, suggest that the apocalyptic tradition of primitive Christianity, which emphasizes the Incarnate God's triumph over sin, is gaining ground over the Constantinian stress on sin and justification by submission to the rule of law. Judging from a purely historical and sociological point of view, religion has been and is an opium of the people. Nevertheless, Christianity was the occasion for the introduction into human history of a keener awareness of the human values of subjectivity and transcendence. If Christians and Marxists measure up to the real situation, they will discover a common desire to work creatively for man's integral development, and will welcome dialogue, cooperation and rivalry to their mutual enrichment.

For Fr Girardi the basic issue here is whether or not Marxism really recognizes the individual person as of value in himself, or attributes value to him only as a function of the part he has in the shaping of history, which alone is of value in itself. Marxism does not so recognize personal values as long as it regards anthropology only as a special case of its philosophy of nature, the laws of history as just some among the laws of nature, of dialectic materialism. Marxism in any interpretation must consider man as constituted a person by his relation to the whole of reality in a dynamic way, but, notwithstanding this, Marx himself attributes a certain autonomy and

originality to man, precisely because the relation between man and nature is a dialectic one. The Stalinist presentation of Marxism wholly in terms of a dialectic intrinsic to nature does not conform to the views of the younger Marx, for whom dialectic materialism is of only secondary importance. Aware of this, Marxists today can, like Marx as a young man, concentrate once more on the problems of individual liberation, life and death—while, of course, never forgetting man's essentially social nature. Man's relativity *vis-à-vis* the historical process no longer, therefore, suppresses his personal autonomy in the order of being and value, but in the last analysis the Communist movement only makes sense in so far as it contributes to man's effective solution of his personal problems. The Communist movement differs from other societies for mutual help in that it seeks not merely the good of its members, but of all men. At the same time it is recognized that while the advent of the stateless, classless society will make personal freedom a practical possibility, each one will have to secure it by his own personal action. Marxism, having cleared heaven of mythology, is at work exploding the myth of heaven on earth. Marxists recognize that in the new humanity not all problems will be solved, not every alienation overcome. History advances dialectically ever closer to the ideal humanity, but never arrives at it.

Fr J. B. Metz has asked whether the realization of the total man will give the final answer to man's questions, or whether the developed man will be still more a questioner, more capable still of an ever-expanding future. According to Garaudy Marxism is interested in the meaning of human living and human dying: 'Marxist criticism rejects illusory answers, but it does not reject the authentic aspiration which aroused them. Beyond the myths about the origin, end and meaning of life, beyond the alienated notions of transcendence and death, there exists the concrete dialectic of finite and infinite, and this remains a living reality as long as we remain aware that it is not in the order of answer but in the order of question . . . On the level of knowledge, the religions, starting from a real need, transformed into answer something which pertained to the order of question. In precisely the same fashion, on the level of action, the religions, and Christianity above all, transformed an exigency into a promise—and even into a presence: from the exigency of mediation, they passed over to the presence of a mediator.' Hence 'the fully developed man in Communism's classless society will be more of a questioner . . . always capable of an always greater future. For us, Communism is not the end of history, but the end of prehistory. . . . Authentically human history will begin with Communism' (pp. 77-79).

In 1965 M. Reding expressed the view that Marxism is not essentially atheist, although Marx personally certainly was an atheist. Girardi considers Marxism can be developed in such a way as to

overcome atheism and yet remain true to itself. The main obstacles to such a development are the tendency of Marxism to be an all-embracing world-view that leaves no room for anything else, and the resistance to any acknowledgment of man's total and radical dependence on God, the author and preserver of human freedom. Marxism can be tolerant on condition of deepening its concept of practicality, and acknowledging, with Garaudy and Schaff—as against Stalin and Il'icev—personalist values which are autonomous *vis-à-vis* the success of the Communist Party.

Vatican Council II in officially disowning the conception of Church membership as institutional commitment abandoned positions which many theologians had for centuries considered essential to the Gospel message, and which for centuries guided the action of the Church in the world. Catholicism, moreover, now recognizes more explicitly than in the past not only the validity of economic values, but also their basic importance in individual and social life, and hence their large part in the determination of the laws of history. It joins Marxism in denouncing the economic and consequently further extended alienation of so many men and women, and criticizes capitalism and liberalism in so far as they caused such evil. Christians are committed to the battle for the liberation of the proletariat by work and social action. By work and social action the Christian transforms nature and gives it unity centred on man. Any past or present alliance between Altar and Throne represents, therefore, a betrayal of the Christian spirit, and Christians are coming to realize this more clearly. Man has a right to economic liberty. Marxism is not wrong to stress the importance of economic conditions for historical progress, but it is mistaken in neglecting the operation of other factors, and in interpreting economic laws too rigidly. How do social-economic laws explain a baby's egocentrism? Is the Russian-Chinese conflict an example of class war? Does money do away with an inferiority complex? Cannot technological advance reduce man to the condition of a cog in the wheel, instead of liberating him?

Individualism is an approach to life common enough among Christians, but it is a betrayal of true Christianity which is a vocation to communion in love. Like Marxism, Christianity holds that man considered in abstraction from his social involvement is *de iure* non-existent. But the Christian community spreads beyond the confines of earth, which it can only do by first embracing the earth with loving care at various levels, yet without losing sight of the central place occupied by personal values. In the political order both Marxists and Christians are becoming increasingly aware that the dynamism of love tends towards effective democracy with its attendant hazards, rather than to oligarchy. But Marxist practice is only in accord with these aspirations to a limited degree and in a few places, while Vatican Council II, notwithstanding strong opposition, made its

declaration of Religious Freedom. Only in a climate of real liberty will Marxism be able to test its claims to historical validity, and vindicate its pledge to consider all persons as ends in themselves, and not means to the attainment of institutional goals. Personal love can only be universal if it is disinterested. The trust supposed by mutual love and fraternal dialogue likewise presupposes common acceptance of certain absolute values. Fr Girardi considers that only absolute values provide a sufficient justification for human togetherness. Despite its humanist inspiration, Marxism is anti-human; it subordinates the community to the party machine. Communist governments seek to impose Communism on all members of the Community, somewhat as in the past some Catholic thinkers used to favour a State's being officially Catholic. To say this is not to suppose there are no obstacles to effective religious freedom in Spain. Neither is it to forget that for Garaudy (*New Blackfriars*, vol. 47, no. 556, September 1966, p. 630) 'the coming of socialism must not result in making atheism a State religion'.

In the economic field there is no vast difference between the Catholic thesis that the right to private property is limited by the social function of wealth, which can make nationalization necessary, and the Marxist doctrine that the means of production are the property of the community as a whole, subject to other arrangements being suggested by the changing conditions of time and place.

As regards the family, while Christianity demands it be related to the wider national, ecclesial and general human communities, it also insists on the need to allow conjugal love to develop according to its own laws, and with respect for personal values, and not to make the family an instrument of the State, or the Party. At the same time, Christianity admits some degree of State intervention in family affairs in view of the common good, for example, with regard to the education of the young. At all events, to reduce interpersonal communication to a political and economic relationship would be to alienate man from many spheres of profoundly personal values; love is not between the objectively labelled bread-winners and Churchgoers, but between unique centres of subjectivity. The more a man is open to interpersonal relations in depth, however, the greater his awareness of human solitude, of man's need of God's love. Christianity teaches that God communicates this love to men, not in isolation as individuals, but to persons who are members of a community. The Church is a juridical and hierarchical community, but, much more so, it is communion in life and love, and this not only psychologically or morally, but ontologically and transcendently: all time being caught up into eternity, as history advances towards the perfection of the People of God. Man's purpose on earth is to build up a human community of temporal and eternal love, centred in Christ Jesus. Marxism needs the infinite and feels the lack of it; Christianity not only promises it, but makes it present. As Garaudy expresses it, 'for a

Christian, transcendence is the act of God who comes towards him and summons him. For a Marxist, it is a dimension of man's activity which goes out beyond itself towards its far-off being' (p. 80).

It is not possible here to do justice to the problem of what Rahner calls the 'absolute future'. Catholics may agree cheerfully with Marxists that there is no providential blueprint for the future. Human history is designed as it develops like a work of art, and not sketched out beforehand like the end-product of a technique. History is man's cooperation with God in the work of his own creation. But what lies ahead? For Rahner it is God, for Garaudy it is a human future. But if one can speak of an absolute human future that measures up not as a particular situated answer commensurate with some particular human question, but as an adequate, dynamic, answering response to man's questioning urge, why should this not be God, whose eternal self-disclosure will put our questioning hearts to rest, and set no limits to the questions we may have answered in him?

*From Anathema to Dialogue* is a well written and well produced book which, despite its rather high price, deserves to be read with attention by every Catholic and Marxist wishing to arrive at a deeper understanding of both positions. *Marxismo e Cristianesimo* is less historical, being a theoretical work aiming to bring to light the basic themes in terms of which a Christian-Marxist doctrinal dialogue is possible, the similarities and differences in lines of development this dialogue encounters, and the consequences of these facts for anyone who desires today to reflect philosophically upon experience and as a Christian. This work is, therefore, speculative without being an academic exercise, and is, like Garaudy's, committed to a confrontation with the grave problems posed by human existence and history. It is to be hoped that an English edition will not be long delayed.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Since going to press, we have learned that *Marxism and Christianity* is to be published as a Logos book by Gill & Son, Dublin. 18s.