

All Is Now Quiet in Marienbad

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This article will give a short account of the present state of the dialogue between Christians and Marxists in the light of the situation in Eastern Europe. All is not well with this dialogue.

Although short-lived, the dialogue was fruitful. It was a kind of spiritual revival, an encounter which seemed to produce all kinds of new and creative ideas, both in the church and in Marxist circles.¹ It died when the Russian tanks entered Prague on 21 August, 1968. Precisely when it came to birth is more difficult to determine, though some would date it from the Papal Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII in 1963. The Encyclical did not take up the traditional Roman Catholic anti-communist position, but advocated a new approach.

Christians and Marxists became more aware of their need for each other, of their common responsibility for a world under the threat of the A-bomb. Roger Garaudy, a leading French Marxist, subsequently expelled from the party, said at the first congress of the Paulusgesellschaft in Salzburg in 1968: "The future of mankind cannot be built up either over against the faithful or without them; and the future of mankind cannot possibly be built up either in conflict with or without the communists."

Two questions are particularly important for understanding the reactions of orthodox Marxists to the dialogue with Christians. The first of these—is atheism an essential element of the Marxist-Leninist ideology? H. Gollwitzer, who concentrated on this particular question in his book *Die Marxistische Religionskritik und der Christliche Glaube*,² said that the history of Marxist religious policy has oscillated between two poles, between criticism of the socially reactionary misuse of religion and criticism of religion in itself. The former position criticizes the church but tolerates metaphysical questions without insisting that everyone must accept atheism. The latter position regards the propagation of a militant form of atheism as an essential task of the Party, for only when the ties of religion have been broken can revolutionary thought develop. The first position was held by those Marxists willing to enter into a dialogue with Christians. But such Marxists were suspect to the Party—they had strayed too far from orthodoxy, which claimed that atheism and Marxism are inseparable. In the view of orthodox Marxists, people such as Gollwitzer

not only attacked socialist politics and ideology but also supported imperialism consciously or unconsciously. So, Party-orthodoxy regards the dialogue as dangerous and cannot accept an open, undogmatic discussion. The dialogue should not weaken the conflict between socialism and capitalism, nor lead to reconciliation of class antagonism. Dialogue can only be meaningful for Party-orthodoxy so long as it remains subservient to the struggle against imperialism and deals with the problems of the class-struggle. At least this is how the *Zeitschrift für Philosophie* in the GDR has formulated the official view on this matter.

The second important question posed by the dialogue was whether ideological pluralism is possible in a communist society. Such a possibility caused a great deal of disquiet, especially when this kind of pluralism appeared to become a reality in Dubcek's democratic socialism. The dialogue was regarded by orthodox Marxists as subversive, and talks like those in Marienbad, where the only dialogue conference in Eastern Europe took place in 1968, were depicted as the preparation for a betrayal of socialism. From a hard-line Marxist point of view, this was perhaps not so far from the truth. The Italian Marxist, Lucio Lombardo-Radice,⁸ said at the Salzburg congress of the Paulusgesellschaft in 1965 that he regarded the 20th Party congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956) as the starting-point for criticism of the monolithic aspect of the system. He pleaded for a plurality of positive, not antagonistic values, and for a free confrontation of ideas. Divergent world-views could express human society's striving for progress to a higher level of social organization. Italian Marxists in his view are convinced that revolution requires pluralism, that the new society needs a free exchange of views in order to avoid mistakes and accelerate progress. The state should recognize no difference between its people on ideological grounds, and if Marxists were to adopt the liberal concept of a laicized state this would be extremely fruitful.

The Marxist-Leninist system could allow room for the coexistence of differing world-views as well as greater tolerance towards religion. The notion, for example, that religion—and non-Marxist world-views—are an illusion, generated by rotten socio-economic conditions and destined to disappear as soon as these conditions themselves have been changed (because religious consciousness will then have been severed at the roots) dispenses with the necessity of fighting it. But such an approach ignores the totalitarian aspect of Marxism, which regards itself as an all-embracing and scientific world-view. Furthermore, to recognize other world-views threatens the monopoly position of the Communist Party, which is legitimized by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Gustav Wetter, the Roman

Catholic philosopher, has concluded that "as long as communism is a philosophy of life, peaceful coexistence with other philosophies within the communist-ruled countries, though theoretically possible, is very difficult to achieve in practice because of the claims of the Communist Party to absolute power".⁴ Although coexistence is now the "in" word in East European politics, it is not applied to ideology. The monopoly of Marxism-Leninism has been consolidated. The Hungarian Communist Party, in a resolution of 15 November 1972, demanded that the hegemony of Marxism-Leninism be strengthened. A new journal, *Argumenty*, was founded in Poland for the purpose of stimulating the spread of secularization in Catholic Poland and a number of intellectuals, of whom Kolakowski is one, were expelled. Newspapers in Czechoslovakia have issued warnings against further East-West meetings in the spirit of the Christian-Marxist dialogue. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is afraid that cultural contacts with the West will lead to the subversion of its ideology and is still haunted by memories of the Prague Spring. Coexistence in politics should not be allowed to extend to ideology. Instead the class-struggle in international relations must go on and the ideological confrontation strengthened. Fear of ideological subversion leads inevitably to fear of dialogue.

The prospects for a new dialogue in its 1963-68 form are not very promising. In an article "Why the dialogue died", G. Nanning mentioned three causes for its death. Firstly, the dialogue was killed by the suspicion of orthodox Marxist leaders, who pushed aside and restricted the influence of the revisionist intellectuals, who had taken part in the dialogue. Secondly, it died because of opposition amongst church leaders, who looked upon the dialogue as a threat to the church's position. Thirdly, according to Nanning, the dialogue was in fact trying to promote "coexistence between capitalism and socialism under the ideological cloak of coexistence between Christianity and Marxism".

Nanning's position reflects that of the East European Communist Party ideologists. Although they still talk about the dialogue, the discussion is kept within the framework of the objectives marked out by the Party. Such subjects as the atheistic character of Marxism and the possibility of pluralism within a socialist society are no longer mentioned. The basis for dialogue is now collaboration aimed at solving social conflicts and the common struggle against imperialism.

Such a dialogue—in which Christians cooperate with communists not because of, but in spite of, their faith—should not be valued too highly. It involves no confrontation of principles within the framework of concerted action. Communists may be encouraged to cooperate with non-

communists, but the latter must remain silent about their views. So dialogue has become merely an instrument for the attainment of specific political objectives, which must be fitted exclusively into the ideological framework of one of the partners. This approach to dialogue was "legalized" at the Moscow Conference of Communist Parties, held in 1969.

What has been the reaction of Christians to this interpretation of dialogue? Cardinal König, the chairman of the Secretariat for Unbelievers, summed up the view of many people in a short report.⁵ Dialogue could not be reduced to practical collaboration: "It would be against the dignity of the human person as a spiritual being; it would be inhuman if Christians were asked to consent to and to cooperate with a social structure, whether existing or to be built (a socialist or communist structure), without their being given permission and the opportunity to scrutinize this structure by means of a dialogue between equals."

Such a dialogue between equals appears not to be possible even in East Germany, where, unlike the USSR, Christians have opportunities for cooperating with the communists. Collaboration presupposes acceptance of the "objectively based" leading role of the Communist Party. The Party does not necessarily represent the political insight of the majority, but is "objectively based" upon the only correct scientific conception of society. A critical attitude to the Party's dictates is banned, for the Party claims to be objectively right. It represents a correct, scientifically based theory—the church, only subjective faith. Where "critical" cooperation is excluded, genuine dialogue is impossible.

Communists talk a great deal about common responsibility for mankind. "But", said the Lutheran Bishop of Maagdenburg (East Germany), W. Krusche, at the Synod of his Church in 1969:

That makes dialogue into a necessity. But we do not mean by this expositions in which one partner wants to be right and to put the other party in the wrong or to convince the other party that his point of view is correct in all respects. Nor is dialogue a veiled threat to bring about deviationism, to provoke unrest and discord. Rather, it is a means of getting people to learn to examine how others see their responsibility for their fellow men. Dialogue assumes both a mutual readiness to listen and the expectation that one's partner has also caught a glimpse of the decisive aspects of human existence . . . We want an open, meaningful and hopeful dialogue, which is aimed at discharging our common responsibilities.⁶

Such a statement emphasises the need for a kind of collaboration which includes more than uncritical acclamation. Reading between the lines,

one can see here both an indictment of those who behave as if they had a monopoly of power and truth, and a warning directed at all those presently collaborating with Marxists who accept as self-evident their premises and objectives. Behind all the fine phrases calling for cooperation, the Party dictates what will be done and those who cooperate have to obey without answering back.

To reproach with "revisionism" those Marxists who took part in the dialogue is mistaken. They worked both for renewal and for a breakthrough in a fossilized system. In their attack against a despotic and bureaucratic form of socialism they tried to rediscover and revivify the real inspiration, the profound intention and the historical dimension of Marxism as a social humanism which seeks freedom and justice for everyone. These Marxists sought dialogue with Christians and grasped the hand which was extended towards them. But they were expelled from the Party and an ideological renewal did not take place. In non-communist areas of the world the dialogue continues, but those taking part would do well to remember the situation in Eastern Europe.

¹ An important bibliography on the dialogue was compiled by the Librarian of the World Council of Churches, A. J. van der Bent, and entitled *The Christian Marxist Dialogue: an annotated bibliography* 1959-1969, W.C.C., Geneva 1969. See also his "A decade of Christian-Marxist dialogue. An historical, literary and bibliographical survey", *Bolletino del segretariato per i non credenti*, No. 2, June, 1971, pp. 23-34.

² Siebenstern Taschenbuch 33, Hamburg, 1971.

³ See Erich Kellner *Christendom en Marxisme*, Publicatie van het Paulusgeselschaft, Utrecht, 1966, pp. 259-271.

⁴ G. Wetter: "The Christian-Marxist dialogue: possibilities and difficulties", *Bolletino del segretariato per i non credenti*, No. 3, October, 1970, pp. 12-19.

⁵ Cardinal König: "Some theories on the Christian-Marxist Dialogue", *Bolletino del segretariato per i non credenti*, No. 2, June, 1962, pp. 8-15.

⁶ Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der D.D.R., E.B.D. Dokumentation Witten, 1970, p. 182.