Chapter Eighteen

Marxists and Christians

It is an interesting paradox that large statements of doctrine are more usually aimed at heresies amongst one’s own adherents than at those who hold other doctrines. This is true not only of Christians. The recent papal encyclical on politics was aimed at casing and accommodating Christian socialists rather than at setting out a polemic against Marxists. Similarly the recent Soviet encyclical on communism addressed itself only to those who already accepted the basic premises of Soviet orthodoxy. More than this, the tendency to official peaceful co-existence is present in both documents. The papal document affirms its own positions rather than denies those of what the English translation of an earlier encyclical called ‘Atheistic Communism’. And there have been Marxists who would have stressed in their

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1 Originally published in Twentieth Century 170, Autumn 1961, pp. 28–37. The original article contained the following introductory passage by the editors: ‘Outside Britain in the 1960s, a huge section of the world has been changed and is still changing under the impact of Marxism, while Christianity is (relatively speaking) in retreat. Inside Britain, as Alasdair MacIntyre says, Christianity has become “more respectable than ever” and Marxism “more disreputable”. Is it possible to be both a Christian and a Marxist? Here the question is discussed by a leading young philosopher, who – after teaching philosophy at Manchester and Leeds – goes to Nuffield College, Oxford this autumn as Research Fellow. Alasdair MacIntyre sums up his own standpoint for us: “Was a Christian. Am not. It is less misleading when asked if I am a Marxist to say ‘yes’ rather than ‘no’. But other Marxists have been known to say ‘no’.”
description of the coming state of communism the withering away of religion. The Soviet document notably does not.

Yet if the discussion appears lifeless at the level of official exchanges between the not always Christian bureaucracy of the Vatican and the much more dubiously Marxist bureaucracy of the Kremlin, it is even more difficult to arouse interest in this debate at what one may call local level. What makes it difficult to discuss Christianity and Marxism in the British 1960s is that the one has become more respectable than ever, the other more disreputable. To be a Marxist in our society is to be a member of a tiny isolated minority; to be a Christian is to be part of the at present rising wave of bourgeois piety. Where, in the 1930s and 1940s, Christian students in British universities would have been pushed by circumstance into confrontation with Marxism, today pietism and ecclesiasticism absorb them more and more. The Communist Party exerts an attraction on few people of any kind and where Christians encounter it today it is likely to be in the guise of a public relations firm in the service of Khrushchev Enterprises Inc. Other Marxist groupings are usually numerically insignificant. When Marx is discussed in universities or schools it is normally a subject for academic refutation. The Christianity of the 1960s has a quality of complacent self-sufficiency that does not seem to destine it for painful encounters and the Marxism of the 1960s is unlikely to make an immediate impact on anybody, at least in Britain.

This framework of deep pessimism about the whole enterprise is a necessary starting-point. Otherwise anything more positive that I have to say will appear out of proportion. What I want to do is first to characterise the kind of dialogue that might go on between Christians and Marxists in the 1960s at occasional moments in odd places. I then want to look at the problems for Christianity that might be created by this dialogue. But I have to say might. And, in so far as this discussion is important, it is not just for people who wear the official labels, who think of themselves as Christians or Marxists. The Christianity of Pasternak (so different from that of the bishops) and the Marxism of Brecht (so different from that of his bishops) infect the consciousness of many people who will think themselves quite alien to this dialogue. But it will cast its shadows in their minds.

Can one be both Christian and Marxist? The first cynical, but historically vindicated answer, is that one can be Christian and anything. In the Cold War, as in almost all hot wars, Christians were on both sides. So rephrase the