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Religion Is a Free Response

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There is nothing in the Christian teaching, says a former clergyman, to warrant the belief that it is compatible with Marxism or the modern welfare state.

The radical and secularized impulses of the past quarter century have had a very definite effect upon the direction of Christendom. Social action groups in all denominations and forms of Protestantism and Catholicism have developed in program and power beyond all previous periods. It has been the day of "social advance."

There have been two main tendencies. One is the assumption that the Kingdom of God can be realized here on earth through personal effort supplemented and enforced by governmental action. The second is the willingness to accept as compatible with Christian teaching the proposal of Karl Marx: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Amazing as these tendencies are, they have been promoted in the churches by men and women who naively believe social welfare to be of such paramount importance that any means to its attainment is true and good.

These aspirations have led many people to misunderstand the nature of religious experience and the validity of the moral order. It becomes necessary, therefore, to study this situation. Let us consider the statements which are continually being thrust upon us with the implication that unless we accept them we can not be classed as Christian. Some of us believe that they are wrong, un-Biblical, and dangerous to valid Christian experience. Let us see if this is so.

Jesus Praised Husbandry

It is said, by a few people, that we should consider material possessions, other than the bare essentials of living, a sin; by others, that competitive attitudes and the profit motive are antisocial and un-Christian.

It is true that the Gospels contain directives to a dedicated life, but surely they were given to a chosen few who would be an inner circle living under a personal discipline, in the world but not of it. The directive is explicit: "You are not to be as the others." When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples, he said: "Get you no gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses; no wallet for your journey, neither two coats, nor shoes, nor staff; the laborer is worthy of his food. And into whatever city ye shall enter, search out who is worthy, and there abide."

Obviously this is not a blueprint for society. These are directives to men who are to be members of a monastic order, who are to give up home, family, property, and concern for their living, in order to preach the Gospel. The purpose, dedication and specialized function of such voluntary groups is beyond criticism. Their avowed purpose is to be the yeast, not the whole loaf. They will live by the charity of those who produce; but they can be granted such charity only if their number is small in comparison with the whole of society.

Such living can not be a general pattern, for if all were required to live in this manner there would be no life beyond this generation. Continuation of life demands that men and women marry and have children, and that the family be provided with food, shelter and clothing through the responsible work of parents.

There is no need, then, to quote these directives for monastic living to those who can not possibly live monastically, and to judge them by this code. It is as idle as suggesting that all men should accept the dictates and restrictions of research, and give up the meaningful labor of producing, selling and distributing its results.

In all the words of Jesus there is no other reference to any form of propertyless living. But there is repeated praise of responsible and trustworthy husbandmen. "Well done, good and faithful servant," was said to men who had increased their possessions 100 per cent. In the same chapter Jesus

commends the bridesmaids who had the foresight to fill their lamps with oil. There is no suggestion that they should have shunned that menial duty, or made someone else pay the cost. Zacchaeus did not tell Jesus that he had decided to give up his business in order to follow Him; but that he would give of his possessions to feed the poor, and would make amends for anything he had stolen. His reward was one of the warmest commendations Jesus ever uttered.

Possession of property was commended when it was used responsibly and with charity to the helpless, *acting upon the voluntary choice to give or to withhold.* There is not a single suggestion in all of the New Testament that the use or sharing of property should be coerced into forms and ends determined by one's associates. Every reference is to a personal and voluntary decision. Jesus urged "the cup of water given in my name." Paul said, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." That is why there is no such thing as Christian social action, or a Christian community. There can only be social action by Christians, and only a community of Christians.

Do not think that this was an invitation to irresponsibility. "It were better that a millstone be hung about a man's neck, and he be dropped into the sea, than he harm on of these little ones." But God would bless the use of one's possessions in compassion and service and for ministries to unfold the freedom of the human spirit. "Seek ye first His kingdom, and all these things shall be added unto you."

This is the Christian basis for such personal action, and it is also the basis of classical humanism. In all the great religions—such as Judaism, Christianty, Confucianism and Humanism—the development of human personality through its unique individual forms is the mark of man's true relationship with the eternal verities. That is "character." The meaning of the Old Testament is found in the development of great personalities in whom the spirit of the living God moved and had its being: Abraham, Moses, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah. They were great servants of Jehovah, but their greatness as servants was engendered by the uniqueness of their personalities, achieved through voluntary response to a sense of vocation, as exemplified by Isaiah: "And I heard the voice of the Lord. Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said, Here am I, send me."

Again, in his parable of the man who built bigger and bigger barns, Jesus did not say, as is usually reported, that the man was a fool because he needed more barns in which to store his farm produce. Jesus said he was a fool to equate his peace of soul with the measure of his possessions, because he had said when he surveyed his barns, "My soul, be at thine ease." The need for larger barns is the result of good farming, an increase of crops which the farmer knows will feed more people and on which he knows he will earn a profit. Jesus did not condemn that process. He was concerned with the security of the soul, which is found in the personal relationship between God and man and is not conditioned by the ways of the world.

Christianity Is Not Socialism

It is said that the accumulation of much more than an average share of this world's wealth is to be condemned, because the social basis of a religious attitude is "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."

No religion, with the possible exception of Buddhism which is a negation of life, teaches that inequality in possessions is wrong or that, from a religious premise, the total wealth should be divided by the decision and power of the State. No such suggestion is in the Bible, the source book of both Judaism and Christianity. Roman Catholicism can make authoritative statements regarding its moral philosophy, but there is no word in any Catholic statement enjoining equalitarianism in the possession of property. Protestantism can not make authoritative declarations binding upon all adherents, but if one surveys the generally-held concept among Protestants one finds no prohibition of ownership and use of unequal amounts on material possessions. That is the record.

It was the "father of communism," Karl Marx, who said: "In a higher stage of the communist society . . . society could write on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." There are two things which should be said about this.

First, it rests upon coercion and not upon voluntary decision. The phrase, "in a higher stage of communist society," is important. A study of communism as conceived by Marx makes clear that the whole development rests not upon the consent of the people but upon the coercion of the obstinate many by the determined few. Marx is reported to have said, " I do not advocate the communist revolution; I announce it," and certainly that is the import of the Communist Manifesto. It will come through coercion.

The very wording of the clause is indicative of its theory of compulsion. It does not say "from my ability according to my response to the needs of my neighbor." Instead it says "from each," which means that every member of society is drawn into the plan for the alleviation of want and distress. This necessarily includes the concept of coercion, for there would obviously be many who would not voluntarily give according to their ability. If they were to be allowed to make a personal decision there would be no need to annouce this thesis as the basis of socialist society, for it would be a voluntary society. It is to be, therefore, a compulsive society wherein resources are to be taken from each according to his ability and distributed among

others in accordance with what the State decides is their need.

There is no possible way of equating this with any Christian admonition, for it is a form of stealing. If one person should take ten dollars out of another person's wallet without his consent, it would be theft. But if five acquaintances should vote that the owner of the wallet should give ten dollars—and then enforce their community decision—is that any less stealing? Nothing has changed because the takers, who have now become voters, have increased from one to five or to five thousand. The Bibles of all religions appeal to the fortunate and the able to extend compassion, sympathy and good will to the unfortunate and the indigent; but in not one Bible can there be found a command that any self-appointed group or majority in Church or State assume the authority to take a share of the goods of one person and give it to another. No matter what other sanction may be said to exist, there is absolutely no religious sanction. Church members know that there is nothing in the Bible, or in the rule and practices of our churches, which would give either clergy or members power to take our resources by force and distribute them against our will. Why, then, should the State be allowed to do so?

Moral Ends Require Moral Means

It is said that if the ends of our effort are those of benevolence and social righteousness, then it is morally correct to use whatever means are necessary to reach those ends.

It is true that not many people make such a statement before pursuing a course of action, but there are many who do so in taking action. It is probably the greatest temptation men face in the realm of moral decision.

Only the moral man is confronted with the dilemma, for it is obvious that a criminal is not disturbed by the question whether the ways in which he murders or steals are considered moral. The moral man decides that he wishes to give food, shelter and clothing to the needy, and to establish brotherhood among men. Undebatably, those are moral purposes, but their very morality poses the next question: Must not moral means be used to arrive at moral ends?

Are moral means always used to attain the moral ends of human welfare? Consider, for example, the constantly increasing use of taxation in national and international welfare efforts. Americans have practically accepted the idea that the local, state and Federal governments should be used for this purpose, and the concept has now been extended to include the idea that the Federal Government should extend welfare to the whole world through such agencies as the Point Four Program. Anyone who questions the morality of these means is looked upon with incredulity and suspicion.

But let us examine the process. It is first decided that voluntary response to human need is too slow, and ends in being inadequate because too few people will respond of their own free will. Therefore it is decided that government—local, state, national, or international—shall be used to provide and distribute the needed resources.

This means that taxes must be collected, and they are collected from all—the good and the bad, the selfish and the unselfish, the religious devotee and the pagan, those who believe in helping others and those who do not. Certainly that is not a moral basis for doing good.

If we believe that a person's money may be taken from him by the State to provide welfare to Americans and people of other nations, then we must also believe that it is right to take his possessions, for that is what his money represents. We must believe that it would be right for the community to vote that his bed, his dining-room table, his overcoat, could also be taken. Most people will recoil from the implications of that sentence. But why? The amount he paid in taxes might have bought a bed or a coat; therefore the State did in effect take those articles. If the State is authorized to do this, then why should not those who voted to tax their neighbor to pay for Point Four drive up a truck, take his bed, and send it across the world?

That sounds absurd, but it is no more absurd than the tax. Moreover if it is immoral to take a man's bed to give it to another against his will, then it is immoral to take that amount out of his bank account through taxes and with it buy a bed to give away. All the tax does is to befog the reality of our expropriating the possessions of an unwilling man. Whether we take his bank account or his bed it is the same act. Is that not the use of immoral means for a moral end?

But is it not also absurd to believe that a tax can be used to transmit good will? Here we are confronted with an amazing phenomenon. The person who is most appalled by the futile attempt to save a man's soul through coercion will often acquiesce in the use of coercion to save his personal attitudes. He will not only say that force should be used to make a man contribute to human need, but also that it can be used to create in him a brotherly attitude toward others. But was not the purpose of the Inquisition the use of compulsion to save a man's immortal soul from hell—an end of the greatest spiritual value? The fire surrounding Joan of Arc and the police force behind anti-discriminatory decisions are designed to accomplish the same purpose—to change one's attitude or belief by force. The only difference is in the extent of the power and the punishment.

Those who desire to create a new spirit in man, and to save his soul, are right. But they are wrong when they use immoral and unspiritual means to attain this end. Those who would serve mankind in the spirit of Christ are right. But they are wrong

when they use coercion, communal theft, and unfair emphasis to accomplish that end. To use these methods is to exploit other people for our own ends; and that is a sin against personality. Both the Bible and human experience teach us that moral ends can be achieved only through moral means.

A Protestant, Whitehead, has said that "religion is what one does with his solitariness." A Catholic, Maritain, has said that "it is a truth of nature, a fact of the ontological order, that created intelligence can only find beatitude in God, and perfect beatitude in God seen face to face." A Jew, Micah, has asked, "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

Each of these interpretations of the essence of religion is that of vocation—and vocation is personal response to a call. That is the creative power of religion, which we have lost. For an act, or a life, to be religious there must first be the hearing of a call from beyond and above all that we are, and then a voluntary response. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," said Christ, and no coercive action of society or the State can ever be substituted for the personal response of the human heart. Religion has interpreted man as a person, known to God; and no religion subordinates the individual to the collective or substitutes response by coercion for response through free will. Such is the essence and the power of the Judaistic-Christian teaching and faith, and only in a return to that faith can man find his salvation.