

# Christianity and Communism: The Dilemma of Dialogue

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Thursday, June 10, 1976, was a memorable day in Lyons, France. The press had prepared the local population for the event. From cities and towns throughout the Rhone Valley special buses, trains, and cars had brought thousands into the city. The Gerland Sports Palace was packed with well over ten thousand enthusiasts. Georges Marchais, Secretary-General of the French Communist Party, would begin his highly publicized speech to the Christians of France at 8:30 that evening.

Two hours earlier fifteen hundred members of the "Church of Silence" had gathered at Lyons's majestic Basilica of Notre Dame de Fourvières. The "Church of Silence," a staunchly anti-Communist group of French Catholics, had participated in a Mass offered for "persecuted Christians in Communist countries."

These two gatherings symbolize the deepest dilemma of Christian-Marxist relations. Can Communist appeals for Christian collaboration in West European democracies have credibility if Christians continue to be persecuted in East European Socialist states? An examination of two texts that approach the question from different sides highlights some of the problems. Marchais's speech at Lyons constitutes the most fully developed appeal to Christians yet made by a Western Communist party leader. The second text, a work entitled *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union*, published by Keston College in England, presents a fully documented report on the continuing persecution of Christians in the USSR.

Georges Marchais's appeal to Christians is the latest, most comprehensive statement of the French Communist Party's policy of the "outstretched hand." This policy derives its name from the dramatic offer of the "outstretched hand" to Catholics first made in 1936 by Maurice Thorez, long-time leader of the French Communist Party. That appeal, issued at the time of the short-lived but nostalgically evoked Popular Front, has been a staple of French Marxism ever since.

The political and religious climate of France has evolved markedly in the forty years since the Popular Front. But now, more than at any previous time, the prospect of an alliance of the Left assuming power in France is generally acknowledged, even anticipated. Simultaneously, the entry of large numbers of Catholics, from peasants to professors, in the parties of the Left is an undeniable political phenomenon. Thus Marchais's appeal has practical political implications, as an examination of its content will indicate.

The first of Marchais's four principal themes that evening in Lyons was the unity and diversity of the French people—which he considers "not an obstacle to be overcome, but a type of enrichment of life, both social and personal." However, according to Marchais, the pivotal distinction within French society is not that between believers and nonbelievers, but rather that between a small caste of grand capitalists and an immense mass of exploited workers. Moreover, this basic division is intentionally obscured by the grand capitalists, who have set up oppositions within the immense mass in order to preserve their privileged position. Class, not religion, is the crucial question for Marchais, and the French Communist Party, he asserted, is the party of the exploited, be they believers or nonbelievers.

The exploited, Marchais emphasized, are "individuals endowed with different personalities, tastes, talents and aspirations." The French Communist Party accordingly rejects the notions both of a small group that "thinks" for all—an attack on the ruling French technocracy—and the uniformity of "barracks communism"—a repudiation of Stalinism and earlier, cruder forms of revolutionary socialism. Positively and in terms especially dear to Catholics of the Left, Marchais called for the "liberation of man and the full flowering of his personality."

Marchais then turned his attention to his *second*, more doctrinal, theme: scientific materialism. Here the Party leader had to address two difficult objections: the conformity of this concept to Marxist theory and the Com-

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munist conception of religion. For Marchais, Marxist theory is "the indispensable instrument for the emancipation of the working class." In this light the decisive determinants of the social situation of each individual are material rather than ideological. Therefore, the liberation of the working class is essential to the building of a new national community, and the French Communist Party is, by definition, the party of the workers. Rejecting in advance charges of either abandoning Marxist ideology or engaging in political opportunism, Marchais insisted: "No tactical reason will ever lead us to water down what distinguishes our theory from others or to seek impossible and illusory convergences of philosophy. Communist theory is based on scientific materialism."

Marchais attributed the earlier anticlericalism of the French workers' movement to the close ties between the bourgeoisie and the Church on one side and "infantile" socialism on the other. Reversing the terms of Pope Pius XI's condemnation of communism in 1937, Marchais emphasized that the faith of Christians was not "intrinsically evil" in the eyes of Communists. For Marchais, as for Marx, religion is both an expression of distress and a protest against that distress. The Communists struggle not against, but for, those who experience the distress at the root of religion.

While the French Communist Party has no intention of intervening in such internal matters of the Church as liturgy, theology, and the social involvement of believers, nonetheless the increasingly large numbers of Christians who seek to live out their faith as more than resignation or consolation bring to the French social situation a dynamic force of great interest to the Communists. That is why the French Communist Party will never declare "war on religion." A debate on the level of ideas, in mutual respect, not antireligious propaganda, is what Marchais pledges.

After treating the themes of social diversity and Marxist theory Marchais addressed his *third* theme: the central question of the place of Christians in a Socialist France. The state Marchais envisioned would be "neither atheistic nor Christian, but simply secular," in which "no philosophy or doctrine will constitute an official philosophy or doctrine." For both believers and nonbelievers such a state, "directed and controlled by workers on every level," would guarantee all the civil liberties associated with advanced Western democracy and French liberal tradition. For Christians this would mean specifically liberty of conscience and religion, which Marchais defined as "freedom to practice one's religion, individually or collectively, in public or in private; freedom of worship and freedom of religious formation by the Church."

On the institutional level the Catholic Church and other believing communities would enjoy, Marchais assured his audience, all the freedom necessary for their purposes. Among these freedoms would be included the right to hold and dispose of property, the right to publish, and the right to form candidates for the ministry. The state would be strictly separated from the churches so as to guarantee the independence of both institutions in reciprocal respect.

At this point in his presentation Marchais hastened to say that the situation of Christians in a Socialist France would be different from that of their fellow believers in the Communist countries of Eastern Europe. Here Marchais explained that in the East European countries the churches had been tightly linked with the old order and sometimes participated directly in the exploitation of the peasants. The churches then fought with all their might the establishment of the workers' states. This reactionary behavior, according to Marchais, "did not favor peaceful relations between the churches and the new states" and had "negative consequences on the states' attitude toward religion and toward believers." Such would not be the case in France for two reasons. First, the Church in France does not now exercise a dominant role in the country's economic and political life. Second, the French Communist Party has demonstrated for over forty years an openness to religion. The French Communist Party pursues a path corresponding to its own time and place, independent of any foreign model. It is for this reason, Marchais confidently proclaimed, that "we accord such great importance to reflection, to dialogue and to joint action between Communists and Christians." Therefore, "the future will be what we together make it."

The *fourth* and final theme of Marchais's speech was that future, which will be both the result and the embodiment of the community of aspirations shared by Christians and Communists. Just as French Communists and Christians share the same civilization and the same history, so they share the same ideals of brotherhood and justice. The Gospel and the Manifesto both preach the liberation of man. Both believers and materialists make up modern France, just as both suffered and died together in resistance to Nazi Germany. The Bishops of France, whom Marchais quoted four times in this section of his address, are as passionately committed to social justice as are the Communists. Therefore, Marchais concludes, "for our part, we are ready to meet with Christians, their organizations, their representatives and their leaders in order to build mutual understanding and to put our dedication in the service of the workers, the people of France." Marchais summarized the goal of his appeal to Christians in one word: "Union! Union in action for a more humane society; union for the victory of the Common Program of the French Left; union for socialism!"

The lengthy, ninety-minute speech by Marchais ended with prolonged and enthusiastic applause as Beethoven's *Hymn to Joy* rather than the traditional *Internationale* resounded through the vast Sports Palace. Marchais's appeal had been carefully constructed and powerfully presented. The reaction of his well-disposed audience was euphoric. The next day the French press reaction was more reflective and reserved. This divergence resulted from the fact that, while what Marchais did say was positively received, what he did not say came to be regarded as equally important.

Objections could easily be raised to the self-proclaimed identification of the French Communist

Party as the voice of all workers and the exploited. This identification, both sociologically and ideologically invalid, nonetheless constitutes a mystique with powerful psychological force in France. More profound and problematic was Marchais's notion of religion. Here Marchais transposed the object of faith from God to heaven, from the personal to the psychological. Thus the whole question of transcendence—so crucial to Christian-Marxist dialogue—was bypassed. While this aspect of Marchais's analysis of religion reflects Marxist orthodoxy, the freedom of conscience he expounded is not so readily reconciled with either Marxist-Leninist theory or Communist practice. Roger Garaudy, the former theoretician of the French Communist Party and foremost Marxist participant in the dialogue with French Christians, was dismissed from the Party for espousing such a position. The fact that "liberation," as proclaimed by radical Catholic theologians, is ultimately spiritual and far more sweeping than the Marxist notion of the removal of alienation is ignored. The independence of French communism from the Soviet model is a development of very recent origin and subject to change by decree of the French Communist Party, whose internal workings are a far cry from open democracy. But the most sensitive area, the most serious objection to Marchais's appeal remains the actual oppression of religion in the Communist states of Eastern Europe, especially the Soviet Union. Marchais's personal pledge that France will be "different" cannot be accepted as undoing or even counterbalancing the long-standing persecution of religious practitioners in Communist lands. It is to the question of religious persecution in Russia that the second text under examination is directed.

The second text, *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union*, is subtitled "The World Council of Churches and the U.S.S.R.: A Post-Nairobi Documentation," an allusion to two interesting and important factors in the background of this publication. The first factor is the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which met at Nairobi from November 23 to December 10, 1975. At that assembly the explosive question of religious persecution in Eastern Europe in general and the Soviet Union in particular was openly and heatedly discussed for the first time since the entry into the World Council of Churches in 1961 of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The immediate cause of the debate over religious liberty in the Soviet Union was the publication of a letter personally addressed to Dr. Philip Potter, General Secretary of the World Council, in *Target*, the journal of the Kenya Council of Churches, on November 25, the third day of the assembly. In the letter two Russian Orthodox spokesmen already known in the West, Father Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson, reproached the WCC for neglecting the suffering Christians in Communist countries, especially their own. The long-standing charge that to avoid alienating the Orthodox members of the Council the WCC applied a double standard in matters relating to religious oppression became the center of discussion on December 8. This occurred during debate about the application of the Helsinki agreement on

human rights, especially principle seven concerning religious liberty.

Dr. Albert Van Den Heuvel captured the mood of the majority of delegates when he said: "It is impossible to have zones of silence in the area of human rights. The WCC has taught us to speak about South Africa and Chile. I do not see how we can speak specifically about one country and not another. If we really want to show brotherhood and fellowship, we must debate the issues out in the open." So it was done, and the outcome was a resolution on religious persecution passed by an overwhelming majority that states: "The Assembly requests the General Secretary to see to it that the question of religious liberty be the subject of intense consultations with the members of Churches of the signatory states of the Helsinki Agreement and that a first report be presented at the next Central Committee in August, 1976."

The resulting study was prepared in English by Keston College and was published in English and German editions in August. The final document is a collaborative effort divided into five chapters.

The first chapter presents a brief historical and statistical survey of the six Soviet churches within the fellowship of the WCC. The variety of Christian bodies within the Soviet Union is striking to most Westerners. According to the report, the Armenian Church is the oldest, the Russian Orthodox Church the largest, and the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists the most mission-oriented. Despite Marxist prophecy and government persecution of varying degrees of severity since 1917, there is increasing evidence of religious revival in the Soviet Union. But the report indicates that "Underlying every other element of the situation is the simple fact that, while the Constitution lays down separation of church and state, in practice the churches are bound hand and foot by the authorities." Specific details of the manifold methods of authoritarian suppression are treated at length in the final chapter of the report. However, one conclusion is readily evident: "A Soviet believer who is experiencing problems on account of his faith is deeply pained at the thought that his fellow-believers in other parts of the world do not know, or even do not care about him."

Chapters two and three are more technical in nature and treat, respectively, "Religious Liberty, the WCC and the U.S.S.R." and "Legislative Discrimination Against Believers in the U.S.S.R." The former considers the relatively recent origin of the concept of religious liberty, the blemished record of the Christian churches themselves in this regard, the political and national implications of condemning a specific country for violations of religious liberty, the admittedly limited but laudable efforts of the WCC in support of religious liberty in the Soviet Union, and finally and most suggestively, the need for scholarly dialogue concerning the concept of religious liberty in Communist ideology. This chapter's conclusion demands reflection: "The remarkable spiritual renaissance in the Russian Church and the Russian people, the spiritual radiation of the Church in a world secularized by force, can only fill the sister churches with silent wonder."

The third chapter examines the ambivalence of the

Soviet Constitution in its provisions concerning separation of church and state, the practical dominance of the state through the Soviet "Law on Religious Associations," and the more recent juridical discrimination against believers fostered by "The Moral Code of the Builders of Communism" (1961) and the "Principles of Marriage and Family Law for the USSR and Union Republics" (1968). Two points forcefully made in this chapter and little appreciated in the West are, first, the fact that decrees of the Central Committee of the USSR are above the law and, second, that severity characterized the antireligious crusade of the Khrushchev regime. Given the emphasis on legality by both the authorities and the dissidents in the USSR, a basic appreciation of the complexities of the Soviet legal system is indispensable to any understanding of the continuing anxiety and frequent harassment of believers.

While the first three chapters of this report are essentially summaries and analyses of materials available elsewhere, the final two chapters are strikingly original. Chapter four contains the full English translation of the lengthy letters from Father Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson in reply to an appeal by Philip Potter in March, 1976, for information relative to religious liberty in countries signatory to the Helsinki agreement. This letter is no less explosive than their first, which sparked the initial debate in Nairobi. In touching prose and with detailed analysis the authors specify four basic principles that characterize the discriminatory nature of Soviet legislation concerning believers. These principles are, in their own words:

1. The unjust registration of religious societies as a sanctioning act.
2. Religious societies are deprived of property rights to the prayer buildings and basic items of the cult.
3. Religious societies are forbidden to carry on missionary and cultural-social activity.
4. The educational system is discriminatory in character; organized forms of private religious education are forbidden.

After a painstaking explanation of each of these principles Yakunin and Regelson reach two conclusions. First, "The atheists desire that religion should 'die out'—they have a right to work toward this, but they should never have the right to *kill* religion with the help of unjust laws!" Second, until current legislation is changed, "the indisputable fact remains that in the Soviet Union there is no freedom of conscience."

The final chapter of *Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union* consists of thirty-four *samizdat* documents. This form of self-published, or underground, document is particularly revealing, since it constitutes "the uncensored voice of Christian Russia." Over the last ten years or so approximately a thousand such documents have reached the West. While these *samizdat* reports vary in form, length, and church affiliation, the pattern of persecution they portray is frighteningly parallel. A Russian Orthodox church destroyed in Zhitomir, an Orthodox priest dismissed in Moscow, Georgian Orthodox worshippers detained in Tbilisi, Catholic educa-

tion forbidden in Lithuania, children taken by force from a Baptist mother in Perm, the right of emigration refused to Pentecostals in Chernogorsk. The litany of discrimination could be extended indefinitely, and the conclusion is inescapable: Religious persecution continues as an ugly fact of daily life for Soviet Christians. The more difficult questions are the true extent of religious persecution in the USSR and what, if anything, Western sympathizers can do to ease, if not eliminate, the discrimination experienced by fellow believers in that vast country.

Fuller, more accurate reportage of the religious situation in Russia is a responsibility of Western religious bodies to their members and a duty of the free press to its readers. Relaxed tensions in Soviet-American relations are no more valid justification for neglect of this sensitive subject than was the cold war an excuse for condemning all things Russian. The weight of public opinion *does* affect Soviet policy. This has been demonstrated clearly not only in regard to Soviet Jewry but in the official Russian Orthodox replies to the World Council of Churches. And Western believers can learn from their Soviet brothers the deepest meaning of religious commitment. As Yakunin and Regelson stated in their letter, "If Christians through faintheartedness, spiritual confusion and lack of moral principles give in to evil advice and feed the forces of inhumanity, then there is no doubt that the world really does face a tragic fate." But finally, as the documents in this dossier witness, it is not we, but the Russian churches themselves, which must ultimately generate the forces needed for the full exercise of their religious liberty.

How can the promising Christian-Marxist initiatives in France be reconciled with the reality of persecuted Christians in Communist countries? There is no easy answer. Georges Marchais was certainly correct when he said that France is not Russia. It is less certain that French communism would be eventually any less authoritarian than Soviet communism, given the full power of the state. It has been accurately observed that Christian-Marxist relations are most fruitful when neither party is itself dominant. Perhaps the hope lies here. Even if the Left should assume power on the basis of its Common Program in France, the Communists would still be junior partners in the resulting coalition. Perhaps France, endowed with excellent scholars both Marxist and Christian, will serve as the center of discussion and research about the enormously complicated theoretical and practical questions that previous Christian-Marxist dialogue and experience have raised but not resolved. The recent independence of the French Communist Party from Moscow is a welcome sign of change. Just as the French Communists have reawakened French Christians to the urgency of social justice, so now may the French Communists be awakened by their fellow citizens to the questions of individual development and transcendence. If such dialogical development is not achieved in France, it is unlikely to occur anywhere else in the foreseeable future.