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With proper understanding and counselling, the experience can be a very positive one. The church must become more involved in understanding nervous disorders and the congregation must encourage and sustain rather than shun the person who suffers in this way.

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Marxism and the Church in Latin America

by J. ANDREW KIRK

INTRODUCTION

BY now the celebrated words of Ernesto "the" Guevara concerning revolutionary Christians have echoed round the world: "When Christians dare to give a total revolutionary witness, the Latin American revolution will be invincible, seeing that until now Christians have allowed their teaching to be manipulated by reactionaries." Echoing the same thoughts Fidel Castro is no less forceful: "A Christian who adheres to Christian preaching in its purest form, will not side with the exploiters, nor with the bourgeoise, nor with those who cause injustice, hunger and misery". (Ernesto Cardenal y Fidel Castro, *Cristianismo y Revolucion*, Buenos Aires, Ed. Quetzal, 1974 p. 36).

These words are not pronounced in a vacuum. They reflect a dramatic change of consciousness which has taken place in certain sectors of the Latin American Church within the last 15 years. It is no longer impossible to imagine that the Church, or at least a large section of it, may one day fulfil the expectations of these two renowned Latin American Communist leaders.

The purpose of this paper will be to try and give a personal account of this change, describing briefly its historical development and attempting to ask a few questions concerning the implications that might be drawn from it for the present and future direction of the Church's mission. Naturally, I hope that the practical and theological fervour which has characterised Latin American Christianity in the last decade and a half may be of some value to p. 108 the Church in Africa (especially in Southern Africa) as it seeks to obey, in the midst of its own contemporary historical circumstances, the call of the same one Lord.

A PERSONAL SLANT

In the preface to his book, *The God of the Oppressed*, James Cone does what I believe every theologian ought to do at some stage in the course of his theological development: give an account of his own cultural and social background and the prime influences which have moulded his thought. If this were conscientiously carried out, theological discourse would

be much less opaque and much more honest. The task runs the risk, of course, of pedantry and sentimentalism. On the other hand, it takes seriously the now acknowledged fact that theological reflection is by no means immune to strong historical forces which mould its method, content and conclusions sociologically. It is one of the merits of Liberation Theology that it takes historical conditioning seriously into consideration and makes no pretence at being neutral. But more of that later. The brief autobiography which follows is intended to explain why and in what way I have come to study Marxism, and how Christian thought should grapple with the particular challenges it represents.

I went to live in Latin America at the beginning of 1967 when I was 29 years old. I was convinced that God was calling me to become engaged in some form of theological education on that continent. The first opportunity which opened up was to join the staff of the United Theological Seminary in Buenos Aires whose rector at the time was Jose Miguez-Bonino. I was invited to participate in the N.T. department, beginning to teach in the second half of 1967.

My theological studies up to that moment had been done at London University (B.D.) and Cambridge, where I specialised in New Testament studies. This being the basic theological training I had received it was inevitable that I should begin by communicating what I knew:—European biblical exegesis with a distinctive British flavour and the characteristic evangelical reservations about some of the methods and conclusions of its more radical exponents. p. 109

For a couple of years, inspite of the problems of teaching in a language new to me, my courses progressed reasonably well. However, I soon discovered that the highly theoretical and abstract approach to exegesis which marks European academic study simply does not fit into the Latin American situation. It would seem, from hindsight, that just as soon as Latin America produced some theologically articulate Christians some kind of confrontation with European-style theological thinking was bound to occur.

There are two reasons in particular for this confrontation which, I believe, help to explain why some Latin American theologians seem to oppose so strongly established theological discourse in the First World. Firstly, there is a considerable cultural and historical gulf between the Latin and mestizo races and the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic ones. This may be seen in many ways, amongst others in the processes of thought by which people in the different cultures arrive at conclusions and decisions. At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that the Latin American temperament is more intuitive than methodical. It is often impatient with what has come to be called “vast erudition”, and much more ready to risk. short-cuts to knowledge on the basis of experience and personal and group dialogue. In this respect there is no biblical reason, that I can see, for preferring the North European to the Latin American style of reflection—indeed Paul, for example, quite often takes short cuts in his arguments which leaves the logical purist gasping for breath!

Secondly, there has arisen a growing rejection of the possibility that theology can be thought and taught in isolation from the reality of the ordinary daily living of the majority of humanity. Especially when the life of the Church and, even more, theological language is as remote to them as reality in the furthest galaxy. The pretense that theology can be studied objectively, without a definite and positive commitment to the real-life situation of sweating, toiling, suffering humanity, is dismissed as a cynical, ideological smoke-screen intended to rationalize and defend comfortable privileges and a prolonged missionary inertia.

Both these ways of looking at theology were almost entirely new to me in 1968—the “year of the young rebel”. The first expressed the reflex action of a centuries-old culture; the second which began to take form at the beginning of the 1960’s, a new awareness of

p. 110 man's historical situation. On both scores I felt ill-equipped to teach theology in Latin America.

Since about 1969 I have been trying to learn (trying to discern) how far these new approaches to knowledge (often referred to as 'action-reflected') are in harmony with a biblical world-view of God and man. This has caused me to be particularly fascinated with the subject of theological methodolgy as such. To borrow the title of Miguez-Bonino's book (*Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Age*, Philadelphia, 1975) how ought we to "do theology" today, given the two fundamental facts that the ideal of pure objectivity in theology has been shown to be largely the result of 19th century positivism (hardly a hand-maid of the Gospel) and that biblical theology (prophet and apostle) is 100% committed to the truth of God's revelation in history. Above all, by what process can we be sure that a particular methodology, or the content of a particular theological position, is in harmony, or not, with the biblical world-view?

These questions have taken me into the intricate field of hermeneutics. In 1970 I attempted a first approach to the question in a paper presented to the inaugural conference of the Latin American Theological Fraternity (LATF). In this I discussed recent attempts by Protestant thinkers to reflect on the hermeneutical problem in the context of Latin America, (cf. P. Savage (ed.) *El Debate Contemporaneo Sobre la Biblia*, Barcelona, 1974). This was followed three years later by the initiation of a doctoral thesis on the 'Use of the Bible in the Theological of Liberation', (completed in 1975 and published by Marshall, Morgan and Scott (London). I soon realized that it was impossible to understand Liberation Theology without a much more detailed knowledge of Marxism, so in the middle of 1973 I began a systematic study of Marx and Engels which I later developed into a paper for a sub-commission of the LATF and which was subsequently published in *Themelios*. Later on I also realized that to understand properly the challenge of Marxism one needed at least an elementary grasp of basic Economics. Therefore, in 1975 I made a tentative, though often interrupted, beginning to a study of this complex social science. This intellectual pilgrimage, if it warrants the name, has convinced me that theological reflection today must be carried out in dialogue with other disciplines, and that the Church badly needs to create opportunities p. 111 for theologians to be exposed to and challenged by Christians who are grappling with problems related to their own 'secular' fields of study and action.

But hermeneutics is not, according to our Latin American perspective, a matter of intellectual gymnastics. It is a practical question related to the Church's daily ministry. From a totally different angle, that of Theological Education by Extension (TEE), classical theological methodology has come under fire, because of its implicit assumption that the communication of theological knowledge is destined for a small elite group of the Church, called pretentiously '*the* Ministry'. Partly as a result of a growing conviction that the traditional concept of ministry is both theologically and practically indefensible I left the United Seminary at the end of 1973.

The opportunity arose, at that moment, to join a small group of Christian leaders involved in discussions over a new project in theological training. The project (the Kairos Community) was eventually born in 1976. It is dedicated to the evangelical formation of Christian graduates in Latin America through interdisciplinary research and practical action.

This brings us up to the present. The purpose of recounting this personal history is to give a brief theological perspective for the task of measuring and responding to the challenge of Marxism. The Church, I believe, will be unable to give an adequate response, unless it discovers a renewed way of reflecting theologically upon the present world crisis.

CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

For 350 years the Catholic Church was the only representative of Christendom in Latin America. With notable and commendable exceptions it reflected the theocratic ideal of the Spanish Crown and the intolerance and autocracy of a faith threatened for generations by the Islamic invasion of the Spanish Peninsula.

When the New World was discovered and its colonization projected, the leaders of Church and State in Spain, weary with the struggle against Islam, convinced themselves that they were about to begin anew the experiment, already severely tarnished in Europe, of "creating the Kingdom of divine Justice on earth". Spain, like p. 112 ancient Israel, considered herself to be an elect nation, destined to save the world. Propagation of the faith in the new virgin areas of America would be carried out, therefore, by the Church's missionaries, under the direct auspices of the State.

The theocratic ideal of Spanish Catholicism has penetrated deep into the consciousness of the creole peoples and the whole cultural fabric of the society which they created. It still continues to influence, in part, the Catholic Church's approach to the issues of social involvement.

This approach can best be summed up by reference to the traditional Catholic moral category of natural law. Natural law points to the givenness of the moral ordering of the universe which is basically discoverable by the natural light of reason, but needing the seal and sanction of the truth of revelation which has been committed to the Teaching Church. This latter gives the Church the right to pronounce on social issues (as in the Pope's Social Encyclicals and the Latin American episcopate's Medellin documents on Peace and Justice) but even more, actively to try to ensure that the right moral principles are implemented.

The theocratic (Constantinian) notion of the Church's role in the ordering of the social life of Latin American mankind has been worked out in the following ways:

i. Latin America is a Christian continent which has embraced and practises the Catholic faith; all other beliefs are foreign to the essence of the continent's self-identity; therefore Catholicism alone can be the rightfully established religion.

ii. All political leaders should be good, obedient sons of the Church. It is their duty and privilege, therefore, to put into practice the Church's moral teaching.

iii. Natural law shows clearly that human society is based on the principle of authority which should be benevolently exercised by Christian governors on behalf of the Christian governed. The greatest crime that man can commit is to revolt against this (divinely instituted) authority, thus breaking the essential harmony of creation, hierarchically structured, and the underlying unity of the peoples.

Consistent and, at times, fanatical adherence to these principles led, after Independence (1812–1824), to severe stress in the relations between the Church and the state. Many political leaders, determined p. 113 to undermine the Catholic Church's monopoly on moral teaching, embraced the new English positivist creed (Spencer and Mill) or looked with fascination and expectation at the positive effects of Protestantism, which they judged to be in large part responsible for the dynamic, expanding society of North America. By the last quarter of the 19th century many of them (most notably the Argentine President, Sarmiento) had welcomed the first wave of protestant missionaries.

The total impact of Protestantism on the Continent has not been very great. Although the pioneers became deeply involved in the political struggle for full religious freedom (e.g. civil marriage and lay education), their children and grand-children became comfortably settled in society amongst the lower middle-classes, always predisposed to defend the legitimacy of what they possessed. In this respect, like the traditional Catholic,

their social position led them unconsciously to accept the belief that the present stratified society was basically unalterable, even if its worst excesses should be mitigated in the interests of Christian charity. Like the Pentecostals, who emerged as a rapidly growing force in some countries at the beginning of the present century, they unhesitatingly and unreflectively adopted the dualistic scheme of salvation which subordinates (and effectively eliminates) concern for social renewal to individual spiritual change.

During the first half of the 20th century the Church's attitude (both Catholic and Protestant) to social change can probably be divided into either one of two basic viewpoints:

a, the role of the Church is to support the present system (i.e. obligarchical rule) both in theory and practice;

b. Though the present system is good in principle, it has certain defects, and therefore needs to be changed and perfected at certain points. The Church is responsible for stimulating these changes (e.g. in the conditions of work) and for meeting those needs which the State has been either unable or unwilling to meet itself.

By mid-century a third view-point had arisen under the influence of the concept of 'theocentric humanism' as it was elaborated by the French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain. This approach, which has been called 'progressive', has been incarnated in the political philosophy of the Christian Democrat Parties and practised p. 114 by Frei's Government in Chile (1964–1970) under the slogan 'Revolution in Freedom'.

'Theocentric humanism' is much more critical of the status quo than the other two view-points. It believes that present social systems no longer correspond to the demands of rapid development and hence of social justice. There should be a new, decisive and egalitarian ordering of the socio-economic sphere inspired by Christian humanist principles of compassion, concern and the demand for social righteousness. These will lead to a pluralist society, the swift mitigating of glaring injustices (such as land-reform), state ownership of more than half the shares in the main exporting industries (such as copper) and strong government control of the private sector of industry.

THE RISE OF A CONCERN FOR REVOLUTION

Spokesmen for the 'progressive' view-point are prepared to use the idea of revolution in a positive sense, meaning by it: fundamental reform of institutions, the overthrow of feudal structures and widespread social equalising. They do not believe, however, that the economic factor is necessarily the most basic element in revolution. Rather, they stress that social change is still a prerequisite for economic advance, or at least that economic development can take place simultaneously with structural change and social justice.

In spite of this unprecedented advance in the Church's social concern (more or less paralleled by the social thinking of ISAL, the Protestant Church and Society group, from its inauguration in 1961 till about 1966), other groups within the Church began to arrive at a decidedly different interpretation of the meaning and implementation of revolution. The decisive factor was the discovery and use of the Marxist theoretical tools for analysing historical forces.

It is difficult to date what we might call this qualitative leap from a progressive to a revolutionary ideology within the Church. Possibly the first to be convinced that certain Marxist categories (such as the class-struggle and international economic imperialism) provided the only real and non-ideological interpretation of the causes of misery was Camilo Torres, the Columbian priest. At the beginning of the 1960's he studied sociology

in the University of p. 115 Louvain and later decided that only the revolutionary violence of the elite guerilla groups (on the Cuban model) could be effective in establishing a total change of power.

The discovery of Marxism had all the attraction of a newly-found faith—many "Christians for Socialism", as these revolutionary Christians later denominated themselves, have spoken of their "conversion" to Marxism—however, what seemingly drew them to a passionate commitment to the Marxist analytical tools was the objective and ideologically disinterested account given by Marxism of the causes and cure of the fundamentally unjust economic order prevalent in all Latin American countries.

Only the Marxist account could demonstrate that it was not influenced in any way by economic vested interests. It appealed to the notion of objective laws of historical change inherent in the dynamic of actual economic processes. These laws demonstrated that justice would be achieved, not because it expressed moral ideals, but because it was the inevitable consequence of the revolution of the exploited classes by which they began to redirect history in their own interests. This account of a given situation was both total and also in absolute conflict with the 'official' one, in the sense that it began from the premise that the present situation was rotten from top to bottom, impossible to justify on any grounds, and impervious to any reforms which did not set out to change the entire economic, political and legal structures concerned.

The lack of ideological defense-mechanisms and the appeal to the discovery of economic laws which explain the development and consequences of international monopoly-Capitalism has led Marxism to claim for itself the status of scientific certainty. The revolutionary Christians (both Catholic and Protestant) accept the scientific nature of Marxist analysis without qualification. Nevertheless, with few exceptions they vehemently deny that they are consistent Marxists. In order to stress the importance of making proper distinctions they prefer to speak about being 'for socialism'.

There are two basic reasons for this fundamental distinction. In the first place, they believe that modern Marxism, as concretely practised in contemporary Communist societies, has gone much further than providing a scientific basis for resolving the intolerable problem of human inequality, installing itself as a dogmatic, totalitarian, intolerant system of beliefs. When a society declares itself p. 116 to be Marxist-Leninist it is usually the first step towards the implementation of a uniform, non-pluralist system. When this happens a set of creeds are given pregeminence over man. A Christian, however, must be radically for man (in every case of his exploitation); he may and must use Marxist analysis, but not the entire Communist world-view, to this end. In the second place, the question of what, or who, is a Marxist today is still very much open. Revolutionary Christians are not disposed to accept the party-line definitions (the Russian-Chinese dispute about authentic Marxism-Leninism is, for them, both remote and sterile). Nor are they automatically attracted by the apparently new vision of Eurocommunism, or any other 'revisionism' for that matter. Their basic stance is that Marx should be used as a valuable, indeed unique and indispensable tool applicable in different ways to different situations. Latin America needs to find it own, autochthonous path to a new society and not rely on out-moded and irrelevant models drawn from outside.

SOME LESSONS TO LEARN AND SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK

What follows in this final section are some very brief personal impressions which have become formulated in my mind as a result of discussion and reflection on the global phenomenon of Christianity and Revolution in Latin America. I offer them here as a

possible basis for further discussion, hoping that certain 'insights' may make a valuable contribution to the difficult debate you yourselves are undertaking on related subjects and realities.

At this stage of the question in Latin America it would seem to me that there are at least six important issues which need further clarification:

1. The fundamental difference between 'reform' and 'revolution'. Is it not true that the radical polarization which has taken place between partial solutions and total solutions has led on the one hand, due to the 'success' of repressive forces, to frustrated expectations, and on the other hand, as a direct consequence of the polarization, to a more conservative stance on the part of groups formerly advocating far-reaching change? The losers in this process have been the exploited who have often become the casualties of bitter intellectual polemics which they can hardly be expected to p. 117 appreciate. The lesson from immediate history, therefore, seems to be that *something* (achieved for example by Frei) is better than *nothing* (achieved by Allende), seeing that *everything* is a pious illusion. This does not mean, however, that repression should not be exposed and resisted in all its forms.

2. Because the Church is concerned to interpret and live by its foundation documents (principally the Bible) it cannot do without theological reflection as part of its analytical armour. Liberation Theology cannot be reduced to Liberation sociology. Moreover, because of its reference-point in God (whom Dussel refers to as the 'absolutely other') it is eternally uneasy about absolutising any historical process. The reason, then, for the distinction between Marxism as analysis and Marxism as dogma is the need to keep the future permanently open. The difficult question is at what point in revolutionary commitment should this "eschatological reserve" be introduced.

3. The Latin American revolutionary Christians should probably be more aware that their commitment to the struggle for total liberation is also conditioned: firstly by the cultural heritage (inclined to over-dramatize problems and look for ultimate solutions) and, secondly, by historical factors (the New World in contrast to Europe which prefers the security of what it now possesses to the risks involved in opening up new liberating processes, contains the permanent challenge and call of a virgin territory—consider Brazil's jungles or Argentina's Patagonia—ever ripe for new experiments). The question is, how do we discern the positive and negative elements in these conditionings?

4. There are good reasons for suggesting that it is easier for a Catholic than a Protestant to accept certain elements in Marxism. I will suggest two, though without developing them: firstly, the tradition of natural law in Catholic theology can easily be synthesized with the Marxist notion of the laws of history; secondly, the idea of the progressive unfolding of revelation within the Church leaves open the possibility that new insights into man's situation in history be given the status of revelation as 'signs' of God's ever new acts in his world. The question is epistemological: why do we give preeminence to some texts and not others in our hermeneutical task?

5. Nevertheless, in the light of the dramatic shift from the anti-communist crusade mentality, still operative in the 1950's, p. 118 to the positive evaluation of Marxism's revolutionary potential, it is necessary to stress that there are also un-Catholic elements in the revolutionary Christian stance. Amongst them we find rejection of any privileged position for the Church in relationship to the State; the acceptance of the complete autonomy of the use of scientific tools of analysis, and a strong emphasis on change rather than order and stability as constituting the essence of man's history. Are these elements incompatible with the substance of Catholic thinking as it has progressed over the centuries or only corrections to certain of its deviations?