

# CHRISTIAN-MARXIST DIALOGUE: AN EVALUATION

Quentin Lauer, S.J.

In a world of manifold and conflicting ideologies it seems safe to say that there are only two forces which are at once sufficiently universalist in their claims and sufficiently extensive in their influence to enlist the allegiance of vast segments of the world's population. Without attending to the manifest differences which divide them internally, we can recognize in each a unity of purpose and viewpoint which permits us to refer to them simply as Christianity and communism. Whatever one's view of the future of these two forces, they are at the present time the most significant forces which can—or will—address themselves to the major ills which plague our world.

It might be said that these forces are completely antithetical: One is a religion which claims to be the depository of God's revelation in Christ, the other is an anti-religion which claims to represent man's promethean destiny to create a livable world with no help from outside. And for more than a century now, the two have gone their separate ways, each condemning the other, each fearing the other, each claiming that the salvation of man demands the elimination of the other. But in the second half of the twentieth century something has changed. It would be a mistake to say that they have ceased to be antagonistic, that the tension between them has been relaxed. There is, however, a growing recognition that the elimination of the other is not a foreseeable possibility and that unreconciled opposition is counter-productive in a world which, despite gigantic efforts, has not succeeded in eliminating war, poverty, racism or economic, political, and cultural imbalance. There has also been a limited recognition, particularly in continental Europe and to some extent in South America, that each side does have aims that need not be impeded or cynically dismissed as hypocritical. To say that this recognition has gone much beyond the talking stage would be to claim too much. But where talking is a possibility one cannot exclude the hope that mutual under-

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standing, respect, and even cooperation may follow.

So, the Christian-Marxist (or Communist) dialogue has begun. Those who seek to promote it do so in the conviction that it is not only worthwhile and possible, but also necessary if the world is to survive.

*The Road to Dialogue.* A number of conditions must obviously be fulfilled if dialogue is to take place and if it is to be fruitful—at least in the sense that it produces in the parties to it a better understanding of each other and of the issues involved. The first and most fundamental of these conditions is that two parties should really want to talk *with* each other and not simply make speeches *at* each other. It must be clear that both parties to the dialogue are addressing themselves to the same themes and that what one says is intelligible to the other. This is a basic prerequisite to dialogue between any two parties on any subject, but it assumes particular importance where the parties have been talking past each other for over a century.

Once the basic will to dialogue (and not to double monologue) has been established, there are other conditions to be met. Neither side, for example, can enter into dialogue with the aim of "converting" the other, however desirable that eventuality. Christian theists must acknowledge, without cynicism, that intelligent and sincere men can be atheists; Marxist atheists must recognize that belief in God need not be an abdication of human intelligence or of responsibility to man. With this mutual acknowledgement, areas of possible fruitful discussion can then open up. There are, after all, interests common to all men of good will, interests which demand cooperative efforts for their fulfillment. It should not be difficult, for instance, to secure agreement that the very possibility of atomic war must be abolished, that the wretched conditions under which the vast majority of human beings live must be improved, that the exploitation of some to the advantage of others must be abolished, and so forth. To dialogue at this level, and thus to learn what the respective attitudes of each side really are toward the realities of a common history, in no way requires agreement regarding a concept of man or of the world.

On a second level of discussion, there can be wide

disagreement about basic philosophic issues (e.g., on the origin, nature, and destiny of man) and at the same time agreement to support moral values which both sides hold in common (even where the words used in describing these values may not have exactly the same meaning for both). On neither of these first two levels is it necessary for the Christian to soft-pedal his religious convictions or for the Marxist to abandon his "humanist" strivings, for cooperation is not incompatible with disagreement. There is a third level, though—in the contradiction between Christian faith and atheistic materialism—where the differences are not only real but irreducible. Yet here, too, dialogue need not be impossible, ruling out neither sympathetic understanding nor a fruitful counterbalancing of positions. If the Christian takes Marxism seriously, and he should, he may be impelled to ask the questions he should be asking anyway regarding the Church's historical forms of expression, of thought, and of life. If the Marxist takes the Christian faith seriously, and he should, he may find that it fills some of the gaps left by his own utopianism.

Roger Garaudy, *From Anathema to Dialogue: A Marxist Challenge to the Christian Churches*. Herder & Herder. 1966.

Giulio Girardi, *Marxism and Christianity*. Macmillan. 1968.

Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Christian Faith and the Marxist Criticism of Religion*. Scribner. 1970.

Quentin Lauer and Roger Garaudy, *A Christian-Communist Dialogue*. Doubleday. 1968.

Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Marxism and Christianity*. Humanities Press. 1968.

Thomas Ogletree, ed., *Openings for Marxist-Christian Dialogue*. Abingdon Press. 1969.

*Self-Re-examination.* Paradoxically enough, precisely because Marxism has not theoretically justified its repudiation of religion, it compels the Christian to reassess the practical grounds for the charge that Christianity has not come to terms with the problems of modern society; it is simply naive (worse still, dishonest) to think that all criticism is utterly groundless. Marxism, in fact, has seen with a clarity not always manifest among Christians that the world as it is is not the only possible world. What is more, Marxism has been able to point up that the Church—in the past at least—has been resistant to change and but rarely open to the challenge of the future. Rightly or wrongly, the Christian Church has been identified with reaction. Its uniform hostility to revolution, along with its intransigent stand against

communism, has led many to suspect that religion's function as an opiate outweighs its dynamic promise and that its concern with individual salvation hereafter blinds it to the here-and-now needs of society. Proletarian disillusionment with Christianity has led many to opt for what seems at least to be atheism's more humanistic thrust. Perhaps there are questions to which Christianity has no answers, but it may be, too, that it does not always give the answers it has. Marxism's failure to find adequate answers to the same questions could force Christianity to advance beyond its repudiation of communism to seek answers in the depths of its own faith.

If the confrontation with Marxism can impel the Christian to a fruitful re-assessment of his own position, so too the Marxist who confronts Christianity honestly may find help in coming to terms with the inadequacies of his own solutions to the problems of man. Even the Marxist must face squarely what is unalterable in the human situation, that his utopian dream can at best be only partially realized, and that hopes which are confined to this world cannot always cope with their non-realization. His concern for the needs of society leaves a gap in his capacity to account for meaning in the individual, to see significance in those human actions which are not oriented toward the transformation of society but toward the reality of the interior life and of private relationships. If it is true that no form of present-day communism can be considered the final stage in Marxist development, if it is true that communism as realized constantly overreaches itself with its promises, then communism may find that a Christianity truly concerned to become consistently more Christian provides an antidote to the temptation to despair and cynicism.

Apart from the danger that both will talk and neither listen, there is another and very concrete obstacle in the temptation of men of good will to enter dialogue in a mood of self-accusation, each side recognizing those faults which the other knew all along and neither allowing a confrontation with what is positive on the other side. The opposite tendency will also impede dialogue: If each sees dialogue as a form of debate in which the aim is to "win," points will perhaps be scored but neither will profit by the confrontation.

Perhaps more pernicious obstacles to dialogue, however, are the *a priori's* brought to the discussions: (1) the Christian can bring with him a belief in an unbelievable God who actually does constitute an "alienation" of man's true humanity; (2) the Marxist can uncritically see the solution to all human ills in a utopian "classless society," which is intelligible

only as a negation of known social structures but which has not yet been shown to be either realizable or separable from the inadequacies which in fact accompany its present partial realizations; (3) the Christian can adhere to an authentic religious conviction which is marred by a more or less conscious suspicion that all refusal to share that conviction constitutes a moral fault; (4) the Marxist can delude himself into thinking that his position is "scientific" in a sense that Marx himself would not recognize, making him think that any solutions but his own involve some sort of irrational "mystification"; (5) the Christian can be supernaturalist to such a degree that he can downgrade the natural and confirm the suspicion that his religion really is an "opium of the people"; whereas (6) the Marxist can think that to refuse a supernatural explanation is to already have found a natural one.

*Clarity of Positions.* Although it is ultimately desirable that more and more participants be drawn into this dialogue rather than confining it to intellectuals—who tend to be out of touch with concrete currents of feeling and action—it is also important at the present juncture that those who engage in dialogue be genuinely cognizant of the positions from which they speak. Only if both sides know where they are going (or, perhaps better still, where it is possible to go from the position they hold) will a real effort to understand sympathetically the opposing positions be practicable. Here, it seems safe to say, Christians are somewhat ahead in their efforts to understand their Marxist brothers—perhaps because their view of what is required is less tied up with a position of negation.

In the Marxist view, the ills of man stem from the very structure of society in which he lives. To remedy this, society must be restructured, most significantly by eliminating private ownership of the means of production. As a corollary, all forms of human alienation—symbolized chiefly by religious alienation—must be eradicated. The Christian, for his part, hopes to eradicate the ills of society by the conversion of man to an attitude of universal love based on the realization that all men are children of a common Father.

The Marxist has the advantage of knowing more precisely what should be done in order to arrive at his goal. But he has the disadvantage of not knowing, despite claims to being "scientific," just what his doing will produce once the most obvious abuses have been corrected. The Christian, on the other hand, has the disadvantage of having to admit that

in the two millennia of history since the advent of Jesus Christ, his message of love has not adequately taken root in the consciousness of man, not even in those who call themselves Christians. But he has the advantage of knowing that nothing else will succeed if love is absent. Marxists do speak of love—and of universal love at that. But it is not clear what the foundation of this love can be. Here, however, we touch once more on the basic disagreement in the concept of man, a disagreement not likely to be resolved in the near future.

What is needed, then, is for each partner in the dialogue to come to terms not merely with the abstract ideas but, more importantly, with the concrete experiences of the other. As a minimum, this requires that each discard the stereotype picture he has of the other, no matter what the partial factual basis for this stereotype. It must be made clear to the Marxist, for example, that belief in a transcendent origin or hope for a transcendent destiny of man does not hinder the Christian conscience from recognizing the task of making this present world a better one to live in. By the same token, the Christian must learn to see in materialism and atheism neither the ultimate in stupidity nor a diabolical attack on what is most dear to him but, rather, the consequences of an affirmation of human values in the only world the Marxist knows. This means that both Marxist and Christian will have to relinquish any claim to sole possession of the truth. The Marxist will have to abandon his dogmatic contentions that the source of all evil is the bourgeois social structure and that the advent of a just social order is assured by the inevitable triumph of the proletariat. The Christian will have to recognize that social involvement and social criticism are inseparable from his Christian commitment. Neither Christian nor Marxist must think that the quest for freedom is his own monopoly, nor must either fail to recognize that power compromises every effort to realize the concrete goal of genuine freedom. Neither side, of course, can ask the other not to be critical, for even self-criticism needs a boost from the outside to keep it honest. But criticism should have as its goal a solution to the human dilemma, not the destruction of forces which can contribute to this solution.

*Concrete Results of Dialogue.* So much from a theoretical and—invariably—abstract point of view. Just what have been the concrete results of the limited dialogue which has already taken place? From the point of view of Christians, like this writer, who have actively engaged in dialogue with Marxists, two types of gains are observable, and these, while seeming to be theoretical, are never-

theless tangible results of the dialogue. (1) Not only have there been real gains in mutual understanding, particularly in regard to those aspirations which are not ideologically conditioned, but each participant has attained a more profound grasp of the implications of his own position. (2) It has become abundantly clear that the dialogue must be expanded, not only extensively, in terms of its participants, but also comprehensively, in terms of new factors constantly introduced in a human situation that never stands still.

Thus, for example, Christians have learned that Marxists really do want all men to become more human—however limited the Christian may find the Marxist notion of being human—and that they sincerely want to abolish the alienation, exploitation, oppression, and destruction of men. Marxists, in turn, have learned that the Christian position can

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and should be genuinely humanistic—which does not mean that the danger of Christian “institutionalism” has been eliminated. But they have noted the growing consciousness among Christians that to be genuinely Christian involves a fundamental recognition of the rights of the person, even where those rights are in conflict with the position of the ecclesial institution. We might say that each has come to realize that the other’s position is not necessarily so dogmatic as might have seemed, despite the seeming intransigence of the leadership in the institutions each represents.

There have also been negative results of the dialogue, of course, not all of them stemming directly from the dialogue itself. One has been a recognition that vast numbers of people on both sides are at best indifferent to all efforts toward mutual understanding and cooperation and at worst hostile to all

attempts to see anything but evil on the other side. Worse still, two events in the Communist world have made Christians suspicious of the usefulness of dialogue. The first of these events occurred on August 20, 1968, when the armies of five Warsaw Pact states marched into Czechoslovakia. A stunned world asked itself then whether the attempt “to give back to socialism its human face,” to reconcile Marxist socialism and democratic traditions, had not been just a dream after all. The second event—which may or may not have been an indirect consequence of the first—was the dismissal from the Central Committee of the French Communist Party of Roger Garaudy, who had for some time been in the forefront of efforts at dialogue on the Marxist side. It was difficult not to remember that, unlike his colleagues, Garaudy had persisted in condemning the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

There have been two other negative results of the dialogue from the Christian point of view. First is the Marxist tendency to use the dialogue to engage in polemics. And the second, the inability—or unwillingness—of Marxists to come up with a clear answer regarding the status of religion in a Marxist world. Polemics are perhaps inevitable in discussions such as these, especially when the Church’s attitude in matters social continues to be somewhat reactionary. But polemics can be disturbing when they consist either in raking over the coals of past history (of which Christianity has the longer one) or in an attack on a capitalistic society which Christianity does not defend. As for the status of religion in an eventual Marxist society, it can be disconcerting to dialogue with a partner who is ideologically committed to the belief that religion is at best a necessity for “alienated” man who, when disalienated, will see that it is all a farce. To the Marxist, it would seem, religion is synonymous with unreason; why, then, engage in dialogue with an irrational partner? It is true that among some Marxists, especially in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, there is criticism of Marxist intransigence toward religion. But it is not yet clear just how much influence these critical voices have.

Without overlooking the vast numbers of Christians who are equally intransigent in their attitude toward communism, it is still necessary to ask pertinent questions regarding the future not only of dialogue but of Communist development. Attempts are being made to realize communism according to models not acceptable to the dogmatic views of the Moscow bureaucracy, and this holds out hope for the

future. It is still not clear, however, that this hope can be realized in the concrete to any great extent. During the course of dialogue, and during the course of the present discussion of dialogue, much emphasis has been placed on openness to change, the sort of change not prescribed by antecedent ideological blueprints. There has to be hope in both the desirability and possibility of just this sort of change on the two sides of the ideological divide. While it would be too pessimistic to say that those hopes have been put to rest, it would be less than realistic not to question whether the present state of affairs is in fact open to change or whether the Party—chiefly in Moscow—has not already decided what can and cannot be thought or said, what can and cannot be allowed to happen. Hope is presently at a low ebb, and the difficulty of receiving answers to some very pertinent questions is not reassuring. By the same token, one looks in vain in the Christian world for substantial signs that emotional opposition to Communist “atheism” has not induced a real blindness to the need of “revolution,” if the patent inequalities in our world are not to persist.

Little has been said in the present discussion about the expansion of dialogue to include members of the

Third World. For one thing, if Christianity and Marxism are considered the poles of opposition between which dialogue is desirable, the Third World is not “third” in relation to them. Separately, perhaps, Christians and Marxists will reach a point where they can successfully engage in dialogue with this other world, and the larger exchange of views and aspirations can then take place. A second reason for the apparent lacuna in the present discussion is a realization by both parties that a dialogue in the future—one which will be attended by all the difficulties of bringing together radically different mentalities—cannot realistically be treated in the same framework as a dialogue which has already been initiated. Nonetheless, Marxists and Christians cannot dialogue as though no one else in the world counted. They must both envisage a future in which all civilizations have learned to coexist and to work together in a common effort to achieve the brotherhood of man, which, in relation to the Third World, will be the monopoly of neither Christians nor Communists. It is obvious that dialogue alone will not bring men together effectively, but their coming together can only be realized if first they learn to talk to each other.

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## **correspondence**

### **CIVILIAN CASUALTIES**

Silver Spring, Md.

Dear Sir: Mr. Ernest Lefever is to be commended for pointing out that Dr. Martin Luther King helped spread an outrageous falsehood when he said in his Riverside Church speech that we (the United States) may have killed a million civilians in Vietnam, mostly children (*worldview*, November, 1970). Since there are those who defend this Big Lie even today, it is important that the truth be made known. I have devoted considerable time to the investigation of what can properly be called “the million children myth.” I discovered that the charge that we were responsible for a million civilian deaths (King) or casualties (Eccles and others) was originally constructed from the flimsiest of evidence and was subsequently repeated and embroidered by people who did not bother to check the validity of the figures.

The myth began with the publication in *Ramparts* of an article by William F. Pepper which alleged that 250,000 children had been killed and another 750,000

wounded as a result of the war in Vietnam during the period 1961-66. As far as I could determine, Pepper simply pulled figures out of the air in estimating civilian deaths in Vietnam. He then multiplied the figure by three to obtain an estimate of the number of casualties, on the ground that it is a military rule of thumb that the wounded always outnumber the dead by three to one. He then assumed, with no evidence to support it, that 60 per cent of all the dead and wounded were children. That produced the figure that became “the million children myth.”

Pepper's figures could not stand up under analysis, since they were based on three invalid assumptions: the number of civilian deaths, the ratio of wounded to killed, and the ratio of children to adults. I soon discovered that no one had any statistics on the number of civilian war-related deaths. However, there were statistics on the number of civilians admitted to hospitals in Vietnam with war-related wounds. In 1967, the year of peak military activity, such admissions were at the rate of 4,000 a