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Marxist and Christian Ethics

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A positive interpretation of Marxist ethics poses a sharp challenge to Christian ethics—and also, surprisingly enough, to Marxists,¹ since a key element of Marxist ethics is inexplicable in terms of Marxist dogma but is patent of a Christian interpretation.

Christian ethics has often been understood as a highly abstract enquiry into principles of behaviour, sometimes seeking to proceed on general philosophical grounds as a type of 'moral philosophy'. Since 'the rise and fall of Christian ethics' is not as such the subject of this paper, it is convenient to refer to a recent study of the evolution of Christian ethics: *Ethics in a Christian Context* by Paul Lehmann.² This book describes itself as 'groundwork' as it does not attempt to set out a Christian ethic, but only to find its way back to an understanding of Christian ethics as *koinonia* ethics to be created in relation to a theological understanding of man's situation and the Church's tasks. In so far as it does this, it will help Christians to respond positively to the challenge of Marxism to see the ethical question as a question of practice, and not merely of principles, of action as well as thought.

Marxist ethics is a puzzle, to be sure; it needs a positive interpretation. In Marxism as it exists today there is a whole confusing range of assertions about ethics. On the one hand may be seen the 'rejection of ethics' by parties and groups intent on revolutionary action and impatient of the claims of ordinary morality. But on the other hand must be set the ethical seriousness of many Marxists: there are outstanding examples of such in India. This confusion runs through the whole movement, and has been known to emerge at the 'top': spokesmen for world Communism reject ordinary bourgeois morality and, in the same breath, flaunt Communist ethical superiority. A good example of this may be found in a quite recent Russian statement:

The Communists reject the class morality of the exploiters; in contrast to the perverse, selfish views and morals

¹ 'Marxist' is used here in a broad sense embracing Communists and groups with similar views. It will be observed that Marxism is spoken of as a more or less unified movement. Its claims in this respect are not much less respectable than those of Christianity.

² S.C.M. Press, 1963.

of the old world, they promote a Communist morality, which is the noblest and most just morality, for it expresses the interests and ideals of the whole of working mankind. Communism makes *the elementary standards of morality and justice*, which were distorted or shamelessly flouted under the rule of the exploiters, inviolable rules for the relations both between individuals and between peoples . . . As Socialist and Communist construction progresses, Communist morality is enriched with new principles, a new content.³

Communism rejects 'class morality', accepts the principles which were nevertheless *there* under the old system, and is creating a newer and higher morality, the precise content of which is not disclosed!

One is tempted to find a tragic schizophrenia in Marxist attitudes to ethics. Before doing so *tout court* it will be good to see how a Marxist viewpoint was evolved and what it means for ethics. This will involve giving some attention to the Marxist criticism of 'ordinary morality' and rather more attention to the Marxist enunciation of ethics as practice, revolutionary action. It must be remembered that Marxist *self-consciousness* has been questioned; elements in the pattern of Marxist ethics may not be those which Marxism proclaims. Indeed they are not apt to be, for Communists have eschewed reflection on the ethical implications of their distinctive action, at least until the present.

THE FAITH OF A RATIONALIST : THE EARLY MARX

Marx began as a rationalist in the tradition of European philosophy that takes its rise in the Enlightenment and comes to its climax in Kant—with a further surprising development in Hegel's *Philosophy of the Spirit*. Marx's doctoral dissertation was primarily Hegelian in outlook, though it contained overtones of the thought of Leibniz, Spinoza and Kant.⁴ This may be seen in Marx's idea of 'reason' and in the related conception of 'freedom'. Reason, for Marx at this stage, and for the left-Hegelians generally, is human self-consciousness and power of thought and action. Freedom, therefore, is to act autonomously, in accordance with the laws of one's own nature. Marx believed in the freedom of the individual—Kamenka remarks 'on traditional grounds which Marx never examines thoroughly.'⁵

Faith in man's freedom remains one of the constituent elements of Marxist ethics. It is eclipsed by later doctrinal developments in Marxism. Historical materialism (the doctrine of the movement of history in the progressive stages of the class

³ *Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1961*, p. 108. Italics added.

⁴ See Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 20-47.

⁵ Kamenka, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

struggle) considers man *qua* member of a class; the class is bound by its historical situation, and so it is useless to speak of man's freedom. Dialectical materialism (the un-Marxian result of Engels' experiments with philosophy) further obscured faith in man's freedom, for it seemed to dissolve man into his cosmic and evolutionary setting. Nevertheless *faith* in man's freedom remained. It remained as a functional factor. It may be seen as such in Marx's own activity; a consideration of this causes Popper to say of him, 'He cherished the spiritual world, the "kingdom of freedom", and the spiritual side of "human nature" as much as any Christian dualist.'⁶ Faith in freedom is presupposed by Marx's revolutionary action—he was not bound by the outlook of the class—and is presupposed by the Communist call to revolutionary action. Freedom is no longer (as with the Hegelians) based on rationality as such. The belief in man's supreme rationality did not survive Marx's closer examination of man's real situation. But faith in freedom remains an unacknowledged spiritual factor in the present as well as being a hope for the future; as such it should be a directing concept for Marxism.

MAN'S REAL SITUATION: ALIENATION AND CLASS WAR

The end of Marx's simple rationalism was in sight when Marx had read Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*,⁷ in 1843. Feuerbach claimed that man created religion by 'projecting' his own innate power and divinity into heavenly spheres; seeking the reality of himself in the illusion he had produced he was weakened in his daily encounter with reality. The human and ethical correlate of the transcendent God, according to Feuerbach, is 'the nature of man withdrawn from the world and concentrated in itself, freed from all worldly ties and entanglements.'⁸ Far from being a state of freedom, this is a pathological state in which man is unaware of his real situation. He is *alienated* from his own concrete existence.

Marx took from Feuerbach the key concept of alienation as a description of man's real situation. He followed Feuerbach in attacking religion. But from the 'criticism of religion' Marx was led on to consider the reality of the social and economic situation. In the Paris Manuscripts of 1844 and in his essay 'On the Jewish Question' of the same year Marx, under the guidance of Moses Hess, explored the conception that men's social and economic life reveals a state of alienation of man from the product of his work, and therefore from himself. Real man,

⁶ K. R. Popper: *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945), II, p. 103.

⁷ There is a fairly recent American paperback edition of this—with a foreword by Richard Niebuhr and an introduction by Karl Barth. Harper Torchbooks; New York, 1957.

⁸ Feuerbach, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

as he exists in modern society, is not a simple, self-possessed rational being; he is under the dominion of alien and inhuman forces. These forces may be briefly described as money and the market. In *The Holy Family*, which he wrote with Engels, Marx further analysed his society as existing in a state of alienation: the rulers of this society are driven by egoism and self-interest even while they create the illusion of an ordered society in which reason may rule. They thus further the dehumanization of masses of men.

So the doctrine of alienation passes over into the doctrine of class war—set out with breath-taking comprehensiveness in the opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.' No doubt the statement is too comprehensive, taken as a sober description of history. And yet Marx did succeed in calling attention to the reality of change, and to the need to recognize the forces at work in social change. He did more than this, for he drew attention to social facts that are still to be seen in the orbit of the development of an industrial economy: 'All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.'⁹ Within the orbit of a developing industrial economy the majority of men are lost to old ties, they are 'atoms' held in the grip of careless forces. They constitute the 'proletariat'. As is well known, Marx viewed this situation as revolutionary, and rested his hope in the proletariat as a revolutionary class, capable of creating genuine human values since it has no particular interests to defend. *Capital* is a gigantic attempt to describe the revolutionary situation posited in the *Communist Manifesto*.

The ethical principle that emerges in the *Communist Manifesto*, and generally in relation to historical materialism, is that action must take account of situation. This principle underlies the Marxist doctrine of ideology, for ideology is, according to Marx, the conscious or unconscious use of ideas to disguise man's real situation. In the light of this doctrine an abstract ethics, one derived from rational principles or even from 'the command of God', is seen to be beset by dangerous illusions. It is unaware of the operation of powers in the context of which man's life is set; it takes no account of the interests of persons or classes, which almost always influence the moral posture of the persons or classes concerned. It takes account neither of human egoism nor of the realities of power. It is in this context that the rejection of ethics in the *Communist Manifesto* must be seen: 'Law, morality, religion, are to him (the proletarian) so many bourgeois prejudices behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests.'

⁹ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 49-50.

THE PRE-EMINENCE OF PRACTICE

The Marxist doctrine of ideology was implicit in Marx's famous theses on Feuerbach, jotted down in 1845. 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways', he wrote; 'the point, however, is to change it.'¹⁰ Thus the analysis of the organization of forces in modern society is to be conjoined with action to change the world. Marx did not intend merely to generate another ideology. Historical materialism does not teach the simple inevitability of revolution; as expressed in the *Manifesto* it is a summons to action. A modern Marxist writer speaks of the genesis of an 'ethics of pugnacity and partisanship' in the teachings of Marx; 'That man must fight, that there is no hope of human liberation without fight, is thus the very essence, the central command of historical materialist ethics.'¹¹

What form will this struggle take? The *Manifesto* disclaimed any intention of the Communists to set up a separate party. Nevertheless, said the authors, Communists have the 'advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.'¹² Though the attempt was made to represent the Communist International as 'an organization of the working class', and not as a separate party, yet it was a fact that revolutionary action required some concerted effort, some coherent form. Thus it was that Marx accepted the necessity of a Communist Party and looked to it to lead revolutionary activity.

FROM LENIN TO MAO : THE ETHICS OF THE PARTY

The Party leads, in theory and practice: this thought was accepted by Marx. It was immensely developed by Lenin. The richest exposition of the Party as the field for the demonstration of an integral Communist ethics is to be found in *What is to be Done?*, Lenin's exposition of the organization and work of the Communist Party. If from one point of view this book seems to be a conspirator's textbook containing nothing more than advice on the attainment and the effective use of power, it must be remembered, on the other hand, that it is with this book that the practice of the Party begins to take shape. In so far as practice can assume a prescribed and normative pattern, this book gives an authoritative exposition of the ethics of the Communist Party.

There is pre-eminently in this pamphlet the presentation of an 'ethics of struggle': 'We have combined voluntarily, precisely for the purpose of fighting the enemy, and not to retreat

¹⁰ Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1958), II, p. 405.

¹¹ V. Venable, *Human Nature: the Marxian View* (London, Dennis Dobson, 1946), p. 179.

¹² *Manifesto*, p. 63.

into the adjacent marsh.¹³ The struggle is to go on inside as well as outside the Party, against 'unconcern and impotence in the development of theoretical thought', for, 'without a revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement.'¹⁴ When Lenin turns his attention to the German Party he finds necessary a struggle against 'spontaneity', because this would lead to 'drift': the overpowering of the revolutionary movement by the forces of the old order, solidly entrenched and capable of powerful resistance.

The struggle proposed by Lenin depends upon a sound estimate of *situation*, social and intellectual. Party work must therefore be carried out in the midst of the masses, and it will attempt at every point to *expose the nature of the forces operating* in the clashes occurring daily. This interpretative work presupposes something like a concern for all men (though this will be limited by hatred of the 'exploiting classes'): 'Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected.'¹⁵ This is an ethics of 'involvement'.

The Leninist pattern of discipline and prescription for action is repeated in the Chinese Communist Party. Early documents of the Chinese Communist Party spell out the 'ethics of the Party' as a way of life; revolutionary principles are to guide Party members 'in every concrete act of daily life.'¹⁶ The Party member refuses 'peace without principle' when issues of Communist belief are involved.¹⁷ Disobedience to orders, failure to dispute incorrect statements, failure to propagandize, are all failures for the member and for the Party, as is 'Seeing actions which are harmful to the interests of the masses, yet allowing them to continue without showing anger.'¹⁸

It is in this pattern of action that ethics becomes ethics: principles become practices. Neither the word 'moral' nor the word 'ethics' presupposes the separation between principles and practices that has sometimes made ethics merely a study of abstract ideas. Marxist ethics finds authoritative form in Party practice.

THE DYNAMICS OF A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT

The Party presents the actual form of a movement with which and in which—at least in Marxism's 'classical' period, its formative pre-revolutionary period—individuals are asked to

¹³ V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (Moscow, 1947), p. 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Lenin, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

¹⁶ Ch'en Yun, 'How to be a Communist Party Member.'

¹⁷ Mao Tse-Tung, *Combat Liberalism* (Peking, 1956), p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

move. 'If you want to know the theory and methods of revolution, you must participate in revolution.'¹⁹ The strength of the movement arises from the commitment it asks, and gets. It increases from the solidarity of the revolutionary party, especially when the party is occupied in genuine tasks.²⁰

It is to be noted that Marxist ethics occasionally rises to the contemplation of a worth-while self-sacrifice.

For the Communist Party member, a sacrifice for any individual or minority interest is most unworthy and uncalled for. But if it is a sacrifice in the interest of the Party, the class, national liberation, or for the majority of mankind's countless millions, innumerable Communist Party members simply regard death as returning home, and they are able to sacrifice everything without the slightest hesitation. When necessary, 'sacrificing one's life to complete one's virtue' and 'giving up life to attain righteousness' are considered the most natural thing by Communist Party members.²¹

While it is true that this declaration was made in wartime, when sacrifice was being called for on all sides, and sometimes on lesser grounds, it is also true that it expresses an integral part of the ethos of Marxism. What about Marx's own commitment to the cause of world revolution? Self-sacrifice of the order envisaged has at least the sanction of some previous Marxist practice, even if it does not find an explicit justification in Communist moral theory. Would one dare to die for numbers?

Consideration of the dynamics of Marxism thus returns to the inexplorable freedom in virtue of which men may rise to the kind of action proposed. This is an aspect of the Marxist ethos not explained by Marxists. It is a functional element in Marxist ethics, an ethics that strives to take concrete form in the achievement of a new fellowship and a new freedom.

A CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF MARXIST ETHICS

A Christian interpretation of Marxist ethics must look favourably on the major shift in Marx's outlook involved in the abandonment of a rationalistic approach to ethics. For the Christian, there can be no speculative search for the 'Good': 'No one is good but God alone.'²² Christian ethics emerges from trust in the living God; its intellectual basis is Christian dogma.

¹⁹ Mao Tse-Tung, 'On Practice', *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 284.

²⁰ But a description of the Party in power as a bureaucratic monstrosity may be found in Milovan Djilas, *The New Class* (New York, Praeger Inc., 1957).

²¹ Liu Shao-Ch'i, 'Training of the Communist Party Member', quoted in Compton, *Mao's China* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1952), p. 111. Quotations are from 'Chinese Classics'.

²² Mark 10:18.

This does not mean that the Christian is, by virtue of his relation to God, abstracted from the world process (in spite of Feuerbach). The Christian faith assumes that one meets God as He is active in His world. Prophetic religion in the Old Testament has this distinguishing characteristic that it does not counsel speculation, seeking God in 'the blue mists of Heaven'; rather it requires that men should open their eyes and see that God is active even in the apparent trivialities of daily life. 'Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and the needy. Then it was well. *Was this not to know me?* says the Lord.'²³ This strain is by no means absent from the New Testament, being conspicuous in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats.²⁴ But one does not have to cite isolated texts or parables. The commandment to love can only be fulfilled in action; faith, as St. James points out, is precipitation into action, it is not a principle upon which one is invited to support theories. Such action to be effective must take account of the facts of life in the world.

While Christians must applaud the decision that 'ethics is action', they need not approve the complete abandonment of moral philosophy that characterized Marxism for some time. There must be reflection on the implications of action. But this is no substitute for action, nor does it provide, for Christians, a source upon which to base ethics.

One of the 'moments' of Marx's return from rationalism to a 'religion of practice' is marked by the development of his theory of ideology. A developed Marxist theory of ideology asserts that the economic sub-structure of society *determines* (directly or in a disguised way) the superstructure: law, morality, religion, the whole apparently free life of ideas. Christians should see the value of this theory—provided only that the operative word is changed to 'influences' rather than 'determines'. Reason is not exempt from the disorder that infects man's whole situation (though Thomas Aquinas spoke of the weakness rather than the depravity of the intellect). Marx saw and condemned the egoism given reign in pre-revolutionary society in the exploitation of the working class. Christians find that careless and unrealistic egoism is found universally as a mark of the misuse of man's freedom. 'Moral values' do not stand above this situation; in real life they are weighted with interest.²⁵

²³ Jeremiah 22:15b and 16.

²⁴ Matthew 25:31-5.

²⁵ 'Conscience' does not escape the snare exposed by Marx. In this connection *vide* Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 337: 'the net effect of the Kantian account of conscience was the dehumanization of man . . . the Freudian exploration . . . has compounded the evidence confirming the fatal role of conscience in the Western ethical tradition.'

Christians would agree with Marxists that this state of affairs is frequently concealed by ideology, which serves as a purely noetic re-structuring of life, not coming to grips with reality and therefore generating dangerous illusions.²⁶ Marxists feel that their theory does come to grips with reality. Christians make the same claim—and have some priority in making it, for their claim begins from the Cross. The Cross is a decisive and practical revelation of the forces operative in human society behind the moral pose. In remembering the Cross, as MacIntyre once said, Christians remember ‘a Lord whom the powers of Church and State combined to crucify outside the walls of the city.’²⁷

It is to be regretted that Marxism as a whole (like Christianity) has failed to show a continuing sensitivity to the dangers of ideology. Ideology, for Communists, has been regarded as good once it is based in Communist ‘scientific’ theory. Thus the 1961 Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union lays stress on ‘ideological work’, which involves the attempt to bend a population into the shape assumed by a set of ideas. Practically speaking, this attempt involves control of the voices of thought and culture. This is anti-human, and even anti-scientific, for a truly scientific outlook is humble before the facts.

Nevertheless ‘original’ Marxism is right in calling attention to the fluid and demanding situation in which modern man exists. While the rigid distinction between classes of developed Marxism cannot be acceptable to Christians, and while Marx’s economic analysis of capitalist society has proved faulty, the elements of truth even here should not be overlooked. Does he not rightly describe, in broad essentials, a situation that exists in India at the present time, in spite of the meliorating influence of the modern state?

The situation of modern man is marked by currents of change: evolution may pass over into revolution. Ethics, the necessities of action, must be shaped in relation to this fact. The Communist understands his situation in relation to ‘the Revolution’. In a Communist country the Communist looks forward to the achievement of the tasks set by the Revolution and the creation of a classless society. For the Communist in a non-Communist country this lies wholly in the future, except for such ‘foretastes’ of the future he may have had in the revolutionary reality of the Party. For Christians too the life of our time is marked by change, and there is a meaning to be attested in this movement of history. Rightly or wrongly the Christian Church proclaims a more radical revolution: the inauguration of a

²⁶ Moral Re-armament (M.R.A.) is a conspicuous example of just this error.

²⁷ A. MacIntyre, *Marxism, An Interpretation* (London, S.C.M. Press, 1953), p. 122.

solidarity of love in a process to be completed only through death and resurrection. The signs of this change are to be discerned in a situation in which the 'old order' of things is in process of dissolution so that 'creation' may be set free from its bondage to decay.²⁸

Marxism, therefore, has performed valuable service in returning ethics from theory to practice. In the situation in which man finds himself when returned to the question of practice Marxism rightly commends an ethic of struggle. The struggle of Marxism is adversely, even fatally, affected, from a Christian point of view, by the mistake in judgement and the failure in charity by which Marx's doctrine of alienation carried him to the point of denying the humanity of his enemies in the class war. Tucker attempts a psychological explanation of this development when he says, 'The capitalist and the worker of *Capital* are personifications of the dissociated antagonistic forces in Marx's original self-alienated man.'²⁹ From this error, an error in dogma or metaphysics and not in psychology—or in tactics—is derived the revolting cruelty of class war as it has been carried on.

There must be a struggle. What form must this struggle take? It must take a corporate form before it has any hope of achieving a general effect. The Christian Church constitutes a field for the implementation and overt demonstration of Christian ethics. Christian ethics are Church ethics. Even in the Gospels 'individuals are "saved" into the *koinonia*, not one by one . . . even the prodigal son . . . returns to the Father's house and is received again into a *family* . . . Being restored to the flock, the family, the individual with whom God is concerned and who has lost his individuality, that is, his selfhood, is drawn back into the orbit of God's way of working with men in the world.'³⁰ This way of working, as becomes even clearer in the Pauline epistles, is corporate. A corporate ethics, a *koinonia* ethics, is the only kind of integral ethics. Marxism is therefore technically and tactically right in seeing the Party as a nucleus for action and as the field in which a new morality must look to be developed. The special action of the Party and the Church gives the necessity for the special ethics of the Party and the Church.

What, finally, is to be said about the 'faith' implicit in Marx's action, i.e. his committed life, and how must Christians interpret the 'dynamics' of the Party? There is in Marx's action, as has been pointed out, an unexplained 'spiritual' impulse. This same impulse is depended upon in the appeal made by the Party to disciplined service and sacrificial action.

²⁸ Romans 8:21.

²⁹ Robert Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge, University Press, 1961), p. 217.

³⁰ Lehmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

When the normative action of the Party is seen in the best light possible it is observed that the Party creates a solidarity in which the principle of 'fellowship' is honoured. It is impossible to escape the observation that this has become in most places a top-heavy and oppressive fellowship. Nevertheless, in so far as the Party creates a genuine fellowship and then submits this fellowship to genuine service of masses of people, it would appear to be conformed to what John C. Bennett finds that 'a moral consensus' witnesses to, 'An objective moral order—and we should think of it in dynamic rather than in static terms—which is the expression of God's will for man.'³¹ From the explicit Christian point of view this order might be termed the Incarnational Order, the moral order for which God Himself has set the pattern, and in which He continually leads men, inside and outside the Church, by His Holy Spirit.

Editorial

Of the three articles published in this issue of the *Journal*, the first two are further papers read at the meeting of the Indian Christian Theological Association held in Nagpur in March 1965. The third article, *Marxist and Christian Ethics*, was presented as a paper at a joint meeting of the staff of Serampore and Bishop's Colleges.

In the near future, we look forward to publishing a further series of articles on the theme of the Cosmic Christ, again in co-operation with the Indian Christian Theological Association.

³¹ John C. Bennett, *Christians and the State* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp. 14-15.