

Theology and Class

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'In a higher world it may be otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to perfect is to change often'.

'The history of all existing society is the history of class struggles'.

The first of these quotations was written by Newman in 1845 in his famous *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. The second was written by Marx and Engels three years later in *The Communist Manifesto*.

Newman's essay can be seen as the beginning of a genuine sense of history in the world of Catholic Theology. *The Communist Manifesto* can be seen as having a similar role for the history of ideas. Catholic Theology could never be the same again after Newman's essay and secular history could never be the same again after the *Communist Manifesto*.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore more than a few of the implications of the Marxist view of history as class struggle for Newman's view of doctrinal development. I am not aware that anyone has ever given a Marxist analysis of Newman's famous essay. There are, however, a number of Marxist treatments of the history of the Church and of Christian doctrine—notably by Engels and Karl Kautsky. These treatments are all written from the point of view of a rejection of belief, both in God and in any meaningful degree of historical certainty about the existence of Jesus Christ.

The reasons for Marxist atheism are well known and can be found in the philosophical background of the young Marx. The reasons for the extreme scepticism over New Testament origins can be traced to early nineteenth century biblical criticism and to the work of the bosom friend of the young Marx at Berlin in the 1830s, Bruno Bauer. Bauer managed to assign both the Gospels and the Epistles to dates well into the second century A.D. and regarded the Gospel story as the invention of one second-century mind.

All the classical Marxist assessments of Christian history are concerned exclusively with Christianity as a phenomenon seen in relation to economic and social change. Their interest is solely with the external factors of doctrinal development as determined by the changing class forces in the Church. By contrast Christian theologians have been almost solely concerned with the continuity or otherwise of one doctrine

with another, or of one stage of doctrinal development with the various stages that have preceded it.

Within the limits of this article I propose to look at each of the two approaches. I shall point out some of the achievements and limitations of both methods. I shall then leave on one side the whole world of non-Marxist sociology of religion, and instead I shall attempt to outline a Catholic Marxist view of the history of theology and to draw some practical conclusions about the role both of Marxists in the Church and of Christians in the revolutionary movement.

Some Christian Interpretations of Doctrinal Development

All Christians have an interest in asserting the continuity between their beliefs and the beliefs of the writers of the New Testament. Roman Catholic controversialists at the time of the Reformation simply denied that there was a problem. The essentials of Christian faith had always remained the same (Vincentian Canon). The reformers were seen simply as innovators. The reformers, on the other hand, regarded the faith of the Roman Church as an alteration and a disfigurement of primitive Christianity as found in the New Testament. At the risk of over simplification it is possible to say that both parties denied the possibility of any evolution in doctrine whatsoever. Both approaches suffered from the absence of any modern historical perspective.

With the advent of modern historical science, and in particular biblical criticism, Liberal Protestant scholars carried the reformers' notion of erroneous development still further. With the loss in status of the Bible as the inspired Word it became possible to argue that the process had begun within the pages of the New Testament itself and that Paul and John had attempted to turn the straightforward moral teaching of Jesus into a mystery religion.

Prior to Newman's famous essay there had emerged three basic theories to account for the formal differences between the dogmatic statements of the Church at different periods in its history. Firstly there is the pre-epigenetic theory which takes its model of development from the older theories of biological growth. According to this theory just as the whole man was thought to be already present in the embryo at the earliest stages of its development, similarly the content of all subsequent doctrinal development was present in detail in the faith of the early Church and these details simply emerged in sharper focus changing the course of the Church's history. Secondly, there is the *dialectical theory* which takes its model from the philosophical syllogism. According to this theory all development consists of logical deduction from the known premises. This theory involved the belief that the apostles themselves had had explicit knowledge of all subsequently defined doctrines.

The third theory, the *disciplina arcana* involved the notion of the deposit of a faith as a hidden store of revelation given by Christ to the apostles which the Church was able to draw from to help in the explication of her teaching.

Newman's (illative) theory, on the other hand, saw the deposit of faith as a basic idea. This idea was the basis of Christian faith and

needed to be interpreted and expanded to meet the exigencies of history. Doctrine 'changes in order to remain the same'.

Despite the importance of Newman's essay its chief limitation lay in its polemical purpose. It did not argue from first principles but was directed at high Church Anglicans who implicitly accepted a principle of doctrinal development over the first four centuries. In effect Newman was saying 'you come with me as far as the council of Chalcedon why not, on the same principles, come as far as Trent'? Nor does Newman appear to have seen that his theory of doctrinal development rendered relative the very nineteenth century Roman Catholicism he appeared to want to make absolute. In the hands of modernists like Alfred Loisy it was used precisely for this purpose.

Many modern theologians have lost the nineteenth century notion of progress as a uniform evolution towards perfection, a view implicit to differing degrees in both Newman and Loisy. For these modern theologians the task of theology is not so much development as translation and the Gospel is seen as having to be translated from one conceptual framework to another. The problem is seen as one of speaking about Christianity in a relevant language. The suggestion that conceptual frameworks are at all affected by changes in economic and class factors is very seldom even considered.

Some Marxist Interpretations of Christian History

Marxist interest in Christian ideas has chiefly centred upon the Reformation and the first beginnings of the Church. Both were periods of social upheaval. The Reformation marked the first ideological expression of the class interests of the emergent bourgeoisie. Early Christianity was seen as a mass movement of the oppressed comparable in many ways to the revolutionary working class movement.

In his essay on the *Peasant War* Engels attempted to show that 'political and religious theories were not the causes but the result of that stage in the development of agriculture, industry, land and waterways, commerce and finance which then existed in Germany'.¹

The Catholic party consisted largely of reactionary and patrician interests and the Lutherans the reformist middle classes. The millenarists, on the other hand represented the revolutionary plebian opposition to both the Lutheran and the Catholic class forces. 'In the so-called religious wars of the sixteenth century very positive material class interests were at play and those wars were class wars just as were the later collisions in England and France. If the class struggle of that time appeared to bear religious earmarks, if the interests, requirements and demands of the various classes hid themselves behind a religious screen, it little changes the actual situation and is to be explained by conditions of the time'.

In 1878 Engels turned his attention to the early Church and to the alleged egalitarianism of the first Christians. In his *Anti-Dühring* Engels attacked Dühring's understanding of man's equality as an innate

¹*The Peasant War in Germany*, 1850. English translation, London, 1927, p. 12.

characteristic. Engels denied that the claim to equality had existed prior to the emergence first of the 'bourgeois demand for the abolition of class privileges and then of the proletarian demand for the abolition of the classes themselves'. He attempts to demonstrate the absence of such demands in ancient Greece and Rome and then turns his attention to the early Church. 'Equality in sin is seen as the only equality, with equality of election a further possibility'. Christianity knew only *one* point in which all men were equal: that all were equally born in original sin—which corresponded perfectly with its character as the religion of the slaves and the oppressed. Apart from this it recognised, at most, the equality of the elect, which however was only stressed at the very beginning. The traces of common ownership which are also found in the early stages of the new religion can be ascribed to the solidarity of a proscribed sect rather than to real equalitarian ideas'.²

Nevertheless it is this equality of men in sin and in redemption which drew persecution down upon the pre-Constantinian Church. 'Equality of all people—Greeks, Romans and Barbarians, freemen and slaves, subjects and aliens, citizens and peregrines, etc.—was not only insane but criminal to the mind of the ancients, and in Christendom its first beginnings were strictly persecuted. . . . In Catholicism there was first the *negative equality of all human beings before God as sinners*, and more narrowly construed, the equality of all children of God redeemed by the grace and the blood of Christ. Both versions are grounded in the role of Christianity as the religion of the slaves, the banished, the dispossessed, the persecuted, the oppressed'.

In 1882 Engels contributed a two-part obituary article on the German philosopher and theologian, Bruno Bauer. By demonstrating, at least to the satisfaction of Marx and Engels, that Christianity was based on consciously fraudulent claims, Bauer had cleared the way for an inquiry into the actual social and economic conditions which had determined the widespread acceptance of Christianity in the first three centuries of the Christian era.

'A religion that had brought the Roman world empire into subjection and dominated by far the larger part of civilised humanity for 1800 years cannot be disposed of merely by declaring it to be nonsense gleaned together by frauds. One cannot dispose of it before one succeeds in explaining its origin and its development from the historical condition under which it arose and reached its dominant position. This applies to Christianity. The question to be solved then is how it came about that the popular masses in the Roman Empire so far preferred this nonsense—which was preached into the bargain by slaves and oppressed—to all other religions that the ambitious Constantine saw in the adoption of this religion of nonsense the best means of exalting himself to the position of autocrat of the Roman World'. (Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, Moscow, 1972, p. 174.)

In order to answer this Engels leaves Bauer on one side as one prevented by his idealism from 'seeing clearly and formulating precisely'

² *Anti-Dühring*, London, 1943, p. 116.

(p. 177). Engels then offers a class analysis of the Roman Empire. The three main classes were the ruling class, the propertyless freemen and their slaves. The ruling class gave itself over to luxury and intrigue while neither of the two poorer classes had any means of transforming the political system. Old national identities and national religious cults were decaying and classical philosophy was becoming bankrupt. 'But in all classes there was necessarily a number of people who, despairing of material salvation, sought in its stead a spiritual salvation, a consolation in their consciousness to save them from utter despair . . .' (p. 180).

'It was in the midst of this general economic, political, intellectual and moral decadence that Christianity appeared. It entered into a resolute antithesis to all previous religions'.

Previous religions had been chiefly characterised by ritual observances and the eastern religions also by detailed dietary and other roles intended to differentiate their adherents from outsiders. Christianity, on the other hand, 'knew no distinctive ceremonies, not even the sacrifices and processions of the classic world. By thus rejecting all national religions and their common ceremonies and addressing itself to all peoples without distinction it became *the first possible world religion*' (p. 181).

Also in its favour the Christian notion of sin, explained 'the wickedness of the times and the general material and moral distress'. In response to this condition Christianity answered. 'It is so and cannot be otherwise; thou art to blame, ye are all to blame for the corruption of the world, thine and your own internal corruption: And where was the man who could deny it? *Mea culpa!* The admission of each one's share for the general unhappiness was irrefutable and was made the precondition for the spiritual salvation which Christianity at the same time announced'.

The doctrine of the atonement also struck a chord in the former adherent of the old faiths. 'The idea of atonement to placate the offended deity was current in all the old religions: how could the idea of the self-sacrifice of the mediator atoning once and for all for the sins of humanity not easily find ground there'.

Christianity then contained all the elements necessary for its success against its rivals in 'what can be called a Darwinistic struggle for ideological existence. . . . How it gradually developed its character as a world religion by natural selection in the struggle of sects against one another and against the pagan world is taught in detail by the history of the Church in the first three centuries'.

As he grew older Engels became more positive in his attitude to the early Church, its Communism and its revolutionary spirit. In an essay of 1882 Engels examines the character of the primitive Christian community as contained in the book of Revelation, which he regarded as 'not only the oldest but the simplest and clearest book of the New Testament'. Engels quotes with approval Renan's characterisation of the first Christian communities as 'rather like local sections of the International Working Man's Association'. Like the Socialism of the First International Christianity 'got hold of the masses . . . under the shape

of a variety of sects, and still more of conflicting individual views—some clearer, some more confused, these latter the great majority—but all opposed to the ruling system, to ‘the powers that be’.

In his introduction to Marx’s *Class Struggle in France*’ (Moscow 1968) 1848-50 Engels develops the analogy between early Christianity and the Socialist Internationalism still further. Christianity under Diocletian was ‘a dangerous party of revolt which ‘undermined religions and all the foundation of the State; it flatly denied that Caesar’s will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, international; it spread over all the countries of the Empire . . .’ (p. 25). Recognised as a subversive force Christianity first experienced persecution and later was proclaimed as the religion of the Roman Empire.

Kautsky developed Engels’s analysis of early Christianity still further. In his class analysis of the early Church (*Origins of Christianity*, 1908), he saw the Church as composed largely of poor urban dwellers in dire economic straits due to the gradual expropriation of small holdings by the slave-based economy of the Roman Empire. The Communism of the early Christians was a Communism of consumption but not production. Even this went into a sharp decline; partly due to increase in the size of the Church and partly due to the lack of income among the lumpenproletariat which necessitated growth, the recruitment of rich Christians and the gradual replacement of Communism by almsgiving. Almsgiving in turn necessitated the growth of a clerical elite with a theological justification for their position. Later still Church building and the importance of fund management heightened this tendency. ‘Thus it was the Christian congregation, not Christian Communism to which the Roman Emperors finally bent the knee. The victory of Christianity was not a dictatorship of the proletariat, but a dictatorship of the masters it had raised up in its own congregation’ (p. 422). Those who still practised Communism became an economically parasite elite; the religious communities.

II

‘Thus the organisation of a proletarian subversive Communism gave rise to the most faithful support of despotism and exploitation; a source of new despotism, of new exploitation. The victorious Christian congregation was at every point the precise opposite of that congregation which had been founded three centuries before by poor Galilean fishermen, peasants, and Jerusalem proletarians. The crucified Messiah became the firmest prop of that debased and infamous society whose complete destruction the messianic congregation had expected him to accomplish’.

Karl Kautsky, *Origins of Christianity* (p. 448).

‘The evangelical teaching of slaves, fishermen, toilers, the oppressed, everyone on earth crushed by a slave society—this teaching of the poor which has its roots in history was later taken over by the monopolisers

of riches, kings, aristocrats, metropolitans, money lenders, bankers, the Roman Pope, and became an ideological cover for their crimes'.³

Trotsky, *Martyrs of the Third International*, London 1971 (p. 7).

Despite their one-sided and frequently seriously defective understanding of much of the critical and historical material, Marxist critics open up valuable perspectives upon the question of doctrinal development. Church history and historical theology do not after all exist in a vacuum but in a material world torn by contradictory class interests. On the other hand, the Christian cannot regard the Marxist social critique as entirely adequate. The Christian is committed to the belief in the Incarnation and the doctrine of the Incarnation demands that we take the divinity of Christ seriously. That is to say, that we see the Christ event as normative; not just some sort of superstructure on an economic base, but as the central reference point for our whole understanding of reality. But an Incarnational view demands that the humanity of Christ be taken seriously as well; that the Gospel should be seen as being preached in different frameworks of thought. Now there is an obvious interpenetration between these philosophical frameworks and the social organisation of the group; and this social organisation in turn is linked and penetrated by the relations of production.⁴

To take the divinity of Christ seriously means to have a radically new perspective on reality. If Jesus is God then all our notions of power and authority have, to borrow a phrase, been 'turned upon their head'. Similarly, if Christ is truly risen then the kingdom has come and will come. There are now no limits on the possibility of change. The humanity of Jesus has been changed and so can everything else be changed. Reformism, one dimensional thinking, any compromise, any common-sense pragmatic concession to 'human nature' should now be seen as impossible.

Since the Christian Church is in the vanguard of the new humanity we would expect Christians to be in the forefront of every genuine social revolution. Nevertheless, to take the socially and politically relative character of theology seriously demands that we should concede that Christians precisely have not been in the forefront of socially progressive movements. The reason for this is that even the most committed and morally serious Christian has a limit to what a Marxist sociologist like Goldmann would term his 'possible consciousness'—and this limit is determined for any individual by the class character of his social group. The social groupings of the Catholic Church are not exempt from ordinary sociological laws, and belief in the humanity of Christ and the this-worldness of our faith demands that we accept this.

W. H. Auden once wrote that 'to extract a political theory from the teachings of Jesus requires the ingenuity of a Seventh-Day Adventist' but felt obliged to add that 'it is possible for the historian to say that, even supposing Jesus to have believed the ideal society to have been a

³Ironically this quotation is part of Trotsky's parallel between the fate of Christianity and that of Kautsky's own German 'Social Democratic Party' at the time of the Spartacist uprising of 1919.

⁴See Raymond Williams. 'From Leavis to Goldmann', *New Left Review*, No. 67, for a balanced account of this interpretation.

Communist one, the circumstances and date of his birth would have made revolutionary advice to His disciples both foolish and immoral'.⁵ The most that can be said is that the early Christian faith in the Kingdom of God and in the second coming of Christ provided an uniquely revolutionary perspective on life, authority, wealth, social status, etc. But in whatever sense it was revolutionary the early Christians, were not, as Kautsky sometimes seems to have supposed, actually plotting the overthrow of the Roman Empire. Politically they were not unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses of today; their attitude to authority was subversive but they were not involved in any form of political struggle. The revolution had been, would be, the work of God alone.

After the 'conversion' of Constantine and the Edict of Milan all this changed. The Church became politically involved but lost the revolutionary perspective. As the ideology of the Roman and Byzantine Empires' Christian theology assumed many of the characteristics of its political counterpart, God assumed more and more the remoteness of a Byzantine emperor. Neither the Church nor the Empire could be thought of as being judged by the Kingdom, so both institutions came more and more to be considered as beyond criticism. In these circumstances Christianity was seen as increasingly interior, death-centred and individualistic. All these tendencies which were to develop still further as Christianity passed from the imperial to the feudal and from the feudal to the bourgeois stages.

For the feudal stage Anselm's treatise on the Atonement, his *Cur Deus Homo* provides an illuminating example. Here God is seen as a liege lord and the Christian has access to him only through a complicated legal machinery designed by God for this purpose. Phrases like temporal and eternal punishment reflect the religious ideology of the same period.

The relationship between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism is well known. Today, of course, Catholicism is having its own bourgeois revolution and it is perhaps no accident that much 'progressive' Catholicism looks so much like a modified form of Protestantism.

From the Reformation until John XXIII the Catholic Church represents one of the most politically reactionary forces in the world. It is true that it compares well with Protestantism and bourgeois humanism in certain respects; in its internationalism; in its opposition to the harsher consequences of the rise of capitalism and to the more overt forms of racism, but in totality its virtues are all the virtues of a departed feudal order. It is no accident that our grandfathers in the faith turned to romantic idylls like distributism.

The condemnation of Lamennais, the Syllabus of Pius IX, Pius X's condemnation of Modernism and Sillonism all represented the Catholic Church's persistent refusal to allow Catholicism to adjust to liberal bourgeois ideology.

When the Pope finally emerged as the only benevolent despot left in Europe, the Institutional Church once again exercised its gift for

⁵*Christianity and the Social Revolution*. Ed. J. Lewis, London, 1935, pp. 32-33.

switching ideological horses. Give or take a few conservative backlashes, Vatican II represents the success of the liberal revolution in the Church of Rome.

Much of the current ferment in the Church can be understood along these lines: the vernacular liturgy; consultation of the laity; contraception; conflicting sociological models of papal and episcopal authority; differing views of what constitutes theological consensus in the Church—these and other issues can be partially understood as the assertion of middle class values in an institution which is only beginning to find a place for them.

Unfortunately the switch is several hundred years too late. In peasant societies and among those whose thought is conditioned along the lines of feudal Catholicism the changes in thinking merely appear as betrayal. But for the ordinary members of bourgeois society the Church has already assumed only marginal relevance. However, it is this same sociological marginality of the Church which makes it possible for an increasing number of (presumably inadequately socialised) individuals to go on through a liberal Christian understanding to a revolutionary one.

What a genuinely radical theology will look like is not yet apparent. It would be a mistake to assume that it is simply revolutionaries devising a theology that fits their revolutionary insights. One might develop any number of crazy theologies which fitted this bill. There must be radical continuity with the faith of earlier generations.

There has to be a constant search for a genuine orthodoxy—true both to the otherness of the object of faith and the relative character of our apprehension of it; true to both the demands of the Gospel and the contemporary needs of man. It is important for the revolution that Christians should be fully involved into the revolutionary struggle and it is vital for the Church's understanding of the Gospel that they should recast their theology from their experience of this involvement. Inasmuch as Christians fail in this task the true face of Christ remains hidden from the world.

Bourgeois theologians can only write bourgeois theology. However brilliant they may be academically, they cannot ultimately produce a theology adequate to man's needs, since their Christian theology must share the limitations of the secular outlook in which it participates. Equally, if we are to break out of false consciousness it is not enough to play intellectual games of linking Christian doctrines with Marxist theory. Unless we are fully committed to social revolution, no amount of learning is going to enable us to fully understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The task is an urgent one.