Christian Materialism

by Giles Hibbert, O.P.

This paper could well have been called *Christianity and Materialism*, but since it is concerned with arguing, from the Christian side, for a more materialistic interpretation of Christianity than is usual, the present title seems more appropriate. It is addressed, however, not merely to Christians but to all those who are interested in bringing together the values inherent in Communism and in Christianity, without detriment to either and to the enrichment of both.

Two things are to concern us. Firstly, how far it is possible (or indeed necessary) for a Christian to be a genuine materialist—even in some sense an atheist—without departing from traditional Christian belief in God; and secondly, how far it would be possible for a Marxist to believe in God, even to be a member of a Christian Church, without betraying his materialist philosophy and the political humanism to which he is committed. These questions could probably be dealt with more easily amongst either Christians or Marxists alone, but whilst much valuable progress is to be made in that way, it is also important that both sides should be able to discuss this matter together. To facilitate and further such dialogue is precisely the purpose of this contribution.

What I want to be able to show to Christians is how necessary it is for them, if they are to be true to Christ, to appreciate and absorb the value of an atheistic materialism such as that of Marx; and in doing this, to show to Marxists that Christians, far from being people who are incapable of taking the human condition seriously, are in principle committed to precisely this—and are thus capable of being cooperated with and learnt from with profit. In this process much that we take for granted has to be unlearned, and much has to be atoned for; only then will the richness in our traditions become fully available to both of us.

The Critique of Religion

We are not going to spend any time on the traditional arguments for or against the existence of God. For one thing, this paper presupposes a more advanced, and indeed more serious, level of dialogue than that; and for another, there are more important critiques than those bearing directly on God's 'existence'. What I have in mind is the critique of *religion*, for this is related directly to human life as lived. Whether God falls or stands in this critique depends on how he is related to religion. Traditionally both Christians and atheists

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

have taken these two to be radically interrelated, but—as we will see shortly—this is not necessarily a valid assumption.

The classical rejection of religion by Marx is so pointed, so powerful and unfortunately so seldom presented fully within its context, that it is worth our particular attention. It falls into two parts; in the first the striking word *opium*, used to describe religion, can be seen largely to imply a *pain killer;* whereas in the second it clearly also has the connotation of *vice*. 'Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.' To this Marx adds: 'The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.' And he characteristically concludes: 'The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion.' (*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right.*)

What Marx is criticizing here is of course primarily the social situation, but he criticizes religion as an obscurantist influence hindering its rectification. He describes it as 'a reversed world-consciousness', and suggests that the struggle against religion is simply 'the fight against the other world, of which religion is the spiritual aroma' (*ibid.*). Religion is in effect the attitude which attributes ultimate human values to something outside human lives, demanding a supreme reverence to something 'other' which results in a subsidiary evaluation of physical reality. And hence, despoiling man by consoling him with a future other-worldly happiness that will compensate him for the misery of this life, it embodies an essentially dualistic, partially unreal, concept of reality.

Although it is probably no longer the chief source of illusion in modern society, religion nevertheless provides ample opportunity for the evasion of a serious approach to man. And this in turn leads to his further exploitation in new as well as in traditional forms. Highest prelates of the Church are still able to be callously insensitive to grinding poverty brought about by forces sheltering under their own patronage; politicians, both at home and abroad, are able to invoke religious principles for their racialist doctrines—and so on.

We certainly live in a situation which encourages illusions, and the charge that can be made against religion is that it fosters a 'solution' based on further illusions, rather than on that revolutionary reversal of values which abolishes them. It encourages the evasion of real issues, and indeed often colludes with such evasion. If one is to take human life seriously, religion has to be rejected; and its opposite, the basis of its rejection, is a thorough-going materialism—one which locates human values in human life as it should actually be lived. Is this in any way compatible with Christianity?

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christianity and Materialism

Christianity is in fact not a religion at all, but something much closer to a form of anti-religious materialism. This is the claim which is being made here, and which is to be substantiated.

This may seem like a sell-out, but it is a claim completely faithful to the Gospel and the overall tradition of the Church; there is no incompatibility here. Of course not all of this can be argued out here; an adequate examination of tradition demands an utterly different format. Whilst, however, this latter is going on elsewhere, we will concern ourselves here with the former—the nature of the Gospel message.

The idea here is really nothing new. At least since Bonhoeffer and the subsequent 'Death of God' movement in America (as well as Bishop Robinson in this country), the idea of religionless Christianity has been current. If this movement, despite its sound anti-dualism, has not however been as fertile as was once hoped, the reasons for its failure are instructive. Apart from failing to take adequate account of Christian tradition, it has proved to be unsatisfactory as the result of choosing the cultural and political norms of contemporary American society as the vehicle for the embodiment of a non-religious (secular) Christianity.

What we are faced with immediately is a twofold task. First it is necessary to demonstrate the way in which Christianity is anti-religious and even materialistic; and then it is necessary to interpret, and see how to put into practice, the materialism involved. Only then will it be possible to see how there is still room for a meaningful and valuable concept of God within this. This will be our final concern.

Christianity and Religion

It would seem at first sight that our thesis went altogether counter not only to the traditional practice and self-consciousness of Christianity, but also to its historical origination and development. With regard to the first, it is not being denied that Christianity has in effect been practised and largely conceived of as a religion throughout its history. The point being made is that in principle, and therefore presumably in potential, it is something quite different. Why it should have failed so badly in this way is something we will come back to when we have looked at its historical origin and development.

The origins of Christianity are without doubt religious. The Old Testament is radically religious through and through. God is presented as standing outside human society, yet coming down to take a hand in its affairs. He is seen manifesting himself as a numinous power, requiring sacrifice and propitiation. The whole life of the people, chosen by him to be especially his, is focussed around the liturgical worship of this God, according to a Law revealed by him personally. He governs their destiny, he chooses or rejects them at will—and so on. If this is not *religion*, nothing is!

Christianity acknowledges all this as its foundation, and seems to

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

add only to this the fantastic, ridiculous or stimulating claim (depending on how you respond to it) that this God of the Old Testament at a particular moment in history sent down his son to live amongst men, to die for them and rise again from the dead, bringing them eternal salvation. It would probably be difficult to find many Christians who would not at first sight accept this as a fair statement of Christian belief—in other words, of their *religion*. But this is not what Christianity is all about; this is not correctly the doctrine of the Incarnation. The real thing is superficially very similar to this, but at the same time radically different—in many ways its effective reversal.

In order to see this it is necessary to examine with care the actual historical movement of the Old Testament into the New—to see, rather than to presume, how the latter relates to the former.

The Old Testament does not simply present an idea of God which can then be used to interpret the claims of Christ and of Christians. The full, and therefore correct, idea of God has to grow from beginnings which clearly contain inadequate and inaccurate elements (e.g. God seen as a tribal god amongst others). This process of growth also involves systematic correction, and this takes place throughout the history of Israel. The idea of God embodied in this history is not only systematically perverted, and on that account in need of correction, but it is also ultimately out of perspective. Retaining the positive element, the perverted and inaccurate elements receive correction, and this is predominantly found in the prophetic movement. This movement thus has two aspects; on the one hand it recalls the people's attention to the origins of their God-consciousness and demands fidelity to this, and on the other hand it points forward towards a future in which the reality of God is to be fully given. And the prophets do not simply provide a corrected concept of God, but draw attention to the way in which the people should be living. Amos, for example, turning up at a great liturgical ceremony tells the people that they have got God all wrong because they are living falsely—the rich and the powerful are exploiting the poor.

This process of correcting and developing the idea of God has a steady movement away from ideas of legalistic observance towards those of interhuman relationships. Isaiah (Ch. 58) talks about the inter-relationships between men that indicate God's presence—in words taken up by Jesus; and from Jeremiah (Ch. 31) comes the famous comment: 'Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel . . . not like the covenant that I made with their fathers . . . . I will put a new law *within* them, and will write it upon their *hearts*. . . .'

This steady correction of the idea of God is an historical process, not just a process having a history but one embodied in the history of the Hebrew people. It is not a process which is completed before the coming of Christ, it is completed by and in him as the fulfilment

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

of this history. Christ came to fulfil the 'Law and the prophets', and not to remove one iota from them; but in fulfilling the Law he did not simply add something new, or confirm what had gone before, he came to turn it upside down. The true relationship of God to men is not to be found in an external imposition on them as in the Old Law, it is to be found in a personal freedom (by which I do not mean just liberty) embodied in interpersonal human relationships. This is the message of the New Testament. The Old (restrictive) Law, precisely in being fulfilled, is abolished; its role was essentially propaedeutic—as St Paul (cfr. e.g. Romans) took great pains to explain.

All this means that in the fulfilment of the Old Law its characteristic *religion* is abolished. Christ proclaims the kingdom of God as amongst us, not simply above or beyond us. The true idea of God is given *in Christ himself as thus fulfilling the Law*. It is not embodied in a law, in obeisance or in worshipping something controlling one from without; it is embodied in the life of men as focussed in brotherhood on Christ. This is Christ's message—effectively the abolition of religion and the demand to take human beings fully seriously as human beings. This is what the Pharisees, in their narrow-mindedness, could not understand or accept—hence their vicious opposition to him.

The abolition of religion is the final and definitive correction of the idea of God in the historical process already referred to. Christ is saying to men in effect that the *real meaning of God* for us is something here and now amongst us; it is embodied in the society of human brotherhood and concern which has to be prepared to go with Christ through his death on the cross towards the renewal of life which followed it. Whatever else one is going to have to say as a Christian about God, he is for us a dimension of this actual human reality, not something outside it. And this reality is, of course, a physical reality. Until Christians have got this straight, their 'God talk' will inevitably be misleading.

This is the claim implied by the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation; and I would suggest that Christian faith precisely involves the recognition and acceptance of this claim and the rejection of what it superseded, namely religion. Thus Christian faith is essentially something materialist, even in some sense (i.e. where God is conceived dualistically) atheistic. To explore this further and see how this could possibly be so we need to turn our attention here to the nature of materialism.

Varieties of Materialism

The essence of materialism lies in the attribution of all values to physical reality; and thus it stands in complete contrast to dualism which sees only subordinate values here. Naturally any but the most trivial approach to physical reality will be concerned profoundly with the human reality—human life. Anything that is prepared to take this truly seriously can validly be called humanism, and thus these two, humanism and materialism, are closely bound together;

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

differences in the way one approaches human beings will reflect on the way one is sensitive to reality, and vice versa. There is thus considerable ambiguity in the way in which the terms humanism and materialism are used, the least satisfactory connotations being unfortunately by far the most common.

The current English concepts of humanism and materialism are products of the English *empirical* tradition. Now this tradition, by insisting on starting with *things as they are met*, in healthy contrast to the *a priori* idealist intellectualism of late ecclesiastical scholasticism, has always had from its very beginning a tremendous strength. Sadly, however, the promise which it contained has never been fulfilled. It has failed through the impoverished view it has taken (through fear of the possible consequences) of what is meant by *meeting* things. It has failed in courage; it has failed to take a necessary risk and has acquiesced in an over-simple duality between subject and object, standing them as it were in confrontation with each other. This prevents any creative interchange and development taking place, and reduces the possibilities that it offers to what one might call *quantitative pragmatism*. One can easily see how the present poverty of politics in this country and in America is to a large extent the product of this failure. Empiricism has been right to fear the power of subjectivity, but sadly its solution to the problem has been a destructive rather than a creative one; it has hindered rather than helped us truly to appreciate the human condition.

Not surprisingly *rational humanism*—the humanism of 'the enlightenment', which is what the term indicates when otherwise unqualified—is to be found hand in hand with such empiricism. It is a sad travesty of true humanism, being an approach to man which sees value primarily in form, order, organization. It characteristically admires the Roman Empire and the Napoleonic Code (though in England, rather than trusting this, it prefers hand-to-mouth solutions in legal matters). It honours successful independent enterprise, and measures success in terms that lend themselves primarily to statistical analysis. Not being able to see, in its abstraction and over-objectification, how facts and moral values interrelate, it has become too cut-and-dried really to connect with the advance of many of the most important of human sensibilities and values.

This is not the only approach to man, however, which has emerged from the English cultural scene. There is a whole heritage of literature and poetry going back to Shakespeare and even to Chaucer, which forms a serious comment on the human situation, on the way in which men live their lives in this world. And the whole approach to man engendered by this, which receives a degree of concise analytical expression in English literary criticism, has in principle the same sensitivity to value in developing, organic, and one might indeed say 'pregnant', situations as is shown for example in a Shakespearean play, a poem by Donne, a novel by George

Eliot or D. H. Lawrence. Here is something approaching a true 'philosophy'; but although artistic and literary concern in no way indicates that what is involved is unreal or wants to dissociate itself from scientific observation and method, nevertheless literary and artistic criticism cannot in itself produce an adequate comment on all aspects of human living, objective scientific observation has to be brought in to complete this. Here we enter the field of philosophy properly speaking. And what we need is a philosophical method that does justice to the sensitivity and appreciation of values just mentioned.

Sadly we have no such tradition of philosophy in England, and attempts to import from abroad are always a hazardous business. Nevertheless we can learn from what has been achieved elsewhere, and the discipline which I have in mind as most helpful is the general movement known as *phenomenology*. This, like empiricism, also has its starting point in things as they present themselves, manifest themselves—hence the title phenomenology. But in this case the encounter, which inevitably ensues unless things are held off at arm's length and therefore never really *met*, is taken really seriously. The distinction between subject and object is recognized, and the danger of over-subjectivity is guarded against to ensure that the procedure remains truly scientific, truly realistic. But it is recognized at the same time that vital knowledge—true appreciation of a situation leading to creative advance and the estimation of real values—depends upon the *encounter* between observer and observed, between subject and object. In other words the 'message' being offered by phenomena is to be read by participation in its offering rather than by standing back from it.

There is a striking similarity between what is involved here and what is involved in the 'reading' of an artistic 'message'. Artistic appreciation, if it is to involve more than private fantasy, demands objectivity, but it also demands *response*—subjective participation in what is being offered. The ability to be open to these is the mark of true art, as well as the mark of a truly human situation .Here phenomenology and artistic or literary humanism come very close together; if true to themselves they produce a genuine materialism which has both its starting point and its further progression in and from the matter which is its subject. But they also have a quality, a possibility of creative advance, which it is not mistaken to call *spiritual*—indeed, I suggest that something of this sort is the only genuine meaning of the word spiritual.

Without exactly defining them or restricting them to this particular form or that, we have been discussing two very different varieties of materialism and the humanisms which are associated with them. Their difference has been seen to be fundamental, the one living and the other dead. This suggests that there are in fact effectively only two types of materialism and no more. If this should be the case, how does dialectical materialism stand in relation to these two? The

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

answer to this is clear: despite its ability to become, through misuse, as abstract and unreal as much theological speculation has become, in principle it is concerned with life in such a way as should make it flower rather than die. It is grotesque that it should have been the propaganda of our philosophically arid and politically acquisitive society that should have given people the impression that Marxist atheism is an ideology whose only gods are material greed and gain, contemptuous of all ethical and aesthetic values. It is the philosophy of western capitalism, both political and ethical, that comes closer to this description; and it is interesting to note that it is under such circumstances that dualistic religion and a form of materialism can become companions, rather than enemies, colluding in the avoidance of taking human values truly seriously.

Let us remember that the philosophy of Marx and Engels is a humanist reaction to the inevitably conservative idealism of Hegel. Marx's early manifest humanism did not simply give way to a later scientific concern with economics and politics; this latter was the practical expression of the continuity of the former. Throughout his life what stimulated his thought was his serious concern for human beings; his being true to humanity was the source of his living materialism. And in view of what has already been said about 'literary humanism' we should not be surprised at the wealth of literary allusion throughout his writings.

Marx's humanism finds its fullest expression in an analysis of what is at once one of the most material aspects of, and one of the most human aspects of, our social and cultural structure: the production and exchange of commodities, etc. Dialectical materialism is indeed a thorough-going materialism, but at the same time its dialectical nature ensures that it is prepared to meet and commune with reality, and is the expression of its concern with creative and qualitative aspects of human sensitivity and fulfilment. But this does not divorce it from the material conditions of life.

Dialectical materialism thus goes along with phenomenology and literary humanism in the field of 'living materialism'. These three have much in common, yet at the same time they probably have much to learn from one another. Together they represent, each in their different degrees, artistic and aesthetic values; scientific values; psychological values; social, political and economic values—in other words the full gamut of human experience and possibilities.

Over against this is that very different type of materialism—the crude and dead variety already mentioned. It is this that is the mortal enemy both of the living variety and of true Christianity, whereas it easily makes friends, in the way suggested, with *religious* Christianity—itself equally the enemy of true materialism. We are concerned with the false one only for the sake of contrast to show up the nature of the living variety in which our interest lies. It is only by way of this latter that a serious approach to life may be taken;

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

and it is only by way of something like it that Christianity can be 'received' so as not to distort its message. If Christianity has suffered badly from misinterpratation at its own hands up to now, this can be seen at least in part to be due to the failures and immaturities in the socio-cultural context in which it has developed, where such a philosophy has not readily been available. Those who misrepresent it today will have less excuse for their misdemeanour.

God without Religion

We are now in a position to tackle the problem of the meaning of God within a non-religious, or in other words a materialist, appreciation of Christianity such as that argued for a little earlier. As a preliminary to this, however, it is necessary to see how a *religious* concept of God succeeded in re-emerging in Christianity after its abolition by Christ.

That the early Church understood the message as we have represented it cannot be seriously questioned, for it is basically on the evidence of this Church – its presentation of Christ's message in the Gospels and Epistles – that our argument has rested. The early Church was conscious of *embodying* what had originally been conceived of as outside and beyond, although this did not come without a struggle—as, for example, the Epistle to the Galatians shows.

This early Church cannot however be said to have had much in the way of an actual *concept* of God. It had indeed a considerable 'God language', the word being used primarily to refer to 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. But this in itself is indicative of where and how God was now as it were available to men—through Christ recognized as our brother and proclaimed as Lord, a title which at once affirms a radical continuity with the Old Testament and an utter break from its formalized religious *Weltanschauung*. It had also an awareness of what might be called its 'further dimensionality' which it expressed in mythological terms such as those of the Ascension story and the imagery in the Apocalypse.

This is something to which we will return; for the moment the point is that God in all his transcendence was recognized as immanent to the Church of Christ; and the liturgy—or what now passed as the worship—of this Church took the form of commemorative re-enactments of the focal and loaded points in Jesus' relation to men—the way in which he called them to him and asked them to live together in union with him and with one another. These re-enactments (the sacramental liturgy) had a twofold purpose, as they still have today. They were for the sake of reminding men of the significance, the 'full dimensionality', of this 'being-together', and for the sake of inculcating its pattern into human relationships.

It is interesting to notice that this sort of theological concern is to be found at its strongest in the fourth Gospel. The author is trying to show how it is the life being led by the Christian Church of his day that contains the idea and reality of the God witnessed to by Christ.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

His Gospel is to a large extent an interpretative commentary on what they are actually doing in their Christian lives. And from this there begins to emerge a more explicitly conscious *concept of God.* God is seen to be something like the *full depth and significance* of the life of Christ which they as Christians now embody.

Now such an explicitation as this would seem to be utterly healthy; it is a necessary part of coming to know why one is doing something and how it should best be done. Consciousness is after all what makes man human rather than merely animal. It is also, however, man's worst enemy because its abuse or misuse spoils nearly everything he does. This cannot be enlarged on here; it can only be suggested that this is exactly what happened with the growing consciousness of the Church about God. The concept of God, emerging from the analysis of the life that the Church was leading, began to get *separated off from* that life—to become an abstraction.

The Prologue of St John's Gospel gives a good example of the danger that can then arise. Regarded as a summarizing prologue to the Gospel's message—irrespective of its possible origins, this is the part it plays in the Gospel—in speaking about the Word Incarnate it is a fine and necessary statement about Christianity. But when the idea of God is beginning to get divorced from its living context, to become an abstraction, it is all too easy to read that prologue as something entirely in its own right, and it is then that it looks so similar, but with a Christian twist, to statements which are made by the Platonists. In this situation we find ourselves all too easily straight back into a dualistic concept of God with all its implications.

It was at this point, historically speaking, that the Church started to come into contact in a big way with Hellenistic thinking, and the influence of Neoplatonism in particular becomes predominant—it fits in so easily with this tendency for the concept of God to become an abstraction. Throughout subsequent history there have been serious attempts by some of the greater thinkers of the Church (e.g. Augustine and Aquinas) to redress this imbalance—even to turn the whole concept of spirituality upside down, or rather on to its feet again. But again and again, probably (as suggested earlier) because of the whole socio-economic and cultural structure within which they were living, their efforts failed and they were not followed or understood by the great majority of their disciples and devotees.

Thus Christians have inherited a consistent history in which their conscious thinking about God has to a very large extent been polluted with dualistic, idealist, and religious attitudes and forms of thought, exacerbating that natural tendency to allow what is a vital and organic dimension in one's actual living to become an abstraction which damps and enervates it. The result of this is that Christians have got to unlearn almost entirely the way in which they have become accustomed to think of God. (Cfr. Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief*—a book unfortunately not without considerable ambivalence.)

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

We will not rediscover an idea of God which is true to Christ's mission until we have destroyed the idol we have created which so effectively negates that mission. The work before Christians is thus very largely of a destructive nature; we will not be able to build until we have carried out considerable clearance. But a plan for reconstruction is necessary even during this period, and it is this that we now want to formulate.

The first positive and creative thing to be achieved is the recovery of the active presence in the Church of what Christ actually stood for; and together with this the recreation of the original consciousness, to which we have already referred. This, however, does not mean recreating an out-of-date cultural consciousness; it means making the interrelationships between men which Christ can be seen to foster and demand into a real part of our lives today amongst other men. These interrelationships predominantly involve concern and justice, sympathy and compassion. They are to be found simply, yet vividly, in the Gospels: to the question 'Are you the Christ?' Jesus in effect answers: 'Go tell what you see me doing; the lame are healed, the blind receive their sight, the hungry are fed, and the wretched have the good news of hope preached to them'. (Cfr. Matt. Ch. 11.) The reference here to the prophecy of Isaiah, already referred to (Ch. 58), which foretells the complete relationship between God and men, indicates that he is not simply pointing to miracles, but to his relationship, and our relationship, to our fellow men—in which God is now to be found. And then again there is the statement that was such an inspiration to Camillo Torres: 'If you are going to the altar with your gift and remember that your brother has something against you, first go and make things right with him, and then return to the altar with your gift' (Matt. Ch. 5). All this clearly involves a totally different political outlook to that which has become habitual in the Church. Fortunately the realization of this has already started, and is growing everywhere.

If one has succeeded in actually living the Gospel message, one then has the material basis in men's lives for the realization of the true Christian God. Very carefully from within, avoiding every tendency to abstract from it, one can interpret this in such a way as to see its full significance. The only way to interpret such a reality as this is with the approach of a *materialist humanism*—naturally, however, one having the life and spiritual qualities which we have already seen to be possible.

All aspects of such a humanism should in the long run be brought into play, but for the moment, as we are only attempting to see how God might possibly be conceived within such a context, we shall confine ourselves to the literary and artistic aspects of humanism as found particularly in the English tradition and in authentic Marxism. The Gospel message as it should be lived has the qualities of that

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

'delicate organic wholeness which is man's actual living in the world' (F. R. Leavis talking about 'literary humanism' in *Revaluation*), and it is something of this sort that art and artistic criticism is best qualified to comment on.

In the criticism and appreciation of art one is able to develop a way of talking about one's subject matter so as to be able to explicitate for oneself and for others, to whom one is trying to communicate, the profound qualities of the work of art concerned. One is not in fact only in a position of having simply to say *look* or *listen* and you will see what a great work of art this is; one can talk about and around the subject, draw on a whole range of other common factors in one's human experience to lead someone on to such an appreciation. And yet one can never simply demonstrate it and say there it is scientifically indisputable. One cannot offer any purely objective proof of the quality of a Beethoven quartet or a Rembrandt painting.

It is the Christian claim—and of course it is up to the Christian to give the practical proof—that the Church, if by that we mean that society of men actually leading a life in which the *patterns of human concern* which originate from and depend upon Christ are present as constituting its reality, has similar qualities to those possessed by a profound work of art, and is thus open to a similar type of analysis. This analysis, at once materialistic and dialectical, should be able to show—if the claim is true– that this especial human situation, the Church, has a richness, a 'further dimensionality', which is in fact precisely what we should have been using the word God for all along.

This 'further-dimensionality' is the Spirit in the Church. As we have seen earlier, Christ's claim is that the Kingdom of God is now, through him, amongst us. This is no static situation—something given for the sake of being copied. It looks forward in hope, not however to something outside itself but to its own fulfilment. And thus this *spiritual element* embodies what is meant by God, and by heaven, etc. But nevertheless no dualism has been reintroduced here, for what we are talking about is still essentially materialist.

In order to make this point more effectively, a final appeal will be made to the nature of a work of art which provides us with the following analogy. Some great paintings, pieces of sculpture, etc., have a quality and character which makes one say that they are great and profound works of art, not just things that are decorative or representative. And this quality can be further described as the ability, the power, to engage a sensitive observer in such a way as to make a real difference to his life. Such works have the power to help one with a step forward in one's life, to make in conjunction with and in response to them a creative advance. Such is the quality of great art, and it is a spiritual quality. But no one but a fool would suggest that this 'spiritual quality' is something in a different sphere of reality to the work itself. The full totality of a painting lies in the

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

paint on the canvas, of a statue in the bronze, wood or stone out of which it is made. It is utterly material, and has no reality outside this. It is not something simply constituted by its cultural context, otherwise we would not be able to recognize real art from a totally different context, or recognize real art within a context which is repugnant to us. A true work of art, as much as any impoverished one, is utterly material in its full artistic quality. And yet at the same time it is not confined simply within its particular materiality; it has a power, of which we have spoken, going right into the future, and it has a dynamic link back to the artist who created it.

Now in the same way the Church, to the Christian, despite its corruption, its being covered over with dirt, false coats of paint, etc., can be seen to have a dynamic quality, a fullness, a richness going right ahead of it, taking one beyond the confines of this particular human situation here and now. It can be seen to be linked organically back to Jesus of Nazareth from whom its fullness comes. All this is its spiritual dimension – what it means by God, heaven, the world to come (in its quasi-mythological language). And yet all this is at the same time totally *of* the human reality which constitutes the Church today—its human materiality. The transcendence of God, the meaning of heaven, of the world to come –all this is *incarnate* in and has its reality for us in what Christians make of the Church today in terms of human relationships in the name of Christ.

There would seem to be one point only in which the analogy between a work of art and the Christian Church seriously breaks down. The spirit incarnate in a work of art not only exists in and through its materiality but is also dependent upon that materiality for its existence (though is this absolutely true in the case of music?), In the case of the Church, however, it is radically a part of the self-understanding of that body, and therefore of its reality, that the dependence is the other way round. This difference may well, however, interconnect with the way in which Christians believe that the Church's founder, its present reality, and its future are in a very profound sense all one and the same – which again makes it different from the work of art.

These differences do not bring with them, however, any danger of a return to dualism and religion as long as the principles for the interpretation of Christianity, which we have outlined, are faithfully observed. What they do indicate is that Christianity, whilst remaining radically a materialist humanism, also makes the claim to be at the same time something more than this. For Christians it is essential to nurture, cultivate and explore this 'more', so that they may be able to offer something in their own right to the world. This cannot easily be done nor can the claim effectively be pressed, however, until the Christian Church has put its house into better order and made it look less like what Christ himself referred to as 'a den of thieves'.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1968.tb06060.x Published online by Cambridge University Press