

Why are most Christians on the defensive with respect to Marxism?

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The quality of Christian life partly depends on how those who believe in Jesus understand what religion is about. As a theologian I am not directly concerned with the pros and cons of Marxist theory and of Communist practice. My preoccupation is rather firstly to pay attention to Marx's denying any permanent value to Christian ethics and religion; secondly to ask whether Marx's assessment of Christian practice is compatible or not with the way most of the faithful have interpreted Christianity in the last few centuries; and thirdly to offer a few considerations on the possibility of partially overcoming religious idealism with the help of both psychology and Marxism.

I hope that it will become evident in due course that a certain number of Christians have been, are and will be on the defensive with respect to Marxism inasmuch as they are a very definite brand of believers, whom we may call 'idealist' believers. I shall argue that so far as we are idealist believers, we cannot but forthrightly reject Marxism *en bloc*, because to our idealist eyes, it necessarily looks like pure materialism. Being two extremes, sheer idealism and sheer materialism cannot but repudiate each other.¹ And in contrast to this main reason for banning Marx from being a partner in fruitful dialogue, I consider as secondary all the other — often legitimate — reasons that we may have to criticize many aspects of both Marxist theory and Communist practice.

1 *Marx's assessment of Christian ethics and religion*

Marx denounces religion as standing bail for idealist morality. Morality is idealist whenever it ascribes efficiency to ideals irrespective of the material conditions in which they could be realized. In opposition to Hegel, Marx thinks that the motor of history does not lie in mere ideas but in the forces active within the economic substructure of society. He tries to show that the concentration of capital and the division of labour result in the formation of classes whose interests are antagonistic. The dominant classes' ideology

consists in using ideas to cover up the irrationality of a state of affairs from which they profit. In economics, for instance, the experts endeavour to make people believe that for all its defects, the existing system is nonetheless the best available one, or that it even stands in conformity with human nature, so that it would be utopian and disastrous to dream of transforming it significantly. Similarly, in law, moral sense is put at the service of rights tied up with an unjust structuring of wealth distribution. And in politics, one appeals to national interest in order to provide justification for the state's supporting the most powerful groups in society.

The point here is not to check to what extent Marx may be right or wrong in his judgments on capitalism, but to notice this phenomenon of concealment by which such ideology legitimizes the status quo. Ideas are used to conceal the real nature of material human relationships. Ideas prove to be highly successful not only when dominant classes accept them but when even exploited people appropriate them to such a degree that they imagine that things could not be different. It is in such a context that Marx charges individualistic ethics and religion of being nothing but the upper part of the ideological superstructure that serves to maintain the bourgeois state of affairs. At best, religion is 'the sigh of the oppressed creature',² as Marx puts it, that is, a powerless form of protest. Religion is like a parasite which feeds on a sick social organism; when the organism is healed, the parasite will die.

Such a negative view of religion still pervades portions of our world. According to *The Tablet* (22 May 1982, p 528) recent Chinese newspapers' editorials directed at the youth have advocated eschewing western moral decline in the form of 'decadent music, pornographic books and films, strange clothes, emphasis on romance to the point of free sex, and so on'. Furthermore, it has been suggested that 'those who turn to religion are often those who have personal problems of some sort, and in view of this it would be wise for young Communists to demonstrate the Party's "warmth" in order to convince others that seeking help from deities will not solve their problems'. For all their oversimplifications, declarations like this can become tests revealing the type of faith that is animating us. Do we simply dismiss them with a smile or a short reply, or do we ask ourselves what truth lies behind them? After all, such views have been held by so many different people in the last few centuries that it might be irresponsible not to question the sort of religiousness that has provoked them.

2 *The infection of Christianity by moral and religious idealism*

Let us now turn to the type of religiousness which has been dominant in modern times and which we have inherited. Does Marx's critique of religion apply to it? I think we can reasonably

presume that it does, although we must be aware of the enormous difficulties which historians run across whenever they want to specify to what extent the Marxist diagnosis is right. I shall therefore restrict myself to offering you a theological description of 'idealist' ethics and religion as a permanent danger to which Christianity is exposed. I am leaving aside the problem of how such a phenomenon can be accurately spotted by historians, psychologists and social scientists thanks to the empirical methods that they employ.

Very briefly, idealist Christianity may be characterized as follows. The main concept which it singles out from the Bible is probably 'salvation'. It views salvation as a two-step process: one which takes place in the present and the other which will take place in a probably very distant future. The first stage consists in an action of God in the soul of the individual, by which God forgives his or her sins on account of Christ's passion and death. The second stage will consist in the action of God in the world at the end of time, by which God will exercise a general judgment over mankind and entirely renew his creation. Now the idealist Christians' shortcomings become manifest whenever they attempt to weigh the religious meaning and value of the interim period which extends from the individual's inward salvation until the return of Christ. Does God's grace directly impinge upon this world's current state of affairs? What is the link between present history and religious salvation? The more people conceive of areas like science, art, education, technology, law, economics and politics as being autonomous or secularized, the more difficult to answer such questions become.

According as idealist Christians have taken a pessimistic or an optimistic view on what is done in these domains which form human earthly history, they have divided along the following two lines of thought. The pessimistic trend maintains that this world's corruption is so all-pervasive that we cannot really improve anything. Faith is then reduced to a disincarnate belief in a salvation that would occur merely in the individual's soul or in a restricted circle of believers. In his profane activities, this first brand of idealist Christian is not concerned with implementing God's salvation, but with applying a set of moral duties which regard the believer's private existence as well as a small portion of his public life like short-range justice, almsgiving and works of mercy. One can see that this conception of Christianity entails a dualism between religion and the rest of human activities. And since what is paramount is the idea or the conviction that one is saved, the rest is looked upon as secondary. Then the link between religion and ethics cannot but be distorted, for whenever someone despairs of improv-

ing anything, this person's negative stand generally favours those who are active in preserving the status quo.

On the optimistic account of human history, however, idealist Christians believe that the kingdom of God can be brought about thanks to mankind's efforts provided they are in conformity with so-called 'Christian' values, the most important of which is obviously freedom, but freedom construed as parliamentary democracy, private property, free enterprise, and so on. But once more, though in a different way, the link between religion and ethics is likely to be distorted, for whenever one selects and labels as 'Christian' such culturally-bounded values like those provided by capitalism, one's ideas about what the world should be tend to exclude the very economic and social data pointed out by Marx as relevant to human liberation.

Thus both types of idealist Christians evade the Marxist challenge and still speak of values such as love, fraternity, reconciliation while ignoring the economic and social conditions which prevent them from living out these values. They imagine conversion in an idealist way, that is, as a change of heart which could be achieved independently of any analysis of the actual economic and social structures, and independently of any change in their own economic and social behaviour. What is typical of idealism is the illusion that good will, or sincere belief in a set of ideals, can be effective independently of the social position and of the network of social solidarity which a given individual enjoys. Any religious idealist would deem very exaggerated the saying of Jesus: 'How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Luke 18: 24-25). It is indeed so unacceptable that a few bourgeois exegetes have suggested that the needle in question might well have been a narrow gateway in the walls of some Palestinian city! On the other hand, the saying of Jesus would not be a surprise for a Marxist materialist who would have studied the mechanisms of injustice in our world and would have tried to combat them in a particular field. But such a militant could not but reject idealist talk about forgiveness and reconciliation whenever it is used by the dominant classes to maintain their privileges. Commenting on the class struggle as one of the tenets of Marxism, Donald M. MacKinnon writes: 'Here is the very root of men's estrangement one from another; in a society split asunder by the fact of class antagonism, it is a mockery to speak of brotherly love and the rest'.³

3 *The healing of Christianity: an ever unfinished business*

I have suggested so far firstly that Marx believed that religion was irredeemably idealist; secondly I have described the strain of

idealism that has marked Christianity as lived out by many people. Now in the third place, I shall argue that it is possible partially to overcome religious idealism provided we are clear about the difficulty of such a transformation.

This difficulty of shifting from an idealistic brand of religiousness to a more genuine form of Christianity takes us back to our initial question: Why are most Christians on the defensive with respect to Marxism? It is, to my mind, because Christians lack security and hope, that they resist the challenge of Marxism as well as of other kinds of atheism. After Marx has put his finger on one of the basic wounds of the Western world, many believers have succeeded in ignoring his diagnosis by using great Christian truths in a twisted way in order to shield themselves from the unpleasant uncovering of their disease. Such debased Christian truths run as follows: 'Since the church has been granted revelation, it has nothing to learn from Marxism in religious matters'. Or again: 'Since we are saved through faith, salvation as such has nothing to do with politics and economics'. Moreover, because both in the Catholic and in the Protestant churches, people have longed for some kind of purity in dogma and in morality, they have not been ready to examine any suggestion that as a religious phenomenon, that is as a process of human thought, speech and practice, Christianity, might be partly corrupted.

In our efforts to overcome religious idealism, we can find an alternative vision of life in the Bible. In both the Old and the New Testaments, God is pictured as eager to save the whole of man. Salvation is experienced in history and it globally embodies spiritual, ethical, legal, political and economical elements. But in our contemporary societies, organization has reached such proportions that it has become very difficult to analyse the precise concrete links between all those aspects of human experience. I do not think that in the midst of our complex world, biblical culture, classical theology or personalist catechesis will suffice to make idealist Christians grasp how interactions between religion and psychology, or religion and politics are operative in their own lives. I do not even think that sound social teaching will be enough, for idealist believers will repeat even materialistic ideas and ideals without accurately detecting what they have to change in their behaviour in order to put them into practice.

I have just alluded to the interaction between religion and psychology. We shall need effective psychological tools to 'deconstruct' our idealist world-view, to look things in the face, to fathom the causes of this insecurity which makes us unhealthily crave for too much definitive truth in Christian religion and ethics, and to plumb the depth of our defensiveness against Marxism. Psychol-

ogy can help us to stop envisaging philosophies of life in terms of 'either . . . or'. For example, instead of saying: 'either Marx is entirely right or he is utterly wrong in his views about religion', we should discriminate between what we can accept from him and what we hold to be mistaken in his thought, and try to apply some of his key concepts to the uncovering of our illusions and hidden interests. Psychology can also teach us that although it should be acknowledged that idealism is a tendency of the human mind which infects Christianity and which should be fought against, it is nevertheless unfruitful to be impatient and intolerant towards it. Idealistic features cannot be extirpated from one day to another. Readiness to recognize idealistic characteristics in one's faith is the best way slowly to shift from partial authenticity to a fuller one. In such matters, refusal to acknowledge one's shortcomings is a worse shortcoming than the ones that are denied! 'If you were blind', said Jesus, 'you would not be guilty, but because you say "We see", your guilt remains.' (John 9: 41)

Finally, in this long and never finished process of religious healing, Marxism can teach us that no intellectual discovery is real until it begins to be put into practice. Marxist ideas, as any other ideas, have to be *used* as guidelines in a sustained endeavour to examine how economic, political and psychological relationships are distorted and how they could partially be improved. Such an effort to transform the material conditions of our human relationships is in itself a Christian task because our relationship with God cannot but be determined by the stance we take with respect to other people. So it is that Marx's emphasis on what is material and visible in our human bonds can be cast in a specifically religious perspective. As St John puts it, 'If a man does not love the brother whom he has seen, it cannot be that he loves God whom he has not seen' (1 John 4: 20).

- 1 By 'pure' or 'sheer' materialism, I evidently do not mean Marx's dialectical materialism, but a somewhat mechanistic materialism which can coexist with idealism in the minds of people who think of themselves as being either Christian or Communist. For illuminating comments on materialism, see John Macmurray, 'The New Materialism', in J M Murry, ed. *Marxism*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1935, pp 43-58; see also Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981, ch 8-12.
- 2 *Early Writings*, Penguin, 1975, p 244.
- 3 'Christian and Marxist Dialectic', in D M MacKinnon, ed. *Christian Faith and Communist Faith*, London: Macmillan, 1953, p 232.