

INFALLIBILITY: STALINIST AND PAPAL

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I HAVE often wondered how Communists can make their faith acceptable to their reason. Granted that in most cases the emotional forces released by their *mystique* leave little room for reasoning, yet man is a rational being and ultimately everybody is driven to rationalise, in however haphazard a manner, and thus to justify to himself the faith that is in him.

Most difficult of all to rationalise must surely be the ultimate foundation on which the whole structure of the Communist party rests, I mean belief in Stalin's infallibility. And let it not be said that to use the term 'infallibility' is an exaggeration. Members of the Communist party are expected to hand themselves over entirely to its cause, to consider its claims as overriding those of any human tie, any interest, any personal conviction, and to be ready to sacrifice for it all they have or are, even their life. And for them this life is the end: they cannot be buoyed up by the expectation of any future reward, they cannot esteem this short present life of theirs as nothing compared with a future eternal life. They are pledged to an *oboedientia cadaveris* which for them is not a mortification of the will which brings its rewards, quite irrespective of whether the order obeyed is in itself right or mistaken, whether it will or will not further the end aimed at. Success—earthly success—is, for the Christian, suspect; for the Communist it is the only possible criterion.

For the Communist to hand himself over body and soul (as we would say) to the directives of the party can therefore only seem justifiable to himself, because only by following them does he think that success can be achieved. And the directives of the party are in the last resort of course those that are validated by Stalin. The course steered by Communism may be a zig-zag: it is for Stalin to say when the 'zig' is right, and when the 'zag'. He is always right, unquestionably, because infallibly right. Today the watchword may be 'Sabotage the Allies' war effort!' (as it was during Stalin's alliance with Hitler); tomorrow, 'No labour trouble to hinder the Allies' war effort!' (as it became when Hitler invaded Russia). Yesterday it was an honour to be in Tito's

confidence; today it is a sure death-warrant. And this infallible judgment concerns not only the practical politics of the day: it decides what art-style is true, what kind of music is a 'deviation'; it decides the laws and facts of nature, as for instance, whether acquired characters are inheritable.

Stalin therefore must be praised as a super-man, as the greatest genius that has ever lived, as one for whom no superlative comes up to the reality of his greatness. The adulation offered to him on his seventieth birthday may have nauseated the outsider listening in; but one must admit, that it is only reasonable and logical for a practising Communist, since for such a one Stalin is the keystone, without which there could be no arch.

This felt need for infallibility seems all the more curious at first sight, when one recollects that relativism and pragmatism are still part of the Communist ideology. Relativism was bred in our Christian civilisation by the Reformation, which denied to the Papacy supreme spiritual power. At first *ersatz* was sought in the Bible: but of course a book is not self-explanatory and there remains the need of an infallible interpreter. Luther, Calvin, Melancthon—who was to choose and decide between them? The obvious way out was the secular power; Machiavelli's Prince; Henry VIII. The principle of *cuius regio, illius religio* tried to put a stop to the wars of religion; but the royal absolutism by divine right in the end only produced the American declaration of Independence and the French Revolution.

Thus the State became the *ersatz* for the Prince. But while royal absolutism had been able to claim the Grace of God, the new notion of the State was 'secular', i.e. one with God left out. Impossible to claim infallibility for the State. But if one could do without God, why not also without infallibility? Was there such a thing as real, objective, absolute Truth? The wrangles endemic in Protestantism had produced the age of toleration—tolerance becoming now a substitute for charity and giving birth to the agnostic's dogma, that absolute truth is inaccessible to human reason, and to the relativist's, that there is no such thing as absolute truth, but that all so-called 'truth' is a purely relative affair, that in fact, as the pragmatists were soon to put it, 'truth is what works'.

With this, infallibility seemed to have received its *coup de grâce* and to have been safely got rid of. Authority itself of course had

gone the same way and rebelliousness became the chief mark of 'freedom'. Turned into a full-scale ideology by anarchism, this branding of obedience as the chief vice of an enslaved humanity was equally hailed by all who believed that one must destroy, before one can build, whether they were anarchists or Communists. Both were revolutionists, i.e. believers in the need of a revolution as a preliminary *conditio sine qua non*, though Communists of course were only anarchists, as long as the governmental authority and power were not in their hands; when in power, they practised a totalitarianism *à outrance*.

However, the lawlessness consequent upon the abolition of an absolute authority based on an absolute truth has by now become so patent and so alarming that a general trend to its opposite, totalitarianism, has set in, marked by such names as Maurras, Mussolini and Hitler. It is to this ideological family that Communism also belongs: all these varieties of totalitarianism merely mark the swing of the pendulum from extreme liberalism to extreme authoritarianism. One is as false as the other; but both prove, the one negatively and other positively, that authority without infallibility is in the last resort impossible.

For authority to be binding in conscience, i.e. to be reasonable, must go back ultimately to a source of absolute truth, God; and it is surely revealing to find that those who would do away with God are obliged to substitute for him, Stalin—a thesis, the blasphemy of which is only equalled by its imbecility. But then the devil always is, in the last analysis, a *dummer Teufel*.

By contrast a Catholic cannot but be struck afresh by the wisdom of God, which has so wonderfully contrived a means for man to harmonise freedom and absolute authority: authority to establish eternal principles, freedom to apply them to the contingencies of his existence in time; an infallibility, not *à la* Stalin, but of a Pope, who, when laying down *ex cathedra* eternal principles of faith and morals, is divinely preserved from error, in order that men's souls may know for certain a path leading to eternal safety: but who, for the rest, is not there in problems which reason is competent to solve, to short-circuit reason, nor to prevent his fellow-men (for their temporal convenience and in their temporal affairs) from learning that fire is hot by burning their fingers.

Betwixt the devil of totalitarianism and the deep sea of anarchy man stands today, hesitating. Perhaps it is therefore not superfluous

to make him see that he does not face a true dilemma of evils, but that there is a *via media* that will lead him safely past the two monsters that on the right and on the left seem to bar his way. But for him to adopt that road, the first need is to realise that infallibility, so far from being a silly invention of obscurantist priestcraft, is a need of the very warp and woof of his nature. Only then surely can one expect him also to consider whether the Catholic formula is not perhaps after all the only one that fully safeguards the freedom of man's will, without reducing human society to chaos.

THE CLAUDEL-GIDE CORRESPONDENCE¹

MARY RYAN

THE publication of this exchange of letters is in some ways unique, and of great religious and philosophical significance. The two men are of absolutely outstanding eminence and influence, and each in his way of outstanding experience. They are of the same generation, Claudel born in 1868, Gide in 1869. They were friends and have long since fallen apart. They stand for two absolutely opposite conceptions of man's duty and destiny.

During his recent visit to Rome, Claudel told an Italian interviewer (Mario Guidotti) that neither he nor Gide had taken the initiative in publishing this correspondence. It came from Robert Mallet, a friend of Gide's (who has supplied the letters with a minute and enlightening factual commentary). Claudel consented, in the hope of exercising a moral influence: 'I should like the letters to do good today to young people whom Gide may have harmed: the good that I tried to do, unhappily in vain, to a great writer and friend'.

Both correspondents hold strongly to what they stand for.

¹ Paul Claudel et André Gide: *Correspondance* 1899—1926. Préface et notes par Robert Mallet. Paris; Gallimard.