

FOUR CHALLENGES TO RELIGION

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MARXISM is undeniably the most powerful challenge to religion of our time, if not of all time. When we have estimated the enormous military might which Marxist governments and parties now have at their disposal, the vast material resources, the huge proportions of the earth's surface, the teeming millions of human beings at their command, we have only begun to estimate its power. Indeed, if we think of these alone we have not so much as begun to assess its inner strength, and we are already on the way to be the victims of its own materialistic ideology. We have to understand the fascination which has enabled it to gather to itself even this material might. When all has been said of the brutality of its leaders, of secret police and labour camps, of denunciations and purges and liquidations, the fact must be faced that Marxist Communism inspires in millions a conviction, a faith and a hope, an enthusiasm and self-abnegation, a sense of release and of solidarity—which even the Pope, in his Christmas Allocution, contrasted with the bewildered disillusion of youth in the 'free world'. Perhaps even more impressive than the devotion it can arouse in its party-line conformists, is the agony of genuine remorse it can produce (as Koestler and others have told us) in the renegades, the purged and the liquidated themselves.

Whence this power and fascination? Perhaps its greatest danger lies in the fact that it is so little felt and understood by most of those who oppose it. Marxism is labelled materialistic; and we tend to dismiss it as some drab positivist theory which can see no further than solids, liquids and gases. This is not the time to expound, let alone to criticise, the intricacies of Dialectical Materialism. But it is well to recall that such crude, purely theoretic, materialism was vigorously *attacked* by Marx and Engels in their criticisms of Dühring and Feuerbach. What Dialectical Materialism in effect professes to offer is nothing less attractive and intoxicating than fully conscious collaboration with the under-

¹ The fourth and last of a series of broadcasts given on the B.B.C. European Service on the Sundays of January, 1952.

lying laws of nature in the struggle of blind necessity to attain consciousness and freedom; the goal, 'not of understanding the world but of changing it'.

Marxism is also labelled atheistic, and we tend to think of a dreary, colourless rationalism, a merely theoretic negation of the merely theoretic affirmation of Divine reality. Yet such theoretic atheism and agnosticism were declared by Marx to be every bit as much a futile 'scholasticism' as their contrary. For the good Marxist, the affirmation and denial of the existence of God are equally meaningless—and in this the most respected bourgeois philosophers of our day appear to agree with him.

Yet, said Marx, 'criticism of religion is the foundation of all criticism'. This is so, given his 'Dialectical' interpretation of history, because only when the social and economic function of religion was understood, could it be transmuted into 'revolutionary, that is, practical-critical activity'. It is in this context that we have to read the famous slogan about the 'opium of the people'. Whatever may have been the positive function of religion in the past in promoting the evolution of history, it is now nothing but an opiate, blinding the proletariat to its own destiny. Marx is only echoing Varro's 'It is in the interest of states to be deceived in religion'. That religion is a potent instrument of law, order and government, and therefore of the ruling classes, was no new discovery of Marx; but on that account Marx saw it as the chief obstacle to revolution, itself the supposed prelude to the 'withering away' of the State and the introduction of the blissful classless society. In this sense, and in this sense only, the Marxist is 'anti-God'. If he is consistent with Marx himself, he does not *advocate* atheism. The *Communist Manifesto* claims only to 'express . . . actual relations springing from an existing class-struggle . . . a historical movement going on under our very eyes'. 'To defend or attack the movement (of history) is not our purpose; our duty is discharged in the simple attestation of its progress.' The Marxist claims to call us only to honest recognition of what has actually happened; and few will care to dispute his observation of the fact of 'the decay of religious authority'; or to deny that 'the days in which religious considerations were a governing element in the conflicts of Western Europe are long gone by'; or that 'from the period of the Reformation, the upper classes in every European nation . . . began to unfasten themselves individually from all

effective religious belief.' It is not easy to dispute Lenin's contention that the abortive Russian revolution of 1905, when the workers, bearing ikons, were led by the priest Gapon with their petition to the Tsar, only to be mown down by his Cossacks—that this attempted revolution failed because the workers were 'too Christian', and that that very fact blinded them to the harsh realities of their situation.

Whatever Marxists may mean exactly by the transmutation of religion into critical and revolutionary activity, it certainly does not mean a repudiation of everything that historically has belonged to religion; on the contrary, the power of Marxism would seem due largely to the fact that it secularises religion, revitalises it and harnesses its immense resources to the revolutionary struggle. Berdyaev was surely right in seeing that the appeal of Marxism lay less in its intellectual analyses, or even in its appeal to the class interests of the masses, than in its potent mythology. This Marxist myth he sees in its almost Jewish Messianism; its promise of redemption and liberation for the oppressed, to be attained only through 'a great tribulation'. It is the *mythos* of the chosen, Messianic people who will conquer and save the world; but these are now, not the stock of Abraham, but the oppressed and exploited of the world, who are nevertheless the actual producers of its wealth, and have only to become aware of their power, conscious that they have all to gain for posterity and nothing to lose but their chains. This is the *mythos* that inspires alike the devotion of the party-member in capitalist economies, the Red Army soldier, the Malayan 'bandit', the underpaid Comsomol member, even the deviationist's abject confession. Berdyaev has shown that the *mythos* is already implicit in Marx's own writings, however inconsistently with his historical determinism; but it has been immensely fortified in Lenin-Stalinism which, whatever its departures from determinism, is the only version of Marxism which has stood up to Marx's own criterion of practical success. Marxism has in fact seized upon, not only Marx's own latent Jewish Messianism, but the most powerful and universal archetypal motif: the motif of resurrection through death, of a new cosmos through chaos, the divinity of man to be disclosed through self-sacrifice. It even has its miraculous resurrection; for, as some Soviet philosophers have recently found at the expense of severe reprimand from the party-organ *Bolshevik*, the promised 'jump'

from necessity to freedom, from Socialist dictatorship of the proletariat to the withering away of the State and the inauguration of Communism, is no matter for scientific investigation or rational scrutiny.

Marxism, in short, only denies God in the sense of setting on record that he is, in our society, in practice denied and ineffectual, and in the sense of echoing the Satanic assurance, 'You shall be as God'. Its power against contemporary Christianity lies in the fact that it has stolen Christ's thunder: the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, of the triumph of the Son of Man, the reign in some new dimension of reality of the despised and rejected. It has made its own the eschatological preaching of deliverance for the oppressed and damnation for the powerful and rich, wherewith Christianity itself first gained the masses of the Roman Empire. But just because it is the ape of God and his Christ, the Christian must see in Marxism a supreme embodiment of the spirit of Antichrist; the corruption of the best which is worst of all.

How is he to respond to this challenge? First of all he must understand and appreciate it, or he can never meet it at all. More disturbing than any theory of drugs or torture to account for the cowed behaviour of some ecclesiastics at Communist State trials, was the suggestion put forward by a writer in *The Times Literary Supplement* that perhaps in prison they had heard for the first time the Marxist creed of godlessness put forward by a convinced adherent. Then, it would seem by no means idle for the Christian to refurbish even the old evidences and arguments for his own beliefs; for, in spite of Marxist theory, man is incurably metaphysical and persists in asking 'what is what', the ultimate 'whence and whither', and not merely 'how come'. And if there be a God, that fact and its practical consequences must override even the most accurate appraisal of the social and economic function of a decadent religion in a decaying social set-up.

Yet such argument can never meet Marxism on its own ground, nor refute the contentions of its criticism of religion. The distinctive challenge of Marxism lies in the fact that it is not just a theory that can be countered by an opposing theory, or solely by appeal to reason. For we are not dealing with a system that claims its confirmation in identities of being, but in action and practice. Hence Christian theory alone is powerless against it; and the constructive Christian criticism of Marxism must be less the task of

the philosopher than of the Christlike saint. Marxism, which is a sort of theory conformed to practice, can be adequately met only by Christian practice conformed to belief. If the challenges which Christianity has met in the past have been mostly challenges to Christian belief, and so opportunities for its development and enrichment, the providential purpose of Marxism would seem rather its challenge to Christian living, and so a providential call to practical holiness. It will be the sort of holiness which will be ready to say with Father Tong Che-tche before his communist judges at Chunting on June 3rd last year:

'Gentlemen, I have only one soul and it cannot be divided: but I have a body which can be broken up. It seems best for me to offer my soul, whole and entire to God, and my body to my country; if it wants it, I do not refuse it. . . . I am a Catholic, but I have a very great admiration for the Communists . . . they have more than one quality which forces my admiration. . . . The first of these qualities in the Communists is their readiness to face death. . . . A Christian capable of betraying God is no longer fit for anything but to betray the Church and his country. . . . I will spare no sacrifice, praying in the hope that the earthly life I offer today may be the price of the conversion of the generation to come.'

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NOTICE

The next issue of BLACKFRIARS will be published in September. It will contain special articles on 'The Social Services Today', as well as the usual features.