

## THOUGHTS ON AN ENCYCLICAL

### I. *Christian Revolution versus Marxist Evolution*

“POPE DENOUNCES COMMUNISM” screamed the headlines. And of course there were the usual impertinent attempts to exploit the fact in class-interests. But the text of *Divini Redemptoris* proved a dangerous weapon for those concerned to preserve the social-economic *status quo* and to hinder the logical development of the existing industrial-capitalist society into a socialistic one. As said *La Libre Belgique*:

If atheistic communism is condemned, so too are all those evil “Christians” who live on the miseries of others, the selfish or blind “conservatives” who have failed to foresee that the indignation of the proletariat would impel them to rebellion, the evil rich who have so long been the object of the Saviour’s curses. . . . The vigour of the Pope’s words to them has astounded and disconcerted the more timid. But there are very few who have understood the love that lies hidden in that anger. This Encyclical is a model of righteous indignation at the service of charity, truly befitting a Father who longs for the salvation of his children.

For, as *Avant-Garde* commented:

This Encyclical does not consist solely in the condemnation of atheistic Communism. The Encyclical itself makes manifest the dangerous self-deception of those who would reduce the Catholic faith to anti-Communism. . . . It shows no tenderness for those opulent robbers who have lived on the distress of the workers. It offers no compliments to complacent, santimonious “conservatives,” to the selfish, to the thoughtless: *Woe to you rich*, for the communists and the atheists are on *your* consciences. You recoil, it is true, from the spectre which your crimes have created; you would invoke the power of the State to break the violence of the revolt which you yourselves have stirred up. But this Encyclical will tell you that you cannot count on the Church to support your confidence in the brute force which you invoke as your only refuge from the fury of the people. Pius XI will tell you: “*The means to save the world from ruin are neither the conflict of classes nor terrorism, still less an autocratic abuse of the power of the State, but the establishment of economic order inspired by social justice and by Christian love.*” The Encyclical employs the most impolite curses of the Gospels—*Depart from me ye cursed*—

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and of the apostle James—*Go to, now, ye rich men: weep and howl in your miseries: your riches are corrupted and your garments are moth-eaten.* At the same time it scourges religious hypocrisy and that ignorance of their social obligations which has made pleasurable the lives of those who purvey misery and cause rebellion.

To the workers, the Church proclaims that it is futile to look for paradise on earth. To the wealthy, that they must not make, nor permit to be made, a hell on earth. But it is to the more unfavoured, the under-privileged, that the predilection of the Church, like that of Christ, is extended.

The Communist and the exploiter are alike scourged in the terrible indictments of this Encyclical. But we who pride ourselves both on the vehemence of our detestation of Communism and on the emptiness of our pockets, can we pride ourselves also that they have for us no relevance or application?

We in England are perhaps inclined to make light of Communism. Despite the Pope's warnings, we are secretly convinced that "it can't happen here." We take comfort in the relative numerical weakness of the official Communist Party; we are blissfully unaware of its rapid growth both among the workers and the intelligentsia, incapable of recognizing its widespread influence far beyond its own party-membership, not least among those who are avowedly most antagonistic to it. But perhaps the chief reason for our complacency is that, knowing little of what Marxist Communism really is, we are unconscious of its own inherent dynamism and momentum, its immanence in our actual industrial-capitalist society.

The Holy Father's persistent warnings and entreaties will be in vain if we flatter ourselves that the "Left" movement that technically goes by the name of Communism can be made the scapegoat for all his denunciations. "Atheistic Communism" as the Pope understands it, and as Marx and Engels and Lenin understood it, is not merely a future possibility, it is a present reality among us: not indeed in its final stages of evolution (nor is it so even in U.S.S.R.), but at least in an advanced stage of development. The proximate *causes* of an atheistic-communist organization of society are actually

and vigorously operative; and that, not primarily within the ranks of the Communist Party, but in our very civilization itself.

Complacency about Communism and unawareness of the irreducible opposition between Christianity and Communism spring from sheer ignorance of what Communism is. Nothing can be further from the truth than the cheerful assumption that Christianity is antagonistic to Communism because Communism is revolutionary. The truth is the very reverse of this. Our case against Communism is not that it is revolutionary but that it is not.

It is essential that we undeceive ourselves of the illusion that Communism is a revolutionary movement (and still more of the assumption that Christianity is not). Not only is Marxism not, in any real sense, revolutionary, it makes real revolution impossible. The basis of Marxism is historical determinism; and historical determinism is the negation of the very possibility of revolution: the denial of the capability of man to shape his destiny, to escape from and reverse the historical process, in a word, to revolt. Marxism is essentially not revolutionary but evolutionary, and in that sense counter-revolutionary: the antithesis of revolutionary. True, Marx and Engels speak much of "revolution," but it is abundantly clear that they understand it in the light of their dialectical materialism as equivalent to Hegelian "evolution." (On this see especially Engels' *Ludwig Feuerbach*.) "Revolution" for the Marxist is nothing more than the metamorphosis immanent *within* matter-in-motion, the "negation of the negation which takes place *in* reality" (Engels, *Anti-Dühring*). It is a mere change wrought *in* the historic process and *by* the historic process: it cannot be revolt *from* the historic process wrought by free and sovereign man. It is true, again, that Bolshevistic (as distinct from Menshevistic) Socialism claims that by "unity of theory and practice" man can so make the evolutionary process part and parcel of his own consciousness (or, inversely, make the evolutionary process conscious) that he can accelerate that process (and also, perhaps, by elimination of "theory," make it less unbearable by resolving the tension between the real and the

ideal). But, according to the Marxist, to revolt freely *against* the inevitable evolution of matter-in-motion, of the trend of history, is not given to man.

Marxists have laughed at the Pope's "ignorance" in denouncing Communism as materialistic. But materialistic it is, and claims to be. Not, it is true, in the sense of a crude positivism which denies the reality of immaterial mind, but in the more subtle and pernicious sense that it immerses mind in matter. The old phenomenalistic materialism was, after all, metaphysical in spite of itself (and precisely on that ground did Marx and Engels attack Feuerbach and Dühring); its very negation of the metaphysical was a "speculative" and "metaphysical" affirmation, and therefore as contemptible to the Marxist as the dogma of the Trinity, a "scholastic ideology" as futile as anything in Aquinas. The Marxist cares nothing for such purely theoretic materialism; he is concerned with the practical materialism of enveloping mind in the "necessary" flux of matter and making it conscious of its determination by the historic-economic process and the creative strife of its opposing forces (cf. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*).

But the genuine revolutionary must be *free*. Revolution presupposes the denial of necessity, the affirmation of the primacy of the spiritual, of the sovereignty and independence of mind from matter, of the distinction and the tension between theory and fact, between things as they should be and things as they are. Revolution is begotten of the sense of disparity between the ideal and the real, between theory and practice: the sense of the specifically human tragedy. It affirms the power of the human mind precisely to detach itself from the historical process and to criticize it; the power of the human will to refuse to acquiesce in it and its power to bend it to its own pattern. There can be no authentic revolution which does not presuppose (if not the power of God shaping history through human agency) at least an elemental humanism which asserts the autonomy of the human mind, the primacy of the spiritual, the reality of freedom. Hence the Christian, and not only the Christian but even the naturalistic humanist, must challenge the revolutionary pretences of Marxism.

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This is not difficult. The whole burden and purpose of the first section of *The Communist Manifesto* was to "meet the nursery tale of the 'spectre' of Communism" by showing that Communists were *not* revolutionaries who sought to impose their own ideas on society, but that the proletarian revolution was the inevitable evolution of industrial-capitalism itself, that it was inherent in the actual economic-social system, that "what the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers." And the second section was yet more explicit:

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties.

They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.

They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement. . . .

The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas and principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer.

They merely express, in general terms, *actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.*

The Communist claims to differ from others only in that he is *conscious* of the movement, and consequently is enabled "always and everywhere to represent the interests of the movement as a whole."

Revolution postulates freedom: the Marxist repudiates freedom in everything but name. For the Marxist freedom is, in the famous phrase of Engels, "the knowledge of necessity," not in the profoundly true sense that the realistic exercise of freedom presupposes the recognition of necessity, but in the plain unvarnished sense that man can ambition no liberty other than the conscious and voluntary conformation of himself to the supposedly necessary flux of matter and the dialectic of its opposing forces. It is itself therefore "necessarily a product of historical development"; it merely makes necessity "*understood*" (*Anti-Dühring*). Herein, surely, and as the Pope implies, lies the crucial and irreducible contradiction between Christianity and Communism and between any humanistic revolution and Marxian evolution. True, there is a Marxist "humanism," but this "humanism"

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is necessarily a dehumanization: a resignation—however “active”—to the historic process by immersion of the human spirit in the dialectic of matter. This dehumanization is, let it be recognized, a comfortable and enticing programme, for it means the elimination of the human tragedy, of the tension between spirit and matter, between the real and the ideal: the systematized evasion of human responsibility. It is a superb programme for the efficiency of the industrialized robot community, for it means the elimination of all that is specifically human, especially of intelligence and will; the abdication of the faculty of social criticism, and therefore of the possibility of revolution. Marxism makes man the *willing* sport of economic forces, of the exigences of production conditioned by the machine. It does not only mechanize man and make man a cog in the machine, it makes him *like* it and silences his will to protest and revolt. Communism is not only, as Eric Gill has called it, the Politics of Industrialism,<sup>1</sup> it is also the Psychology of Industrialism which tames the human psyche to keep time with the rhythm of the machine and refashions it in the machine’s own image and likeness.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth remarking, in passing, that Marx was not insensible to the attractions of pre-industrial culture nor to the horrors of the tyranny of the machine. It was not Father McNabb or Eric Gill who wrote:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery . . . the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Politics of Industrialism*, BLACKFRIARS, February, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> The “Russian experiment” must not be allowed to cloud our vision of essential Marxism. In Russia Lenin was faced with a historical situation such as Marx had never envisaged: a mainly non-industrialized and hence a non-proletarianized society. Hence in Russia, to the scandal of the Menshevik Marxists, we have seen something like an inversion of Marxism in the determination of economics by politics and of politics by something approaching a *mystique* (which to Marx was of all things most abhorrent). Indeed, it would seem that in U.S.S.R. materialistic determinism has been abandoned in all but name, and that something approaching to a genuine revolution has been achieved not because of Marx but in spite of him. But this is not to be expected in the industrialized West. On this see the important and penetrating article of N. Berdyaev, *The Metamorphosis of Marxism*, in BLACKFRIARS, February, 1934.

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machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. Hence, the cost of production of a workman is restricted, almost entirely, to the means of subsistence that he requires for his maintenance, and for the propagation of his race.<sup>3</sup> . . . Masses of labourers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. . . . Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class and of the bourgeois state; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine. (*The Communist Manifesto*.)

But because of his historical determinism, it could never even occur to Marx to criticize the *machine* or its control, and he had only scorn for the workers of the early days of the industrial era who "attack the instruments of production themselves . . . and seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages." The machines were just *there*, necessarily, and must be allowed to go on destroying the proletariat till both proletariat and machine destroy their creators, the "bourgeoisie."

Against this dehumanizing evolutionism Pope Pius proclaims the doctrine of the dignity of *man* as it is taught us by reason and revelation:

Man has a spiritual and immortal soul.

He is a *person* marvellously endowed by his Creator with gifts of body and mind.

He is a true microcosm, as the ancients said, a world in miniature, with a value far surpassing that of the vast inanimate cosmos.

God alone is his last end, in this life and the next.

By sanctifying grace he is raised to the dignity of a son of God, and incorporated into the Kingdom of God in the mystical Body of Christ.

Society is for man and not vice-versa.

Ultimately all material things should be ordained to man as to a *person*. . . . *All things are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

While Communism impoverishes human personality by inverting the terms of the relation of man to society, to what lofty heights is man elevated by reason and revelation!

In asserting the subordination to man of matter, of the

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<sup>3</sup> One suspects that even Marx would have been shocked to see "bourgeois interests" combining to hinder the propagation of his race!

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cosmos, of the social collectivity itself, the Pope asserts against Marxist evolutionism not only the possibility but the necessity of revolution in the name of humanity and of Christ: the revolution that will deliver man from slavery to his historic environment: the revolution which is not a mere modification wrought *in* and *by* the historic process but is *against* it.<sup>4</sup>

For the Pope makes it abundantly clear that our opposition to Communism is not based merely on some objection to the Communist analysis of the auto-dynamism (to use the modern Marxist word) of the existing industrial-capitalist organization of society, not merely to its effort to make us conscious of "the historical movement going on under our very eyes"; *he indicts that organization, that historical movement itself*. It is not merely "Left" politics that he condemns: it is the whole trend and evolution of our civilization itself which the "Left" would merely explain and sanction. His criticism of the *status quo*, because detached from it, is far more radical than is possible to the Marxist. *Divini Redemptoris* is the forthright denial of the "necessity" of the present drift of the historic process, the affirmation of the power and the duty of man to change it radically and subject it to himself, and through himself to Christ and to God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *The Christian Revolution*, BLACKFRIARS, February, 1934.

<sup>5</sup> Since the above was written come reports of Mgr. Jackman's splendid address to the S.V.P. (*Catholic Times and Universe*, 16th April, 1937) in which he describes the Communist "revolution" as no revolution at all, "a quiet transfer, a change of business, Hell under new management." May we express the hope that this address will be published in pamphlet form and scattered broadcast?