

The Soviet Attitude to the Christian-Marxist Dialogue

CHRISTOPHER READ

The nature and perspectives of the dialogue between Christians and Marxists have developed considerably since the time of the first meetings of the Paulusgesellschaft in the mid-60s. The cynics remarked then that at these meetings the Marxists were all from Western Europe, the Christians from the East. It is indeed true that as far as the authorities in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were concerned, the dialogue was permitted to exist but not officially encouraged. However, since then important changes have occurred in the tactics of the Party and recently a relatively consistent Party line has been visible.

The pages of this journal have provided considerable evidence of the complexity of Soviet religious policy. An underlying ideological hostility to religion has not prevented the Soviet authorities from using religion for its own purposes, and forming alliances—in theory temporary, but in practice often of an enduring nature—with believers and with churches. One of the most recent developments in this field has been the renewal of the Party's interest in Christianity outside the Soviet Union as a possible source of support for the international communist movement and ultimately for the propagation of Marxism-Leninism. This should not surprise us because Lenin himself was in favour of admitting believers, and even priests, to the Bolshevik party if they were suitable candidates in other respects. What follows is a brief attempt to portray the general features of this policy of co-operation with believers abroad.

The most important official pronouncement on the dialogue was made at the International Communist Conference held in Moscow in 1969. It is perhaps ironic that this meeting, the chief task of which was to help normalize inter-party relations after the Czech crisis, should take a major step towards promoting dialogue with Christians. The Party announced: "In various countries co-operation and joint action between communists and the broad democratic masses of Catholics and believers of other religions is developing. It has acquired great urgency. The dialogue between them on such problems as war and peace, capitalism and socialism, neo-colonialism and the developing countries, joint action against imperialism and for democracy and socialism, is very pressing. Communists are of the opinion that on this path—the path of broad contacts and joint activities—the mass of believers is becoming an active force in

the struggle against imperialism and for thorough social transformation." This text has become the official guide for Soviet commentators on the dialogue and is frequently quoted by them. It has been developed in a number of important works by high-level Party ideologists in the Soviet Union who are working on religion and atheism.

An authoritative exposition of the Soviet attitude was published in the July 1971 issue of *Problems of Philosophy*, the journal of the philosophy branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In this article, L. Mitrokhin invokes Lenin's authority in support of the dialogue. According to Mitrokhin, Lenin wrote that the philosophical idealism of religion existed outside the sphere of class struggle and as a result believers could be valuable participants in the revolutionary movement. In Mitrokhin's words: "As a consequence of the Leninist position, communists can take part in joint activities with believers in 'dialogue' and in the elucidation of common social programmes and possible forms of joint practical work." On the Soviet side, then, the dialogue is predominantly one of joint action glossing over fundamental differences of theory. This fits into the wider context of Soviet policy towards ideological enemies, which is characterized at present by increasing co-operation with the West on practical issues, combined with a firm resistance to Western influence in the intellectual sphere and resolute opposition to any traces of ideological co-existence. The intellectual gulf between Christianity and communism was noted in an earlier article in *Problems of Philosophy* written by L. N. Velikovich in 1965. His words apply just as strongly today. He wrote that "the dialogue with Catholics does not signify ideological compromise or the ideological coexistence of Marxism and religion. Communists recognize the deep ideological differences between Marxism and Catholicism but do not consider them to be an obstacle to the joint activities of atheists and believers in defence of the fundamental interests of the workers." Again the phrase "joint activities" recurs. It is clearly a key phrase in the Soviet explanation of its position, and gives rise to two questions. Firstly, do we know what "joint activities" the Party has in mind, and, secondly, is it possible to separate the dialogue into "practical" and "ideological" compartments in this way and try to promote the one but not the other?

It is easier to answer the first question than the second. The mutual practical benefits of dialogue are indicated by the fact that the major participants in it have been the Roman Catholic Church, working to protect its members in the communist countries, and communists in countries such as Italy and France who wish to end a fruitless confrontation with a Church which wields considerable political influence. However, these

immediate considerations, based on political tactics, are now less central to the dialogue and it is clear that in the Soviet view its focus is turning away from Europe altogether. It is now focused on the third world in general and Latin America in particular. In the course of the struggle for economic and social progress some third world Christians and communists have found that their social conscience has led both into similar political activities. Even joint membership of guerilla and revolutionary movements has been possible. This, of course, is not entirely new, as during the war communist partisan units in Italy had some Catholics and Catholic chaplains, and even a few priests sided with the government in the Spanish civil war:

An excellent exposition of Soviet thinking on the social role of Christianity in South America, and on the scope and importance of the dialogue there, is to be found in a recently published book by I. R. Grigulevich, a member of the ethnography branch of the Academy of Sciences and the leading Soviet authority on Christianity in South America (I. R. Grigulevich: *The Rebellious Church in Latin America*, Moscow 1972, in Russian). Although this authoritative book is devoted mainly to an examination of the revolutionary elements in the church, it did not evolve from any new-found sympathy for religion as a whole. Grigulevich's overall view is one of extreme hostility to it. But despite this very broad—and, for a Soviet writer, compulsory—perspective, Grigulevich welcomes as potential comrades those people within the church who stand on the side of the oppressed and against the oppressors. In particular, Grigulevich has in mind the radical elements at the Conference of Latin American Bishops (Selam) and spokesmen such as Helder Camara and Camillo Torres, whose views receive considerable attention. Grigulevich's ideal is a popular front embracing "all progressive forces, including communists and believers, workers and peasants, patriotically minded priests and soldiers, the advanced intelligentsia and those sections of the national bourgeoisie who place their country above their own individual egoistic interests." Thus at this point, too, the policy of dialogue with Christians is part of the wider Soviet policy of supporting national liberation movements, even when they are not a hundred per cent communist. The best example of the kind of movement Grigulevich wishes to see was Salvador Allende's Front of National Unity in Chile, which contained left-wing Catholics and depended on the Christian Democratic Party for parliamentary support.

The Soviet authorities see practical political dialogue with Christians as conducive to the development of the international communist movement. They have striven to keep the dialogue within this framework, but

have not succeeded in completely avoiding what is, from their point of view, harmful ideological contamination. Suitable intellectual grounds for dialogue have proved difficult for the Soviet side, but despite the risks involved subjects have been found. One of the main subjects discussed has been the thought of Teilhard de Chardin. A book reviewer, named V. M. Pasika, commented in *Problems of Philosophy* (No. 4, 1970, p. 150) that "Teilhardism is a complex phenomenon. It cannot be evaluated easily or fitted into a simple, handy schema." Part of Teilhard's "complexity" for the Soviet ideologist lies in his "positive" side, expressed in his sociology and ethics (Pasika specifies, for example, his desire to base his faith on the creative powers of man and his criticism of the excessive individualism of western society), which exist alongside a "negative" side, namely, belief in God and philosophical idealism. This is ideal territory for dialogue.

However, the case of Roger Garaudy, expelled from the French Communist Party for continued opposition to the pro-Soviet line over Czechoslovakia and to its anti-revolutionary activities in the French May revolt of 1968, shows the dangers of dialogue and the difficulty of splitting it into theory and practice. The 1965 article by Velikovitch mentions with approval Garaudy's participation in the dialogue, but by 1971, in Mitrokhin's article, it was necessary to point out the "mistaken position of Roger Garaudy", who took the dialogue into theological areas of transcendence, subjectivity and love, rather than leaving it in the sociological and political fields of class struggle and revolution. A more remarkable example of a party ideologist, who engaged the enemy on his own territory and was then forced to retire prematurely, is provided by Viteslav Gardavsky, whose book *God Is Not Yet Dead* was recently published in English (see *RCL* 4/5, pp. 37-39).

Despite these difficulties there are signs that Soviet thinkers are themselves preparing to take part in a genuine dialogue with Christians. Previously other Communist Parties participated more readily than the Party in the Soviet Union. Sceptics on both the Marxist and Christian side have echoed each other when remarking that compromise on fundamental principles is impossible, and when openly giving the objective of dialogue as the conversion of the other. The dialogue has engendered, nevertheless, a fragile but growing spirit of goodwill among the participants. Who could more appropriately inspire this new rapprochement between Christianity and socialism than Vladimir Solovyov, one of its pioneers. In 1876 he gently upbraided the Christians who feared contact with socialism: "We stand upon principles for which socialism holds no menace, thus we can talk freely about the *truth of socialism*."