

Christian-Marxist dialogue: Church leaders advocate an unrealistic option

Is it possible to have a profitable dialogue between Christians and atheist Marxists in Eastern Europe? "Yes." says Dr. Mojzes, whose personal history and academic training make him imminently qualified to treat this little-known subject in his book *Christian Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe*.

Dr. Mojzes was born in northeast Yugoslavia. His father, a Methodist minister, was murdered by a fascist camp guard in 1942. In postwar Yugoslavia, he was exposed to atheist Marxism, which was militantly anti-church. His faith crumbled; and he not only accepted Marxism, but also became an active member in the local People's Youth movement. He kept up church attendance for the sake of his godly mother and at last had to relinquish his party membership.

Mojzes's upbringing in Yugoslavia helped him master Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Russian and German. The knowledge of these languages were a great help to him for the research of this book with its enormous amount of detail.

Mojzes was given an opportunity to study in the U.S.A., where he took – out of curiosity – some courses in religion. These courses led him to accept a "liberal Protestant interpretation of Christianity." a view which "could accommodate both his search for a respectable scientific and rational approach to life" and his need for meaning and purpose in life supported by a system of values that demeans neither the individual nor society." Despite his conversion to Christianity, he didn't become anti-Communist; he considers all anti-movements futile.

Paul Mojzes earned his doctorate in Eastern European Church History at Boston University in 1965. He is vice-president of Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe (CAREE) and co-editor of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. In 1978 he edited *Varieties of Christian-Marxist Dialogues*.

CAREE is an ecumenical association for international peace and justice and for relationships with the Christian Peace Conference. It is related to the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. as part of its international Affairs Inter-Unit Program.

CAREE published a newsletter four times a year to provide information and different points of view on the developments in Christian-Marxist encounters throughout the world. On May 28-30, 1982, it sponsored the Third North American Christian-Marxist Dialogue on "Work: Its Meaning, Organization and Control, at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C. Papers on work were delivered by both Marxists and Christians. The banquet speaker delivered an address on Martial Law and the Future of Poland. The Sunday morning session featured, besides a dialogue, "A Christian-Marxist Period of Meditation and Celebration.

Liberal Christianity

The Marxist-Christian dialogue was conducted mainly by intellectuals. It has never become a popular movement.

The Christians involved in this Marxist-Christian encounter came from the liberal wing of Christianity. Mojzes views God as the source of "purposiveness, goodness, and other important values." He believes that "those acts which make Christians and Marxists work for the general human benefit are the will of God." Christianity is kept very much on the horizontal level.

Even atheists may be doing the will of God. Mojzes comments that. "Theologians such as Hromadka, Lochman, and Franic pointed out that the atheist may be a part of God's plan, doing in fact, God's will." The Czech Marxist philosopher Milan Machovec points out that with the modern theologians' new notions of God, Marxists should alter their approach. He says: "Twentieth-century theologians have worked out new models for thinking about God, so that often we Marxists no longer know whether we are still atheists or not in their regard." This is a significant statement! No wonder that Mojzes claims that dialogue has become possible because of "the de-dogmatization of theology and of Marxist theory" that "has largely taken place among thinkers

World Council of Churches [WCC]

Dialogue has become an important feature of the WCC in its approach to world religions and Marxism. In the 1965 meeting of the WCC in Stockholm, Heinrich Gruber, the representative of the Evangelical Church in Germany with the East German government until 1958, urged cooperation between Christians and Marxists and criticized both sides for their weaknesses and reluctance. A Marxist philosopher read a paper at the WCC consultation on Christianity and Marxism in Geneva in 1968. The leadership of the WCC has suggested that Communism must not be 'demonized.' and it advocates a different stance towards communism than toward fascism even though both are totalitarian and anti-Christian ideologies.

In the past, Christians suffered greatly in Nazi concentration camps. Today, many Christians are being persecuted by communist powers. So, why has Protestantism been reluctant of absolute condemnation of communism? Has liberal Protestantism accommodated and compromised itself so much that the antithesis has gone altogether? This appears to be so. According to Mojzes: "The climate changed so much that theologians spoke appreciatively of Marx, Lenin and their heritage, and Marxist expressed appreciation for Jesus, early Christianity, and, with more difficulty, the contemporary role of Christianity.

Marxism

Conventional Marxism asserts that it is incompatible with Christianity and any form of religion even though Lenin said that, Marxism as materialism is absolutely atheistic and resolutely hostile to all religion. We must combat religion."

Mojzes distinguishes three typical responses to religion advocated by Marxists. Firstly. "The task of Marxism is to show the nonsensical and unscientific character of religious dogmas and superstitions by pointing to how they obstruct human progress." Secondly. "Religion as a false social consciousness is caused by adverse natural circumstances and the class system." And thirdly. "Religion can be removed by 'administrative measures' against religion."

The latter stands for "physical and psychological persecution and terror, legal restrictions, administrative harassment. job discrimination, vilification in the press, destruction of church edifices, removal of items necessary for the conduct of worship, as well as other repressive measures for the purpose of weakening and finally eliminating religion." The official Soviet view is similar to the conventional view.

This type of Marxism. which is prevalent in Eastern Europe, is unacceptable to Mojzes. He comments that, "The way Marx's ideas are being used to justify totalitarian, exploitive policies is repulsive. It is not easy to avoid the trap of becoming anti-Marxist when one witnesses and experiences this form of Marxism. But the formalistic, fundamentalist, dogmatic, frequently barren and authoritarian expressions of Christianity experienced in the same geographic area could easily make one anti-Jesus or anti-Christian. Such forms of Christianity are also unacceptable to me.

Marxism is no longer a unified ideology. The current vast differences within Marxism are even recognized by many Marxists. A distinction must be made between dogmatic Marxism and Humanist Marxism. The dogmatic form of Marxism is often called Diamat, and the other, praxis or humanistic Marxism. "Diamat can be described as the rigid acceptance of a certain body of Marxist teachings as interpreted by Lenin and the official leadership of a respective Communist party.

The praxis or humanistic Marxism flexibility applies certain insights of Marx as a methodology of dealing critically with present-day problems." Within the communist world, we may also talk about "pro-Soviet Marxism-Leninism; Yugoslav, self managing socialism; Euro-communism; Maoism; Albanian and Rumanian anti-Soviet Marxism-Leninism: humanistic Marxism of Czechoslovakia and so forth."

Marxist critique of modern theology

How do Marxist philosophers and Eastern Christians view modern and liberation theologies? The Polish Marxist philosopher Adam Schaff was astonished by the positions taken by the Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner and Johannes B. Metz. He deemed them so far-out "that he considered them radical departures from the traditional realm of Christianity, as indeed they are from the stand point of Polish Roman Catholicism."

Mojzes notes that very few Eastern European Christians favour liberation theology. They warn against mixing Christianity a" Marxism. Bela Harmati a Lutheran Professor of Theology from Budapest, points out that various theologies of liberation as witnessed in Latin America are opposed by Hungarian Lutherans. Harmati writes; "We are against any kinds of mixtures; `Christian Marxism' or `Marxist Christianity' does not exist ... The Marxists themselves do not approve of such mixture."

Dialogue

Mojzes's book is a brilliant historical survey and analysis of the actual dialogue between Christians and Marxists, which has taken place with either Europeans or East European participants. It defines dialogue as "a way by which individuals or groups of different persuasions respectfully and responsibly relate to one another in order to bring about mutual enrichment without removing essential differences between them." The purposes of dialogue are: "attempts to grasp the truth better; the achievement of greater justice, human freedom, brotherhood or sisterhood; and, action for the welfare of all or part of humanity." The conditions for a useful dialogue exclude "outright persuasion," but they include the willingness to trust the partner, the belief that truth is attainable and the consent to "the notion that reality is greater than any one person or group can grasp and interpret."

Dr. Mojzes's perceptive and in-depth study includes a lengthy profile on Poland. Since the book was published just prior to the imposition of martial law in Poland the observations he makes are very interesting.

Evaluation

Is dialogue between Christianity and Marxism possible? This depends on what we mean by dialogue. In current WCC thought dialogue is a search for unity and community among the people of various faiths and cultures. Dr. S.S. Samartha, Director of the Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies of the WCC points out that, in spite of different commitments, Christians and Marxists can work together to bring about a just society. He says that human communities are inter-dependent and subsequently have a common responsibility for the future. Proselytism is forbidden. A WCC statement equates it with "compulsive, conscious, deliberate and tactical efforts to draw people from one community of faith to another."

Conversion is no longer a turning from sin to the living Saviour, but it is seen as "a growing mutual awareness of the presence of God in an encounter in which each becomes responsible for the other."

But how can there be a dialogue between Christians and Marxists when in reality, the basic beliefs of the one are denied by the other? In practice, the Marxist world and life view is openly atheistic. Wherever communism is in control, the church suffers. All communist parties, as they gain control, cease to practice co-existence with the church. They all become completely merciless as far as religion is concerned. A friendly

dialogue with Marxism is impossible, since the very basis of communism is world domination through the destruction of religion and spiritual values. In communist countries, everyone must be subordinated to the doctrines and ideology of Marxism. We must not be deceived by the various shifts in policies and practices in communist parties. Poland is a horrible symbol of Marxism's intent to stamp out opposition to its goal.

Dialogue has a place in Christianity. The Christian who is faithful to the Bible, insists that "if dialogue is to take the form of true Christian witness, it can never reach the point when the Christian, consciously or unconsciously, has to confess to the other man: 'I am as lost as you are.'" We may never lose sight of the purpose of missions - to win the world for Christ.

The apostle Paul engaged in dialogue, but not in search for truth. He preached the truth. He used all his great intellectual powers to persuade unbelievers to come to Christ. For example, "For three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead." Paul's dialogue was a Christ-centred proclamation. This is vastly different from the dialogue advocated by Dr, Paul Moizes and the leaders of the WCC.

In the biblical form of dialogue we must struggle to listen so as to discover what prevents others from coming to Christ. We must sympathize with their needs, their doubts, their fears and try to understand their faith positions. At the same time, we must persuade them to follow the master, as he alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn gave the west his clear warning about East-West discussions: ".For communists a dialogue with Christianity! In the Soviet Union this dialogue was a simple matter; they used machine guns and revolvers. And today, in Portugal, unarmed Catholics are stoned by the Communists. This is dialogue...And when the French and the Italian Communists say that they are going to have a dialogue, let them only get into power and we shall see what this dialogue will look like."

Johan D. Tangelder
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