

THE TRUTH & ERROR OF COMMUNISM



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BY

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TO MY FRIEND
EDWARD CADBURY

WHO HAS HELPED ME TO APPRECIATE PUBLIC SPIRIT IN EMPLOYERS

AND TO

MY FRIENDS AND FELLOW MEMBERS
OF THE SELLY OAK EARLY MORNING SCHOOL

WHO HAVE HELPED ME TO APPRECIATE THE ASPIRATIONS OF LABOUR,

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Communism is presenting a grave challenge not only to our social order but also to our religious faith. Whatever their final verdict may be, Christians ought to be facing that challenge much more seriously than they are at present doing. The Press is therefore issuing a number of volumes, written from different points of view, to help Christian people to assess both the truth and the error of the Communist doctrine and way of life.

PREFACE

TO-DAY is Labour Day, and seldom has May 1st found the Labour movement in this country confronted with greater difficulties or heavier responsibilities. There is much in the situation, both at home and abroad, to urge Labour to move to the left. If this be interpreted to mean "follow Marx," I believe such a step would be fraught with disaster both for Labour and mankind.

In this book I have set down some main reasons for rejecting Marxism as a system. The over-statements which all but blind idolaters recognise in the doctrines of Karl Marx can do nothing but harm. Historically, his exaggerations may be excused when set against the exaggerations of mid-Victorian economists and politicians. But as the Master of Balliol recognises, "his opponents' over-statements are dead and forgotten, and his are very much alive." His errors are so much alive that they are made the basis of actual programmes and policies. But social revolution based on falsehood must in the long run fail.

The British Labour movement has often been deeply coloured by Marxism, but never fundamentally convinced by it. I believe the Movement should look to its own true sources of inspiration, and not to Marx, in the present crisis. If British Labour is not ashamed to be genuinely ethical, and not afraid to be genuinely scientific, and if it shuns the sham-realism which is always morally reaction-

ary, we may yet see fulfilled Isaac Penington's prayer for our country:

“ O! my native country, that thou mightest be the first nation in this age of the world, that might pass through the judgments of God, and be cleansed thereby and be happy! ”

* * * *

We know from the Gospel that obedience is the condition of insight into truth, and I am well aware how ill-qualified I am to write such a book as this. The fact that I have written under pressure makes it the more likely that there will be lapses from truth and charity. I only hope that such lapses may not disable it entirely as a contribution to understanding and co-operation.

I am much indebted to Miss Janet H. Kelman and Mr. J. C. Kydd, who read the manuscript and saved me many errors. They are not responsible for opinions expressed, or for any errors that remain.

H. G. WOOD.

Woodbrooke.

May 1st, 1933.

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CHAPTER I

COMMUNISM AS A RELIGION

“**C**OMMUNISM is the one living religion in the Western world to-day.”¹ In this assertion of Mr. Middleton Murry, we may no doubt detect the enthusiasm of the new convert. The man who finds the joy of maximum Christian living in the “Groups” movement is apt to disparage all other forms of Christianity as dead or decadent. So the individual who experiences a dynamic unification through embracing the Communist faith feels that every other type of Socialism is insipid, and cannot believe in the vitality of any other religious faith. In Oxford, as I write, Communism and the “Groups” movement are competing for the loyalty of youth. Some two hundred and fifty undergraduates are said to have joined the October-club. Communism is certainly what William James used to call a live option.

Visitors to Russia unite in reporting contact with a religious enthusiasm, whether they are repelled or attracted thereby. The members of the Communist movement possess that most essential element of religion, devotion to a cause. If Russians are desperately poor and suffering privation, they can feel that they are making sacrifices for a definite and

¹*Necessity of Communism*, p. III.

worthy end. They are being saved by hope, whereas the unemployed in England feel that they are suffering to no purpose. It is quite justifiable for men to speak of Socialism as their religion, since Socialism gives them a hope for mankind and a cause to be served with utter loyalty. A movement which proffers hope and evokes devotion is a religion, and a religion which fails to do either the one or the other is not a living religion.

De Tocqueville drew attention to the same features of the Revolution at the close of the eighteenth century. It was essentially a political revolution which advanced after the manner of religious revolutions. The faith which inspired the events of 1789 was universal in its appeal and in its claim. We speak of the *French* Revolution, but its banners bore the legend "The Rights of *Man*," and it was regarded not as a national achievement but as a movement of the spirit of man. It was propagandist like primitive Christianity or Islam. It produced its prophets and its martyrs. Something similar is true of Communism. If its appeal, in the first instance, is not to men as men, but to a class, yet it appeals to that class across national frontiers and brushes aside racial distinctions. "Workers of the world, unite!" There is a universal note in such a slogan, even if it falls short of the simpler inclusiveness of the rights of Man. And then the proletariat is called upon to deliver not only itself but mankind, and Communism stirs enthusiasm as opening the path to an ideal human society. And whether or no the Communist faith inspires prophets and poets, it certainly nerves men and women to martyrdom. In China and in Russia, Communists face death for their creed. One cannot but honour such devotion.

It is true that there is an element of immoral fanaticism in it. To the out-and-out Communist, the end of a classless society justifies the use of any means. I received a letter from such an enthusiast in which she said that for the sake of her class, she would lie, she would steal, she would whore, she would murder. Such extravagance must not be regarded as typical, but from the strict Communist standpoint all ethical standards are relative and all is fair in the class-war. If Communism is a living religion, as it undoubtedly is, it is not necessarily the true religion, and it is not necessarily a moral religion.

Socialism may be, as we have seen, religious in its hope and fervour. How is Communism related to Socialism in the broader sense? Perhaps very much as Calvinism was related to Lutheranism. Calvin gave to the leading ideas of the Reformation, a precision and a systematic form which immensely strengthened intellectual conviction, and so inspired confidence in action. Calvinism is almost the only theology which has effectively moulded the thought of the laity, and since its hold was shaken no new theology has taken its place. And at the heart of Calvinism was a belief in the sovereignty of God. God is the sole cause, and men are only instruments. And yet man is responsible, and must act his part in fulfilment of God's will and to His glory. Those who accepted this faith found that the fear of God freed them from all lesser fears. In the same way, Marxism gives precision and system to Socialist ideas. It grips men's minds and inspires both preaching and practice, as Calvinism did. And the Marxist belief in predetermined process is parallel to the Calvinist insistence on God's absolute sovereignty. Marxism is, in fact, Calvinism secular-

ised, and yet not completely secularised, for submission to a process may have something of the mystic quality of submission to the will of God. Moreover, Marxism is misunderstood, exactly as Calvinism was misunderstood. Looked at from without, faith in God's sovereignty would seem to sap human responsibility and favour quietism. Actually, it made men of iron will and powerful initiative. So the Marxist faith in a dialectical movement, rendering Communism inevitable, sustains patience in tribulation and inspires hope and nerves effort in times of opportunity.¹

Communism might be described as the Fundamentalism of the Socialist movement. For propaganda purposes and for strengthening personal conviction, it has all the advantages of an over-simplified system. These advantages have to be paid for, and as education advances, the price to be paid is raised; but as things are, these advantages are still real, and they tempt truer forms of the Socialist faith to ape Communism in the hope of securing the leverage which simple unqualified dogmas still provide.

* * * *

If Communism be a religion and a living religion, no cool logical analysis of it will do it justice. It is next to impossible to do justice to any religion except from within. The best critics are those who have been through it and seen through it, writers like Henri de Man and Nicolai Berdyaev. But though logical analysis and scientific criticism will be inadequate and may try the reader's patience, they are none the less necessary. A religion may legitimately defy rationalism, but it cannot ignore reason. Yet a

¹Cf. Bertrand Russell : *German Social Democracy*, p. 6.

negative critical judgment, even if valid, will not arrest its advance.

Again, if there is a religious faith and a social ideal at the heart of Communism, its advance will not be stayed by a social order which, less religious and less moral, offers larger immediate material benefits. Mr. Keynes seems to think that Capitalism might save itself by securing economic advantages for the masses. But this in my judgment is more than doubtful. Mr. Middleton Murry justifiably challenges the statement of the Rt. Hon. Herbert Morrison: "If capitalism could stand all the social expenditure which we ideally desire, capitalism would be a good system."¹ Men do not live by bread alone. Gasset is right in thinking that the middle-classes themselves may embrace Communism, if no better faith emerges to give meaning to human life. "Whatever the content of Bolshevism be, it represents a gigantic human enterprise. . . . If Europe . . . persists in the ignoble vegetative existence of these last years, its muscles flabby for want of exercise, without any plan of a new life, how will it be able to resist the contaminating influence of such an astounding enterprise? . . . For the sake of serving something that will give a meaning to his existence, it is not impossible that the European may swallow his objections to Communism and feel himself carried away not by the substance of the faith, but by the fervour of conduct it inspires."²

If Communism as a religion is a danger, because of irrational and immoral elements contained in it, it can only be met by a religion more truthful and more ethical than itself. Is it possible not only to

¹*Necessity of Communism*, p. 100.

²*Revolt of the Masses*, pp. 199, 200.

distinguish but to separate what is true from what is false in the Communist faith ? Can what is true in it inspire a deeper fervour and a more effectual faith than the more popular mixture of truth and falsehood which Communism on analysis turns out to be ?

CHAPTER II

CHRISTIANITY AND THE IDEALS OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

I HAD intended to head this chapter "What Christianity and Communism have in common," but I have chosen another title because I want to emphasise three points at the outset. First, the Labour movement is not to be identified with Communism. It is a much bigger thing than Communism. Second, the ideals and principles which Christianity shares with Communism are for the most part the property of the wider Labour movement and not peculiar to Communism. Thirdly, official orthodox Marxism repudiates the very ideals which give it life and worth. Communism normally does not recognise the Christian character and origin of its moral claims. Labour, at least in England, is often fully aware of the basis of its ideals in the Christian faith.

At the heart of Western civilisation, involved in all that is worth preserving in it, inspiring all that is genuinely progressive in it, is a distinctive sense of personal worth. This conviction of the value of personality is often described as individualistic, but this is a misunderstanding of its real character and implications. On it rest not only personal claims, but social obligations. It is better expressed in Mazzini's *Duties of Man* than in the individualism of

the Social Contract, as interpreted by Locke or Rousseau. Respect for the personality of the individual and recognition of the claims of humanity upon oneself go hand in hand and are inseparable. This sense of personal worth issues in humanitarian sentiment as well as in individual self-respect.

It is, moreover, essentially Christian. Actually, in Europe, wherever this sense of personal worth obtains, it is the outcome of Christianity. As Loisy says, we derive our humanitarian feeling not from Greece and Rome, but from Jerusalem, from that very Jewish-Christian element in our civilisation which impatient and ignorant humanists are so anxious to excise. The basis of this sense of personal worth is religious. Men are of infinite worth because God loves them, because Christ died for them. Deny the underlying religious faith, and it is doubtful whether any scientific truth or so-called rational principle can prop up this ethical standard. The French Revolution, by its rationalism, rendered its faith in humanity and progress irrational.

As Mr. Bertrand Russell sees, this is Christian ethic, and "Christian ethics is in certain fundamentals opposed to the scientific ethic which is gradually growing up. Christianity emphasises the importance of the individual soul and is not prepared to sanction the sacrifice of an innocent man for the sake of some ulterior good to the majority. Christianity, in a word, is unpolitical, as is natural since it grew up among men devoid of political power."¹ Mr. Russell anticipates that the Christian ethic must yield to a new scientific ethic, which will justify authoritarian states, Communist or Fascist or Technocratic, in ruthlessly sacrificing innocent

¹*Scientific Outlook*, p. 241.

individuals to the supposed good of the larger number. In the long run, this will not occur, because the Christian ethic has its source and its support in a reality which Mr. Russell does not recognise. In Europe, political and social systems that have ignored or defied the Christian ethic in the past have gone down, and they will go down in the future, however imposing may seem their temporary triumphs. The sense of personal worth, inspired by Christianity, works like a perpetual leaven in Western civilisation. It has now been transferred to the East, and it works in India, challenging the oppression of the untouchables. The Christian ethic is not a waning force, not an effete idealism. It stands now on the threshold of new triumphs.

The power of the bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century, we are told, "was partially derived from the puritan sense of the religious worth of personality."¹ The Labour movement draws its strength from the same source. Read Jack Lawson's tribute to the Little Bethels, at which the intelligentsia sneer. "Methodism took the 'nobodies' and made the most humble and hopeless 'somebody'." "Here among the Methodists my growing tendencies were encouraged, stimulated, and given opportunity for development." Jack Lawson's experience is typical of many. It would be difficult to calculate the debt of Labour to Methodism. Such Christian influences generate self-respect and self-control.

This intimate connection between Christian faith and the ideals of Labour should never be forgotten by those who glibly repeat the Communist cliché about religion being the opiate of the people. Often

¹Niebuhr : *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 65.