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A CHRISTIAN-MARXIST DIALOGUE ON A JUST SOCIETY
by Ans J. van der Bent

Ans J. van der Bent (United Church of Christ) has been the director of the Library and Archives of the World Council of Churches in Geneva since 1964. In April 1968 he was the secretary of a Christian-Marxist dialogue at Geneva, sponsored by the World Council of Churches, under the chairmanship of Dr. George Casalis from France, and Dr. Paul Abrecht, executive secretary of the WCC Department on Church and Society. In 1969 he compiled a multilingual bibliography containing 1,200 entries on the early stages of the Christian-Marxist dialogue and later wrote a number of articles on problems of Christian approaches to Marxism and on ideology and ideologies for English, French, and German theological journals. Among several books, he published in 1980 Christians and Communists--An Ecumenical Perspective (the WCC Risk Book Series 9). His latest book is entitled Christian Response in a World of Crisis--A Brief History of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. It was published by the Council in October 1986 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the CCIA. He has also written various essays on the Christian dialogue with people of other living faiths.

A Christian-Marxist dialogue on the theme, "Christian and Marxist Views on a Just Society--Practical Problems of Reconciling Social Justice and Individual Liberty," took place at Weggis, near Luzern, Switzerland, September 18-21, 1986. Marxists and Christians (Roman Catholics and Protestants) from the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, the Federal Republic of Germany, the USA, Poland, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and the German Democratic Republic participated in the dialogue. The sessions were moderated by Dr. Paul Mojzes, who had also organized the conference which was sponsored by the New Ecumenical Research Association. A paper was presented by a Christian scholar from the Netherlands, to which two Marxists reacted. Another paper was read by a Marxist philosopher from Yugoslavia the next day, to which two Christians reacted.

The first paper, by Dr. William van den Bercken of Utrecht, Holland, "Christianity and the Ideologies: Between Collectivism and Individualism," emphasized that Christianity in modern times is no longer an obvious part of the cultural decorum of society, but now exists on the ground of the conscious choice of individual Christians. The Christian religion has lost its political power but has found itself, its true nature. Christian doctrine should not function as an

ideology and the church should not have political power as in past centuries. It can only contribute to structural improvements of society if it performs its trans-ideological task. The apolitical stand of the church as an organization and a community in no way implies an isolation from social reality. The church must always take a stand on social justice, the fate of the poor, the violation of human rights, defend human dignity, and reject the arms race. It can only do this with any authority, however, if it is not itself a part of human politics and power struggles, does not identify with groups of economic interests, and does not become entangled in international block formations.

In view of the ideological non-alignment of Christianity there is no reason to become involved in a specific Christian-Marxist dialogue. Christians in their political engagement have to investigate Marxism to discover its positive thinking and achievement, in the same way as they point to the advantages of capitalism. There is no capitalist ideology, but a capitalist society. This form of society has an inbuilt potential for self-correction. In testing Marxism, Christians should not start with a fundamental preference for this ideology. Insofar as Christianity is always in danger of becoming an ideology itself, the danger may be increased in a Christian-Marxist dialogue, if it believes that there is a fundamental similarity between Christian and Marxist views of a just society.

The paper was criticized from the Marxist standpoint of being too general, indulging in vague conclusions, not evaluating the Marxist achievement in the social sciences, underestimating the differences in the various East European countries, and not dealing with different conceptions of the meaning and happiness of life. It was further added that Christianity is not so unproblematic, as the paper suggests, since it has been contaminated by the historical process. All religions, including the Christian religion, are infiltrated and conditioned by ideology. If Christianity maintains that it is ideologically neutral, it is still ideological. On the other hand, if it continues to claim that society must be built up on Christian principles, it is equally guided by an ideology.

The main thesis of the second paper, by Dr. Svetozar Stojanović of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, "Marxism and the Struggle for a Just Society: Some Lessons," was that Marxism is only genuinely alive today when it is fragmentary and radically revisionist. It must include various traditions. "Unfortunately, many Marxists still arrogantly see Marxism as a kind of Hegelian 'world spirit' which, through its own self-development, takes over and incorporates all major contributions made by these traditions. In the final analysis, the very term 'Marxist' is a sign of personality cult."

In any conflict between political rationality and economic rationality in Eastern Europe, the former takes the upper hand. The attempts at more radical economic reforms are ultimately destroyed by the monopoly of political power. Political dominance takes the form of absolute control over the state (and through it) over the means of production. Marx undoubtedly knew that human beings are not only creative, social, and free beings, but also destructive, selfish, and unfree beings. Yet his dialectic of human practice did not leave the possibility of regress as open as that of progress. The result was that the progressive framework of Hegelian dialectic remained unquestioned by Marx. Not only a radical change with regard to philosophical anthropology, but also in regard to anthropology of power must take place in contemporary Marxism.

Marx's only experience was with communism in opposition, not with communism in power. It was in the 20th century that bolshevism shifted quickly from the phase of the Paris Commune's levelling egalitarianism to Stalinist super-despotism in which the ruling statist class held enormous privileges and exerted a monopoly control over the means of production. Social classes must today be defined by their role in the mode of production as well as in the control of the domination by the state. An objective assessment of democracy in the West represents one of the most reliable criteria for recognizing the democratic character of conceptions of socialism. Statist socialism is not as dynamic as democratic capitalism. The latter is more quickly and successfully heading toward the post-industrial information age.

A change from "socialist realism" to "real socialism" took place. The chances for democratic socialism in the USSR and in Eastern Europe will remain more or less illusory but there are chances that statism may first be liberalized. A form of permanent reform-revolution through which pressure would be exercised to liberalize statism might spill over into a mass movement for real socialism. Since Yugoslavia finds itself on the outside of the international statist encirclement it reveals internal possibilities of liberalization of statism through an effective mass movement for democratic socialism.

Christian reactions to the paper were that an emphasis on the need for separation of the civil society and the state, representative democracy, and full participation of the working class in the political process were to be welcomed. It was asserted by others that Marx's theory of surplus value was no longer valid today since history has moved in another direction. There is no dialectical but a linear history. In a society of automatization the products of labor do not fully belong to the workers. Moreover, the working class has often become a bourgeois class. Labor leaders and party members have academic roots. A democratic welfare state in the West is a mixture of

capitalism and socialism and comes closer to Marx's ideal of welfare and freedom for all than a socialist state in the East. The worst feature of socialist nations in Eastern Europe is the denial of immigration of its citizens to another country.

In a presentation on the dilemma of justice, Dr. Tamás Földesi, a Marxist philosopher and professor of law from Hungary, pointed out that Marx himself did not discuss problems of justice in depth and concentrated considerably more on economic and political aspects of society. Also Lenin had no positive theory of justice. Only in later declarations of communist parties has justice played a greater role. Marxism should make use of all good elements of traditional teachings on justice--Aristotle, Roman law, Kant, etc.

There are five distinctive marks of the human Gattungswesen: labor, responsibility for the society, development of the personality, liberty, and universality. Diverse societies must be compared on the degree of justice and injustice. The construction of a just society is not simply a matter of common decision. There are various sorts of needs and various ways of distribution of material and spiritual goods according to birth, religion, race, private property, etc. Equality often produces inequality. This is a real danger in socialism. As the value of justice is now of primal importance in Hungary, reducing of inequality of chances and of disadvantages is as much a high task as it remains a distant possibility. Both Christianity and Marxism continue to face problems of just law and just distribution. The elimination of alienation and the implementation of human rights belong together and condition one another.

Besides the issue of justice, issues of peace and disarmament and theism and atheism were discussed. Some conference participants felt that in precarious conditions of the world, peace is more valuable than justice since avoiding of war and survival of humanity are at stake. A Marxist raised the question of nuclear holocaust and the accidental destruction of humankind. A super irony of history would be that pre-history does no longer usher in history and that human beings become the object of accidental history because negative human creativity will triumph. The Christian religion speaks of original sin, but how does it deal with absolute sin, the final revolt of humankind against its Creator? This planet is, of course, not the only creation of God. God can create other worlds. But this option goes beyond biblical revelation and is sheer Christian speculation. How can it be that even God cannot overcome final evil in this world? Also for Marxists an ontological vicious circle of history is an unsolvable problem. For both Christians and Marxists an ultimate catastrophe can only be avoided if they together build a more peaceful and a more just society.

Problems of atheism and theism were raised during the conference at several occasions. From the Christian side it was stated that God is the only subject of history. But also human beings are subjects of history. The paradox that all depends on God and that God's creatures are responsible for their destiny cannot be reduced. God created men and women as free and active. This is the essence of all Christian philosophy. The mistake of Karl Marx was that he conceived God as Zeus, the supreme deity of Greek mythology. Jesus of Nazareth is the best mirror of God of how he acts in the midst of human history. As he gave his own life for the sake of justice and love in the world, he is the divine-human prototype to follow.

From the Marxist side it was asserted that since Marx had to break away from Christianity, which endorsed for centuries the status quo of society, his conception of society became exclusively human-centered. The preservation of the human being's own authority and identity is absolutely essential, since the human being is both the author and actor of history. In the context of scientific ontology the primary factor in Marxist anthropology is the relation between human beings, not between individual persons as such. Marxism presupposes that the world can be explained from within itself and that human beings can achieve a just and meaningful society. This kind of Marxist atheism was criticized as outdated. Modern philosophers and scientists, it was affirmed, are agnostic as they experience that they cannot disprove the existence of God. Marxists are simply unbelievers, epistemologically to be placed on the same level as believers.

There was finally a prolonged debate on the nature and the purpose of dialogue. The discussions were partly based on the various conditions for successful dialogue, outlined by Paul Mojzes in his book Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe (pp. 213-14). There was general agreement that Marxists and Christians enter into dialogue, each with their own traditional and cultural identities, in order to share convergent points and to enrich each other by their specific diversity. It is in concrete historical situations that partners in the dialogue discover their mutual insights and values, shake their conscience, deal together with contemporary crises, and mutually influence their decisions. As religion and secular humanism have the same cultural roots, goals of peace and justice can be jointly pursued in spite of remaining differences. There was no agreement as to whether the purpose of dialogue is to convert the partner. However, the aim should not be for Christians to become "Marxist Christians," and Marxists "Christian Marxists."

The conference undoubtedly raised new pertinent issues in the continuous divisions and tensions between East and West because of the resistance to dialogue on both sides. Yet in the realm of social

justice and human dignity it did not succeed to deal sufficiently with preconditions of peace and justice, problems of state power, representative democracy, participation of the people, destructive militarism, and the idolatry of national security in both Eastern and Western societies. Positions on theism and atheism resembled to a great extent those in the dialogue of the sixties. It should be quite clear by now that the existence of God can be neither proved nor disproved and that anti-communism in the West, based on the defense of religion, and anti-imperialism in the East, based on militant atheism, are both primitive, sterile, and offensive. The conference near Luzern revealed the need to widen the Christian-Marxist dialogue to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Christians and Marxists and other believers or unbelievers from the Third World have still quite different perspectives on a more just society as they struggle for survival and the implementation of the most basic human rights. Their cry for justice puts the search for peace and equality in the First and Second World in the proper world perspective and can correct the one-sided and selfish pursuit of harmony and well-being of the white race. The era of European and North American triumphalism has come to an end, also in the Christian-Marxist dialogue of the last three decades.

Eastern European participants at the Weggis conference were:

Christians

Dr. Hans-Hinrich Jenssen, Berlin, East Germany

Dr. Helmut Fritzsche, Rostock, East Germany

Dr. Joachim Kondziela, Lublin, Poland

Dr. Stanisław Kowalczyk, Lublin, Poland

Marxists

Dr. Alicja Kuczynska, Warsaw, Poland

Dr. Janusz Kuczynski, Warsaw, Poland

Dr. József Lukács, Budapest, Hungary

Dr. Tamás Földesi, Budapest, Hungary

Dr. Svetozar Stojanović, Belgrade, Yugoslavia

Dr. Srdjan Vrcan, Split, Yugoslavia

Dr. Marko Kerševan, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia

Dr. Viktor Garadzha, Moscow, U.S.S.R.