

Can a Christian be a Marxist¹

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In this paper I defend a 'strong compatibility' thesis. According to this thesis Marxism is not only not inconsistent with Christianity; Christianity is compatible only with Marxism. I further argue that for Marxists to accept this proposition on the grounds that they have no reason to object to the *personal* combination of Marxism and Christianity is to miss the point both of Christianity and of their own Marxism. This concession is, from the point of view of the Marxist, quite unprincipled. It is to misconstrue both the true nature of the Marxist critique of religion and the true nature of the religion of which Marxism is the critique. But more about this in due course.

First, though, what sort of reasons are invoked against the 'compatibility' thesis? They seem to fall, generally, into two categories. First, there are objections to the Christian belief system itself. Secondly, there are objections to the social and historical role of the set of institutions which has espoused that belief-system.

To the belief-system of Christianity on almost any account of what it maintains, defenders of the incompatibility thesis have a form of objection which I shall call 'ontological'. This objection, taken on its own is, it seems to me, both the most widely canvassed and the weakest. It is roughly this: Christians believe that the universe is peopled with entities and agencies and activities and events—a God, an act of creation, an act of redemption, souls, grace, post-mortem survival and all the rest—all of which the Marxist is, as a Marxist, committed to the denial of. Christians are, thus, ontologically theists, spiritualists and mentalists; Marxists, on the other hand are ontologically materialists. Since ontological immaterialism and ontological materialism cannot both be true, one cannot consistently hold both. So a Christian cannot consistently be a Marxist. I do not as I say, myself consider this a very serious objection when taken by itself. However, it does become serious when taken in conjunction with the second form of objection, so I will go on to consider this immediately, returning to the ontological objection later.

The second form of objection to the compatibility thesis I take a lot more seriously. I call this set of objections 'historical' though this is really just a term of convenience covering two quite different sorts

¹This is a reduced version of a paper which was first read to a Staff Socialist Group Seminar in University College, Dublin. It owes so much of its inspiration—and indeed of its arguments—to the work of Herbert McCabe OP that it would be as pedantic as impossible to note every point where this influence has made itself felt. Nonetheless, obviously, it cannot be assumed that he would agree to the use I have made of his material.

of objection. The first sort of historical objection is simply to the record of Christian churches in their relations to nearly every progressive movement in our western history, that is to say, in European and American history. That record is sometimes said to have been wholly reactionary. This, however, is to oversimplify the matter, though the charge is not much weakened by the fact that it should be more accurately described as 'diplomatic' or just plainly Machiavellian. The objection, so stated, is that Christian churches have opposed all revolutionary movements in the last two thousand years of our history until they have proved successful and then, once established, have joined them; but that, in addition, those churches have sometimes crucially thrown their weight on the side of the successful repression of revolutionary movements. Either way, it is said, the churches have an appallingly reactionary record and, furthermore, show every sign of continuing to display diplomatically acrobatic proclivities in the present day towards the coming socialist revolution. The old instincts are there. There are already signs, are there not, that the Christian churches are preparing themselves *theologically* for the possibility of global socialist revolution while simultaneously in practice committing themselves to its frustration in nearly every part of the world.

Now the reason why I take this charge more seriously than I do the ontological objection, is that it may seem to some Marxists—as it did apparently to Connolly—to be neither here nor there to the Marxist what *private* beliefs Marxists hold so long as they do commit themselves to the struggle for socialist programmes. This, as an answer to the question of whether or not a Christian can be a Marxist may be satisfactory to some Marxists, though I think, myself, they are both fools and ignorant Marxists who find it so, but it certainly will not satisfy, or should not satisfy any Christian. But let us see, first of all, what there is in this contention, for it is important to be clear that it is not such a proposition as this which I am defending.

First of all some of the Marxists I questioned said to me that they saw no reason why a Christian should not be a Marxist for just so long as he is genuinely a Marxist. Whether, being genuinely a Marxist, he therefore has, as a result, problems defining his Christianity, is a matter for him, his conscience or his church; but is irrelevant to the great issues to the solution of which, as a Marxist, he is committed. If he is committed to them, it matters not what his reasons are. Marxists have no need to be concerned with bourgeois ideals of private motivational purity. All that is needed is correct *praxis*, a unity of verifiable analysis and strategically well-directed action. The consistency, or otherwise, of his private hang-ups with his Marxism is quite beside the point.

Then there are the tactical reasons of a culturally specific propaganda nature why Marxists might not at all mind the mix of Christianity with Marxism. Connolly is reported to have answered to the question how he could reconcile membership of the Church of Rome with the materialist conception of history as follows: 'Well, it is like this. In Ireland all the Protestants are Orangemen and howling jingoes. If the children go to the Protestant schools they get taught to wave the Union

Jack and worship the English king. If they go to the Catholic Church they become rebels. Which would you sooner have . . . ?²

Well that hardly answers the question does it? Besides I do not propose to venture into the territory of accountancy of Irish nations and the relevance of the exact number to Irish revolutionary socialism—territory into which, incidentally, immaterial entities belonging to my ontology would fear to tread—but there are, obviously, circumstances—societies, cultures—in which Christian beliefs are the only, or at least the most favourable soil for the cultivation of socialist ideas. In Latin America, whatever about Ireland, there are obvious reasons why this has been so spectacularly the case among Roman Catholics. But in Britain this has never been the case—Catholics have no socialist tradition. On the other hand, in Britain, the low-church dissenting brand of Christianity has a long history of association with the spread of socialism.³ Anyhow, at least contingently, if not necessarily, it may be true, in some conjunctures of ideologies and social conditions, that it is *via* their Christianity that Marxist converts have been made.

None of this, however, will do as a defence of the proposition that a Christian can be consistently a Marxist. The fact that some Christians have been Marxists, and even the fact—in some cases undeniable—that some Christians have been Marxists just because of their Christianity, does not show that any of them have been consistent in being both. Nor can the Christian accept, and the Marxist is foolish to imply, that the Christian commitment to an immaterialist ontology is a private matter separable at all fundamentally from his commitment to an historical, empirical institution—a ‘visible church’, as it used to be called. It would be quite wrong for the Marxist to drop his guard on this matter: he must, it seems to me, accept that very early statement of Marx that ‘the criticism of religion is the beginning of all criticism’—well, if not quite the beginning, at least a crucial part of it. And this criticism of religion, and therefore of Christianity, is, in at least the case of Christianity, the criticism not just of some private hang-ups which, incidentally, some of the population of capitalist societies suffer from, and some Marxists might suffer from too if, like a tooth-ache, they can put up with the inconvenience. This criticism is essentially the criticism of a nexus which there appears to be between an ontology and an institution, between that institution and a self-defined historical role, to which the institution seems to be committed precisely by its ontology or belief-system. More simply, the Christian either believes his ontology as a member of the Christian Church, or else he is not a Christian. The idea of a private Christianity is absurd with the absurdity of the idea of a private Marxism. Christianity is either a *praxis*—in which case a serious problem about the compatibility of it with Marxism is raised, or else it is not. But in that case it is compatible with anything whatever.

That being so it becomes impossible to separate the Marxist critique

²Conversation with Thomas Bell, reported in *The Worker's Republic*, Selection from the Writings of James Connolly, ed. D. Ryan, Dublin (1951), p. 61, n. 2.

³See, for example, A. MacIntyre, *Secularisation and Moral Change*, Oxford (1967), for a discussion of this point in relation to nineteenth century English socialism.

of the ontology of Christianity from the Marxist critique of the historical role of institutional Christianity. The reason why this separation cannot be made comes both, indeed, from Marxists and from Christians. It is true, it seems to me, that the Marxist has no reason to spare a curse for what entities do and what entities do not actually people the universe. So far as I can see Marxism, represented in the materialist conception of history, involves no *ontology* of a materialist sort whatever.⁴ Indeed, Marx himself was notoriously hostile to just those materialist ontologies which do provide the standard arguments against Christian theism and immaterialism. What the materialist conception of history does assert, however, is that all ontologies, Christian ontologies not excluded, are derived from, are formed, given content and force by the constraints of material human social relationships; that social relationships are embodiments of ideas and that, vice versa, all ideas, including abstract ontologies, are ideological transformations of material social relationships. The Marxist, therefore, cannot on his own grounds, be allowed to say that the Christian universe of God, grace, redemptions and after-lives is a private illusion of private minds, separable from the conception of a form of society which they imply. For the belief in this universe is a theory of society and history and entails and is embodied in a concrete social, historical *praxis*.

Nor can the Christian consistently deny that this is so. His beliefs are not just the beliefs of the members of a community whose nature as a community and whose historical mission can be defined independently of those beliefs. Those beliefs are constitutive of the Christian idea of itself and of mankind as a community. *All* Christian beliefs are social doctrines; all Christian ritual and sacramental acts are embodiments of social ideas. And so the espousal of those beliefs is a *praxis*, situating the believer in the world in whatever relation to the world, whether revolutionary or reactionary, in which his church is situated in the world. And, it is said, that historical *praxis* of Christianity is inherently reactionary, anti-revolutionary.

It is only at this point, therefore, that I can present the full case about the nexus between Marxism and Christianity: at the point, that is to say, where it is recognised by Christians and Marxists alike that the Christian ontology is an implicit and explicit historical *praxis*, not at all a matter of private belief. To be a Christian is to be a member of an historical community, with an actual history of relationships with social revolutions, an official attitude towards Marxism; but much more fundamentally than that, to be a Christian is to commit oneself to an ontology which, as a *praxis*, provides the basis for accepting, or else the basis for criticising the empirical history of the Church in relation to social revolution. To my mind, everything in that ontology demands of the Christian that he rejects the reactionary behaviour of his official church; it is not in spite of, but because of his ontology that he is so required. For the Christian, therefore, the question is, what is

⁴If most Marxists are and have been ontological materialists this materialism really is, relative to their Marxism, just a 'private' i.e. logically independent, and anyway false set of beliefs, one to which they are in no way committed by their Marxism.

the beginning of this criticism of religion? For the Christian under capitalism, that answer is Marxism.

The question, then, whether the Christian can be a Marxist is the question not just whether he can believe the doctrines of Christianity simultaneously and consistently with the commitment to the revolution of capitalism into socialism, but also whether he can accept, consistently and simultaneously, the criticism of religion which that revolutionary commitment both presupposes and entails. Put in another form, can I consistently and simultaneously accept both Christian beliefs and the materialist conception of history, according to which just those beliefs are the products of material social conditions against which Marxists are waging strategic warfare? My answer to these questions is that I can both simultaneously and consistently accept both the Christian beliefs themselves *as true* and the materialist explanation of why they are asserted.

I see every reason why the Christian should accept the materialist conception of history as true of his beliefs, and no reasons at all why he should reject it. There is no greater difficulty about this than there is for the Marxist to accept the materialist conception of history as true of Marxism. Let me, however, just as an aside, clear away a sort of confusion which is very common among, if not exclusive to Marxists. From the fact that you can explain *why* a certain belief is held by a group of people in terms of the material conditions of their social relationships, it does not at all follow that the proposition they believe in is *false*. It does not follow that $1 + 1 = 2$ is a false proposition just because some people seem to believe it is true for all the wrong reasons, or even because, when asked, they haven't the slightest idea why it is true. In just the same way, just because most Christians are unaware of the fact that their belief-system is a product, to put it somewhat crudely, of material social conditions, or even because most Christians who have entertained the thought have denied it, it does not at all follow that that belief-system is a system of false beliefs. The truth conditions for any proposition—the conditions, that is to say, under which it is true or false—are generally quite different from its assertion-conditions—the conditions, that is to say, under which its assertability is warranted. The materialist conception of history can explain why Christians assert and believe the propositions they assert and believe. It can also explain why there are any Christians around at all to do this asserting and believing. As such it has nothing whatever to say on the question whether those beliefs are true or false. I thus see not the slightest reason why the belief in immaterial entities is shown to be false, just because one can account for the fact of their being believed on materialistic principles.

To put this matter somewhat more plainly and in terms more in the style of traditional Christian apologetics, it is the commonest of Christian sense to say that its own origins and peculiar form were historically determined. We say things like this: if there is a God, and supposing that he created a world of beings who both create and are created by their own historical actions, how could that God intervene

in that human history except via historical agents acting under the constraints of social conditions which men have created and transferred for themselves? We do believe that God has acted upon and within history, and most of us believe, though perhaps not quite all, that God is a being who exists outside of history. But for every action which we believe is an action of God within history we believe that there is a sufficient explanation of a purely historical and material form. We do not say this out of a desire simply to be curious and interesting and two-dimensional about history in preference to the dullness of everyone else's boring one-dimensionality. We say this simply because we do believe it to be true that there is a God and that he has acted upon history; and we also believe that the God *could not* have acted so as to change the course of history otherwise than in a way that is explicable entirely in terms of that history. We are, therefore, *overdeterminists*. At any rate, if there are some Christians who dissent from this point of view, I for my part follow the central tradition in the Catholic Church on this, represented in the theology of Aquinas.⁵ And as for the materialist conception of history itself, if not all Christians have accepted it as explaining their own historical agency, they have, to my mind, been thoroughly inconsistent in this: if they do not accept it, it appears the God they believe in does. If not all Christians are Marxists, certainly their own God is.

Anyhow, I, at any rate, accept, as representing the central tradition both of Christian and Marxist thought, the materialist conception of history. I accept as true, both of Marxism and Christianity that they are, in their different ways, *praxes*—historically conditioned action-systems which define, in each case, for different historical epochs, the possibilities and constraints upon the future development of that epoch. I thus believe, both of Christianity and of Marxism, that, as historical *praxes*, they *could not have* anticipated their historical origins and that they will not survive the completion of their historical tasks. I believe, with Marx, that both will realise themselves by abolishing themselves and abolish themselves in the act of their own realisation.⁶ Marxists know what this means in their own case: it means that with the realisation of its historical task, the achievement of a universal and fully socialist society, Marxism as the revolutionary *praxis* of the capitalist era *eo ipso* eliminates itself.

But Christians too know what this means. It means that in the New Jerusalem, there will be no churches, no priests, no sacraments, no faith, no hope, only love, a fully socialised humanity and a fully humanised society.⁷ Christianity, in the end will realise itself as a fully human reality by abolishing itself as a sacred one.

But, for the Christian, that time comes when and only when the

⁵For an account of the historical significance in the seventeenth century English revolution of the Protestant version of the 'overdeterministic' theology of history, see Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman, Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, London (1971), pp. 219-250.

⁶*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. B. Bottomore, London (1963), pp. 50-51. The remark was made a propos of German philosophy but is equally apposite to religion.

⁷See *Revelations*, 21, v. 22.

structures of domination, oppression and exploitation, the structures of lies, mystification and hate, the machinery of war, of imperialism of racism, when and only when all these things have been wiped from the face of the earth. For, we say, it is only under such material social conditions that the presence of Christ can be fully revealed. In the meantime, we say that Christ is present to the world only in the form of his absence, in the form of a withdrawal, or, as we otherwise say—because we Christians, like the Marxists, need a special vocabulary of dialectics—Christ is present to the world only *sacramentally*. By that sacramental present we mean, broadly speaking, the kind of presence which alone love can have in a world the very essence of whose structure is exploitation; the kind of existence alone which fully socialised humanity can have in a world of irrational competition over the distribution of resources of production and exchange; the kind of presence which alone Christ can have in a world of dehumanised, alienated social relationships. And so we say that Christ, love, community are present in the world, really present, in the form of their absence, in the form, that is, of a *real possibility*, in each age historically determined, of love, of emancipation, of community, but that they are not present as historical *actualities*.

Today it is the structures of the capitalist world which are the historical obstacle to the very love, emancipation and community of which that capitalist world also harbours the historical promise. In the meantime, then, the Church itself, is not, as in that bourgeoisified post-Vatican II ecumenical self-image it professes, a *community*: that is a sociological, and anyway a theological, untruth. The Church can never be a community under the conditions of capitalism, because what the Church means by community it means by love, and what it means by love is Christ. And under capitalism community is not possible because love is not livable and thus Christ is not visible. The Church is, by its own more orthodox account, a promise of community to the world, the promise of the world as a community. So, to go back to the original Marxist formula, the Church realises itself by abolishing itself as it is in the general nature of promises to do. The material social conditions under which community is possible for all men are just those under which the Church eliminates itself. The Church becomes a community just when mankind becomes a community. But *just* then the Church ceases to exist. Which is to say, is it not, that, for the Christian, the beginning of all criticism is the criticism of religion.

The idea, then, that the Church is *now* a community is but the fetishised, reified idea of a concrete historical future for mankind, expressed in the form of a reified ontology. As such the Church is, and unfortunately often actually has been, exactly what Marx said that it was. But it is, in fact, a Christian heresy to say that the Church is a community. The Church is, in fact, either false to its own historical mission, or else is a revolutionary movement. It is, of course, unfortunately true that Christian churches have often preferred and continue to prefer being communities—indeed just now would seem to prefer being just one big happy community—to being a

revolutionary movement. The Church has shown a constant proclivity to be a community concerned about itself and thus to betray its commitment to being a *praxis* about the world.⁸ (So too, incidentally, have far too many 'revolutionary socialist' sects.) Nonetheless this record of betrayal of its own revolutionary mission is but one half of the story, and in response to the charge that historically speaking its role has been entirely reactionary I first of all answer that, whatever about the facts of the matter, to which I will come in a moment, the theological essence of Christianity is a commitment to world-historical revolution: for the time being this meaning the socialist revolution.

And so, in any historical epoch the only theological question a Christian is constrained to raise is how, in the material social conditions of that epoch, its revolutionary mission is to be defined. Christianity, unlike Marxism, is not *itself* a political doctrine, in the sense that out of its own resources of belief alone it can pull the appropriate revolutionary strategy, correct for any, let alone for every, age—as it were like a rabbit out of a hat. On the contrary, the Christian church has had constantly to redefine its historical mission, and therefore its ontology and belief-system as a whole, for every age and in terms of the revolutionary issues of that age. Is not this, in fact, just what the history of Christianity consists in: its pursuit of that analysis of contemporary conditions which will define its historical mission in the form of a contemporary *praxis*? And is it not just over the question of what analysis to back—or where agreed on analysis, which side to back—that Christianity has constantly divided itself? It is simply false that Christianity has always adopted a counter-revolutionary stance. What is true, however, is that it has always fragmented itself over the question of revolution or reaction. The Roman Catholic sect did, certainly, set its teeth officially against the bourgeois revolution, from its sixteenth century origins to its early twentieth century development, not indeed in the name of more advanced ideas, but in the name of Feudal reaction. But was it not just that refusal to part with Feudalism which makes it the Roman Catholic church as distinct from the Protestant church. The Roman church has to that extent substantively betrayed its continuities with the message of Christ. But with that message the Protestant churches, or some of them some of the time, remained in revolutionary, not reactionary continuity, precisely by backing, in various and occasionally wildly utopian ways, the implicit democratic, anti-authoritarian freedoms of the bourgeois revolution. Luther, Marx commented, restored the authority of faith by destroying faith in authority.⁹ He thus destroyed not just the sacred, but also the secular heart of the Mediaeval world, and provided, in turn, a sacred heart for the bourgeois world of the future. Long before the political theorists of the bourgeois revolution began to secularise the theology, the Protestant churches had consolidated the fact: those Calvinist, Anabaptist, Dissenting, Levelling and Digging Churches were already embodying ideas of democracy, freedom of conscience and of consent

⁸I consciously echo McCabe here, see *Law, Love and Language*, London (1968), p. 142-3.

⁹Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

far in advance of either the contemporary bourgeois political theory or the contemporary bourgeois political reality. But the consolidation of the bourgeois revolution being by and large completed, the Protestant churches lie now by and large exhausted, abolished by their own realisation.

Just now, too, it may be necessary, indeed seems increasingly likely, that just when the official Christian churches are drawing together in vertical ecumenical solidarity with each other—a movement which, in effect, amounts to the effort to fully bourgeoisify a still remarkably Feudal Roman church—they will have to split horizontally over the question of the socialist revolution. There are many signs of this ecumenical convergence of Christian Marxists coming from all varieties of Christian sect, splitting *against* the ecumenical convergence of bourgeois official churches. Nothing can yet be safely predicted about how or what will happen. But what does seem to be clear is that at last a new crisis of theology and *praxis*, pregnant with the possibilities of schism, is being raised for Christianity by the crises of capitalism itself. For my part, to retain my orthodoxy as a Christian, to remain in revolutionary continuity with the Church of Christ, I must, now be a Marxist. And we should be clear about this too: this commitment, as a Christian, to Marxism, derives not from some absurd general proposition that Christians should be in favour of revolutions, just for the heck of it. Christians are not revolutionary *on principle*. Nobody is a revolutionary on principle. That is sheer madness. To be a revolutionary on principle is to be an utterly unprincipled revolutionary. And it is fair to say that as there are absurd Christians who are reactionary on principle, so there is an absurd kind of Christian who is a mere adventurer, in a permanent mental attitude of opposition to something called, without the slightest idea of what is meant by it, 'the world'. No: the Christian must now be a Marxist because and only because there is no longer any issue in the world but one, the issue of being for or against the revolution of the capitalist world. For just so long as 'the world' is specifically a capitalist world, Marxism alone can define the *praxis* of the Christian. And this is because for just so long as the world is capitalist there is only one revolutionary *praxis*. That is not a doctrine of Christianity. That is just a fact which capitalism imposes. And, furthermore, that is just why the Christian and the Marxist actually agree that the criticism of religion is the first premiss of all criticism. For, insofar as the socialist revolution really does represent the next historical step in human emancipation and in the enlargement of the possibilities of love, it also represents the next historical step in the dismantling of the Christian church.

I do not, for my part, believe that the completion of the world-historical task of socialism necessarily spells the end of all human pre-history, nor that there cannot be any post-Marxist Christianity. I no more believe this than I believe that the world will necessarily survive long enough for world-socialist revolution to take place. After all we could blow the whole lot up today. I further believe that there are no conclusive guarantees that, even if the world survives long enough for

this to be possible, the socialist revolution will necessarily be successful. As a Marxist I am not a historicist. I do not believe that there is some one destiny for the human race which will necessarily be realised within historical time. As a Marxist I believe only in the proposition, which I believe to be scientific, that for just so long as capitalism extends its grip on the world, and for just so long as capitalism thereby intensifies its own irrationalities and contradictions, revolutionary socialism is increasingly made to be the only rational response and projects the only predictable outcome. I accept this, not because, as a Marxist, I believe myself to be endowed with gnostic powers of prophecy, nor, because, as a Christian, I believe that love, or Christ, will necessarily conquer, within history, over exploitation and hate. On the contrary, as a Christian I expect, as Herbert McCabe has put it, that if you love you will be killed. I accept the stance of the revolutionary socialist because, as a Marxist I believe—or rather I am a Marxist because I believe—that capitalism is so developing that either the world will blow itself to smithereens, or else it will just lie down and die, or else will become, by the logic of its own historical development, socialist. For the time being either nothing will happen or else socialism will. As a *Christian* I have no such analysis. All I know is that unless Marxism is just a false analysis anyway, it, and it alone, defines the conditions under which men might be able to love, as conditions under which Christ can be revealed.

Does the Christian therefore identify the achievement of socialism with the realisation of the *pleroma*, the coming of the kingdom? Of course he does not. First because the kingdom, for the Christian, comes from beyond, from outside history, and involves transformations of man and society altogether beyond the powers of men to bring about for themselves. The kingdom is a new creation. Secondly, this identification is not possible because the Christian believes that the kingdom will come *whenever* world-history ends, and, as I have said, that end could, logically, have come before 1844 and could, empirically, happen today. I do not see why the Marxist should trouble himself about this. When the world has passed away—if it does—there may or may not be a general resurrection. But either way there will be neither Christians nor Marxists. And either Christ will come before all mankind and recreate the kingdom or else all this is nothing but blarney. It does not matter to the Christian that Marxists do not believe this; and it should not matter to the Marxist that the Christian does believe that *outside* of human history there is a final revolution on the cards. All that matters now, to Christians and Marxists alike, is that we have capitalism. And that means that all that matters to either is the revolutionary socialist action which capitalism both generates the conditions for and at the same time attempts to suppress. When that revolution is completed, Marxism is self-abolished. To whom, then, will it matter if Christianity is still around; if the revolutionary potential of the Christian sacraments proves not to have been exhausted by revolutionary socialism? For either there will be nobody to whom it could matter, or else Christianity will have proved its own truth in practice.