Christianity and Communism

Historic Christianity began with crucial confrontations with intensely antagonistic forces. During the first century A.D., as Christianity spread from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the Roman Empire, there were bitter cells of opposition. Beginning with the Jewish Sanhedrin, the arena of conflict extended to the religions of paganism with their appeal to the desires of the flesh and an equally significant invitation to satisfy the thirst for a mysterious religious experience, to the sophisticated claims of the philosophers, whose influence captivated the Roman Empire. Also, the wrath of imperial Rome was frequently addressed to the followers of Christ.

The principles of Christian response to opposition are indicated in Peter’s sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2) and Paul’s address to the Athenians (Acts 17).

These words are an appropriate summary to guide the Christian: “But in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15).

I. A CAPSULE OF COMMUNISM

Between one-third and one-half of the world’s population is dominated by the tenets of communism. Both philosophical and political concepts are involved in communism. For the former we look to Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, and for the latter to the events taking place in Russia, China, and the “Eastern bloc countries.”

Communism also has reference to an idealistic goal of the future. No nation has ever reached this goal!

Contemporary communism has its roots in Greek thought. Democritus (494-404 B.C.) the father of empiricism, postulated that matter was the ultimate reality. Heraclitus (500 B.C.) viewed everything as being in a state of change. The only constant of the universe was change or dialectic. (He did believe that there were eternally fixed eternal measures to this change.) Plato believed that the ideal society was a regimented one. He did not feel that man was capable of enjoying freedom if left to his own devices. Plato’s visualized society consisted of philosophers, who were coldly rational; workers, who lived by their sometimes unstable emotions; and soldiers, policemen, who were extremely necessary but had to be checked carefully lest their ambitions become too extensive.

Renaissance thinkers Sir Thomas Moore with his Utopia, literally “nowhere,” and Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis dealt with the control and distribution of goods and wealth.

Our “capsule of communism” must consider the German-Jew, Karl Marx (1818-1883). His educational background included law, history, and philosophy. Prejudice against Jews prevented his being employed by a university. After marrying a German aristocrat, he went to France and then to Belgium, where he joined the communist party. Later he journeyed to England where he was supported by Engels. His major works are the Communist Manifesto and Das Capital. He did not found communism, but he is responsible for transforming it into a powerful international tool rather than an isolated movement.

By dissecting the brain of Marx (with apologies to Carl Sagan’s Broca’s Brain), his ethics can be traced to that of a Judaeo-Christian nature and his concept of revolution to the fact that most major European countries had one in 1848. He was especially impressed by what he considered the prophetical nature of the French Revolution. To Marx, the French Revolution was an inevitable event controlled by the inexorable forces of constant change. (It is doubtful that he considered the multiple causes of the French Revolution. Among these were the rather doltish behavior of Louis XVI; the impact of the American war of independence; the writings of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Paine; the emergence of a wealthy middle class; and certainly not least, the bad
harvests of 1786-92 which were due to unusually bad weather. History does not appear simple but complex. There are so many novel and unusual factors.) His general theme was that the wage paid is of less value than what the worker makes. Catalyzing Marx’s political theory were the teachings of Hegel. Hegel saw history in terms of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. (One idea or system is opposed by another and the result is a new concept or synthesis. Then, the process starts all over again.)

What does all of this have to do with Christianity? Communism is in reality a secular religion demanding total commitment. It must actively oppose belief in any other religious thrust. It is aggressive, using all resources to gain converts. It reduces man to a material entity whose chief doctrine is simply that humanity is the product of economic processes. The impersonal forces (rather than the creative powers of God) make us what we are.

II. A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO COMMUNISM

A Christian response to communism must involve three thrusts: (1) intellectual or philosophical, (2) emotional or intensity of personal commitment, and (3) practical or the historical nature of Christianity.

A. Intellectual or Philosophical

It is a valid rule of inquiry or critique to go to the central point of any discipline or system. Since materialism is a central tenet of communism, what are some of the questions to be directed in this area?

First, there are the piercing problems as to how sheer materialism created intelligent creatures. Then the dilemma of free will or choice in a materially programmed universe must be considered. If the molecules of one person are “edited” to make him a “capitalist” while another is designated “communist,” is there a consistent reasoning behind propaganda or teaching campaigns to change one to the other? Does materialism offer an adequate, consistent explanation to the complexity of human emotions such as love, jealousy, hatred, and the enormous capacity of the human brain? (Our brain possesses 15 billion neurons; consequently, even simple actions of such a system presents staggering implications.) One of these implications is that the human brain transcends the “designated basic need of man.” In other words, the brain is much greater than man’s need for it to be.

Communism poses seven epochs of history: primitive, communal, slave, feudal, capitalist, socialist, and communist. Why should these epochs end with communism? In a materially orchestrated system, how can any state be considered the ultimate? Communism has postulated the dialectic system of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis as the modus operandi of history. Why shouldn’t there be an antithesis of communism?

Communism depends upon an aggressive participation to effect, in a practical sense, changes in the way things are. If history is flowing inexorably in a predetermined design to communism, why are the efforts of great military forces, fervent censorship, and the concept of an iron or bamboo curtain necessary?

Is the assumption that economics is the ultimate science warranted? How exact is economics? In the latest issue, the causes of the French Revolution revealed many variables of a non-economic nature. To classify economics as being comparable to physics or mathematics would be questionable since the latter involves an expertise of measurement while the former involves a vast amount of mental juggling and analysis.

Communism has largely downgraded the nature of the family. A most basic “economic” family trait is the transmission of property. Yet, communism submerges a very fundamental family tenet to the realm of government control, while asserting on the other hand that someday government will be unnecessary. It appears that communism is a step backward in its portrayal of the historical process.

Communism declares materialism as the ultimate basis of reality. Communism, however, relies upon faith that the ideal communist era will come. (Even though the step from the contemporary dictatorship, government control state has never been made.) Essentially communism remains an ideal based upon faith in certain historical processes.

B. Emotional or the Intensity of Personal Commitment

One has pointed out that we hear much of the acts of the apostles and nothing of the resolutions of the apostles.
Communism has grown because of a sacrificial, life-on-the-line attitude. In the first century, it was this type of dedication that brought the Christian message to the Roman Empire.

Elders and preachers cannot be “ivory tower” types, mouthing statistics about the evils of everything, and make a difference in the world. These men must be powerful presentations of the Christian faith in the marketplace and in the hearts of a world that is desperately seeking something to believe. Alvin Toffler observes:

Never before have so many people in so many countries—even educated and supposedly sophisticated people—been so intellectually helpless, drowning, as it were, in a maelstrom of conflicting, confusing, and cacophonous ideas. Colliding visions rock our mental universe. We see a . . . desperate search for something—almost anything—to believe in (The Third Wave, p. 306).

This is a time to present Christ and His church in the most determined, effective way that it is possible for us to do.

In September of 1981, Dr. William Teague, president of Abilene Christian University, challenged preachers to leave the seclusion of offices and to reach out into the heart of society. (He was not speaking against the discipline of careful sermon preparation.)

The point is simply this: We have been long on resolutions and short on actions. Yes, I know a better world begins with me and that what I am writing here applies to me!

C. Practical or Historical Nature of Christianity

Communism appeals to a theoretical historical process. Christianity turns to an event in recorded history. Communism depends upon philosophical interpretation. Christianity rests upon the demonstration of Jesus as the resurrected One.

Much emphasis must be given to our world that Jesus as a being of history possesses all of the credentials as such. In addition to the accurate transmission of the New Testament writings, there is the testimony of non-Christian historians like Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger. Our society is not aware of the abundance of evidence that magnifies the amazing preservation of the New Testament documents. This documentation lifts Christianity from the clouds of speculation to the realm of serious, sober thought!

If you and I do not accept the responsibility of declaring Jesus, who will? If we do not do this now, when will be the time?

—Virgil Trout