

# Sincerity, Authenticity and God

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I regard this article as part of a continuing debate in *New Blackfriars* concerning the relations of Christianity and Marxism. But it is also an attempt, within that context, to ask and answer the question why we should continue to believe in God. I raise the question here because, it seems to me, that most of the effort expended by earlier contributors, particularly Denys Turner<sup>1</sup> has been towards showing that it is possible, and even necessary for a Christian to be a Marxist. Obviously, if a Christian *must* be a Marxist, as Denys Turner argues, then the question whether he can, or should, continue to believe in God is raised at once. For it is a pretty widely accepted opinion among Marxists that belief in God is incompatible with their own view of things, and that anyone who is a Marxist and believes in God is something of an oddity, a man with a private religious hang-up, and quite probably an unreliable ally. Denys Turner rightly affirms that, in holding to this view of religious belief, Marxists are themselves merely hanging on to a private opinion that has nothing to do with their Marxism as such. But a Christian cannot be content with remaining there. What the Christian needs to be able to show is that, if *he* ought to be a Marxist just in order to be a complete Christian, it is equally the case that the Marxist ought to be a Christian just in order to be a complete Marxist. Nothing short of this will do, from a Christian standpoint: to pretend otherwise is to connive at a sell-out. I believe that at the present stage of the game there is a real danger of just such a sell-out. For example, to say, as the editorial committee responsible for *Crossleft* do<sup>2</sup>, that 'there can be no question today . . . of Christian modification of Marxist praxis' (which, if it means anything, means that being a *Christian* Marxist makes no difference at all to what, as a Marxist you are prepared to do): or that 'the Church is basically on the side of the oppressor' (what else, strictly speaking, can 'basically' mean here but 'from the very foundation'?)—to say things like this suggests to me a readiness for just such a sell-out as I have indicated.

In a nutshell, I want to argue that any Marxism that lacks God will inevitably have to evaluate human beings in terms of their 'authenticity' as revolutionaries, for, in Denys Turner's words: 'there is no longer any issue but one, the issue of being for or against the revolution of the capitalist world' (*N.B.*, June 1975, p. 252). But clearly, all the individ-

<sup>1</sup>See *New Blackfriars*, February and March 1973 and June 1975.

<sup>2</sup>See *Crossleft*, Newsletter of *Christians for Socialism* in Britain, No. 1, p. 1 (Editorial address: Coombe Lea, Cliftonville, Dorking, Surrey).

ual himself can ever do is honestly *try* to carry out in practice what is demanded of him by this commitment to revolution. Yet his value will lie not in his sincerity (that is, in his honesty of purpose) but in his success or failure in living up to what is demanded of him. My conclusion is that it is only if there is a God that the gap between sincerity and authenticity can be bridged. If there is no God, then to judge a man for his failure to be authentic is to judge him for failing to ensure something that he cannot ensure : and this is quite simply an inhuman doctrine. This is why Marxism as commonly understood *needs* God to fill a gap which it creates but cannot fill by itself.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary tends to define sincerity in a negative way : 'freedom from dissimulation or duplicity'.<sup>3</sup> But I think one may put the matter in a more positive way, by saying that objectively speaking sincerity is a state of a person in which the interior life (thoughts, feelings, etc.) and the exterior life (utterances, actions, etc.) are in harmony with each other. In this sense, sincerity is a form of wholeness, indeed is an aspect of holiness. And in this sense, too, it is something to be aimed at rather than something we can ever perfectly attain. (It makes sense, after all, to say 'I am trying to be sincere'.) Thus, objectively sincerity is a state of personal integration, while subjectively it is a virtue which consists in honestly trying to attain to that state.

Now, in a world as murky as the one we are at present living in, it is not surprising to find that so elusive a virtue as sincerity should commonly be devalued by comparison with something more obvious, even spectacular, like 'authenticity'. Authenticity may be defined, for my purposes as that state of a person in which what he does corresponds exactly to the demands made upon him by his historical and moral situation. The 'authentic' person is one who lives up to the demands that are made upon him. For this reason, unlike sincerity, authenticity is necessarily observable in its effects, for the test of its presence is a correspondence between a person's actions and the external world's needs, not between a person's actions and his interior life.

Authenticity, thus understood, is as much a form of wholeness as sincerity is. For to be whole, it is as necessary for a person to do what is truly demanded of him by the moral imperatives of the world in which he finds himself as it is to integrate his external actions with his interior life. For love itself is necessarily out-going, and the test of it is to be found in action. From a Christian point of view (indeed from any properly human one) sincerity and authenticity are therefore both required of us if we are to be ourselves, to live up to the human potential that we begin with.

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the history of the term in Western culture see Lionel Trilling: *Sincerity and Authenticity* (O.U.P., 1972), *passim*. Trilling's complex and subtle account of the rise and fall of 'sincerity' in post-renaissance culture, and of the tendency for its replacement by 'authenticity' in this century, is too long to summarise here. Suffice it to say that he does not discuss authenticity in quite the sense I use it here, nor does he consider in any detail its contemporary political implications.

So much for abstract generalities. But now the question arises, how do we know what are the demands made upon us by the world around us? How do I know when I am on the right road towards becoming authentically myself? (The corresponding question about sincerity seems, at first sight, to be easier to answer: Can I not know when I really mean what I say or do simply by self-examination?) But how can I examine the world in such a way as to discover my authentic responsibility? Since this article is conceived to be part of a dialogue with Marxism, I shall not consider any other answer to this question than that which is provided by Marxist theory. Now, as I understand it, Marxism claims to be able to provide at least a rough guide to authenticity through a scientific analysis of the forces which govern the world-historical process. Human history is produced according to discernible laws: namely the laws of material production, and in particular the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production.<sup>4</sup> 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles' begins the Communist Manifesto, and this statement may be regarded, for my purposes, as a summary of the Marxist position here, since classes exist only by virtue of their necessary function in the process of production, in capitalist society. So it is in the struggle of classes that the laws which govern human history are manifested. For example, the emergence of bourgeois society from the womb of feudalism is the story of a law-governed process of struggle whereby the bourgeois, or capitalist class captured the processes of production. Similarly the revolution whereby the proletariat will achieve its freedom from the domination of capital is another law-governed process that has already begun in many parts of the world. Of course, to say that these revolutions are subject to scientifically discernible laws is not to say that they are fatalistically pre-determined; nor is it to say that Marxist materialism is any kind of positivistic science. It is simply to say that they can occur only according to laws appropriate to them, and that these laws can be—indeed thanks to Marx have largely been—discovered by a process of rigorous analysis and (even more to the purpose) practical revolutionary experimentation, or praxis.

Given this perspective, personal authenticity may be defined as alignment with the proletarian struggle against capitalism. The authentically human person will be the one who has made 'a class decision in favour of the proletariat and of the oppressed people of the world'—to quote from the Manifesto of the Quebec congress of Christians for Socialism.<sup>5</sup> (Of course, this decision is not one made simply in the head: it must issue in the appropriate form of practical action on behalf of the proletariat and the oppressed.)

But even for the person who wants to make such a decision, the question remains, what exactly do I have to do? How can I tell whether what I propose to do is, in fact, what the present state of the revolution demands of me? To put it in Denys Turner's words, how

<sup>4</sup>Terry Eagleton, in *New Blackfriars*, October 1975, p. 467.

<sup>5</sup>English version printed in *Crossleft*, No. 1, pp. 3-7.

am I to act given the facts? Unfortunately, arguing rightly that Marxism is in line with the classical (pre-Kantian) morality which refuses to acknowledge a dichotomy of fact and value is of little practical help in answering this question. I agree that what I have called 'the moral imperatives of the world around me' are themselves rooted in historical facts—facts about the sort of society I am in—so that I can't answer my question without first satisfying myself as to the basic nature of that society. But even when I have done that, for example by concluding that the basic truth about my society is that it is governed by a fundamental contradiction between the forces and the relations of production within it, I am still far from knowing what, in practice, I ought to do about it. This is because there is no consensus even among those who accept the analysis in general terms, as to what should be done about it; at least, nothing sufficiently detailed to indicate to me, as an individual, what I should do.

To illustrate what I mean, let me take the first issue of *Crossleft* as an example. In the *Manifesto* there published (translated from the first international congress of *Christians for Socialism*) I am told that I must make 'a class decision in favour of the proletariat and of the most oppressed people of the world'. That is to say, I must not merely do what (say) I am told to do in the twenty-fifth chapter of St Matthew's gospel (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, etc.); I must further accept the definitions of 'proletariat', etc., implicit in seeing my commitment to them as a 'class decision'. But what difference does this make in practice? The *Manifesto* still cannot give me any answer to that question. 'The decision is expressed by actual socialist societies and movements which prefigure future society', I am told; but which they are does not emerge. 'The socialist countries have a responsibility to provide a point of reference and solidarity for the world revolutionary movement': but manifestly they don't. This is why the editors of the *Crossleft* newsletter, after telling their readers that 'the chief aim of any CfS member is that of every socialist, the ending of class exploitation by international capital, with all its consequences' can still only continue by praising the virtues of what they call 'pluralism' in praxis. 'Thus on its socialist side CfS is essentially pluralist, spread over a number of conflicting left parties. . . . The differences between parties and factions are real, and only to be resolved in their own terms'. Now my response to this is not the usual liberal one, of saying that the inability to spell out the practical consequences only goes to show the poverty of the theory. On the contrary, I want to insist on the value of the theory; but to note that it is in the nature of the case impossible to translate that theory into any detailed programme for individual personal choice. For such is not the purpose of the theory. Indeed, as Denys Turner shows, in his analogy between Marxist and ancient Greek conceptions of morality, the only way in which a person could be clearly told how to behave morally would be if the society in which he lived were so integrated with itself that the choice would be self-evident. Only if there were no distinction between being a good member of one's polis and being a

good man'<sup>6</sup> could a person know, for certain, that what he chose to do was what his society needed from him. And Marxism, precisely as a science which operates by using abstract concepts such as 'labour', etc., can itself only exist once that integrated society has disappeared, so that there is a gap between actual social (especially productive) relations and the concept of being a 'good' man (that is, the ideology) which operates within those changed relations. In other words, I am faced with a choice that I have to make precisely because of the very gap between 'foundation' and 'superstructure' which allows Marxist analysis to occur at all.

Given this fact of choice; or to put it another way, given the fact that the laws which govern the historical course of class struggle are, as it were, immanent within it, not imposed as a sort of 'fate' from above or beyond it (for men realise their capacities by their own labour in reproducing their material life); there is a certain sense in which all such choices are at the same time self-fulfilling prophecies. It is not as though history has already provided me with a slot into which, to be 'authentic' I must fit, so that my task is merely to find that slot: on the contrary, my choice *combined with* those non-random 'laws' which govern human history, together provides me with my authentic role in the revolutionary struggle. To achieve authenticity, then, is not simply a matter of choosing rightly from among a set of pre-arranged alternatives: it is a creative choice—yet not a random (purely 'existentialist') one.

It follows from this conclusion that there is still a place, and hence a positive *value*, to be given to *sincerity* in choosing. But it is equally clear that sincerity is not invariably a good thing. A sincere anti-semitite is not made any better by being sincere in his anti-semitism, but if anything worse. (Bigotry might, I suppose, be defined as a combination of a pernicious belief with sincerity.) For sincerity to be an unambiguously good thing, it must be allied to a good cause. In other words, sincerity without authenticity may be good, but it is not good enough. Yet I think we do need to insist that, in itself, even when allied to a cause which is not positively good, or not good enough, sincerity is still a good: a quality to which we should attach positive value in our assessment of people. That sincerity can be perverted, and indeed make a bad cause even worse than it might otherwise be, does not mean that in itself sincerity is a morally neutral quality in a person. For simply as I defined it earlier, it is a kind of wholeness, a necessary aspect of that integration of the personality which (in the Christian vocabulary) is called holiness, and which is needed in any vocabulary for the designation of a person as good. Further, the absence of sincerity, however good the cause, is *always* damaging to that cause, and this in itself goes to show that sincerity is itself a good, since merely by virtue of its absence a cause which might otherwise be good is spoiled.

But how can the intrinsic goodness of sincerity, its positive value in

<sup>6</sup>*New Blackfriars*, 1975, p. 65.

a person, be squared with the over-riding demand for authenticity? To answer this question, it is first of all necessary to insist that authenticity is as much a Christian demand as it is a Marxist one. It is no part of Christian belief that sincerity by itself is enough. Christ did not suggest that those people, in the story of the last judgement presented in Matthew 25:31-46, who were condemned to eternal punishment, were insincere: merely that they did not live up to what was morally required of them. This was enough to condemn them. It is therefore just as important for the Christian as it is for the Marxist to find some way of filling the gap that yawns between sincerity (which is required for being good) and authenticity (which is what is required if we are to be good enough). The problem is that I can be held responsible for my own sincerity in a way that—for reasons already given above—I cannot be held responsible for my authenticity. History, certainly as written by Marxists, is littered with cases of those who chose sincerely what they thought was the side of the proletariat and the most oppressed, only to be proved mistaken. They turned out not to be authentic revolutionaries, only ‘liberals’, not because of any lack of sincerity but because they made the wrong choice. Consider, for instance, the Proudhonist Darimon, with his suggestion of ‘Free Credit’ as a way of helping small farmers and others in financial difficulties. As Martin Nicolaus puts it, in his foreword to the Pelican edition of the *Grundrisse*, ‘Marx shreds Darimon’s “radical” and “socialist” mask; the proposal is a bourgeois dream—the dream of printing press alchemy—combined with poor bourgeois economics. At the time of Marx’s writing, Darimon was one of the most fiery and renowned radicals in France: a few years later he went over to the Bonapartist regime, was decorated and died a reactionary’.<sup>7</sup> Now my point is that, from a Christian point of view, the tragedy implicit in that last dismissive sentence is far from the end of the story: it would indeed be humanly, not just christianly, intolerable if it were. (I know nothing of Darimon: but I am assuming, for the sake of argument, that he was a sincere radical, doing his best according to his lights, for the poor and oppressed. I am also assuming that we must take with the usual pinch of salt any such easy dismissal of him as is implied in ‘went over to the Bonapartist regime’ and ‘died a reactionary’, as though what he did could only be explained by a kind of conscious treachery.) My point is that it is intolerable to suppose that Darimon’s sincerity went for nothing in the long run. Ordinary Marxism may, of course, reply that it didn’t: for, even if he was wrong, he was nevertheless part of a generally ‘progressive’ tendency which—in the long perspective of history—helped the cause of the workers’ struggle. To that extent, his sincerity was rewarded, just as any ‘progressive’ force is rewarded in retrospect (even the bourgeoisie, in their own time). But this is not good enough: for what is intolerable is that Darimon’s sincerity should count for nothing in the scale *for himself*: that all we can say about that is: ‘he

<sup>7</sup>*Grundrisse*, translated with a foreword by Martin Nicolaus, Penguin Books, 1973, pp. 14-15.

died a reactionary'. For to leave the matter at that point is, quite simply, to see Darimon's life as tragic, in a traditional—and I would say, with Brecht, anti-Marxist—sense of that term.

It is at this point that I would argue belief in God is actually needed in order to complete Marxism. For it is only God—that is, one who is able to see, from outside history, how the parallel paths of sincerity and authenticity converge in an ultimate future—who can reconcile the equal, but different demands of sincerity and authenticity. He does so, for mankind as a whole, in the *pleroma*: he does so for the individual in purgatory; which is that painful process whereby not only our sincerity but also our choices, including the struggle on behalf of the poor and oppressed are searched out, bitterly compared and finally brought together by a power that we were not able to command by ourselves.

But it is not only belief in God that is required for a complete Marxism: it is also a belief in the Church. As I have said already, there is today a danger, not just of selling God short, but the Church too. It is a dangerous half-truth (one that will tend to *mislead* Marxists) to say, with the *Crossleft* editors, that 'the social order . . . always determines that of the Church' or that 'existing theology is ideological'. On the contrary, we have to insist—precisely as *Marxist* Christians—that the Church is basically (yes, basically) a reality that escapes being determined by the social order; and that theology is basically not ideological because, like Marxism, and for the same reason, it is a 'science'. Thus Denys Turner is surely wrong (and, I think, misinterprets Herbert McCabe) when he says that 'the Church can never be a community under capitalism' and that Christ is present only sacramentally, that is, in the form of his absence (*N.B.*, June 1975, p. 250). Admittedly, this is a tricky area: but I do not think (and I doubt if Herbert McCabe thinks) that we can simply accept these statements without a great deal of further qualification. For it is necessary, theologically, to insist that somehow the Church already is what the future of mankind is to be; and that Christ's sacramental presence is a real *presence* which ensures that this is so. A sacramental reality, in other words, is a kind of reality beyond any categories possible in a wholly secular Marxism, and cannot be accommodated within it. Admitting this prevents us from either reducing the Church (and Christ) to a mere institution in historical time (of which we might otherwise say *simpliciter* it is 'always determined by the social order') or elevating it to a supra-historical reality wholly exempt from the laws of history. To put my point, then, in another way: what Marxism lacks, and needs for its own self-completion as the science of history, is precisely to admit the category of sacramental reality in the world.<sup>8</sup> For the very existence of the Church

<sup>8</sup>This sort of language will be unintelligible to many Marxists: perhaps it may be made clearer by pointing out that talk about a sacramental reality is talk about a *contiguity*. The entry of Christ, the incarnate God, into history meant that the world of secular experience was actually 'touched' by the divine and the eternal, the present and the future have come into contact with each other. The resurrection of Christ, his ascension to the Father and the outpour-

manifests that there is such a reality in the world<sup>9</sup>, and that no account of the laws of history can be complete without an account explaining the development of such a reality. But this is just what theology is about. It exists to explain the nature and the working of this sacramental reality which is manifestly in the midst of us. (Let those who have ears, hear.) This is why theology can be said, in the precise Marxist sense, to be a science: for it explains an area of human history in terms of the internal laws of its own development.

Finally, it is important to insist that a belief in God and the Church does—*pace* the *Crossleft* editorial—raise the question of a Christian modification of Marxist praxis. For, as I said in an earlier article, it at least introduces negative ethical absolutes into the arena of Marxist morality (*N.B.*, October 1975, pp. 463-64). As Terry Eagleton has admitted (*ibid.*, p. 489) he does not know how to answer this question: and despite his intriguing and promising (if tentative) line of thought in this regard, the basic problem remains, of how to fit the absolute prohibitions of Christianity into the usual Marxist framework. The practical approval of many Marxists for abortion, as a generally 'progressive' aspect of modern life, and even by a few of the use of kidnapping of the innocent, etc. (incidentally a form of torture, among other things) makes this question one of urgent practical importance to Christians who are sympathetic in general to Marxism. I am not, of course, pretending that being a Christian automatically solves all ethical dilemmas: I am merely insisting that it is less than honest to suppose that a Marxism made complete by the addition of the Christian dimension would still leave the question of praxis exactly as it was before. How precisely the difference would work out is for the future to decide: meanwhile, virtually all the work remains to be done.

ing of the Holy Spirit upon men, means that this contiguity of the secular and the divine has been made a permanent feature of all subsequent history. For a development of the idea that theological language (what the scholastics called analogical language) is essentially a matter of contiguity, and is therefore given a new intelligibility by the notion of contiguity as it is to be found in structural linguistics, see my recent book *The Story-Shaped World* (Athlone Press, 1975), Part 1, *passim*.

<sup>9</sup>This may seem, especially to those with little direct contact with the life of the Church today, to be mere assertion. But those with experience as Christians will be able to think of many ways in which Christ's presence is made manifest, at least to those with eyes to see or ears to hear. For my own part, I would say that many of the things that are happening within the Catholic Charismatic Renewal are outstanding examples of what I have in mind.