Piediscalzi's and Thobaben's "Three Worlds of Christian-Marxist Encounters"

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BOOK REVIEW


Piediscalzi and Thobaben have brought together a very impressive and valuable collection of scholarly essays on the Christian-Marxist encounter. As a result of their participation in the dialogues and their team-taught inter-disciplinary course, they came to see the necessity for a single text that would present and assess the various types of Christian-Marxist relationships throughout the world. They utilize the typology of three worlds in organizing their work and they achieve their objectives with impressive skill. It is impossible to do full justice to the complexities of the issues and the scholarship disclosed in this work; one can only call attention to certain significant developments.

Piediscalzi provides an excellent introduction to this study and points to the dramatic changes due to a constellation of factors that have brought about various forms of dialogue. He maintains that Christians and Marxists have become aware that they share similar institutional problems such as dogmatic approaches to knowledge and truth which do not present accurate analyses of the present world situation. He discusses the four different types of encounters that have emerged—the unreflective partnerships, the partnerships in struggle, the confrontationist approach, and the critical involvement. He believes that the most promising type of encounter for the future would be one which combines partnerships in struggle with critical involvement.

The First World Encounters are illustrated by the Italian, Paulus-Gesellschaft, and North American dialogues presented by Grace, Boutin, and McGovern. Grace maintains that the Christian-Marxist encounter has been involved in a new type of encounter that has become an integral part of Italian life. He states that the elimination of dialectical materialism as the required philosophical faith for membership in the Communist party meant that the encounter was not only an external possibility but also an internal reality. He further underlines the growing awareness that atheistic Marxists have come to understand the non-alienating role of religion and even the positive dimensions of religious motivation; the church has come to understand that the scientific tools of Marxism may be used for liberation quite apart from the implications of dialectical materialism. This is a critical development in many of the encounters. The importance of the recognition that Marxist philosophy and methodology are not inextricably interwoven but provide two separate and distinct categories cannot be overstated.

Boutin carefully analyzes the Paulus-Gesellschaft Dialogues on basic problems and issues common to both Christians and Marxists. McGovern provides a survey of the dialogues in North America and the important role of academicians. He calls particular attention to the
critical, indeed indispensable, role of Paul Mojzes, author of the definitive work, Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe, in the revitalization of the Christian-Marxist encounter in the late 1970's with the support of CAREE. Attention is also called to the special dimensions of alienation involved in racism and sexism. He feels that these dialogues have brought greater understanding of Marxism to many Christians and they have led some of the Marxist to a greater appreciation of the continued vitality of Christianity. He also focusses on the divergent anthropological visions and notes that Marxists tend to stress the perfectibility of humanity and the capacity of social transformations to change individual attitudes and behavior whereas Christians find some form of sinfulness in human beings that will remain in spite of the most far reaching social changes and will present a continuing problem.

The Second World Encounters chosen are in Poland, Yugoslavia, and East Germany by Will, Mojzes, and Hoffman. Will convincingly points to the uniqueness of the Polish situation with the political power of the Marxists and the socio-cultural powers of the Catholic Church. He makes a sober assessment regarding the terrible tensions that still torment the Polish society and the ambiguity of the prospects for authentic dialogues between "comrade Marxists" and "brother Christians." He emphasizes that the common good in Poland may only be worked out in dialogue with a Marxist understanding of social justice.

Hoffman calls attention to the dilemma of the church in the German Democratic Republic and the emergence of the critical solidarity stance. He points to the continuing tensions and focusses on the important role of the church as a broker between disaffected youth and the authorities. This reviewer has seen an impressive example of this in East Berlin. Hoffman makes the very important point that the long term political significance of the church, both Catholic and Protestant, is due to the fact that it keeps alive the idea that the state is not the final authority and that it is not above criticism. Hoffman maintains that the Evangelical Church in the GDR has been in a position to carry out genuine dialogue, but he also warns that there is the possibility of a conflict between dialogue and integrity.

Mojzes, in his own inimitable style, provides a very perceptive and profound analysis of the Yugoslavian scene and gives an excellent summary of the various phases of Christian-Marxist relations. Both Christians and Marxists who support the dialogue agree that it is desirable, if not necessary, and they are anxious to transcend the inflexibility and hostility that have marked their relations in the past. He calls attention to the fear, however, that exists of the entrenched bureaucracies that dominate, curiously enough, both the church and the state. At the same time he maintains that the Yugoslavian encounters on the whole are free from the charge that dialogue is a form of ideological subversion that will lead to a synthesis unacceptable to both Christians and Marxists. Mojzes admits that the dialogue thus
far has not accomplished fundamental changes in church/state relations; nevertheless, he makes a strong case for its very important role within the Yugoslavian society.

The Third World Encounters selected are in Africa, India, and Cuba by Thomas, Mathew, and Hageman and Deats. Thomas discusses the enormous complexity in Africa with two significant patterns of Christian Marxist encounter--those related to socialism and those to revolutionary Marxism. He calls attention to the new attitude within the churches toward the liberation movement and stresses particularly the program of the World Council of Churches to combat racism as the most visible and important symbol of this change. Thomas points out persuasively that Africans are no longer the silent partners in the encounter and that the African social context gives a special character to it encounter. Africans, he emphasizes, have replaced the arguments over opposing philosophical theories with praxis--action for creative social change and reflection upon it. He stresses the important areas of consensus that have emerged such as the value of the Marxist critique of colonialism and the relevance of traditional African values for the contextualization of both theology and Marxism. He expresses a measure of optimism and feels that, freed from the legacies of the ideological conflicts and political systems of Europe, Africa possesses the potential for a new and dynamic encounter between Christianity and Marxism--both external and internal--in which Christians and Marxists strive for holism, integrity, and liberation in the fullest way.

Mathew offers a very sobering picture of the lack of cooperation between Christians and Marxists in India. Both ideologies possess a liberating message for the oppressed, but they very seldom cooperate in the emancipation process. He suggests that unless some institute or a group of intellectuals from both sides take the initiative the foundation for formal dialogues on theoretical questions will not be established in the near future. He stresses that the critical issues around which Christians and Marxists could join ranks are: (1) the degradation of human life arising from poverty and (2) growing authoritarian tendency in the political system.

Hageman and Deats maintain that open hostility between Christians and Marxists in Cuba has subsided over the past two decades and that although serious ideological disagreements continue, mutual respect appears to be emerging. Each side now accepts the challenge to create the new person in a socialist society, and the motifs of internationalism and solidarity now find resonance among Christians despite a residual individualism. They write of a confusion of faith and ideology that revealed itself in the perception that the revolution sought to make all Cubans atheists and in response to that perceived threat Christian faithfulness became identified with an anti-Communist ideology. They touch upon a very sensitive area when they raise questions about the full dimensions of religious freedom and they suggest that the churches will continue to test whether they have in fact earned the right to engage in prophetic political criticism.
Thobaben provides a superb conclusion and stresses that CME is alive and well in general on a world wide basis. He offers very penetrating comments as he deals with the variety and scope of the problems that require attention such as the control of power, myths to be shattered, and the approach to nationalism. He maintains that church and party are necessary evils; it is impossible to live without them. He states that the Christian-Marxist encounter participants can and must work together to transform them into more responsive and responsible institutions. Thobaben waxes particularly eloquent as he challenges political scientists who ignore or even deny implicitly, and at times explicitly, that religion is a major factor in explaining political behavior. He is convinced that it is now time for political science to unbracket the divine alternative in order to maintain scholarly honesty. The false dichotomy between religion and politics must be abandoned and it is imperative that there be the recognition of their profound internal relationships. He states that the study of politics in isolation from the study of religion in general and Christian-Marxist encounter in particular simply does not make any sense. He discusses in a very forceful manner the concepts of humankind, the state, power, justice, and change in demonstrating the importance of encounter for political theory. He is convinced that there is no more useful forum available to political scientists than the Christian-Marxist encounter because it is here that the search for the nature of justice and its implementation in critical ways goes on continually. He stresses that historically religion and political change have been intimately related and that one important place where political science may begin to understand this phenomena is in the Christian-Marxist encounter. For example, in Latin America it is not only a forum for political change; it, in fact, is a creative participant in the process through dialogue and the cooperative activities of Christians and Marxists.

Thobaben very persuasively argues that is is time to transcend the fragmentation and separation between the disciplines of political science and religion in the West with a new holistic approach in both fields. This could lead to new stimulating hypotheses which would open new vistas. It may well be paradoxically that one learns most about one's own discipline because the conditions have been created for a new approach to the fundamental problems.

This work is an excellent resource for all scholars concerned with understanding two of the most powerful ideologies in the world and the various phases of their interactions. It contains impressive research and a wealth of information, and it provides new stimulating angles of vision on very perplexing problems. The common awareness in Christian-Marxist encounter of the cultural limitations imposed by the distortions and caricatures embedded within their respective ideologies and the necessity for a radical form of honesty and self criticism in the light of the overwhelming human problems that they confront together is indeed a most momentous and exciting development. This book unquestionably deserves a wide audience and this reviewer recommends it enthusiastically.

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