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THOUGHTS ON AN ENCYCLICAL

II. *The Immanence of "Atheistic Communism"*

"POPE DENOUNCES COMMUNISM." But we must read his words carefully, and see just *what* it is he denounces and *why* he denounces it, however painful and humbling may be the process. And then we must ask ourselves whether the monster against which he so insistently warns us is not London or Birmingham, or even Nazi Berlin or Fascist Milan, as well as Moscow or Barcelona, U.S.A. as well as U.S.S.R., whether the *thing* called Atheistic Communism is not to be found among avowed Catholics as well as professed Communists. We must ask ourselves not only whether our industrial-capitalist world is not guilty of having *brought about* the thing which the Pope calls Atheistic Communism, but further whether it is not guilty precisely of the very evils of Atheistic Communism *itself* in so far as these fall under the anathemas of the Church as they are expressed in the text of the Encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*.

(1) Evolutionary materialism, (2) atheism, (3) class-struggle, (4) the dehumanization of man, (5) the denial of individual property, (6) the destruction of marriage and the family: such, it will be found, are the principal headings of the Pope's indictments. If the point of the Encyclical is not to be missed, these should serve not merely as missiles to hurl at Communists but also as headings for *self-examination*.

(1) *Evolutionary materialism*. "According to this doctrine there is in the world only one reality, matter, the blind forces of which evolve into plant, animal and man. Even human society is nothing but a phenomenon and form of matter, evolving in the same way. By a law of inexorable

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necessity and through a perpetual conflict of forces, matter moves towards the final synthesis of a classless society." (*Divini Redemptoris*, § 9.) Of course we reject the theory with disdain. But in practice? To the extent that we uncritically accept, acquiesce in, conform ourselves to, the actual historic process of social evolution, we are necessarily evolutionary materialists in fact, whatever may be our theory. Here as elsewhere, it should be remembered, Marxism professes only make us honest and consistent by conforming our theory to our practice. (It is, as we have seen, the root evil of Marxism that it would conform theory to practice instead of practice to theory.) To the extent that we do not detach ourselves from the world in which we live, to the extent that we allow ourselves to accept it uncritically and consequently to be determined by our historical environment instead of seeking to determine it, to that extent we are historical determinists in practice and in fact. This is not a question of what has been called "mucking out" or "mucking in": the complexities and the infinite varieties of the problems of Christian life in the world are not to be resolved by any facile slogan. Prior to all such problems of method and technique, of "segregation" or "infiltration," comes for the Christian the inexorable duty of detachment from the world. And the world, in the scriptural sense, is precisely the factual historical process which disregards the primacy of the spiritual and the divine intervention.¹ Christianity demands imperatively as a primary condition of its very existence the obligation of achieving the utmost possible independence from this world: the necessity of detached criticism, the constant, unwearied refusal to be determined by our factual environment. We shall understand the vehemence of the Catholic Church's opposition to Marxist Communism only when we understand that evolutionary materialism is, on analysis, precisely the embodiment and legitimization of "worldliness" in the sense in which the word is used in the New Testament. Then only

¹ cf. Etienne Gilson in *BLACKFRIARS*, June 1936: "The 'world' is not nature; it is nature seeking to be independent of God, to become something autonomous, self-contained and self-sufficient."

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shall we see that the application to Marxism of such terms as "antichrist" and "diabolic" is no mere rhetoric. But we shall also understand that we are in no position to oppose Marxism so long as we accept its primary postulates in practice. The distinctive challenge of Marxism to Christianity is that Marxism is not merely a theory which can be countered by an opposing theory or solely by an appeal to reason. Marxism is not a speculative philosophy, but a technique of fusing theory with practice.² For this reason "Christian *theory* alone is powerless against Dialectical Materialism . . . in the last analysis the constructive criticism of Marxism is the task less of the philosopher than of the saint."³ Marxism, which is theory-conformed-to-practice, can be adequately met solely by practice-conformed-to-theory. If the heresies of history have been challenges to Christian *belief* and, as such, opportunities for its development and enrichment, the providential purpose of Marxism would seem to be its challenge to Christian *living* and, as such, a providential recall to sanctity.

(2) *Atheism*. "Criticism of Religion is the foundation of all criticism," said Marx. "And," explains Middleton Murry, "the reason why criticism of religion was the foundation of all criticism was that only when supernatural religion was understood, and so transmuted, was the ground cleared for a completely materialistic religion: which was 'revolutionary, i.e., practical-critical activity.' " The Communist would have no objection to a purely theoretic God, nor to a religion which had no influence on life and history. But the Marxist's equation of theory and practice, his conception of the social-economic function of ideologies in general and of religious ideologies in particular would compel him to hold that a purely theoretic God was an im-

² "Hence the critique of those whose minds are fixed in academic ways of thought nearly always misses the point. We are not dealing with a system of thinking which claims its confirmation in the identities of being, but with one which claims its confirmation in action and practice. Moreover it does not confirm itself by referring back to traditional ways of action or established practice; it claims its verification in the unity of thought with revolutionary practice."—Bernard Kelly, *BLACKFRIARS*, January 1937.

³ *BLACKFRIARS*, March 1935.

possibility: a God who was really believed in would be bound to interfere in the affairs of this world. For that reason, and for that reason only, the Marxist is "anti-God": he has no interest whatsoever in purely speculative atheism. Perhaps we are wiser than the Marxist. " 'In England, you see,' Mr. Britling remarked . . . 'we have domesticated everything. We have even domesticated God.' " It is a pulpit platitude that there is such a thing as a purely practical atheism, even a religiosity which pays lip-service to God but will not allow Him to make a nuisance of Himself. That our civilisation is *in practice* hardly less atheistical than that of Soviet Russia, needs little proof. To the extent, therefore, that our belief in God fails to influence our individual conduct and our social relations, to that extent are we atheist in the *Marxist* sense of the word. Here again, it is well to remember that Marx did not precisely *advocate* atheism as a theory or as an ideal: he called only for the honest recognition of what he considered to be a *fait accompli*, the fact of "the decay of religious authority." It was his thesis that religious ideologies could no longer exercise their function of moulding the course of history, and could serve only to hinder its progress by being utilized by the governing classes as an opiate for the people: "The days in which religious considerations were a governing element in the wars of Western Europe are long gone by."⁴ Consistently with his general view he held that "To defend or attack that movement is not our purpose; our duty is discharged in the simple attestation of its progress." Hence, again, the specifically Marxist critique of religion is not to be met by a purely theoretic vindication of theism, but only by a theism which finds its confirmation in practice, in life and in conduct.

(3) *Class-struggle*. "Insisting on the dialectical aspect of their materialism the Communists claim that the conflict which carries the world towards its final synthesis can be accelerated by man. Hence they endeavour to sharpen the antagonisms which arise between the various classes of

⁴ *The Crimean War: The Decay of Religious Authority* (Articles in the *New York Tribune*, reproduced in the Gollancz *Handbook of Marxism*, pp. 172-179.)

society." (*Divini Redemptoris*, § 9). "Endeavour to sharpen"; but class-struggle is not, it must be understood, something created or invented by the Communists. Class-struggle is simply "the conflict of strivings which arise from differences in the situation and modes of life of the *classes* into which society is divided."⁵ It is not perhaps generally understood that class-struggle *as such* has nothing to do with personal likes and dislikes, and does not *as such* mean riots or bloodshed or even strikes. The existing class-struggle is simply the conflict of the respective interests of capital and labour which is inherent in industrial capitalism. This class-struggle is a fact, however much we may dislike it, and a fact in which we are willy-nilly implicated on one side or the other to the extent that we live *either* on profits *or* on wages derived from capitalistic enterprises. We may or may not be conscious of this conflict of interests and strivings (the Communist considers it his business to make us so); this conflict may or may not find expression in violence (the thoroughgoing Communist will endeavour to whip us up to violence—if it be to the wage-earning class that we belong.⁶) But whether we be conscious of it or not; whether we be violent or not, it can hardly be denied that the class-struggle is a fact which is part and parcel of the economic system on which we live. To the extent that we acquiesce in that system, we acquiesce in its necessary concomitant which is class-struggle. Class-struggle, and the demands which the existence of it make upon Christians, have recently been so excellently treated in these pages⁷ that there is no need further to elaborate the point. Here we would note only that the denunciations of *Divini Redemptoris* are directed not merely to the use of violence, nor to the activities of one only of the conflicting classes, but to the conflict of interests itself. In his very denunciation of

⁵ V. I. Lenin, *The Teachings of Karl Marx (Handbook of Marxism)*, p. 546).

⁶ See especially the chapter on *The Force Theory* in Engel's *Anti-Dühring*.

⁷ *Christians and the Class-Struggle*, by Bernard Kelly, BLACKFRIARS, Jan. 1937. Berdyaev's *Christianity and Class War* (Sheed & Ward, 1933) should also be read.

violence and hatred the Pope shows how far more radical are the principles of Christian revolution in comparison with the Marxist programme. For whereas the Marxist proposes the acceleration of the dialectic of history by the use of force, the Holy Father defies, in the name of Christian justice and charity, that dialectical process itself. Like Leo XIII before him, it is the very opposition of capital and labour that he would resolve.

(4) *Dehumanization*. "Communism, moreover, strips man of his liberty, robs human personality of all its dignity, and removes all the moral restraints that check the eruptions of blind impulse. There is no recognition of any right of the individual in his relations to the collectivity; no natural right is accorded to human personality, which is a cog-wheel in the Communist system." (*Divini Redemptoris*, § 10.) Of this aspect of Communism we have already written.⁸ But it is well to recall that here again the Marxist does not propound any *a priori* dogma of the insignificance of the human personality, but simply attests what he considers that the human individual is and must be in the industrialized collectivity. "Social organization and the State incessantly arise out of the life-process of definite individuals, but not from these individuals as they may appear in their own, or others', idea of them, but from themselves as *they really are*, that is to say as they work and materially produce, i.e., from themselves as they are active under definite material limitations, pre-conditions and conditions which are independent of their free-will."⁹ Marx's assertion against Feuerbach that the human individual is abstract and illusory, his celebrated definition that "the human essence in its concreteness is the totality of social relations," are less attributable to any preconceived philosophy than to an attempt to assess what man in the actual stage of historical evolution must be. As Middleton Murry has expressed it:

The reason why Marx could transcend the isolated individual was that the last material walls of individual isolation were breaking down . . . The increasing and apparently inevitable de-

⁸ BLACKFRIARS, May 1937.

⁹ Karl Marx, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, Vol. II.

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gradation of humanity had become stark and staring. Yet the capitalism which caused this degradation was a natural emergence; it was manifestly a form naturally taken by bourgeois society in a machine age . . . By a socially natural evolution, human society had reached a morally unnatural condition; by exercising the normal human activities of a member of bourgeois society, the Capitalist had become a more abominable tyrant than any in human history. What was the conclusion to be drawn? The conclusion was inevitable. First, that individuals in bourgeois society were not individually responsible for the social consequences of their acts. And what did this mean? Essentially this: that the "individual" human being, as currently conceived by religion and ethics, was an illusion. The "individual," of whom men thought and spoke, in whom men believed (and in whom men believe, of course, to-day) was an abstract conception.¹⁰

Marxism, it is clear, does not *advocate* dehumanization and depersonalization, it seeks simply to give conscious and active recognition to the logical process of industrialism, believing moreover that its concomitant hardships will thereby be ameliorated. Communism fits industrialism like a glove. Christianity and Christian personalism, to put it mildly, do not.¹¹ It is here that the task of the Christian revolution in the modern world is so extraordinary difficult. To the Christian, even the material hardships and injustices which industrialism has brought with it must be less terrible than this dehumanizing process which seems to be inherent in it. Communist and Capitalist devotees of industrialism agree in sounding the praises of the *panes et circenses* which it has brought or can bring to the masses. To the Christian these are its greatest danger and evil: *What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?* The more tolerable the dehumanization of industrialism is made, the more intolerable it must be to the Christian. *Les esclaves perdent tout dans leurs fers, jusqu'au désir d'en sortir*, said

¹⁰ J. Middleton Murry, *The New Man in Marxism* (Chapman and Hall, 1935). We are well aware that Mr. Murry is no "orthodox" interpreter of Marxism, but his exposition of Marx in this particular seems to us penetrating and unexceptionable.

¹¹ By industrialism is here to be understood the *historical* and *existing* reality; we are not here concerned with the possibilities of utilizing machinery and scientific technique in ideal forms of society conformably with the preponderating exigencies of Christian humanism.

Rousseau. Herein lies the great menace of Communism to human individuality and responsibility—and so to the human soul. The human shambles of the early stages of industrialism are less perilous than the cosy lethal chamber of its later stages as we are already beginning to know them, and as they would be brought to perfection in a Communist society.

(5) *The denial of property.* Communist views about property are widely misunderstood. Here, once more, the Communist does not profess to maintain any doctrinaire views about what *should* be in the matter of ownership, but simply to press to its logical conclusion the actual state of affairs:

We Communists have been reproached with the desire of abolishing the right of personally acquiring property as the fruit of a man's own labour, which property is alleged to be the groundwork of all personal freedom, activity and independence.

Hard-won, self-acquired, self-earned property! Do you mean the property of the petty artisan and of the small peasant, a form of property that preceded the bourgeois form? There is no need to abolish that; the development of industry has to a great extent already destroyed it, and is still destroying it daily. Or do you mean modern bourgeois private property? But does wage-labour create any property for the labourer? Not a bit. It creates capital, i.e., that kind of property which exploits wage-labour and which cannot increase except upon condition of begetting a new supply of wage-labour for fresh exploitation. Property, in its present form, is based on the antagonism of capital and wage-labour . . .

You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths.¹² You reproach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is the non-existence of any property for the immense majority of society.

In one word, you reproach us with intending to do away with

¹² cf. *Quadragesimo Anno*: "The immense number of propertyless wage-earners on the one hand, and the abundant riches of the fortunate few on the other, is an unanswerable argument that the earthly goods so abundantly produced in this age of industrialism are far from rightly distributed and equitably shared among the various classes of men."

your property. Precisely so; that is just what we intend. (*The Communist Manifesto*.)

The "age-long doctrine of the Church concerning the individual and social character of private property"¹³ is yet more antagonistic to existing property relations than is Karl Marx. Too easily has it been assumed that the Christian defence of the right of property justifies, not only the propertylessness, but also the property of industrial capitalist society. The Encyclical calls attention forcefully to the fact that the Christian idea of property is seldom put into practice. Yet more deplorable is that fact that it is so little taught or understood. A thorough study of Christian teaching regarding property¹⁴ suggests that not only is the contemporary assumption of quasi-absolute dominion utterly contradicted by natural law and Christian ethics, but also that much, if not most, *de facto* property at the present time can have little or no *de jure* justification.¹⁵ On the other hand, the distinction between property and wages is as clearly recognized by *Quadragesimo Anno* (see especially §§ 52, 53, 60, 61) as it is in the above extract from *The Communist Manifesto*. But whereas the Communist is content to foster and ameliorate the process which is eliminating private property altogether, and to constitute collective ownership as alone fitted to the conditions engendered by machine-production, the Pope seeks to reverse the process "by letting wage-earners attain to property" (*Quadragesimo Anno*, § 61). If it be argued that this would spell the doom of industrialism, there seems to be no answer but "Let it."

(6) *The Destruction of Marriage and Family life*. In the words of the Encyclical:

Refusing to human life any sacred or spiritual character, Communism logically makes of marriage and the family a purely artificial and civil institution, the outcome of a specific economic system . . . Naturally therefore the notion of an indissoluble marriage-tie is scouted. Communism is particularly characterized by the rejection of any link that binds woman to the family and

¹³ *Divini Redemptoris*, § 31.

¹⁴ e.g., in such a masterly work as *Eigentumsrecht nach dem hl. Thomas von Aquin* by Dr. Alexander Horváth, O.P. (Graz, 1929.)

¹⁵ This is a delicate way of calling it theft—though not, of course, deliberate theft.

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the home, and her emancipation is proclaimed as a basic principle. She is withdrawn from the family and the care of her children, to be thrust instead into public life and collective production under the same conditions as men. (§ 10.)

It is the Communist's own boast that in all this he is introducing nothing new or revolutionary: he is simply following to its logical conclusion the dissolution of the family begun in "bourgeois society":

Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists . . .

The bourgeois claptrap about the family and education, about the hallowed correlation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting the more, by the action of modern industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.

But you Communists would introduce community of women, screams the whole bourgeoisie in chorus . . .

Nothing is more ridiculous than the virtuous indignation of our bourgeois at the community of women which they pretend is to be openly and officially established by the Communists. The Communists have no need to introduce community of women; it has existed almost from time immemorial.

Our bourgeois, not content with having the wives and daughters of the proletarians at their disposal, not to speak of common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other's wives.

Bourgeois marriage is in reality a system of wives in common and thus, at the most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with is that they desire to introduce, in substitute for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalized community of women . . . (*Communist Manifesto*.)

When we have shuddered at the cynicism of this analysis with its rather pathetic lack of subtlety, we must face the fact that Communist views on marriage, women, love, sex-relations and education are, at their worst, but logical developments of a state of things which has become worse rather than better since the days when the *Communist Manifesto* was published. The breakdown and degradation of family life and all it implies are perhaps the most obvious feature of our civilization. This is not the place to make a more accurate and detailed analysis of the fact nor to assess its causes: we would simply record that in these matters

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again Communism neither is nor professes to be particularly revolutionary.

One fact, then, seems to emerge with startling clearness from a thoughtful and humble reading of the Encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*. It is that the evils of Atheistic Communism which are singled out for reprobation are mostly, if not entirely, not peculiar to organized Communism, but are already present in various stages of evolution in our actual industrial capitalist society, of which Communism itself is a product. They are evils to be feared, not merely in some problematic Communist society of the future, but actually immanent in our own, here and now. The conclusion to be drawn is clear:

“Our struggle is not merely against Bolsheviks and Communists. In the first place we must combat the Communist mentality in our own ranks. There would seem to be a sore need, in this respect, of some Saint John, whose exhortion: ‘Reflect, do penitence!’ would at last awaken our souls from their torpor.”¹⁶

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

¹⁶ Statement from the Secretariate-General of the Sodalities of Our Lady in Rome, reproduced in *The Catholic Herald*, 14-5-37.