

Marxists and Christians: Questions for Denys Turner

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Denys Turner's attractive argument for the compatibility, nay the virtual identity, of Marxism and Christianity (*New Blackfriars*, June 1975) is excellent as far as it goes, and I have little to quarrel with in it. But this is because it doesn't go very far. So I'd like to press him to go on to the next step.

Marxism and Christianity are at one—indeed, *are* one—because each affirms that it is only by means of revolutionary socialist *praxis* that a community of human love can be attained, through the overturning of the capitalist system of human exploitation which for us in the present era is the incarnation of everything which is opposed to such love. All right: but then I have to ask myself am I a *practising* Marxist or only a sham Marxist? A *practising* Christian or only a sham Christian? Until some objective criteria have been established by which I can judge my own praxis, nothing has been done to help me except to juggle with words. Now it is at just this point, it seems to me, that Marxism fails because, unlike Christianity, it refuses to take the meta-physical basis of ethics seriously. Or, to put the point the other way round, it is at this point that Christianity, in going beyond Marxism, ceases to be wholly compatible with it.

Of course, it is easy for anti-revolutionaries to show that there is no agreement among either Christians or Marxists about what their proper praxis is. And it is equally easy for revolutionaries to retort that this is precisely because each values human freedom—which is the freedom to act according to conscience. It might indeed be argued that one of the points at which the identity of Marxism and Christianity can be most clearly observed is in the fissiparousness of both. Notoriously, neither Christians nor Marxists can agree among themselves for long on what their praxis should be. Furthermore, in both cases, the attempt by a centralised power to impose some uniformity of praxis leads at once to injustice and tyranny and a betrayal of the very praxis which is allegedly being defended. But these truths do not dispose of the crucial question: how am I to know whether I am a practising Marxist, or a practising Christian?

Now I am not pretending that it is easy to answer this question in either case. But I am saying that, in the absence of some general and commonly agreed set of guidelines, there can be no answer at all. This is why Denys Turner's argument is radically incomplete. However, as I

understand it, part of Herbert McCabe's argument, in *Love, Law and Language* and elsewhere, has been that it is possible to show, by philosophical analysis, some of the fundamental limits within which human behaviour has to remain if it is to be legitimately regarded as loving behaviour. And since a praxis based on love is what the praxis of the socialist revolution is about, the limits which are implied by the concept of love are also, by the very same token, limits which define any genuinely socialist, or Marxist praxis. (Furthermore, it then becomes a necessary part of any Marxist historical analysis to show that unloving behaviour is not typical of the genuine Marxist revolutionary, but is typical of the capitalist order against which he is fighting.) Thus, to take one example out of many, the practice of torturing people in order to extract information, can *never* be a part of truly loving behaviour and is therefore beyond the pale of any truly Christian, Marxist behaviour. (See *New Blackfriars*, Comment, October 1973, Vol. 54, p. 435). Now it is just here that, it seems to me, the Marxist refuses to jump the final hurdle. For the notion of any moral absolute, even a negative one like the prohibition of torture, is incompatible with the orthodox Marxist position that everything in the ideological superstructure is radically conditional upon (not just conditioned by) the historical situation of the material base.

Any ethical absolute touches, or claims to touch, upon a metaphysical, trans-historical nerve which Marxist dissections refuse to recognise. It is no answer to this argument that the record of Christians in regard to the observance of their own ethical absolutes has been abysmal. Nor, in the end, is it any use pointing out (perfectly truly) that ethical systems are, quite obviously, determined by class interests and all that goes with these. For the nub of the issue remains, despite these quite legitimate observations. How can Marxism accommodate the trans-historical ethical absolutes which alone can give us the guidelines we need in order to decide whether we are, or are not, authentic Marxists, authentic revolutionaries, authentic Christians? This, it seems to me, is the crux on which the compatibility or otherwise of Christianity and Marxism turns.