

Why some Christians find fulfillment
in a scientific faith that makes hope
superfluous

Marxism as the Guarantee of Faith

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*For now we see through a glass, darkly;
but then face to face.*

—St. Paul

Until a few years ago it was dogma for most of us that Marxism was the negation of the most central values of the Christian faith. Faith believes in God. It faces history as an open process which can be invaded by the unexpected. Marxism, on the contrary, is radically atheistic. It takes the material components of life as the only ones to determine the future of mankind.

For a large number of Christians that dogma now belongs to the past. The Christian-Marxist dialogue has been going on for years, involving thinkers especially from the U.S. and Europe. Among the many issues which separate them, a common philosophical or political denominator has been found, making conversation possible. In other parts of the world the dialogue has been superseded by active cooperation, and the relation between faith and Marxist ideology looks more like a new synthesis.

However we feel about this new development, it is a fact we must try to understand. This dramatic change of attitude is the result, I believe, of a number of factors. The Church suffers from a radical contradiction. She creates expectations and aspirations which are frustrated by her institutional arrangements. In sociological language her confessed intentions are prevented from being realized historically by the actual functions operative in her social structure. Ideas, by themselves, are not powerful. Schiller once remarked that "when truth is to triumph in the struggle with force, it must itself become a force." It has to become embodied in a social group. The fact is, however, that although the

Church preached love, love remained impotent. Although she spoke about a just society, her talk never became more than a "tinkling cymbal." It seems that the ecclesiastical establishment has a way of sublimating the intention of love so that the end-results are never those originally intended. This is nothing new, since social analysis has already dealt extensively with this process as it was already present in the origins of the Church. A Church historian once remarked, with a touch of irony and sadness, that the early Christians expected the Kingdom, but what they got was the Church. History, most of the time, is made apart from and against our conscious intentions. But when realization systematically frustrates aspirations, an institutional crisis is bound to occur.

Within the Church the consciousness has been growing that the spirit of the Gospel and the spirit of capitalism are utterly incompatible. The Gospel asserts in quite unequivocal terms that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." It longs for the utopia of the Kingdom, a new order in which the poor, the meek and the powerless will inherit the earth. To be sure, that faith cannot be transformed into a political program. But it is also true that faith contains very definite ideas about the structure and spirit of a just social order. This order is the very antithesis of the spirit of capitalism. Capitalism measures man by his economic achievements and society by its gross national product. An advertisement appearing in *Newsweek* magazine (March 17, 1969) makes the point with admirable candor: "A big family? Sales last year exceeded \$1.4 billion. A growing family? Our earnings have nearly doubled in the last six years. Needless to say: a happy family." Man is a function of his status, and his status is a function of wealth. Conclusion: man is how much he earns. Being is displaced by having. As a consequence, one is bound to become neurotic if one does not succeed in keeping up with the Joneses. In order to transform everything into gold, the al-

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chemist's dream, capitalist society mixed souls and bodies in the magic cauldron and got what it was looking for: wealth. But life itself was lost in the process. Capitalism implies the abrogation of all the qualitative dimensions of life, which are superseded by quantitative ones.

Implicit in faith, however, is the quest for a society in which human beings are more important than things, in which quality has priority over quantity, in which human freedom and values are able to conquer the determinism of a reified social order. Augustine said it: The "love of power" must be overcome by the "power of love."

Here is the main contradiction of the Church: Whereas she confessed absolute loyalty to this just society in her preaching and creeds, she was, at the same time, on very good terms with the powers which denied her ideal. One cannot be against capitalism while investing heavily in capitalist corporations! The Christian ideology convinces man that what he is doing with his hands is an expression of what he confesses, thereby effacing from his consciousness the awareness of the real social results of his lifestyle. This is one of the ironies of history. As Karl Mannheim once pointed out, ideas which go against the dominant system on the verbal level often function to preserve that system.

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Together with the debunking of the Church, one must also take seriously what is rightly called the crisis of faith. Ours is a "scientific" society. It takes for granted that knowledge is quantification: observation plus mathematics, eye plus number. Anything which cannot be processed according to this logic is dismissed as not belonging to reality. The result of this tendency is that Christian faith was stripped of any claims to offering insights and knowledge about the structure of reality. The scientific world destroyed the plausibility of faith. Christians confronted the dreadful possibility of a metaphysical anomie from which there seemed to be no escape.

Marxism, to our surprise, appears to offer a way out. First, it seeks abolition of capitalist society. It looks for a time when a new social order, expressive of human freedom, will become history. "State interference in social relations becomes superfluous, and

then dies out of itself," remarks Engels, as if in a trance. In the future socialist society

the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things. The state is not abolished; it dies out. . . . The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself. Only from that time will the social causes set in movement by him have, in the main and in a constantly growing measure, the results intended by him. . . . It is the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. Man, at last the master of his own form of social organization, becomes at the same time the lord over nature, his own master-free (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*).

We may dismiss this vision as empty talk, as a utopia which cannot become history, but it is nonetheless a beautiful vision. I wish it would come true. The Marxist utopia understandably gripped the imagination of many who recognized the institutional realities both of the Church and of capitalist society.

More than that, Marxism claims to be science. According to its theory this vision is neither dream nor utopia; it is the result of cold, objective analysis of the social process. Here, some Christians came to believe, one finally finds a science of reality which proves the truth of faith. What Aristotle was to Christianity in the Middle Ages Marxism is becoming for some Christians today. Ironically, Marx, the atheist, the heretic, is becoming the new saint, the new prophet, the new apologist of faith.

What made the Christian-Marxist dialogue possible was the discovery of the humanistic elements of Marxism. This may sound self-contradictory, since materialistic determinism and humanism may appear to be mutually exclusive. The resolution is supplied by the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* written by the young Marx in 1844 and revealing the issues which most impressed him at that time to be emphatically humanistic issues. It is in the name of the body, of joy, of creativity and of freedom that Marx criticizes the capitalist society. Economic analysis becomes a tool of anthropological values. If Marxism is in some fundamental way a form of humanism, there would seem to be no obstacle for Christians, committed to similar values, to engage in dialogue with it.

The Christian-Marxist synthesis we are talking about, however, is something quite different. Humanism is an ideological attitude. It might very well reveal how one feels, but it says nothing about the way things really are. Humanism was a sin of the young Marx, it is said, before he became a mature thinker and while he was still under the influence of the very German philosophy he was trying to abolish. Scientific Marxism, declares Louis Althusser, the most influential advocate of this line, is radically antihu-

manistic. It is Marx himself who says that his "analytical method does not start from man but from the economically given social period" (quoted in Althusser's *For Marx*). If this is the case, how is the Christian-Marxist synthesis possible?

Marxism claims to be the science of history. Marx himself denied that he was a sort of prophet or social reformer proposing a better model for society: "Communism is not for us a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things" (*The German Ideology*). The difference between humanistic and scientific Marxism becomes clear. The language of humanism is ethical. Starting from man, it indicates how society should be. The language of science, on the contrary, claims to be objective. It is "value-free." Starting from what is, it claims to describe what will be by analyzing existing structures. The value element is eliminated from consciousness. Consciousness is to be nothing more than a copy of what is objectively given. As Engels put it, "modern socialism [i.e., Marxism] is nothing but the reflex in thought [of what takes place] in fact" (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*).

One of the basic axioms of Marxist theory is that consciousness does not make history. Consciousness is a result, not a cause. It is a function of the relations of production. "It is totally irrelevant what this proletariat or even the whole proletariat directly imagines," says Marx. "What matters is *what is* and what one will have to do historically because of this reality" (quoted by György Lukács, *History and Class-consciousness*). Thus, the essence of the Marxist science, according to György Lukács, consists in "the knowledge of the independence of the forces which actually move history vis-à-vis the psychic consciousness that men might have of them." For all practical purposes one may operate, in the science of history, as if consciousness did not exist. That is why Marxism was and is so strongly opposed to the utopian socialists; they believe that man's intentions can change and shape the future.

What determines history are the material, economic structures. Structural determinism is a rather strange concept for the pragmatic mentality. Pragmatism is a worldview which understands reality as a series of independent problems to be solved one by one. The pragmatic mentality asks the questions "How can I do this? How can I solve this concrete problem?" remarks Karl Mannheim. And in all these questions "we sense the optimistic undertone: I need not worry about the whole, the whole will take care of itself" (*Ideology and Utopia*). The basic axiom of structuralism is that parts are functions of larger wholes. Therefore, if one wants to change the parts, one has to change the whole. According to this view, man is not an individual. He is part of global structural re-

lations, and these relations are the determining factor of his thought and life.

Marxism is an analysis of a specific structure, capitalism. It is noteworthy that the title of Marx's main work is *Das Kapital*. His conclusions are simply summarized: Capitalism is a structure containing self-contradictory elements—much like a cancerous body. Therefore it has to destroy itself—inevitably. There is nothing to be done about it; capitalism is doomed to disintegration.

Now we may see the point of contact between anti-humanistic Marxism and humanistic Christian faith. Humanism, because it is not a science, has always an element of uncertainty in it. "This is how society should be," it says. But it offers no guarantee that this is how things will be. Humanism is based on hope, and hope does not see what it longs for (Rom. 8:25). Science, on the contrary, has as its object that which is directly seen. It aims at certainty. Thus science claims to make hope superfluous to the extent that it declares that only what can be seen is an object of knowledge. This is the relation between Christian faith and Marxist science: The humanistic hope of the nonscientific language of faith claims to have found its realization in the antihumanistic, scientific method of a nonreligious theory. Marxism is a secularized form of the old Christian doctrine of Providence, a doctrine that had lost its credibility. Marxism assures its believer that, no matter how bad things look, there are rational, irresistible dynamics in operation behind phenomena, so that one may be sure as to the inevitability of the future one hopes for. In sociological terms Marxist science is a functional alternative or a functional equivalent to religious dogma. Thus the new synthesis proclaims that, if in faith we saw through a glass, darkly, now in Marxism we see reality face to face. The hope of absolute knowledge, implicit in faith, becomes immediate vision. The Christian values are thus preserved and the threat of anomie overcome.

Obviously the Christian-Marxist encounter has taken a wide variety of forms. My immediate concern is with this new type of synthesis in which faith is assimilated to Marxism in a way similar to the resolution of religion into the absolute knowledge of Hegelian philosophy.

Some new theological arrangements had to be made by Christians in order to preserve the inner logic of their system of thought. First, they had to agree with Marx's eighth thesis on Feuerbach in *On Religion*: "Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human praxis, and in the comprehension of this praxis." The immediate consequence of this axiom is that theology has to give up "theos" as the reality with which it is concerned. It becomes "praxis-ology," the analysis of what is actually taking place in society. Second, since Marxism is the science

of the real, of which Christian faith is no more than a hunch, faith cannot be used as an instrument of analysis. It does not give knowledge. When the knowledge of society is at stake, one must remain within the limits of Marxist science.

Third, the specificity of faith, as a consequence, has nothing to do with *what* it adds to the situation (it adds nothing), but rather with *how* one lives a situation objectively given and scientifically analyzed by Marxism. "The question of faith," I once heard someone declare, "is *how* one lives a revolutionary situation." This *how* is not to be counted as one of the elements which determine the situation (consciousness does not make history). In other words, theology ceases to be critical because it is denied critical eyes and critical reason. Its function is apologetic. "If this is the case," you might as well ask, "why remain Christian? Why not simply Marxist?" I asked the same question. The answer that I received was that faith is a residue, a survival of one's past. As one cannot forget one's past, one cannot forget that one was, once, a Christian. And this residue continues to determine one's present. So one remains Christian *not because* of something that faith adds to the situation but *in spite* of the fact that Marxism is more than enough.

Fourth, Marxist theory becomes the hermeneutical key for the reading of the Bible. The biblical language does not have conditions to understand the situation from which it emerges. Most of the time it is ideology, false consciousness. It has to be demythologized. And just as Bultmann used (mistakenly) Heidegger's existential analysis as the key for his reading of the texts, it is claimed that Marxism is the scientific view of reality which extracts the true meaning of the biblical language.

It is impossible to ignore the great contribution Marxist method makes to our understanding of reality. It is intellectual naïveté, however, to believe that methods are devoid of presuppositions. As Alvin Gouldner has shown in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, every method emerges from certain assumptions. Methods are tools in the service of hidden ideologies and thus tend in a determinist way to arrive at those conclusions which prove what had been previously and unconsciously assumed. "If you are going to fish, what kind of hook do you use?" "Well," you will reply, "it depends on what kind of fish I expect to find in the river. If small fish, small hooks. If big fish, big hooks." Method is a hook that we use according to our "background assumptions" as to the kind of fish that we believe to swim in reality. They operate in a selective way which prevents the catching of "undesirable" data. This is true for all theories. It is true also for Marxism.

My suspicion is that the background assumptions behind Marxist theory are in no way different from

those which came to determine the collective unconscious of our "scientific" civilization. As is well known, the shift from social philosophy to sociology had much to do with the inferiority complex social philosophers had vis-à-vis their colleagues who were studying nature. Why not use the same hooks that the natural scientists were using so successfully? If they managed to understand the universe by organizing data according to mathematical models, social science should follow the same method. Sociology became the physics of society (see A.R. Louch, *Explanation and Human Action*). Thus, we take for granted that the determining factors of social life are those aspects of phenomena which can be translated into mathematical symbols. Any social research which does not include sophisticated equations lacks scientific respectability (see Stanislaw Andreski, *Social Sciences as Sorcery*). And among the social phenomena economy is the one most amenable to mathematical treatment. As methods derive from background assumptions, they easily become scientific

"Why remain Christian? Why not simply Marxist?"

presumption. Method becomes metaphysics, an immediate vision of reality. What is the essence of society? The answer: it is economy. The criteria which have been consistently used in order to establish a phenomenology of development and underdevelopment have been economic ones—GNP and per capita income. Quality of life is identical to level of consumption. The question of values and the qualitative dimensions of life are ignored. They cannot be dealt with statistically, ergo, they are not an object of scientific knowledge. Capitalists and Marxists share the same outlook, seeing the world through the economic perspective. They are cooks who are in basic agreement as to the ingredients to be used, quarreling only about how to mix them. They agree as to the nature of the determining factor but do not agree as to the structure according to which this factor is to be organized. This basic agreement is producing some unexpected results. For instance, in underdeveloped countries both capitalists and Marxists are saying exactly the same thing about the ecological question. "The ecological question is a new ideological weapon created by the rich nations of the world to prevent our development." This is no acci-

dent. The ecological question implies a radical critique of the economic logic which both capitalists and Marxists take for granted. It calls our attention to different issues which are not economical but biological and aesthetic. Ecological balance does not help development as development is now defined. Is not a "scientific socialism"—scientific because based on an economic analysis—bound to repeat the mistakes of capitalism? The irony in the Christian-Marxist synthesis is that the price Christians are paying for the scientific verification of faith implies giving up the very perspectives which would make possible a radical critique of the materialistic roots of our civilization.

The other assumption on which capitalists and Marxists are in agreement is that quantity automatically produces quality. The "laissez-faire" theory argues that greed and selfishness should run rampant in their search of profit. Psychological factors do not disturb the preestablished harmony of the social physics. The determining factor is the laws of the market. The alleged happy surprise is that man's greed produces that which it did not intend: the general well-being. There is a similar logic in Marxism. Think as you will. Act as you please. It makes no difference. What matters is what is and what one will have to do because of this reality. History moves ahead because of the iron determinism of the economic structure. Beyond the disintegration of capitalist society the same forces which brought about its downfall will automatically and independently, from human planning, create the new socialist society. This is why Marxists refuse systematically to make plans for the future. "That is not our business. History is taking care of it." I would like to believe this. But with the evidence I have at my disposal the theory seems in no way different from magic. It is difficult to believe that antihuman factors will produce a human result as it is to believe in the God of traditional theology.

Are these background assumptions objective truths or acts of faith? The problem with social theory is not that it has to start from acts of faith but rather the presumption that our hypotheses are faithful copies of reality. When a theory ceases to be a provisional tool for a provisional understanding of an elusive reality, it becomes metaphysics. Then dogmatism can no longer be avoided, and further corrections of our insights become impossible. In what way is this attitude different from religious illusions? I think that it is this metamorphosis of science into religion that Leszek Kolakowski has in mind when he writes that

a rain of gods is falling from the sky on the funeral rites of the one God who has outlived himself. The atheists have their saints, and the blasphemers are erecting chapels. Perhaps the desire for the absolute, the striving to equalize tensions, must embrace a disproportionately larger number of units in the system than the increase of tensions, if the whole is not to blow up. If this is so, then the existence of priests is justified, although this is no reason for joining their ranks ("The Priest and the Jester," in Maria Kuncewicz, ed., *The Modern Polish Mind*).

The great contribution that faith can make in the encounter with ideologies is its awareness that indeed "now we see through a glass, darkly," and that, whenever one claims to have seen reality face to face, one is bewitched by the desire for the absolute which lurks within men and cultures. My suspicion is that the end result of the Christian-Marxist synthesis will be the hardening of both faith and science. Faith is possessed by the illusion of having become absolute knowledge, whereas Marxism gains a new religious validation. If this happens, faith will lose its critical edge and social theory will lose the openness, humility and provisionality which must characterize our efforts to know and to humanize our world.