

WHAT COMMUNISTS SAY ABOUT CHRISTIANS

BY CARSTEN JOHNSEN

Indictments against the church by Marxists tempt one to agree with Nietzsche—the last Christian died on the cross!



Museum of Religion and Atheism: model of a monk's shop with numerous relics of superstitious characters.

together, and it should not be the Christians who discount the convicting power of the Spirit! Does not Scripture witness that in all ages there have been mighty ones among the heathen? Whatever the fallacies of Marxism—rooted as much in man's "bent" nature as in the dialectic—its message has proved so engaging that nothing save religion itself has produced effects of similar magnitude. And among Communists themselves is a concept of mission and a commitment that should cause many a Christian to review the meaning of discipleship.

The image of Christianity that emerges from Christian-Marxist dialog is not flattering. In some respects, it is not accurate. In

others it is all too accurate. The image is based primarily on six charges.

1. The church is always on the side of established authority. It defends the status quo, no matter how unchristian the status quo may be. Russian Orthodoxy sustained the cause, corruption, and oppression of the Czar. Roman Catholicism supports repressive governments. Dictatorships of the right are supported by both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Alliances with the bourgeois are legion.

2. The church pacifies the poor with lullabies of future recompense in the Great Beyond; offers prayers for the dead and sentimental hymns in place of compassion and care for the living; in brief, dispenses those bromides of cheap escape from reality that Proudhon and Marx called "opium for the people."

3. Christianity is reactionary in principle. It puts the concrete injustice of earth beyond human reach by confining battles between right and wrong to a distant heaven. Injustice in the here and now is quietly countenanced because punishment is relegated to God, the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent One. Even in heaven, we are told, there is a hierarchy. And celestial inequality gives license to terrestrial inequality. God is said to grant His benediction to, and confer authority on, whatever government has usurped power at a given moment. It is authorized to wield the sword of injustice, whereas the poor are refused every right to defend themselves.

4. The church is reactionary because it turns a person from his real future, circumscribing him within the bounds of an alleged sinful nature. The symbol under which this resignation is preached is eloquent: It is the cross. Its ideal is the patience of the oppressed.

5. The church is reactionary because it proclaims the gospel of charity. But charity is the invention of the strong, who pose as just and gracious men, while in reality, remaining unjust and without pity. The employer who has enriched himself by the sweat of his employees permits himself the

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The way the story goes, an American tourist in Moscow chides a Soviet acquaintance about his country's lack of freedom. "Why, in America," he says, "I can stand in front of the Capitol and shout, 'Send Ronald Reagan back to Hollywood!' and nothing will happen to me."

"That's nothing," responds the Russian. "I can stand in front of the Kremlin and shout, 'Send Ronald Reagan back to Hollywood!' and nothing will happen to me, either!"

Undoubtedly, variations of this story have featured every American president since Woodrow Wilson. And since Lenin, himself, a succession of Soviet leaders has contributed to the image of a totalitarian state that denies basic human rights, including freedom of religion. Is the image the reality? I'm reminded of the Soviet Christian who told me, "We have full religious freedom in our country!"—and then, after a cautious look around, whispered, "But we want *more!*" Western Christians, in the main, would insist that repression rather than freedom is the keynote of church-state relations in the Communist world.

But the Western world also has an image. Freedom of speech? Maybe, says the Communist, but words cannot fill an empty stomach—though, as the saying has it, words must at times be eaten. And when freedom of speech means pornography, when the freedom to bear arms means hourly homicides, when freedom of religion means sanctified disregard of justice—repression does have its attraction! No one who has visited the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad will dismiss the Marxist image of the church out of hand. Communists can make a persuasive case against the Christian Church. A case that tempts one to agree with Nietzsche—the last Christian *did* die on the cross!

Recently, and on a limited scale, Communist dialecticians and Christian theologians have sat together to explore and compare "images," to the distress of the "righteous" on both sides. (One remembers that Christ Himself was attacked by the "righteous" for eating with tax collectors and other sinners.) But in this nuclear age it surely is better to talk together than to die

luxury of generosity. He supports the charities of the church and thus basks in the flattering approval of priests and prelates. In reality, he is returning an infinitesimal portion of what he has stolen from the workers. Such gracious gifts have one effect and purpose: they perpetuate servile souls.

6. Though professing the ethic of agape love, the church has used physical, mental, and spiritual coercion to achieve its ends. Christian has slaughtered both Christian and heathen to bring them into the loving embrace of God! States became instruments through which the church perpetuated injustice, and the church itself became a den of thieves.

Dismiss what charges we, with integrity, can, we are left with a residue of truth. We are being hit hard, and we should feel it. But Communists should know that every accusation hits us hard, not to the degree that we are consistent Christians, but to the degree that we are not. In fact, much the same charges are hurled against us in Holy Writ. The Bible does not justify the Pharisee but calls him to account. Here are three samples of rebuke as the forceful Phillips translates them:

"And now, you plutocrats, is the time for you to weep and moan because of the miseries in store for you. . . . You have made a fine pile in these last days, haven't you? But look, here is the pay of the reaper you hired and whom you cheated, and it is shouting out against you! And the cries of the other laborers you swindled are heard by the Lord of Hosts himself" (James 5:1-4).*

To the rich young ruler who said that he had kept all the commandments from his youth, Christ said:

"If you want to be perfect, go now and sell your property and give the money away to the poor—you will have riches in heaven." "A camel could more easily squeeze through the eye of a needle than a rich man get into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:21,24).

Of unjust religious leaders Christ spoke: "You must not imitate their lives! For they preach but do not practice. They pile up back-breaking burdens and lay them on other men's shoulders—yet they themselves will not raise a finger to move them. . . . Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you utter frauds! For you pay your tithes on mint and aniseed and cummin, and neglect the things which carry far more weight in the Law—justice, mercy and good faith" (Matthew 23:3, 4, 23).

Are these indictments from Christ's mouth less severe than those from the Marxists? The difference is one not of degree but of target: while Marxists direct their charges against Christianity itself, Christ directs His against false disciples. Hearing the Communist attack against

Christianity, one feels like crying out, "But this is *not* Christianity!" This is the perversion, the counterfeit, the prostituted.

And what was Christ's judgment on the alliance of apostate church and oppressive state? Hear the words recorded by the Revelator:

"Come, and I will show you the judgement on the great whore, enthroned above the ocean. The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and on the wine of her fornication men all over the world have made themselves drunk.' In the Spirit he carried me away into the wilds, and there I saw a woman [the corrupted church] mounted on a scarlet beast [the corrupted state] which was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet and bedizened with gold and jewels and pearls. In her hand she held a gold cup, full of obscenities and the foulness of her fornication; and written on her forehead was a name with a secret meaning: 'Babylon the great, the mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth.' The woman, I saw, was drunk with the blood of God's people and with the blood of those who had borne their testimony to Jesus. . . .

"Then he [the angel messenger] said to me, 'The ocean you saw, where the great whore sat, is an ocean of peoples and populations, nations and languages. As for the ten horns you saw, they together with the beast will come to hate the whore; they will strip her naked and leave her desolate, they will batten on her flesh and burn her to ashes. . . . The woman you saw is the great city that holds sway over the kings of the earth.'

"After this . . . [another angel messenger] in a mighty voice . . . proclaimed, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, for every vile and loathsome bird. For all nations have drunk deep of the fierce wine of her fornication; the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and merchants the world over have grown rich on her bloated wealth.'

"Then I heard another voice from heaven that said: 'Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins and share in her plagues. For her sins are piled high as heaven, and God has not forgotten her crimes'" (Rev. 17:1-6, 15-18; 18:1-5; N.E.B.).†

Harsh as is the Communist indictment of Christianity, it does not equal this divine indictment of the fallen church. Students of church history—and in the Soviet context, Orthodox church history—cannot escape the conviction that the Marxist-oppressed church is reaping what it has sown.


The church has professed Christ while

defending antichristian doctrines and practices. Thus it bears responsibility for the appeal of Communism, and even for its emergence. Were churches more penitent, they would manifest greater self-scrutiny and self-criticism. At the very least the result would be less belligerence and self-righteousness.

These observations are not intended to obscure the real hardships that Christianity has suffered, and suffers still, under Communist regimes. To the Marxist, religion is either a tool to be used or an enemy to be destroyed—though some of the more liberal are willing to give the church license to destroy itself. Constitutional guarantees of the right to believe, embodied in most Marxist constitutions, do not entail the right to witness; only Communists may propagate their belief. Communism is not noted for offering a free market, whether in economics, politics, or religion.

It must be noted, however, that minority churches often enjoy greater freedom and equity under Communism than they had under church-dominated monarchies. State churches often have used civil government to persecute their smaller competitors. Now, deprived of privileged status, these former state churches often are first to cry persecution.

Sadly, Marxists have not learned the pitfalls of imposed conformity from their deposed predecessors of church and of state. How different things might have been had they truly separated church and state, rather than making the church the creature of the State! Perhaps the church, in the main, has learned the merits of allowing every man to go to hell in his own way; this wisdom the Marxists have not yet demonstrated.

It may be a long time before a Russian can stand in front of the Kremlin and shout, "Send Comrade Andropov back to the collective farm!" It may be a long time before a Russian Christian can pass out tracts even in a back alley. Freedoms do not come easily to the Marxist state. But we will remember that neither did they come easily to the Christian Church. The Communist charges against the church have merit. We who feel ashamed must go forth, with greater humility, to witness and suffer for the truth. 

FOOTNOTES

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