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Communism and Religion in Russia and China

A Review Article

By WALTER W. OETTING

Scores of impressive books are appearing on the nature of Communism in Russia and China, on the history of Russia as background to what happened in 1917, reprints of Russian and Communist classics, and on the struggle between Christianity and Communism. A single reviewer could not hope even to list, much less review, this literature. The task that this reviewer has set for himself is to examine the "pick of the pack," especially those that have come across his desk for one reason or another. He writes this article with the intention of directing the attention of his colleagues in the clergy especially to some recently published books that they might find helpful in a field where much that appears is partisan propaganda.

One of the finest studies of the struggle between Christianity and Communism is that by Lester DeKoster, librarian at Calvin College and Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, entitled *Communism and Christian Faith*.¹ The author treats both as "faiths," attempting to show the fallacies

¹ Lester DeKoster, *Communism and Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962; x and 158 pages; cloth; \$3.50). Other studies of this subject are Lambert Brose, *How to Fight Communism Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962) and Thomas O. Kay, *The Christian Answer to Communism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), reviewed in this journal, XXXIII (November 1962), 691—2.

of the former and to assert needed correctives in interpreting the latter. On the whole it is an excellent general evaluation of the conflict.

It is important, however, to note at the very beginning that this book is a popular treatment. DeKoster begins with a popular analysis of Marxism. One is tempted to write off his "caricature" of economic theories unless one remembers that he is writing for the nonprofessional mind. He discusses Marxism within the format of a play where workers and employer examine the theory together. In chapter two he turns to capitalism and reveals his "evangelical" orientation by discussing capitalism from the viewpoint of the Christian imperative. While few will agree with everything that he writes about capitalism, his tendency to prefer broad analogies and contrasts is especially difficult. These work fine in popular speeches and fireside chats, but break down under scrutiny. He does not mention the important contributions by Plekhanov, for example, in his remarks on the Marxist evaluation of human freedom, nor the "decentralization" emphasis of Khrushchev in his discussion of "flexibility."

DeKoster's gravitation to broad analogies also gets him into difficulty when he treats the place of man in Communist theory. He rightly suggests that the origin and perpetuation of evil for the Marxist is in the capitalistic class system rather

than in the perverted will of man, but it is hardly correct to suggest that in Marxist ideology neither "evil" nor "salvation" really involve man, since the "classless society" is presumably for man's benefit. DeKoster also gets into difficulty when he treats capitalism. Concepts such as "Christian economic program" and "Christian social order" come much too easy to DeKoster for a Lutheran reader. Again in his concluding remarks the reader suspects that DeKoster is not properly defining Marxian "materialism." This concept covers not merely the petty economic materialism of Yaroslavsky's now defunct League of the Militant Godless, but actually includes many of the "mental" and "spiritual" categories that DeKoster sets in opposition to it. But he does make very clear the Marxist indifference to the individual when individual interests conflict with the demands of certain social objectives.

It is good that DeKoster carefully defines what he means when he describes Communism as a religion. He writes, "Understand communism, then, as a religion, or miss the secret of its power" (emphasis added). DeKoster also calls it a "religion of hate." It was Nicholas Berdyaev who popularized the interpretation that Communism is a religion turned inside out since it is the worship of a false god. Berdyaev's *The Russian Revolution*²

² Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1961; 91 pages; paper; \$1.75). This book was first published in 1931 and is reprinted as part of the University of Michigan's attempt to make available works for use in its extensive program of Russian studies. See also its reprint of Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1961; xlvii and 191 pages; paper; \$1.95).

and his *The Russian Idea*³ have recently been reprinted. In *The Russian Revolution* Berdyaev does not deal with the history of the revolution itself but rather with the ideological revolution—the nature of the revolution as an historical-ideological principle—that Lenin carried in his briefcase. In contrasting the ideology of Marxism with the intellectual traditions in Russia he develops the religious character of Russian Marxism. Quoting Solovyev that "to defeat what is false in socialism one must recognize what is true in it," Berdyaev proceeds to characterize the "religion turned inside out" character of the Marxist faith.

Certainly calling Communism a religion can lead to misunderstanding since Communism denies the existence of God, but Luther's explanation of the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism* would seem to suggest that "godness" can, indeed, be defined as that which is the object of our ultimate concern. While this is certainly not a complete definition, it does help to describe what DeKoster calls "the secret of its [Communism's] power." On the other hand we must be careful that we do not denature the definition of "religion" so that it ultimately becomes the label of something like the spiritual goals of society, a not uncommon phenomenon. DeKoster commendably stays clear of anything like this latter ambiguity.

In the final chapters DeKoster develops

³ Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962; xx and 267 pages; paper; \$1.95). See the note in this journal, XXXIV (March 1963), 186—7. A helpful tract for group study of this conflict of ideas has been prepared by Robert P. Scharlemann, *Communism and the Christian Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963; 39 pages; paper; \$.35).

precisely the specifically Christian concerns and specific reactions, and appends a fine book list with comments for further reading. This reviewer personally feels that John C. Bennett's *Christianity and Communism Today*⁴ is equally impressive in the area of critique, but DeKoster elucidates the specific accents of evangelical Christianity more explicitly. DeKoster points up the irrelevant character of the classical Marxist critique of capitalism, since changes have taken place in capitalism to a degree undreamed of by Marx, but he also illustrates just how Christians need to "examine themselves" in the face of criticism. In his chapter on Christian action he makes clear that the "advances" of capitalism are often just in those areas most often attacked by the so-called anti-Communist crusaders. He writes, "By reckless usage [as] a slogan, [the word 'Communism'] is used to denote not only Marxism and the Russian system, but also to condemn the income tax, racial integration, public housing, medical assistance to the aged, progressive education, [and] decisions of the Supreme Court."⁵ In a section on "Serving the Truth" he writes further, "Not every African native, for example, who protests colonialism, who seeks self-determination, who asks for the possession of his country's natural resources is by these tokens a Communist. And we have no right to say that he is one, unless we know that he subscribes to Marxist ideology."⁶ And again, "The reckless use of *Communist* or *Communist conspiracy*

or *Comsymp* or *fellow-traveler* is an affront to truth."⁷

Perhaps the most important criticism of DeKoster's book is that it is too theoretical in its approach to the conflict between the two systems of life. Theory is most important, but so is history. We ought not merely oppose Marxist theory to Christianity, but also see how Marxism in action has opposed Christianity in its concrete expressions. What about Christians living in a communist society?⁸ Marx provided no "theory" for a communist state dealing with an Orthodox church. The church was supposed to wither away with the advent of Communism. Theoretically, there is no *modus operandi* between Communism and Christianity, but in historical reality such a *modus* has had to be found. DeKoster does not distinguish between Marxist theory and the Russian type of Communist reality in the conflict with Christianity. This is not being pedantic; on the contrary, it is most important in developing possibilities for the future. Russian Communism often departs from theoretical Marxism when situations arise of which Marx was not aware.⁹ Russian Communist political theory has been in great part opportunistic. Marx knew nothing, for example, of Lenin's tight party structure, much less of Communist purges and concentration camps. Stalin reversed Soviet policy in its approach to Russian culture

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See the correspondence between Johannes Hamel and Karl Barth, translated by Henry Clark, James D. Smart, Thomas Wieser, *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land* (New York: Association Press, 1959).

⁹ See R. R. Rostow, *Dynamics of Soviet Society* (New York: Mentor Books, 1954) and John Maynard, *Russia in Flux* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951).

⁴ John C. Bennett, *Christianity and Communism Today* (New York: Association Press, 1960).

⁵ DeKoster, p. 123.

⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

and nationalism when the situation required it. The attitude of the Soviet Russian state toward the Orthodox form of Christianity has also changed as the situation demanded it. Three books have appeared recently which discuss the history of this relationship: Constantin de Grunwald's *The Churches and the Soviet Union*¹⁰ and Walter Kolarz' *Religion in the Soviet Union*¹¹ on the situation in Russia, and Francis Price Jones' *The Church in Communist China*¹² on the situation there.

Grunwald writes in a journalistic style of his journey through Russia to examine the situation of the Russian churches. Formerly a member of the diplomatic corps of the Russian Imperial government, Grunwald left Russia in 1917 and has

¹⁰ Constantin de Grunwald, *The Churches and the Soviet Union*. Trans. G. J. Robinson-Paskevsky (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962; 255 pages; cloth; \$4.00). A similar study is Marcus Bach, *God and the Soviets* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1958).

¹¹ Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962; xii and 518 pages; cloth; \$12.50). At Concordia Seminary the resource text used for the unit on "The Church under Communism" in Church History III is Matthew Spinka, *The Church in Soviet Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

¹² Francis P. Jones, *The Church in Communist China* (New York: Friendship Press, 1962; x and 180 pages; paper; \$1.75). The reader might also consult Chow Ching-wen, *Ten Years of Storm* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960; xxii and 323 pages; cloth; \$6.00). Subtitled "the true story of the Communist regime in China," Chow's book describes in detail the Communist takeover in China. Chow was a political leader in China who found himself in violent opposition to Communism. Also see the article by Francis P. Jones "Theological Thinking in the Chinese Protestant Church under Communism" in *Religion In Life*, 1963, 534—546.

since lived in France and England. He begins his report: "A specialist in my country's history, I was bold enough to consider myself qualified to undertake an extremely delicate project, to give readers in the West a full picture of the religious situation in my native land and of the bitter struggle now going on there between believers and unbelievers."¹³ His report is generally realistic and at times rather too optimistic. He feels that there is a bright future for Orthodoxy in the Soviet Union.

After a brief and inadequate review of the role that the Russian church has played in Russian history, Grunwald discusses the attitude of the Soviet state, the legal situation, the patriarchate, the parishes, seminary life, and finally religious minorities.

Generally the author pictures the good qualities of religious life in Russia, but gives few insights into the serious and varied difficulties that the church faces. This is true of his presentation in every area of the church's life; we hear the good, but little about the difficulties. Certainly his conversation with Karpov's successor, Vladimir Kuroiedov, is, to say the least, surprising, and, if accurate, surely denotes a perceptible change in the Soviet attitude toward religion even in the last few years. Grunwald reports that this Soviet director of religious affairs told him: "I myself am a Communist, but none of my friends who is a Party member feels at all hostile towards religious believers. Citizens should not be separated from one another because of religion. So far as I am concerned, I sometimes dream of the future when the coexistence of

¹³ Grunwald, p. 9.

these two ways of looking at the world will be finally realized."¹⁴

Grunwald's description of the Russian church today too often degenerates into special pleading. He defends the attitude of Orthodoxy towards Communism. He praises Russian Biblical scholarship. (Incidentally, his description of Russian seminary life indicates that the Orthodox theology is still out of conversation with the intellectual tradition in Russia today, that its philosophy is pre-Kantian, and that its exegetical theology remains pre-critical.) Grunwald passes over the severe limitations imposed on Russian Christianity with little more than a bare mention.

The study of Walter Kolarz is much more detailed and objective. He begins with an excellent chapter on the conflict of the Russian church with Communism. He proceeds to discuss in successive chapters each of the religious groups in modern Russia: The Russian Orthodox church, the national Orthodox churches, the Old Believers, the Armenian church, the Roman Catholic Church in Russia, Roman Catholics in other countries behind the iron curtain, Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennonites, Evangelicals, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's witnesses, Christian Science, specifically Russian sects, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others of less importance. He treats each of these by giving a brief account of their history in Russia, where they are located, and attempts to give some statistics. This is a most helpful summary, interestingly told, of information that is otherwise rather scattered.

Accepting the theses of N. S. Timasheff, Kolarz credits the survival of religion in

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

Russia to the failure of antireligious propaganda and the inability of the Communists to come up with a good substitute for religion as a foundation for the new morality. He is much taken by Yaroslavsky's report about a party member who filled out a questionnaire "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen." He reports the inability of the party to purge itself, much less the whole country, of Christians. He accepts the conservative estimates that from twenty to thirty million Orthodox Christians survive in Russia today in the face of continuous antireligious propaganda.¹⁵ And now that "the establishment of a separate Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church [has] marked a return to a pre-revolutionary order and the abandonment of that hostile aloofness towards religious matters which the Soviet regime originally observed," the author feels that, barring a radical change in party policy, which is possible at any time, the church in Russia can look for a continuation of the no-persecution policy, but can have no real hope for any lifting of the severe restrictions on the work of the church. The grounds of this belief are admirably set out. This is certainly among the best of the books that have appeared on the makeup of religion in Russia today.

The little book by Jones is the more important because there are so few treatments of the situation in China, and since

¹⁵ Excellent material on this propaganda can also be found in Paul B. Anderson, *People, Church and State in Modern Russia* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944) and in N. S. Timasheff, *Religion in Soviet Russia 1917—1942* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1942). See also the "Special Report" in *The Christian Century* for Feb. 6, 1963.

Price's report is written against the backdrop of his many years in China as a Methodist missionary (1915—1952).

While the author is willing to go a long way in attempting to understand the Communists, even to accepting in principle the Three-Self Reform Movement, he presents a clear picture of the church's situation in China today. His book is limited by the fact that it is essentially a history of Protestant missions; those of the Roman Catholic Church receive only passing consideration.

Jones attempts to understand those Chinese Christians who cooperate with the Communists. He writes that while we may question their judgment we dare not question their sincerity. How does a sincere Christian obey a Communist government? The author states that his purpose is to present "a picture of a church striving to adapt itself to its new situation in such a way that it may continue to preach the way of salvation through Christ." Since Christians in China make up at most 1% of the population and are one of the "younger churches," it is interesting to compare their opposition and/or cooperation with Communism with the reaction of the old and established church in Russia.

The author's comments are especially interesting to Western Christianity because he feels that as a result of Communism in China the church there has been called back to her real mission. Since Christians are no longer able to engage in charities such as hospitals, orphanages, schools, libraries, etc., much less in developing modern methods of agriculture, because all of these are now the avid interest of the government, the church is limited to the basic task of preaching the Gospel.

The author also shows just how Christians cooperate with the Communist government in building the new China. He illustrates with specific cases the problems that continually confront Christians. While he is sympathetic to the attempts of Christians to live their faith and yet obey their government, he is not blind to the dangers of this approach. Yet, he insists that while the dangers are many, as long as the Word is preached and baptisms continue there remains hope for this young Christian community.

Other topics that Price discusses are the distinction in the Communist mind between a Christian missionary and a Chinese Christian, the broken nature of the Chinese church prior to Communism and its consequent attempts at ecumenical activity, how the Communists reeducated Christian teachers in China, and the attempts to rethink the Christian doctrines like those of original sin, love, and the last things, in the light of Communist theories.

These studies of the actual relationship that exists between Christianity and Communism show that merely theoretical discussions of the problem are not adequate. They also demonstrate that Communism nowhere accepts the existence of the church with equanimity.

Studies have also appeared on various related areas. Helene Iswolsky, a convert to the Roman Catholic Church who left Russia in 1917 and has since been associated with various universities in the field of Russian studies, recently published a good popular history of the Russian Church,¹⁶ although the book is heavily

¹⁶ Helene Iswolsky, *Christ in Russia* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1960; x and 213 pages; cloth. \$3.95).

oriented toward Russian piety rather than toward discussion of ecclesiastical institutions. The chapter on the church in Soviet society has limited value; the bibliography does not include the recent treatments of this subject. The author does not adequately uncover the problem of source materials in early Russian history and consequently will perhaps confuse some readers by not distinguishing between history and myth. She also tends to cover up some very real difficulties that continue to divide Roman Catholicism from Russian Orthodoxy.

Another study on an area of intellectual tradition related to Christianity is that in which Michael Cherniavsky, associate professor of Russian history in the University of Chicago, analyzes the ideological myths told to justify or explain away the social and economic realities in old Russia.¹⁷ He illustrates the inseparability of social and economic factors from the religious and ideological traditions of a given time

¹⁷ Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961; xix and 258 pages; cloth; no price given). Another book that treats the social and economic background about which Cherniavsky is writing is Jerome Blume, *Lord and Peasant in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961; x and 656 pages; cloth; \$12.50). Blume is chairman of the history department in Princeton University. His book treats the period between the conversion of the Russians in the tenth century and the formal rejection of religion in 1917. Both Cherniavsky and Blume work with primary sources and the bibliographies are exceptional. See also Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963; xviii and 711 pages; cloth; \$10.50). Riasanovsky is professor of history in the University of California at Berkeley. The book is an introduction to the history of Russia from the beginnings to the present. It integrates the political history with social and cultural movements, and is enhanced by 32 pages of excellent illustrations and maps.

and place. The social structures that defined lord and peasant played a decisive role in establishing the relationship of bishop to priest. The economic poverty and suffering of the Russian people shaped their understanding of Christianity.

Relying heavily on the theses of Kantorowicz, Cherniavsky traces the changes that took place in the Russian myths associated with the tsar and with the people between the 9th and the 19th centuries. He does not analyze the contrasts or the continuities with 20th-century Communist economics or myths. But for those who see continuity in Russian history across the great divide of 1917 there is much in this that proves interesting. Cherniavsky shows how the myth of the saintly prince ultimately develops into a rationale for absolutism in the time of Nicholas I. The ancient Christian theory of Agapetus that takes even the wrongs of the ruler and turns them into rights on the basis of his position is clearly evident in modern Russia. Cherniavsky also makes the interesting claim that the myths associated with "Holy Russia" began as anti-state and anti-tsar slogans and only later were turned into a messianic theory of Russia as "holy" because God had selected it to carry out a unique task in the redemption of mankind. Needless to add, this messianism is an important part of the psychology of modern Russia.

All of the studies that we have mentioned above are attempts to elucidate what has happened during the last years in Russia. Men and women engaged in the historical task are limited by their imagination and by the documents available. The task is made more difficult in the area of Russian history by the unwillingness

of the Soviet government to allow open investigation especially of more recent historical materials. Furthermore, Western historians have found it difficult to rely on the studies coming out of Russia because they are often inaccurate. A symposium that attempts to explain the problems faced by the Russian historian is *Rewriting Russian History*.¹⁸ The essay by Cyril Black, the editor, dealing with the relationship of politics to historiography in modern Russia, demonstrates the tension that plagues the modern Russian historian. On the one hand there are facts that he must interpret; on the other hand are the passing remarks of Marx or Lenin on historical questions to which he must try to be loyal. Since the creators of Communism could not, according to Marxist theory, err, Soviet historians must be careful not even to seem to contradict them. Black states that even though "Marxism [does not] provide a scientific law of history, but simply a general view-

¹⁸ *Rewriting Russian History*, ed. Cyril E. Black. Second ed. (New York: Random House, 1962; xv and 431 pages; paper; \$1.95). This book includes twelve essays by various authorities on Communist Russia's historical tradition. The editor is professor of history in Princeton University. Leo Yaresh, who contributes five of the essays, was educated at the University of Kiev. Konstantin Shtepa, for many years professor at Kiev, evaluates the "lesser evil" formula. Igor Sevchenko of Columbia University evaluates modern Russian interpretations of Byzantine influences. John Thompson of Indiana University evaluates the interpretations of the allied intervention of 1918—20. Volodymyr Varlamov, trained at the University of St. Petersburg, interprets Communist historiography on the relation of Lenin to the earlier radical tradition in Russia. Alexander Vucinich of San Jose College treats questions on the origin of the Russian state. The bibliographies include both Russian and English works.

point, a spirit, and nothing more,"¹⁹ research is too often geared and limited to the elucidation of Marx' theses, such as the five types of "relations of production." Marx also suggested an "Asiatic mode of production," a comment that historians have been debating ever since. Offhand characterizations of the Babylonians and Tartars by Marx or Lenin cannot be contradicted.

Soviet historians are also required to elucidate the dialectical process in history. They have found this in itself most difficult. Stalin made it even more difficult with the requirement that the dialectical process be combined with the aspirations of the Russian peoples. He demanded that history support not only Marxist theory, but also his own attempts at centralization and the defense of the Russian national state against Hitler. Before 1936 the history of Russia played a minor role in the interpretation of Marxism. Since then, however, resulting in part from the patriotism engendered by the Second World War, Communism in Russia has absorbed more and more of the pre-1917 ideals. To integrate the anti-national movement of Marxism with the nationalism of the Muscovite state was Stalin's aim. The Russian state must be defended as a good institution. Russia's conquests must be justified. Stalin required that the Slavic elements as opposed to the Greek elements in Russia's past must be glorified. Great figures of Russia's past such as Ivan the Terrible and Alexander the Second were no longer treated as representatives of the old order but precursors of the new.²⁰

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁰ A study that illustrates some of the good results of Soviet efforts is W. E. Mosse, *Alexan-*

Stalin pressured the historians to rewrite history with these ideas in view.

der II and the Modernization of Russia, revised edition (New York: Collier Books, 1962; 159 pages; paper; 95 cents). While Mosse's description of feudalism is totally inadequate and curiously enough follows the directives of Merzon (see Black, p. 41), the contribution of recent monographs is obvious in his thorough description of Alexander's reform legislation. Mosse

attempts no probe of Alexander's character or of the structures related to serfdom. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that the treatment is popular. We feel, however, that this explanation does not account for the fact that the radical intelligentsia and especially figures like Bakunin and Nechaev, who play such an important role in the ultimate destiny of Russia, are only mentioned.

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