

## A CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF MARXISM

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**T**WO conceptions of the world are struggling for the possession of the soul of man, the Christian and the Marxist. And it would seem that nothing can ever reconcile their antagonisms. The Christian vision of the world involves a triple transcendence; that of spirit over matter, of the human person over society, of God over the world; whereas the Marxist vision of that same world seems to be built on strictly corresponding negations. Spirit does not transcend matter, since it is matter itself that makes spirit; the human person does not transcend society, since man can only become truly himself in and through society; and God does not transcend humanity, since 'it is not religion that makes man, but man who makes religion'.

Can a Christian content himself with such a rough and ready interpretation of Marxism? If it corresponds entirely to reality, then there is nothing more to be said and all doors are closed, since no possibility of a dialogue between Christians and Marxists can exist. There is a very real danger in simplifying doctrines, as theologians only know too well; and though Marxists are often guilty of crude generalisations about the Catholic position, Catholics themselves can over-simplify their assessment of the Marxist standpoint. 'The low materialism, the shoddy history and the false messianism which made up Communist propaganda in the nineteenth century...' I find these words in a Catholic manual of sociology published in recent months for use in schools. There is no doubt a certain satisfaction to be derived from using rude words about one's opponents; but it is a game that two can play, and go on playing indefinitely. And one can ask oneself: is it a game that Christians should play? The example quoted is no doubt an extreme example of the low controversial standard to which the debate may sink; but the only too-prevalent tendency to treat Communism as the universal bogey-man of modern history encourages a dangerous shallowness on the part of Catholics. We can be too easily satisfied that all issues are blocked in the debate with Communism, and that Marxism is the absolute

and final negation of everything that Christianity stands for.

What, then, should be our attitude in regard to the contradictions between Marxism and Christianity? Some Catholics have tried to solve the problem by a form of eclecticism and look forward to a Christian Marxism. Others, like the 'Progressive Christians' of France, have sought a solution in a dichotomy that balances a Christian religious philosophy upon Marxist politics and economics. Both paths seem to lead nowhere and have little to commend them to either side. The greater number of both Christians and Marxists continue to glower at one another from their respective positions. But there are some who are convinced that Marxism and Christianity, taken as concrete historical facts, have both, on different planes, a fundamental significance, and that an effort is called upon from both sides to face these contradictions and to make a fresh examination of them.

Père Desroches, a young Dominican sociologist of the group *Economie et Humanisme*, has recently attempted this from the Christian angle in his book, *Signification du Marxisme*.<sup>1</sup> This work is of extreme importance and, as far as I know, nothing like it has been done before. Many 'explanations' of Marxism have been published in recent years, as well as innumerable refutations, popular or learned. Père Desroches does not pretend to add to their number, and his work has quite a different significance. It is the fruit of a deep knowledge of Marxist literature and also of personal friendships with Marxist intellectuals and militants. These contacts—characteristics of an age in which Christians and Communists have shared the sufferings of forced labour and concentration camps—have enabled him to apprehend Marxism as a living philosophy and a driving force in the life of men.

Père Desroches sets out to test Marxism in its three fundamental aspects: materialism, communism, atheism. To each of these aspects he devotes a large chapter in which the content of Marxist doctrine is thoroughly examined. The first chapter, that on Marxist materialism, is an exhaustive study of dialectical materialism and its implications. In its philosophic aspect, it would seem that dialectical materialism presents itself as an explanation of the world and of man by way of spontaneous generation and creative evolution, which develops and prolongs in the domain of social forms the hypotheses tested in the domain of biological forms.

<sup>1</sup>*Signification du Marxisme*. H.C.Desroches. (pp. 395. Editions Ouvrières, Paris)

Marx believed that the self-evolution of the world was a refutation of the idea of creation. Matter is the cause of everything, not because it is matter, but because it is creative. Creative power is not transcendent to matter, but immanent to it. God does not create matter out of nothing and, from thence, everything else; it is matter itself which, out of nothing, creates everything. And thus it is that Marx is led to affirm that man himself is the supreme destiny of man. Marxist humanism is closed in upon itself; the maternity of matter is a total maternity, and has no need for a heavenly Father.

The Marxist believes that the possibility possessed by the world of evolving itself freely suppresses the need for a Creator transcendent to the world. This the Christian denies; for him, the world has all the more need of a Creator when science shows it to be creative on its own plane. There is a radical difference between these two conceptions; the difference between a 'closed' humanity existing by and for man, and an 'open' humanity existing by and for a Being beyond itself.

Dialectical materialism finds its technological expression in the relationship between techniques and structures. Historical research has shown the great extent to which changes in the life of humanity have been brought about by new techniques of production. At the beginning of the Christian era the spread of the water-wheel brought about a revolution in milling, diminished the number of slaves needed for grinding corn and enabled Constantine to begin their emancipation. In the Middle Ages the invention of the horse-collar and the horseshoe freed serfs for the Crusades, the revival of monasticism, and the building of cathedrals. And so on down to the present time, to the transformations brought about by steam, electricity and, tomorrow, atomic power. For Marx there is a primacy of techniques over structures. The structures are, in fact, made by the techniques, just as an army is made by its weapons.

Here we strike one of the deepest of the Marxist intuitions. It indicates the place that must be taken one day by a new science, that of human economy, which would bear the same relation to political economy as human geography bears to physical geography; the science of what man makes of his physical environment, and what the physical environment makes of man. In this sense, Marx's materialism would be a materialism of method, a method indispensable for the analysis of the evolution of human

society. Its strongest temptation is to become a materialism of principle.

The sociological expression of dialectical materialism is to be found in its belief in the masses. For the Marxist, the masses provide the motive force of history, through their will to exist. The modern proletariat possesses within itself all the revolutionary potentialities of our time, and it is the role of the party, the highest expression of the proletariat, to make an effective revolution. Père Desroches confronts this Marxist vision of the proletariat with the Christian theology of history. The Marxist believes in the masses; the Christian believes in respect for man, for the human person—respect for each single one of those millions of men who make up the masses. And these masses bear within them all the deepest hopes of humanity. The motive force of history is the will to be saved of the living person. How does this express itself in human history, which today is still at the stage of its prehistory? For the greater part of humanity it is still confined to the struggle for material existence; salvation means daily bread. Yet the history of the working-class movement bears witness to the fact that none of the proletarian struggles have been utterly utilitarian. The workers have not simply wanted to live; they have also wanted reasons for living. Marx knew this when he said that the proletariat needed roses as well as bread. And at the same time the Christian knows that he who said that man does not live by bread alone also multiplied bread in the desert to feed the hungry multitudes.

Thus the will to be saved wells up most strongly in the proletarian masses, among the poor of all time and the poor of our time. And that is why 'the poor have the gospel preached to them'. And that is why all our modern apostolate, to quote Cardinal Suhard, must be pivoted on the working class. It is the mark of the authentic Church of Christ that she is the Church of the proletarian masses.

Marxism is the scientific doctrine of Communism, because it is the doctrine of the 'return of man to himself'. It affirms that humanity is entering into a new historic phase, at the end of which it will recover its original unity. It will end the exploitation of man by man and usher in the age in which the free development of each will be the condition of the free development of all. Marx first of all discovered that the history of society had been the

history of class war, and he then envisaged the ending of class in a classless society; humanity would return to its final unity. When Marx and Engels discovered, through the works of Morgan and Sir Henry Maine, that the communities of primitive man had been communist in form, they felt they could give a sociological content to the dialectic of history. The first phase, or thesis, was the primitive rural community with collective ownership of the land. The second phase, the antithesis, was marked by the dissolution of these communities and the division of society into distinct and warring classes. The synthesis will come, not by a return to the past, but by a projection forward in the collective ownership of a classless society.

There are many who would forgive Marxism its materialism and its atheism, but who draw the line most vigorously at its communism. We have to point out to these that there is nothing inherently wicked in collective ownership and collective living. It has been practised in various forms throughout the long history of man, and its most extreme form is possibly to be found in Cistercian abbeys. In the concrete historical context, however, Christian positions and Marxist positions in the matter of ownership stand opposed. The Christian bias is in favour of private ownership for reasons chiefly psychological and human; Marxist reasons for collectivism are chiefly technical and economic. But neither of these positions is absolutely rigid. The trend of the Papal encyclicals has been to admit progressively the intervention of the State, the public ownership of monopolies, the evolution of the wage contract towards a form of association. And on the other hand, collectivism as practised in the U.S.S.R. seems to be tending towards forms of decentralisation, for reasons curiously similar to those advanced by Aristotle and St Thomas in favour of private ownership.

Marxist atheism is probably the most fundamental point upon which Marxism and Christianity contradict one another. The Marxist critique of religion is well known, and can be summed up in the phase of a communist leader: 'Religion is a monstrous flower growing on the dunghill of capitalism.' And the conclusion drawn is therefore as follows: 'Suppress the dunghill, and sooner or later the flower will wither away.' Marxist atheism claims to place the Christian believer on the horns of a dilemma. Eighteen hundred years of Christianity have shown that it is incapable of

establishing upon earth the reign of love; Christianity stands condemned by its ineffectiveness. If the Christian really sets out to be effective, by participating in revolutionary action, then his religious sense is bound to wither away. As the idea of man grows strong, so the idea of God grows weak. When man has fully become himself he will have no need of God.

To this practical criticism there can be only a practical answer. Christians must be able to show that their faith can be an effective thing, that the reign of love which their religion proclaims in principle can be established in reality. Marxist atheism is perfectly secure unless experience can prove it wrong. It establishes a challenge that we have to answer, and the only answer that can be given is that of sanctity.

It would seem to be more than a coincidence that this virulent challenge of Marxist atheism should be making itself felt at a time when the Church is promoting the laity to a participation in the apostolate of the hierarchy through Catholic Action; and that Catholic Action should prove itself most vigorous in the working world, where the crisis of human development is particularly violent. The proletariat and the people of God hold the key to the future of humanity. It was the scandal of the nineteenth century that the Church lost the working class; and experience has shown how much the Church is uprooted when the people of God is not made up of the ordinary people. Not that the Church draws her inspiration or her vitality from any messianic qualities of the proletariat; but if she is to remain true to her mission, she must remember that the workers and the poor constitute the margins of history and therefore all the promise of the future. 'The poor have the gospel preached to them.' Marxism constitutes a challenge to Christians all along the line; the only experience we have the right to oppose to it is the experience of holiness.