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CHRISTIANITY AND MARXISM:  
THE AFTERMATH OF DIALOGUE

In this paper, based on that given at the 1980 Symposium, Dr Lyon outlines the course which Christian-Marxist dialogue has taken since the 1960s. He argues that such dialogue, while necessary and important, is not without attendant difficulties and dangers.

For me, Christian-Marxist dialogue is an everyday reality, a necessity. In our 'Community Studies' department we examine social relationships in a theoretical and a practical way, based around an exploration of the community-idea. Intellectually, much of the social analysis and theory which we teach has been tempered by the challenge of Marxism. But in a practical way, as well, students who go on to be community workers (in the widest sense) will often take their bearings from Marxist analyses of the city and of welfare, as well as capitalist society generally. As a Christian, aiming at intellectual integrity in my teaching, I am forced to a serious consideration and discussion of Marxism. I cannot capitulate to a system of post-Christian humanism<sup>1</sup>, but neither can I ignore the potentially relevant thrust of much Marxist social analysis.

The question is — can such dialogue produce anything worthwhile — and has it done so? Bob Dylan apparently thinks not: "counterfeit philosophies have polluted all of our thought; Karl Marx has got you by the throat..."<sup>2</sup> Maybe Christians are the mere suckers Lenin suggested they are. "We shall find our most fertile field for infiltration of Marxism within the field of religion, because religious people are the most gullible and will accept almost anything if it is couched in religious terminology"<sup>3</sup>. There are grounds for believing that Lenin was right.

My main aim is to access the 'aftermath of dialogue', as I have deliberately termed it. 'Christians' and 'Marxists' of various hues have engaged in dialogue since the early 1960s and, in certain places, the dialogue continues into the 1980s. This is an impressionistic and necessarily selective appraisal of that dialogue, and some might also add 'premature'. However, I

believe that enough has occurred, thus far to show the direction in which such dialogue seems to be going, and that some lessons may be drawn from it.

'Dialogue' is defined as "an exchange of views in the hope of ultimately reaching agreement" (*Chambers Dictionary*), but while this is a good beginning, it is somewhat vague. However, as we shall see, some dialogue participants have ended by agreeing that the two projects of Christianity and Marxism are the same, so the vague definition is worth retaining. 'Aftermath' (according to the same Dictionary) has to do with later consequences, "especially if bad", and this also is what I intend. On the other hand I do *not* intend to say that dialogue is pointless or worthless (as I said, it is for me a fruitful necessity), or that dialogue necessarily leads to debilitating compromise, an automatic sell-out to the dialogical partner.

Three tasks confront us, requiring elaboration. Firstly, I shall examine the historical career and social context of the dialogue, attempting to stretch its salient features. Secondly, I shall comment on the polarizations of Christian opinion on the effects of dialogue, arguing that neither right or left wing responses from a Christian viewpoint, have proved particularly healthy or helpful. And thirdly, I shall glance at future possibilities for dialogue, bearing in mind what has transpired thus far.

It would be naive to imagine that the history of dialogue between Christians and Marxists can be encompassed in a few paragraphs. Moreover there are different types of dialogue, from the informal discussion to the highly organized international conference. And limiting oneself to one 'side' of the dialogue does not help, because there is a mass of material from the Christian side, and precious little from the 'Marxist'. It is also difficult to decide *when* to begin. However, although there were efforts at dialogue, especially between *theology* and Marxism, notably associated with Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>4</sup> before the First World War (WW1) it was after World War Two (WW2) that the dialogue proper took off.

It cannot be denied that the 'thaw' which made dialogue (at least of an official nature) possible is traceable to the 20th Party Congress in USSR in 1956, and the 2nd Vatican Council of 1962. Khrushchnev's denunciation of Stalin seemed to herald a new mood of willingness (among some, in the satellites of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) to question certain dogmas which had come to be associated with party-line communism. And Pope John's desire for *Pacem in Terris*, in the face of cold war and a nuclear arms race between the superpowers resulted in permissible attitudes (at least among Catholics) towards a system once branded as an atheist enemy. In Roger Garaudy's words, there was a shift "from anathema to dialogue"<sup>5</sup>.

It was no accident, then, that the dialogue took place in the context of an urgent desire to bring reconciliation to a world which threatened to tear itself apart. Among cultural critics of the time, the 'end of ideology'<sup>6</sup> was being vigorously proclaimed, and among sociologists, the notion that 'industrial society' was eliminating the differences between East and West in a process of 'convergence'<sup>7</sup>, became widely accepted. In other words, we should not be wrong to think that more than detached academic curiosity, or a desire of some intellectuals to come to terms with major systems, was involved. Marxism was being equated with the East and Christianity with the West<sup>8</sup>. The bringing together of these two sides was nothing less than an attempt to prevent a holocaust. One suspects that this gave an early dynamic to the dialogue, and indeed, some of its ongoing rationale<sup>9</sup>.

Of course, others entered the dialogue for less ambitious reasons. Intellectuals in Soviet satellite countries, such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, were desperate for the fresh air of free enquiry and this offered a possible window to be opened. Milan Machovec and Josef Hromádka in Prague and Adam Schaff in Warsaw are examples. Those efforts at dialogue, well publicized during the mid sixties, were brought to an abrupt end by the events of August 1968.

Intellectual movement also contributed to the possibility of dialogue. The writings of the 'young Marx' which only became available in the 1930s, were the subject of increasingly widespread discussion after WW2. Indeed, one critically important work, the *Grundrisse*, did not appear in English until the early 1970s, and this has also given a new start to dialogue. The 'young Marx' could be read as a humanistic philosopher, one concerned for an end to alienation and willing to view persons as active agents. The heavy, positivist-tending writings of Marx and especially Engels, which now culminated in the official doctrines of dialectical materialism, and which the Hungarian Georg Lukács had originally attempted to soften, were shown to be only one aspect of the total Marxist corpus.

A good example of the continued effect of de-Stalinization and the discovery of the 'young Marx' is the work of Roger Garaudy, a French CP member who was subsequently expelled from the party for his intellectual adventures. For two decades Garaudy had been a leading CP thinker working along Stalinist lines. But in 1970, the year of his expulsion, he wrote, "Marxism contains within itself, in its very principles, infinite possibilities of development and renewal" fully recognizing that this recognition "necessitated breaking with an ingrained habitual procedure"<sup>10a</sup>.

But what exactly has the Christian-Marxist dialogue been about? The theme for dialogue identified by Garaudy provides a

useful way on to a more general look at the topics discussed by participants. He argued that Marx thought about religion in more than one way. Yes, opium which distracts from earthly tasks constitutes part of the message, but Marx also regarded religion as an expression of and a protest against real distress. Thus, religion might function either to legitimate the *status quo*, or to articulate a protest (which could lead to action) against it. For Garaudy, Christianity provided a symbolic language in which to express deep human aspirations. But it appears that, for all his enthusiasm about dialogue, he still regarded Marxism as the "awareness of the underlying movement that governs our history"<sup>10b</sup> Christianity could only illuminate the subjective area, stimulating brotherhood and justice.

However, as Peter Hebblethwaite<sup>11</sup> has indicated, Christians have also taken such a line. At the Salzburg dialogue Karl Rahner argued against an identification of Christian hope and Marxist utopianism. The two visions are not even on the same level. Christian hope rather "fills the vacuum left by the Marxist expectation for the future..."<sup>11a</sup>. Moreover, it is dangerous to turn the future into an idol on whose altar whole generations can be sacrificed, and illusory to try to freeze a particular form of post-revolutionary society which is claimed to have 'arrived'.

Hope, the nature of man, an alleged common biblical heritage, the future, transcendence, freedom, praxis, alienation — all these and others have formed dialogical themes. But none of the dialogue seems to have produced significantly new insights into these topics even though some have argued that common ground has been found in the effort to enhance human dignity, wholeness, freedom and so on. A curious feature that has followed from the choice of themes has been the difficulty of identifying typical, orthodox Marxists or Christians among the ranks of the participants. As more than one commentator remarked at an early stage, dialogue members seemed willing to minimize precisely those areas of belief which were normally taken to be characteristic of their faith; Marxists played down violent revolution, Christians played down the inherent sinfulness of humanity.<sup>12</sup>

One need only glance at a couple of leading participants to see how this is true. On the Marxist side we have already mentioned Garaudy, with his background of intractable party-line dogmatism. His shift in emphasis (precursor rather than consequence of dialogue) towards a gradualist and non-violent socialism seems to have finally pushed him out of the Marxist camp altogether. No Marxist calls for a 'purposeful capitalism' with 'human goals' as he once did.<sup>13</sup> Neither are the majority of Marxists happy with the Chinese influenced anarcho-syndicalism which he more recently adopted. "Ironically" says Dale Vree

"Christians have gained a sincere partner in dialogue, but it is highly doubtful that, in making dialogue with Garaudy, they will be making dialogue with a normative Marxist"<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, with the 'Christian' side represented by men such as Metz, Moltmann, Rahner, Gollwitzer and Hromadka, it is clear that an unambiguously biblical stance is not to be expected. For all the freshness of some of their insights, and their proper corrections to evangelical and other Protestant theology, they hardly represent orthodoxy. Moltmann, for example, brings Christian hope firmly down to earth as the 'political liberation of mankind' and seemingly minimizes biblical faith in the new heaven and new earth, resurrection and so on. As Andrew Kirk puts it: "I am not satisfied that Moltmann has really grasped the nettle: the relationship between eschatological liberation which includes the groaning creation, and the personal justification of the individual who accepts that in Christ's death his sin has been borne and his guilt removed."<sup>14a</sup> Just as some Marxist participants are difficult to recognize as such, so those who join the 'Christian' side of the dialogue seem willing to follow an agenda not entirely controlled by biblical revelation.

But we may not limit 'dialogue' between Marxism and Christianity to those in East and West Europe. Although many Latin Americans would repudiate what went on in these dialogues in the 1960s, their emergent theology of liberation has certain features in common with the dialogue. The situation may be different again in Asia or Africa, but on more continents too, the encounter, confrontation, or synthesis of Marxism with Christianity is a feature of the continual debate too significant to be neglected.

In Latin America the proposal for a 'theology of liberation' was inspired, not so much by desire for a peaceful solution to misunderstandings, but by a commitment among Christians to a concrete demonstration of concern for the plight of the poor and oppressed. As Paul Mojzes rightly points out<sup>9</sup>, 'public dialogue' is far less appropriate in Latin America, both because of the urgency of tackling actual social injustices (which would be Miguez's point) and because of the everyday reality of oppressive forces unsympathetic to such subversive talk.

As with the European dialogue, however, the main direction of thought-flow has been from Marxism to Christianity. Kirk, again, "...the most significant aspect of Liberation Theology is the use of Marxism as an ideological tool in liberating theology and, as a consequence, liberating the church to become an instrument for change in society."<sup>14b</sup> It must be said, however, that evidence for liberation theology's use of Marxian analysis is hard to find. (There is another similarity which we shall not explore but merely comment on, that Catholics have been more involved than Protestants.)

A new method of doing theology has been introduced by the liberationists. They begin with political commitment, to people-in-history, and reflect that in the light of faith, obedience (related to righting injustices) precedes theological interpretation. Nothing less than a quest for a new hermeneutic is the product of liberation theology.

Space forbids treatment of the encounter of Christians with Marxism in India, Africa, in the European movement, or among blacks in North America, but the general picture which may be built up is not dissimilar. While some Marxists appear willing to concede some validity to Christian groups who have repudiated the Constantinianism of conventional orthodoxy and who opt rather for some forms of chiliastic radicalism, an increasing number of Christians seem willing to accommodate at least a humanistic Marxism, if not some of the social analysis (or at least its slogans) of the more dogmatic variety.

Such comments would also be true of North American intellectuals who have continued the old dialogue on the soil of tolerant pluralism. The widespread enthusiasm for some version of liberation theology (which could, cynically, be viewed as American voguish bandwagonism) led to Christianity and socialism conferences in Washington, San Francisco and Chicago in 1977, and a Christian-Marxist conference at Rosemont PA on "US socio-economic order in the next decade: Christian and Marxist perspectives in" in 1978.<sup>9a</sup> I believe that such comments would also apply to the British scene, even though as far as I am aware, no official dialogue has taken place except in print. *Marxism Today* carried a series of articles by 'Marxists' and 'Christians' in 1966-7<sup>15</sup>, there was a short-lived Catholic-Marxist journal, *Slant*, and more recent articles in the *New Blackfriars*<sup>16</sup> Protestants are again underrepresented and, although there is obvious Marxist-oriented commitment among B.C.C. adherents, it is unlikely that they would also identify in any way with evangelicals.

As to the future public or official dialogue, it seems unlikely, given the current increased East-West tension, that it will be popular. A new anti-communist mood has been reawakened in the USA and this will no doubt dampen dialogue enthusiasm. Also, in a sense, there is little need for public dialogue -- Marxist slogans seem to have become an expected aspect of theological education. It remains to be seen whether it can resist total domestication and if its radicalism will be maintained.

### *Responses*

The literature of Christian response to dialogue and Christian-Marxist encounter has achieved almost as prolific proportions as writing within the dialogue itself, and this of course also

perpetuates discussion. The polarisation between those who have accepted the notion of dialogue, and been willing to 'repent' of past blindness and class-interest, on the one hand, and those who regard the whole project as a major heretical deviation from historic Christianity, on the other, is reflected in the responses. We shall limit ourselves mainly to a consideration of some responses made and supported by evangelicals in Britain.

Negative responses, first of all, were given a boost by Edward Norman's 1978 Reith Lectures. He attacked what he saw as the politicization of the gospel, by which he meant "...the internal transformation of the faith itself, so that it comes to be defined in terms of political values"<sup>17</sup>. His continent-by-continent survey is intended to demonstrate this movement, which he sees as an attempt by the decreasingly significant church to regain credibility by wording its message in contemporary radical activist terms. Despite his incredibly vague 'Christian' affirmation of 'ethereal' and 'celestial realities' signposted in the "materials of eternity [which] lie thick upon the ground", evangelicals can be heard applauding his efforts. Of course he made some valid and penetrating points about politicization, with which one cannot but agree, but he also made a number of errors of fact and thus judgment which simply exposed his commitment to certain class and cultural prejudices, and his unwillingness to permit their scrutiny.

Another popular source of evaluation of attempt at Christian-Marxist dialogue, it would seem, is the number of organizations who publicise the plight of Christian believers in communist countries. One such organisation has published an exposure of Marx which makes the intriguing suggestion that Marx himself was a Satanist, and that his followers also show evidence of satanic inclinations<sup>18</sup>. The same organisation published in 1979 a booklet entitled *No Compromise Possible*<sup>19</sup>, in which Marxist-Leninism is declared to be "not for the church". Again, generalisations are made on the basis of inadequate information, but they are given emotional weight by the appeal to consider the sufferings of those persecuted for their faith by totalitarian regimes. Such appeals should have our sympathy, but are not the basis of the argument.

On the side of positive response, little exists, except perhaps among those whose outlook was influenced by the appearance of Míguez Bonino's *Christians and Marxists: the mutual Challenge to Revolution* in 1976. But Míguez's situation is very difficult for Britons to understand, although the dilemmas of identification with the church and the poor in Argentina arouse considerable sympathy. The same might be said for comments in *Third Way*<sup>20</sup> from Chris Sugden in Bangalore: Christians may be voting for Marxist parties in India, and the Indian Christians may well be "more open than others to see in Jesus the fulfillment of their



hopes for a just society", but India is a long way away.

Two new books from Andrew Kirk, *Theology Encounters Revolution* and *Liberation Theology*, may encourage a new positive response to Christian-Marxist dialogue, but it is too early to make any judgments on this (and again detailed Marxian analysis is missing). Although again his work springs from Latin American experience, the fact that he is a *Westerner* grappling with alien realities, brings the message of the liberationists and revolutionaries — and a critique of their position — much nearer home. He emphasises the need to re-evaluate the *how, where* and *why* of theology in the light of the liberationists' challenge, concluding that theology must become engaged with the real world, in order, secondly, to show the relevance of the "gospel of the kingdom to the poor",<sup>14c</sup> in specific situations, and lastly, in answer to 'how?' theology must follow the hermeneutical circle. The original meaning of scriptural texts must challenge the idolatries of power and privilege "which so often shape the life of both church and world", and above all must be interpreted from the "the praxis of the cross and resurrection"<sup>14c</sup>. But Kirk decisively rejects Marx and Marxism, despite what he has learned from his enforced encounter with both. Marxism's main deficiency, according to Kirk, following from its humanistic basis, is its inadequate analysis of evil, and therefore its impotence to produce genuine human transformation.<sup>14d</sup>

#### *Future Dialogue?*

As I suggested, public dialogues may continue to wane in popularity in the present international climate. That does not mean, however, that Marx and Marxism will also wane. Marxism, at least as a tool of analysis, still provides a present challenge both at the level of grass-roots practical involvement on social intervention and in academic theology. Dialogue — the exchange of views with the hope of reaching agreement — is still a necessary fact of everyday life for some. And even if dialogue proves sterile, Christians must still be conversant with Marxism if they are to understand the challenge and respond to it in a biblical and Christ-centred way.

Undoubtedly, the traffic resulting from dialogue of all kinds has been overwhelmingly one way. More Christians than Marxists have been involved, but while Marxists have felt unable to accept any basic tenets of orthodox Christian commitment, although they may have softened their hostility to Christians, Christians seem to have been very ready to adopt Marxist categories, and to have their eyes brought firmly down to a this-worldly horizon. Politicization of Christianity has occurred both in the new language of alienation, praxis, and ideology, and in the commitment to socio-political action as an expression of the message of

redemption<sup>21</sup>. Curiously enough Christians do not seem to have gone far beyond the acceptance of Marxist slogans. Although it is true that Marxists who engaged in dialogue have also had to modify their views, this has not been significant in proportion to Christian changes.

The conclusion to be drawn is based partly on an avenue we have not explored here, but which must be stated. The impossibility of what Vree calls 'synthetic dialogue' is due, fundamentally, to the incompatibility of the two belief systems. In part the old European-based dialogue became increasingly monological so that in the end, as Alvin C. Currier put it, "separation into the categories of Christian and Marxist seemed inconsequential"<sup>34</sup>. Somehow, despite what he sees as the theological incompatibility of Christianity and Marxism, Peter Hebblethwaite felt able to conclude his study with Teilhard de Chardin's (a basically humanist) vision of synthesis between a "transformed Marxism and a renewed Christianity"<sup>35</sup>. He illustrates once again that the price paid for synthetic dialogue is the essence of Christian and Marxist commitment. In short, I believe that the Christian who also claims to be a Marxist is in fact following 'another gospel'. The Bible is demoted; salvation perverted. No synthesis or symbiosis is desirable or possible.

Nevertheless, two tasks remain for Christians, one of which is still - dialogue. Not dialogue for synthesis, but dialogue for understanding. Those who work alongside Marxists in everyday life and social involvement must find a *modus vivendi*. Agreement needs to be found both on what *is* acceptable in Marxist analysis - a task hardly begun - and on strategy in common for community action, union policy, or a whatever. While that is true for Britain, it is even more pressing in situations of greater brutality, injustice, and exploitation, wherever it is found. Moreover dialogue-for-understanding is also necessary in countries where state-socialism is the order of the day. Believers in Yugoslavia, Romania etc. must struggle to find biblically consistent ways of "seeking the welfare of the city" in which God's providence has placed them. The examples of Kusmic and Ton ought to be emulated here.

Dialogue for understanding must also take place at the theological level. For all its deficiencies, a movement like liberation theology contains lessons for other Christians to be ignored at the peril of ignoring scripture. It highlights the ease with which theology becomes culture-and-class-bound (although it tends to swing to another pole of culture-bondage). And it highlights the speculative and abstract nature of much theology which has blinded us to the realities of an unjust and immoral world which requires change. Such theology fails to come up to the demands of Jesus Himself, spelt out so plainly in Matthew 28.

Lastly, it challenges the church to be characterised by new life, rather than the old. The old life, as Kirk reminds us, is manifest in "legal righteousness, without genuine repentance and faith, in human wisdom, without the knowledge of God's purposes and in political and economic power, without compassion for the weak in society."<sup>36</sup> The scriptures demand something totally different.

In the end, then, Christians are challenged by the dialogue to go beyond Marxism and, eventually to repudiate it as an inadequate and contradictory world-view and action-system. Alongside dialogue-for-understanding is needed confrontation, the willingness not only to accept the challenge of Marxism, but to argue *and demonstrate* the ultimate paucity of its salvific claims and, I might say, some of its analysis. The social implications of the good news of Jesus are more radical than any of Marx's proposals for struggle and revolution. We shall not avoid the contradictions of capitalism, or those of state-socialism, while we are in the flesh, so to hope for peace by simply ignoring Marxism or writing it off without thought is to hope for an illusion. But to recognise that the contradictions and struggles which we all face daily, and which will continue to frustrate, anger and sadden us, are ultimately caused by our rebellion against God and our sinful rejection of His ways is to be supremely realistic. That kind-of realism will shut us up to the only ultimate solution to the painful problem of our unequal and greedy world — the cross on which Jesus of Nazareth died, the just for the unjust, that we might be brought to God. That realism leads to authentic optimism.

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- 21 Although alienation, praxis, and ideology can be discussed without politicization, and socio-political may in some sense be seen as a legitimate expression of the 'good news' (see John Stott *Christian Mission to the Modern World*, 1975) it is clear that some politicization has occurred, to the detriment of Christian witness.
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