

Christian-Marxist Dialogue

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by David McLellan

Apart from a certain number of discreet and limited meetings between Christians and Marxists, it was not until comparatively recently that these discussions came to the public notice. There was a Catholic participation at the *Semaines de la Pensée Marxiste* in early 1964 and then a reciprocal Marxist presence at the *Semaines des Intellectuels Catholiques* at the beginning of the following year. From France, the lead in this field has now passed to Germany, and more precisely to Austria, where in the spring of 1965, the *Paulusgesellschaft*, an association of German-speaking Catholic university teachers, organized a meeting specifically devoted to a dialogue between Christians and Marxists from both West and East Europe. There have since been two more meetings of this nature; the most recent, in 1967, was held at Marienbad in Czechoslovakia.

Of course, the idea of a meeting between Catholics and atheist movements (of which Marxism is presently the most important) was mentioned quite clearly in 1963 by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. He there made a distinction, since become familiar, between static theories condemned by the Church and the movements inspired by these theories, but which evolve in time. He said: 'In as far as these movements are in accord with sound principles of reason and are a response to the just aspirations of the human person, who would refuse to recognize in them elements that are positive and merit our approval? It could happen that certain meetings with a view to practical co-operation that had up till now appeared inopportune or sterile, could now produce real advantages or at least contain the promise of such for the future.'

It is in this climate that the Austrian review *Neues Forum*, in conjunction with whom these chronicles are being written, has recently emerged as the official review for Christian-Marxist dialogue. Ironically *Forum*, as it was formerly called, was founded under the auspices of the 'Congress for Cultural Freedom' and thus profited from American money whose source was discovered at the beginning of last year. However, these links were broken in 1961, since when *Neues Forum* has become one of the liveliest reviews in German¹ in which the best writers from East and West regularly appear. Its circulation has risen from 2,400 in 1961 to 12,000 at the beginning of this year.

The international editorial committee consists of some 20 leading

¹ The first number of an entirely English-language version of this review appeared in the spring of this year under the title *Dialogue*. It is to appear quarterly.

personalities from both sides. Their first meeting was at the end of last year in Vienna and its purpose was to discuss the present state of the dialogue between Communists and Christians. The general opinion was that it was time to talk of a 'new stage'. As Roger Garaudy, the leading French Communist participant, said, the 'prehistoric' stage is finally over, the stage in which the Christians saw in Communists the incarnation of the devil and Communists saw in the Churches social bastions of conservatism. Meanwhile the character of the dialogue has itself been changing. 'Ten years ago', said the Prague philosopher Machovec, 'we began to talk to each other with the thought at the back of our minds that the other side would slowly wither away or break up.' Now many Christians acknowledge the achievements of Marxism in the social field, while Communists in small, but growing numbers, are beginning to accept certain insights of Christianity. For Garaudy, for example, one of these insights is 'the freedom of man, conceived of as participation in creation: the feeling that man can make a new beginning at each moment, that he is not simply the product of his glands or of his social background. Here lies a path towards the future of man, a future that is not simply a continuation of the past.' And if this is to be conceived of as a 'transcendence' then it is 'the only element of transcendence that an atheist can admit'.

Thus the phase of 'dialogue about dialogue' is over; and the intention today is to continue the process of mutual enrichment by discussing such practical subjects as scientific progress or aid to developing countries. The committee also realized the need to go beyond a small circle of specialists in dialogue and reach a much wider public. An important step in this direction has already been made by abandoning the framework of the *Paulusgesellschaft*, that to many seemed too exclusively Germanic and Christian, in favour of *Neues Forum* sub-titled 'International Review for Dialogue'. A further stage is emerging—a 'dialogue of civilizations' to bring into interplay currents of thought indigenous to Asia and Africa.

In this article I intend to describe, in a very general manner, the ideas of the chief participants in this field about why a dialogue of this sort is necessary, how and on what subject it should be conducted, and what are the aims in view. In later chronicles I shall attempt a more detailed account of current or very recent meetings or publications that contribute significantly to an East-West dialogue.

It is not necessary to dwell long on the necessity for this kind of dialogue: it is merely an extension of the ecumenical movement. For Marxism is indeed a 'Christian heresy' in the sense that, although its atheism represents a radical break with all religions, whether of the past, or of the present or of the future, yet Christianity and Marxism also have a certain continuity: firstly in that Marxism views itself as the successor to Christianity as the religion *par excellence*; secondly, there is an evident continuity between Marxism and

the various non-conformisms with secularizing tendencies, such as the movement of Thomas Munzer; thirdly, there is the negative social mysticism of Saint-Simon and Proudhon. With such a pedigree a dialogue between Christianity and a Marxism which is becoming more and more conscious of its sources, seems to be obviously fruitful. From another point of view, contemporary society owes a lot to Marxism which is an important element in the common inheritance of humanity—quite apart from the fact that Socialism alone at present seems to provide some sort of an answer to constant search for an improved human society.

It is worth while dwelling longer on the question of what the participants have conceived to be the most important subjects of their discussions. It seems to me that there are two: the meaning of socialist atheism and the nature of man.

The first question can be rephrased thus: is a Socialist and Communist society essentially characterized by a rejection of any idea of God, or is its atheism a secondary characteristic that is historically explicable in terms of a socio-political movement aiming at establishing a new order? Compared with the genuine revolt of Nietzsche against God, a revolt that was not content to proclaim the death of God but made it into the foundation of its concept of the superman, the movements inspired by Marxism seem to regard their atheism merely as an accessory. It would, of course, be misguided not to take this atheism seriously and declare simply that this was a thoroughly unimportant aspect of the revolutionary movement that has developed under the influence of the ideas of Marx and Lenin. But at the same time it would be useless to discuss this question without paying very close attention to the profound motives and aims of the Socialist movements. Inevitably there follows the question whether what is called the atheism of authentic Socialists and Communists is not a spiritual and moral expression of humanity that is much truer than the struggle waged in the name of God and traditional Christianity against attempts to create this new society. Here it would be important to discover the origins of the antipathy to religion and the anti-clericalism of those who led the assault of the modern proletariat on old social injustices, the artificial division of society into rich and poor, privileged and outcast. The point of departure and the ultimate aim of modern Socialism was an attempt to help man as such to attain to his dignity and liberty, to free him from political oppression, class privilege, hunger, misery, social insecurity and material powerlessness. The aim was to give man as such a greater freedom in all moral and intellectual domains. The Marxists claim insistently that this is their most radical desire: they are for the fulness of the human personality understood in its terrestrial and concrete reality, the importance of the body and the soul, reason, conscience, personal responsibility, desire for freedom of thought and moral dignity. All modern reformist movements and

all attempts at revolution in Europe and America criticized the official Church for its view of the world and its propensity to play a conservative role in contemporary society. To say this is to admit that atheism is, in this respect, merely the expression of a radical humanism. Moreover, in this radical humanism are found, in a secularized form, almost all the moral and social preoccupations of a living, biblical Christianity. This humanism centres on the existence of authentic social relationships between men.

The second question, that of the nature of man is, of course, the fundamental one. Here the point is to discover what relationships we should try to be establishing between men, what the future shape of the world ought to be, what the meaning of human brotherhood consists in. The Marxists say that it is necessary to change the world, to transform society, remodel civilizations to destroy injustice, suffering, egoism and the exploitation of man by man; and the Christian replies that these are answers to the questions raised by the apostolic or prophetic witness and by the content of the Gospel itself. In general, the Christians seem to be content to start from man as the Communists, and Garaudy in particular, would wish. But, they say, man only becomes intelligible in virtue of his future, a future of which Christianity maintains the mystery. Christianity is not a theory that is either abstract or static, but a sacred and dynamic history, the proclamation of an 'absolute' future. For Christianity, the essence of man consists in the possibility he has of attaining to the 'absolute' future and Christianity is the religion of this absolute future. The basis of this futurist dynamism is God. God is the 'absolute' future, not an object along with other objects. But God remains a mystery, that transcendence that is the future of man.

For Christians, Christ is a self-communication by God of man's future. But they reject as Utopian the idea that this future of man could be realized in the temporal duration. Nevertheless, Christianity has a very positive attitude towards the temporal achievements of mankind, the ever-growing power over nature. While Christianity welcomes planning of the future, it rejects ideological Utopias of a future that is outside God. Christians, of course, are not alone in contributing to the future of mankind; but they reject any 'Moloch' conception of the future that would sacrifice one generation in favour of the following one, and believe in the irreplaceable value of every man and his place in the absolute future. It is impossible to make men lose faith in their own importance. Christianity has the right to raise the question of the absolute future, even though it does not possess the reply. It cannot pretend that one day it will embrace the whole of mankind, but it does affirm that it will always be a part, even though perhaps a very small one, of any united humanity. This 'theology of hope' that interprets the present in terms of the future rather than the past, and which has been developed particularly by the German theologians Metz and Moltmann (see the

article by Fergus Kerr, O.P., in the April issue of *New Blackfriars*), commands considerable attention and respect in Marxist circles.

One more remark: in many of these discussions the Christians often seem to be, from the very start, at a disadvantage. This is not because the Marxists are more subtle dialecticians, nor because Marxism is the younger and more impulsive religion. Rather the Marxist declares that a necessary condition for man's self-realization is the socialization of the means of production. Although the experience of some Communist countries has caused this thesis to have some nuances introduced into it, it is still fully Marxist. If this is accepted as the basis of discussion, then the Christian immediately finds himself outside the familiar reference points of his religion, and his faith can give him no clear answer to the Marxist's proposal. For Christianity does not afford a programme for social reform in the way that Marxism does. So the Christian is reduced to asking about the possibility of his realizing his faith inside the Marxist social system. The result is that the Christian tends to accept the Marxist system as a whole, provided he is guaranteed the means of practising his faith. Thus the Marxist asks for co-operation while the Christian asks for freedom. But here the dialogue seems to be on two different levels: for whereas the question of religious freedom is one to be answered by those in power in Communist countries, and thus not by those taking part in the dialogue, the question of co-operation is answered by those taking part in the dialogue and not by those in authority in the Church—since Christianity affords no clear picture of the optimal social system in the way that Marxism does.

Finally, it seems to me that the present Christian-Marxist dialogue contains some dangers:

Firstly, there is the idealist danger of thinking that it is an intellectual dialogue that will produce common action—which is what everyone agrees is the fundamental thing. For the best of dialogues will not convert a Christian who has not experienced a common struggle for justice and peace. One has no need for allies outside a fight; and in the inter-Christian ecumenical movement it has been shown that common action is psychologically a necessary preliminary to dialogue. This needs emphasizing, for a lot of contemporary thinking seems to reverse this and automatically adopts an idealist position—that dialogue is the source of common action. It is this confusion that leads to so many debates about orthodoxy. For, in effect, if common action flows from previous dialogue, if it is the product of an ideological pact that has preceded it, then it is inevitable that co-operation should lead to accusations of theoretical compromises. Whereas in reality a common action should not need to imply any philosophical convergence. This is not to deny the usefulness of dialogue: it is only to put it in its rightful place, which is second to that of the field of action as a meeting place. The movement is from common action to dialogue. It is the meeting of men in

common enterprises that provokes and nourishes dialogue. This, in its turn, makes common action more effective and increases its range, which then leads to need for a more profound dialogue, and so on.

Secondly there is a danger that the two sides in the dialogue will, by their very attempt to understand each other, have made themselves into fixed systems. A fearful example of what must not happen is the 'debate' in this country between Christianity and organized humanism: not only has the latter taken over some of the worst characteristics of organized religion, but both sides are arguing about a situation that is already dead, not realizing that what is characteristic of modern man is precisely his rejection of all *Weltanschauungen*, his unwillingness to think systematically.

There is also another way in which this dialogue can have an air of unreality. There is much talk of man, his planetary unity, his freedom, his creative capacities. But the participants in the dialogue are limited to Westerners—at the latest Marienbad conference the delegates were all Europeans (with the addition of one or two North Americans) except for one Argentinian. Thus talk of a dialogue 'between East and West' is highly misleading. The claims of the developing countries and the war in Vietnam were mentioned only in passing. It was a very homely discussion among Westerners, all more or less mechanized and absorbing the right number of calories: the problem that obsessed them was a more equitable distribution of their profits and the threat of a nuclear war. It was a family of rich people discussing their own wealth and the aims and conception of mankind that they authorized. As a French Dominican, Bernard Gardey, recently wrote in *Frères du Monde*:

'In reality, this dialogue took place against a silent background of millions of starving people who care nothing for our debates but claim, either passively or with arms in their hands, bread and liberty. Peace is a luxury commodity.

'We must not deceive ourselves. Whether in China or in Cuba or among the guerillas of Bolivia, we, Western Communists and Christians, find ourselves challenged in the most violent manner. However rigorous our debates, they will turn into salon discussion if we remain solely concerned with the West.

'In effect, the levels of dialogue are not confined to action, ideology and humanism as defined in our own civilizations. They are geographical . . . and dependent on the pyramid of historical ages. Western Communists and Christians care much too little what the opinion of the third world is about them and do not seem to imagine that their dialogue has any other level to it.

'Viewed in this light, Western Communists and Christians are about the same age. Marx dates from the steam machine, Lenin from electricity, we are at the stage of nuclear energy, electronics and spatial exploration. Western Communists—the Russians included—are, just as much as Western Christians, the subjects, or victims, of what we call the acceleration of history.'