Christian-Marxist Dialogue: A Look at Some Foundations

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Relatively few people have participated in the public dialogue between Christianity and Marxism, or have even been aware of it. Some have found the content rather boring, others have found the very idea quite bizarre: The only Christian-Marxist dialogue they can easily imagine is the kind between Jack Hawkins and Alec Guinness in The Prisoner.

Nevertheless, this dialogue has been going on for some years in various places, perhaps most importantly in Rome. Indeed, the Vatican, having accommodated itself to almost every kind of political regime known to unhappy humankind, seems about to do it once more with Italian communism. Like Aldonza in Man of La Mancha, Vatican political operatives might well exclaim, “one pair of arms is like another!” Alas! Such are the dangers of “experience”—for suppose the next pair of arms belongs to Jack the Ripper.

Unfortunately, the usual approach to dialogue taken by participating Christians has been to urge understanding of Marxism “in the Gospel spirit of love.” Thus the slim and well-crafted volume by Dale Vree, On Synthesizing Marxism and Christianity (John Wiley; 206 pp.; $14.95) is a timely effort to rise above the general level and examine the intellectual bases for the dialogue.

Although the author identifies himself as “both a (generally orthodox) Christian and a (rather eclectic) socialist,” he has undertaken to “dispassionately analyze” attempts at Christian-Marxist dialogue from a “neutral frame of reference.” This is perhaps an impossible task. But Vree makes a valiant effort and has produced an important—perhaps a very important—little book.

Vree’s thesis is that “Marxism and Christianity are disjunctive belief systems, that synthetic dialogue between the two is destructive of both basic Marxism and traditional Christianity, and that hybrid world views are incompatible with parent world views.” He approaches the argument by dividing Christianity and Marxism into two kinds: orthodox and heretical in the first case, normative and revisionist in the second. Orthodox Christianity is defined as “what most Christians most of the time have believed.” Normative Marxism (and this is a crucial and intelligent observation) is what Russian communism says it is. “Soviet Marxism is the dominant form of Marxism in the world today” and “within the European and North American area (which is the chief context of the intellectual form of the dialogue) the Soviet party is always taken to represent the standard of orthodox Marxism, which usually goes by the name of Marxism-Leninism.” Thus the redefined thesis becomes: Orthodox Christianity and Marxism-Leninism are incompatible belief systems. Only heresies of Christianity and Marxism might be found congruent. “For Marxists or Christians to declare that the categories of heresy and revisionism are in principle irrelevant is tantamount to declaring that the discrimination of truth from error does not interest them. Such declarations, of course, are intellectually self-defeating.”

Vree defines orthodox Christianity in terms of beliefs about “(1) the source and nature of revelation, (2) Original Sin, and (3) the Kingdom of God.” Orthodox Marxism is defined in terms of “(1) the character of its atheism, (2) the nature of determinism and the controversy surrounding the young Marx, and (3) the role of the party.” Heresies are possible on other issues, but for Vree these are the issues on which it is easiest to establish what and who is or is not orthodox. Those who depart from the normative or orthodox positions on these sets of issues do so by placing “more weight on the concept of human freedom than their respective belief systems can sustain, and hence fall into philosophical confusion.”

The book’s tone is clear and reasonable. The notes and bibliography contain many names that most readers will not readily recognize, but there also are such nonsense political scientists as A. James Gregor and Hans Morgenthau, familiar faces in an unfamiliar and vaguely disturbing crowd. Refreshingly for this sort of book, the author deals with Marxism and communism pretty much as they are, rather than as would be convenient. It never hurts to call a rose by its right name.

Before developing his thesis Vree offers some provocative speculations about the genesis of the Marxist-Christian dialogue. Willingness to enter into dialogue with competing or unfriendly belief systems may be “symptomatic of senescence.” This is disturbing because “on the whole, Christians have shown far greater enthusiasm for the dialogue than...

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Marxists," and "institutional Christianity is on the whole more indulgent toward the dialogue and dialogists than is institutional Marxism." The Marxists indeed "enter dialogue from a 'world-historical' position of strength [because] Christianity does not present Marxists with a question of survival." Besides, "since Christian intellectuals enter into dialogue without any obligatory Christian political philosophy to defend, they easily slip into a discussion of political matters which is determined by Marxist categories." Such Christian intellectuals do "seem tempted by what they see as an earthly avenue to enter dialogue from a 'world-historical' position of potential Protestant theologian living in America today." This may be distressing to the nontheologian (and others) because Vree makes a strong case that Cox is both a Pelagian and a Gnostic, that is, an adherent of heresies long ago (and still) repudiated by what Vree calls mainstream Christianity. By thus describing Cox, Vree means that Cox holds unorthodox notions about Original Sin, the nature of revelation, and the possibility of erecting the Kingdom of God on earth. For Vree, not only is "America's most influential Protestant theologian" a heretic, but his thought is quite disorganized. Vree quotes Cox to the effect that God is "whatever it is within the vast spectacle of cosmic evolution which inspires and supports the endless struggle for liberation...." This, says Vree, "is a way of saying that whatever Harvey Cox likes at a given moment is God." Cox thus sees "the finger of God [in] the integration of professional baseball, and children's liberation." Furthermore, for Cox, Original Sin was not Pride but Sloth; man can become what he wills, men are becoming like gods. (To intrude a personal note: I read Cox's *Secular City* when I was an undergraduate because it was "in." I confess I found it gaseous then, more so today. For a man over thirty to believe, to expect, that men are becoming like gods suggests that instead of writing books he should be reading them. It is not necessary to believe in the reality of Original Sin; it is merely necessary to believe in the reality of Verdun, Auschwitz, and the Gulag Archipelago.) Perhaps the most stimulating part of the book is Vree's discussion of the worship of the zeitgeist, the "spirit of the times" being identified with good (and God). Vree maintains that dialogical Christians treat the zeitgeist as "a new source of revelation" (a heretical stance). Vree thrusts the point home when he observes that "when Providence is equated with one's own understanding of man's noblest designs and achievements, then the temptation is overwhelming to see God supporting one's own favorite political projects. Notions of a manifest Providence are always self-serving." Vree goes on to point out the dread consequences of identifying the spirit of the times with God, political movements with Providence. It leads to "the investing of political leaders and movements with sacred, hence absolute, significance.... This is the classical formula for totalitarian movements." And not only Red totalitarianism; Vree reminds us of the *Deutsche Christen*, those pitiable "German-Christians" who saw in Hitler's successes the Divine Finger. He then identifies Cox's willingness (in Feast of Fools) to indulge in the creation of Myth. For Cox, a "religious symbol" is defined "not by its content but by its relative degree of cultural power," its ability to motivate by emotional magnetism. This is the Myth of Georges Sorel. The enlightened mobilize the dull masses with compelling myths. By showing how Cox's thought can be linked to Sorelian and elitist concepts, the *Deutsche Christen*, and the divinization of political leaders, Vree makes us uncomfortably aware that worship of the zeitgeist can lead down a labyrinthine way to fascism. (Fascism and communism are not opposites; they are half-brothers. But we can fight about that another day.)

All of which brings us to a fundamental question: Why dialogue with Marxism? Why not with Islam? Certainly there are more convinced Muslims than Marxists. The usual answer is that Christianity by its very essence spurs its serious members on to do something about human suffering, about social injustice. This is, in the first place, patently false in the light of history. For the sake of argument, nevertheless, assume that there is a direct relationship between Christian devotion and a desire for social amelioration. Dialogical Christians seem to reason in this way: First, economic injustice is the worst injustice; second, economic injustice can be eliminated; third, this elimination can be accomplished most efficaciously by Marxists. Ignore the fact that the first two propositions are, to say the least, debatable. Take the third one, that Marxism is the high road to social justice. Would anyone, especially today's relevant theologians, turn to nineteenth-century texts and masters for enlightenment about anthropology, statistics, or geography? Then why turn for economic salvation to the writings of a nineteenth-century out-of-work German professor? The answer given is that, although he lived in another century and another world, Marx gave us the key, he gave us scientific analysis and solutions for mankind's deeply rooted social dilemmas. Yet it is the most elementary truism of science that if predictions logically deduced from a body of theory turn out to be empirically incorrect, and if things happen that the theory dictates cannot happen, something is radically wrong with that body of theory. How often have the predictions of Marxism—its "laws"—been proved resoundingly wrong on fundamentals! Wrong about the "inevitable" worldwide triumph of bourgeois social organization and methods, about class polarization, about the "immiseration" of the proletariat, about where the revolution would take place and where it would not. Marxism is a lot of things, but it is not science.

But so what? Who cares about science, the zeitgeist is still Marxist, correct? (How lucky we live in 1977 and not 1937, when the zeitgeist would surely have told us all to be Fascists.) No, not correct. It is not Marxism that has enjoyed success in the world, but Leninism. If God is
dead. Marxism is a mummy; Lenin’s “updating” left only the skin. Lenin found Marx’s views on the inevitability of revolutionary class consciousness among the proletariat to be in error. This is the root of the Vanguard Party. But if Marx was wrong about class dynamics, what is left? And yet must not Christians try to help clean up the uglier wounds of the human race? Of course, but why through an alliance with communism? Because the Communists are serious about stamping out poverty and ignorance! Good—but seriousness of purpose and efficacy of method are not the same thing. Besides, they also seem serious about stamping out Christianity by one means or another. Shall we join them in that endeavor too? And can one separate the two aims if communism should finally triumph? Thus we come to the problem of how intrinsic or necessary to communism is atheism.

Participants in the dialogue like to get around the question of atheism by looking to the “Young Marx,” who seems less a determinist and militant atheist. “But,” says Vree, “according to the orthodox Soviet view, the young Marx was a romantic aberration from the normative Marxism of the mature Marx (and there is evidence that this is exactly how the mature Marx and Engels themselves regarded the matter).” We are stuck with the Old Marx, and, for Vree, atheism is essential to his thought. “Some Christians assume that if Christians were to promote rather than impede the social liberation of humanity, then Marxists would no longer have any justification for their atheism.” This is death wrong. Marxism is atheist a priori. Marx was an atheist “because religion subordinated man to a creator-God, thereby denying man’s full dignity, independence, and freedom of action.” Besides, “even if there were a God he would have to be an evil God to have created and sustained such a wretched world.” The revolutionary “cannot repudiate the world without repudiating its God.” For Marxists, atheism is essential to a totally committed this-worldliness necessary for revolution. This life is the only life, injustice must be stamped out here, now, for there is no possibility of atoning for it anywhere else. Hence, “Marxism’s Promethean atheism is indispensable to its revolutionary energy and dynamism, its messianism.” Then, when it turns out that the churches really have sought to drape their robes over the ugliness of human exploitation and misery, this is not the cause of Marxist atheism, only “the proof of the pudding.”

But suppose atheism is not intrinsically necessary to communism, would the Communists let it go anyway? Would they in effect agree to share power with Christianity? Why should they? What has Cox, what has Gutierrez—what have any of them—got that Communists perceive themselves to need?

Unfortunately, Vree felt unable to treat, even in passing, the dialogue in Italy, the very heart of the matter. Granted the author set out to write an examination of the intellectual roots and bases of dialogue, not of its chief political ramifications, but one hopes a work on the Italian situation will be forthcoming, written with the same clarity of thought and expression employed here by Dale Vree. It is hard to see how any serious English-speaking “dialogical Christian” will be able to proceed in the future without coming to grips with the problems raised in On Synthesizing Marxism and Christianity.

The Distant Drum: Reflections on the Spanish Civil War
edited by Philip Toynbee
(David McKay; 192 pp.; $9.95)

**Samuel Hux**

Philip Toynbee’s *The Distant Drum*, fortieth-anniversary reflections by diverse hands on the Spanish civil war, is not a scissors-and-paste job. Most collections of views and memoirs of Spain 1936-39 contain snippets of Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, a chapter from Malraux’s *Man’s Hope*, pieces of Dos Passos reportage, a poem by Spender celebrating the Republicans, a poem by Roy Campbell celebrating the Nationalists, and editorials of hard-won objectivity. The contributions to this volume are originals. Still, *The Distant Drum* has the feel of not being a book at all, and for that one must hold editor-contributor Toynbee responsible. The volume does not impress its significance upon the reader by its own weight; the reader must know the volume is significant because the Spanish war was significant. Since I am little short of obsessed with 1930’s Spain, I found surprising the labor required to be impressed.

Most of the contributions are worthy enough in themselves; a couple are stunning. What is needed is an organization that shows this job of editing was undertaken seriously. One feels Toynbee has spent a few days in a library reading pieces in different magazines as he finds them. Lacking is an intellectual context, which indicates the subject was taken with sufficient seriousness by the man who invited the contributions. The organization he provides is: “Reflection and Reinterpretation.” “Eyewitnesses,” and a third part reserved to himself. But half the eyewitness recollections are obviously intentional “reinterpretations,” and two of the four “Reflections and Reinterpretations” are essentially reflective eyewitness accounts. The two that are not—an essay by Hugh Thomas leaning slightly leftward and an essay by Brian Crozier tilting in the other direction—are the