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The Theology of Communism

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In 1964 the Chicago University Press published a volume of essays entitled *What Can a Man Do?* The chapters of this book were written by one of our most distinguished Jewish journalists. One of his essays goes under the title "Christ Under Communism."¹ It concludes with the observation that today there are really only two serious contenders for the hearts and minds of men, namely, the church and communism.

At the moment, as the author points out, the Marxist movement looks strong and victorious while the church appears to be in retreat. Yet the latter has known right along that this contest would be long and bruising. She has entered the arena, therefore, prepared to endure. Communism has only recently discovered that this struggle is not an easy one. In the meantime, both address themselves to man's capacity for basic loyalties. Both work with an interpretation of reality that proposes to deal with ultimate issues in depth. That is to say, both have a theology, as

¹ Milton Mayer, *What Can a Man Do?* ed. W. Eric Gustafson (Chicago: The University Press, 1964), p. 59.

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Nicolai Berdyaev was quick to point out when he went into exile from Russia almost 50 years ago.²

It is a paradox to describe communism in terms of theology. After all, do not its prophets insist that "religion is the opiate of the people"? Yet communism may properly be spoken of as a religion. It certainly insists on dealing with men at that level. Hence the World Council of Churches in its Evanston Assembly of 1954 took special note of the structural correspondence between Christianity and the Marxist system of thought.³

² Nicolai Berdyaev was himself a Marxist for a time and was converted to the faith of the Orthodox Church. With a rather large number of other members of the Russian intelligentsia he attempted to bring the Church of Russia into the 20th century. These efforts were cut short by the October Revolution of 1917. Cf. Nikita Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, trans. Lancelot Sheppard and A. Manson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 21. Berdyaev's views may be found in his book *The Origin of Russian Communism* (London: Centenary Press, 1937).

³ The official report of that assembly, unhappily, does not include this observation contained in the second report of the Advisory Committee on the Theme of the Second Assembly (p. 18), which reads: "Thus in Marxism men have often noticed a kind of structural correspondence to Christianity. . . . This correspondence is, of course, counterfeit. But it would be a mistake for the Christian to treat this correspondence as if it were merely counterfeit." The final report of the committee is given in *The Christian Hope and the Task of the Church* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1954), pp. 33 to 35. It is dilutions of this kind that prompted one sensitive soul to observe: "The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in

We shall not understand the full dimensions of the worldwide conflict in which we are all engaged if we do not reckon with those aspects of communism which reveal it to be a product of that emptiness of the soul and of that dark despair which overtake men when they abandon the substance of the Christian faith but want to preserve its forms. Communism can be thought of as a Christian "heresy." It is a child of the church in the sense that it is a product of the Christian West and not of the thought of the East.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels both worked in the West. The system of thought they put together could not have been created had there not been a Christian tradition from which they could borrow some major features of their ideology. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, therefore, quite a few years ago properly entitled his work on Marxism *Communism and the Conscience of the West*.⁴

Marxist theory is a caricature of Christian doctrine, rationalized and secularized by men who grew up within the church and who at times insisted they were speaking for the church. We can discuss the theology communism contains under the following general headings: its doctrine of God; its view of sin; its belief in salvation; its teaching on man; and its concept of last things. We shall try to spell out each of these items as we go along.

Evanston may be cited as an additional symptom of this mood — of lethargy." Cf. Arthur Vööbus, *The Communist Menace, the Present Chaos and Our Christian Responsibility* (New York: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1955), p. 40.

⁴ Fulton J. Sheen, *Communism and the Conscience of the West* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1948).

1. ITS DOCTRINE OF GOD

We must always keep in mind that communism has a doctrine of God despite the fact that it is officially atheistic. If what we put our trust in is our god — and that is a good working definition — then the god of communism is history itself. The followers of Marx think of the historical process as a cosmic endocrine gland which secretes its own solutions as it goes along. This god is good, since history is moving toward a noble end, namely, the creation of a classless utopia and a stateless society. The communist is sure that he has a roadmap for an open future, and so he is basically optimistic. He is convinced that he is riding the wave of the future.

On the basis of this conviction he will go to an emerging nation and try to persuade its leaders that he has the key to history, and that he can show people who are caught in the revolution of rising expectations how to do a shortcut past the evils of capitalism. Pointing to Russia as exhibit A for his kind of revolution, he offers to show backward peoples how to move directly from feudalism into socialism.

We must observe at this point that communists think of the historical process as moving along a line. This is a concept of history which Karl Marx borrowed from the Scriptures. In the ancient world it was the prophets of the Old Testament who alone among the religious thinkers of that time rejected the notion that history moved in a circle, returning periodically to its starting point. Israel's prophets spoke of a God who had given certain promises at one time in history which He would fulfill at some time in the future.

They proclaimed a God, therefore, who had given His people both "a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11). Communism has taken over this view of what is going on in the world, thoroughly secularizing the concept in the process of adapting it to the needs of revolutionary activity.

The prophets of old spoke of history as having a goal, the establishment of the kingdom of God. In much the same way communism speaks of man's future as moving toward a classless society. To be sure, it denies the existence of God as the Lord of history, displacing God with its own autonomous notion of history as that process by which men will be redeemed as they are carried forward toward the communist order of things. The degree to which such a view of history serves as a compelling idol may be gauged from the title of a book written by Andre Gide and a number of other disillusioned Marxists. It is entitled *The God Who Failed*.⁵

2. ITS VIEW OF SIN

Communism also has a view of sin. The disciple of Marx knows that there is something wrong with the human situation. He does not, however, think of this contradiction between what is and what ought to be in the same way that Christians do. Yet he has caught something of the idea.

He is convinced that the difficulties which beset mankind have their source in that moment of history when someone invented the instruments of production that enabled him to exploit others. This is what is wrong with society, says the communist. Evil is not within the human

heart; it is to be found rather in economic maldistribution. It is the invention of the means of industrial production that drove men from their primordial paradise of primitive communism. The means of production made possible the accumulation of private property, enabling some men to become wealthy and reducing others to slavery. It is this development that created the destructive struggle of classes within society; and that is evil.

At this point we must remind ourselves that the communist applies to all of life a law from the laboratory known as the law of conflict and tension. It is best illustrated in terms of electricity, which comes to us in units of opposites. A positive proton is always balanced by a negative electron. These are held in tension within a single unit of reality. Marxist ideology works on the pure assumption that there is nothing in the universe except matter in movement.⁶ Hence it is not only permissible but necessary to take this law from the laboratory and apply it to man and to society. Everywhere there is conflict and tension, says the communist. Reality comes in units of opposites, and the communist is happy to help this process along. He causes difficulties and stirs up trouble as an act of faith and not just for the sake of harassment.

This is one reason why it is very difficult for a man from the West and another from the East to have a meeting of minds. Each thinks of reality in quite different terms. We believe that the world was created as a place for order and harmony and are quite willing to work at

⁵ *The God Who Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Harper & Bros., 1950).

⁶ Gustav A. Vetter, *Sowjetideologie Heute* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Bücherei, 1962), I, 15 ff.

this kind of design under a national policy devoted to security, stability, and development. The communist, however, enjoys conflict because he believes that tension is, so to speak, the motor of the historical process. In all these tensions, though, we must keep in mind that there is one artificial conflict—the class struggle. This, the communist holds, must be eliminated for it is destructive. “All past history is the history of class struggles,” says the *Communist Manifesto*. The goal of history will be achieved when this has been eradicated.⁷

3. ITS CONCEPT OF SALVATION

If men are to be saved, therefore, something must be done about the class struggle to eradicate evil from the social order. Here we touch on the communist teaching about salvation. The communist has something of the same kind of passion for social justice found among the prophets whose works we have in Scripture. He is concerned with the redemption of mankind and often thinks of his movement in terms of Biblical Messianism. In his case the proletariat, rather than a single Savior, is the anointed instrument.

One concept Marxism has borrowed from the Scriptures in this connection is that of a center of time. Christians think of the events in the ministry of our Lord, specifically of His crucifixion and resurrection, as occurring in the fullness of time. That is to say, we look back upon these events as a way of evaluating all the rest of history. We see a principle at work in the life of our Lord, namely, that

in the kingdom of God the lowly shall be exalted and the proud brought low (Luke 14:11). The communist also has a center of time which he uses as a point of reference. In his case it is the October Revolution of 1917. If mankind is to be saved, if there are to be successful revolutions against the bourgeoisie and against imperialism, men must follow the program and the methods of Lenin in bringing the socialist revolution to Russia and converting that land into the outpost for mankind's liberation. History will never be the same again, the communist believes. Lenin introduced into the historical process those forces which will and must set all men free.⁸

In this connection it may be useful to point out the fact that the Communist Party functions something like the Christian clergy. The job of party members is to interpret the particular historical context in which people live and then to prescribe what needs to be done. As clergymen have the job of proclaiming the will of God, so the members of the Communist Party have the assigned task of prescribing what needs to be done at a given moment.

This principle of pragmatic change is one of the most deadly weapons in the communist arsenal. It recognizes the need to change the rules when the historical context requires it. For example, in the 1930s the party believed that it would be good for the movement to make it possible to get easy divorces in the Soviet Union. That time is past. Now there are new re-

⁷ *The Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels is available in a Government Printing Office book known as *Marxist Classics* (Part I, Section A).

⁸ Cf. William Ebenstein, *Two Ways of Life* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 119; also Wolfgang Leonhard, *Sowjet-ideologie Heute* (Frankfurt: Fischer Bücherei, 1962), II, 139 ff.

quirements. The historical context requires rather stringent rules on marriage.

Karl Marx himself began this process of changing the rules. In 1848 he reworked the Ten Commandments to suit his own needs.⁹ The Ten Commandments say: "Thou shalt not steal." Karl Marx wrote: "Thou shalt steal; because the property your neighbor has does not belong to him in the first place; he got it by exploiting the poor wage earner." The Ten Commandments say: "Thou shalt not kill." Karl Marx wrote: "Thou shalt kill, if the needs of the movement require it." Ever since that time communists have been making up their own moral rules as life goes along. In fact Lenin specifically denied the existence of anything like absolute moral principles. To the Young Communist League, assembled at Moscow in 1920, he boasted: "We deny that there is a moral law which comes to men from outside of history, outside of society. It is a fraud. We devise our own moral rules according to the needs of the class struggle."¹⁰

Communists apply to man and society another law from the laboratory which deals with the general concept of salvation. It is known as the law of negation. Again,

⁹ The full text of this revision is given in the *Französische Jahrbücher* of 1844.

¹⁰ V. I. Lenin, *Aufgaben der Jugendverbände*, in *Socinenija (Werke)*, fourth edition, Vol. 31, p. 266. Whittaker Chambers, who served the Communist Party for 12 years before breaking with it to bring Alger Hiss to trial, once observed: "I can no longer retrace with certainty the stages of my inner earthquake or distinguish its successive shocks. I did not know what had happened to me. I denied the very existence of the soul. But I said, 'This is evil, absolute evil. Of this evil I am a part.'" From that moment he broke with the system. Cf. Department of Defense Pamphlet 4—6 (8 Dec. '55) (Washington: GPO, 1955), p. 6.

this is basically a very simple proposition. If you want to grow a crop of barley, you have to sow seed in the ground, and that seed must die before there can be new life. Our Lord Himself used this example to depict the necessity of His death and the consequences of His resurrection. (John 12:24)

It is interesting to see how this particular idea has been taken over by communism. It insists that there has to be wholesale death before there can be a general reconstructing of society. Stalin did not scruple, therefore, at the death of a million kulaks. In fact he was sure that this was a major contribution to his revolutionary movement. Today the Red Chinese generals sometimes talk about unleashing a nuclear holocaust. When Russian experts remind them that this would cost China at least 300 million lives, their response is simply this: "That is good; there can be new life only where there is this kind of wholesale death." Thus the doctrine of the death of One, our Lord Jesus Christ, is transposed into a new key. Communism speaks of the death of many as a means of saving future generations yet unborn.

4. ITS TEACHING ON MAN

Communism also has a doctrine of man. This follows from its basic principle: "There is nothing in the universe except matter in movement." Man, as a consequence, is just another glob of matter. In essence he differs in no way from a tree, from a concrete block, from the stuff that has gone into the making of your car. Man is a set of chemicals put together in a certain way to create a unit of energy able to work. And so the individual is

reduced to being "the quotient of one million divided by one million," to borrow a phrase from Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*.¹¹

No one will deny that we are constituted of chemicals. In fact, 90 percent of each of us is water. But when we have said this, we have not given a complete description of man. We have not taken into account what the communist specifically denies, the transcendental in man's existence.

Communist insistence on this point was never more clearly brought to light than when Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced into the United Nations Assembly in 1948 "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights." This document contains the statement that men are endowed with reason and conscience and are therefore entitled to certain rights. Every communist representative in the assembly rose to object.¹² He had to do so in order to be true to his beliefs, for he sees man as being just another configuration of matter. In this view man's superiors are human engineers. They manipulate numbers. Since the number one is of less value than ten, a single individual may properly be eliminated or liquidated in the interest of the larger figure. This is a matter of mathematics.

¹¹ Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy, p. 155. (New York: The Macmillan Co. [Modern Library], 1941), p. 155.

¹² Much of the story behind the communist maneuverings in the United Nations Assembly, when this declaration was before it, is given by Maurice Cranston in *What Are Human Rights?* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1962), pp. 29 to 42. Article One of the Declaration reads: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

5. ITS DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

We now come to the final item: Communist teaching on last things. It is this element in his creed that gives the communist something of the same driving power and sacrificial spirit manifested by early Christians in their service to the Lord of history.

In the development of this doctrine the communist makes use of a third law from the laboratory. It is known as the law of transformation. This consists of the very simple observation that if you take a glass of water, reduce the temperature down to 32° Fahrenheit, you will suddenly—not gradually—create a new substance, ice. Since there is nothing in the universe except matter in movement, the communist is persuaded that it is quite proper to apply this law from the laboratory to men and society. The communist leader therefore insists that he is busy regulating the human environment in such a way as to produce the equivalent of the 32° Fahrenheit so that by a "leap"—that is his expression—a new order of things may come into being. Again it is clear how difficult it is for one of us to get himself into the frame of mind of a communist. We believe that things are changed gradually. So we accommodate, we modify, we compromise. The communist rarely does. He moves along the total spectrum of life in the hope of producing the equivalent of the 32° Fahrenheit. He is convinced that only in this way will he be able to create the conditions that will produce the "leap."

You will recognize this as a secular version of our Christian hope. We believe that our Lord will suddenly return, "in the twinkling of an eye," to quote St. Paul.

At that moment history will come to an end, and then will begin what we call the kingdom of glory. Christians have always looked forward to this moment as the time of their full redemption. The communist imitates us in this respect. In the second verse of the *Internationale* he sings:

"'Tis the final conflict, let each stand in his place:

The International Soviet shall be the human race."¹³

Toward that prospect every communist looks in faith and hope. He is persuaded that he can hurry along the process by his own devotion to the right side of present struggles in the world just as we hold to the conviction that we can hasten the day of the Lord by our prayers and our service.

6. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

You see, then, how communist ideology is in fact a caricature of Christian doctrine. This is important to keep in mind. For if the communist conspiracy is to be combated successfully, it will have to be understood and fought also on this level.

We need to keep in mind, for example, that the church, too, has a view of history. She is persuaded that God is the Lord of history and that He is its judge. When Alexander Miller wrote his interesting little work *The Christian Significance of*

Karl Marx, he began the chapter "What Shall We Do?" by quoting the Nicene Creed.¹⁴ Every time we say the Nicene Creed we are reminded of the fact that history is not an autonomous process, that, on the contrary, it, too, will be judged. What is going on in the world today, we believe with the apostle Paul, is the subjection of one enemy of our Lord after another until they have all been subdued. And at that point our Lord will return the kingdom of His Father so that "God may be everything to everyone" (1 Cor. 15:28). Perhaps it is useful to recall that Christianity is also a revolutionary movement. As a matter of fact the most dynamic statement in history is not *The Communist Manifesto*. On the contrary, the most radical interpretation of history you will find in these familiar lines:

He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted them of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things; the rich He has sent empty away. (Luke 1:51-53)

These words from the Magnificat describe the abiding revolution of which we are all a part. To this inversion of all values we are committed as the followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church is the Lord's instrument to bring to pass that principle of God's rule which is announced in the New Testament: "He resists the proud and shows favor toward the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)

St. Louis, Mo.

¹³ The whole verse reads as follows:

We want no condescending savior
To rule us from a judgment hall;
We workers ask not for their favors,
Let us consult for all.
To make the thief disgorge his booty,
To free the spirit from the cell
We must ourselves decide our duty;
We must decide and do it well.
'Tis the final conflict, etc.

¹⁴ Alexander Miller, *The Christian Significance of Karl Marx* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946), p. 34.