

Marxism-Maoism and Christianity in China

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It was 1963. I was 15 years old, and had just entered the seminary of Milan Diocese. During the holidays I went with my father to a conference on Marxism near my hometown. A member of parliament who was a Christian Democrat introduced us to the basics of Communism. I heard for the first time words like: “dialectical materialism,” “class struggle,” the “principle of contradiction,” “proletariat,” “bourgeoisie,” “internationalism,” etc.

One day our teacher in the seminary divided us into groups to prepare an exhibition on the five continents in the world. Our group was assigned to illustrate the situation in Asia, and I had the task of preparing materials about China. Therefore I read some simple little books which depicted China as an emerging country in the world. At that time the Great Leap Forward was considered a positive step for the development of the country.

Pope John XXIII had just passed away, but not before opening the Church to the dialogue with Communist countries in Eastern Europe. The encyclical letters *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris* were instrumental in promoting the dialogue. The day he died, many Communist shopkeepers closed the shop for one day, as many others did as a sign of mourning. The Second Vatican Council opened the Church to cooperate with all people of good will, no matter what their beliefs or their ideals were. The concept of the Kingdom of God entitled all the people in the world and in history to have a say in promoting a new society of equals, a society of brothers and sisters.

In 1966 the Cultural Revolution erupted in China. No matter how it was seen later, it had a great impact on the youth in the West. Secondary school and university students became involved in the attempt to change society from its base. Many of them abandoned

the comforts of their middle-class families and went to live with the so-called proletarian people.

May 1968 saw the students revolt in Paris, forcing the government to step down. In 1969 all the centre and leftist unions united in Italy, and the labour movement became stronger and stronger. In the United States the campaign for peace and the opposition to the war in Vietnam gained momentum. All over the world people were asking Israel to change its stance against the Palestinians.

As the Red Guards in China bombarded the headquarters of the Communist Party which was regarded as corrupt and revisionist, all the other Communist Parties in the world were under criticism by their own members. In Italy some Communist members of parliament left the Italian Communist Party and founded a newspaper called *Il Manifesto*. They formed an independent political group with the same name. The reference was to *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* written by Marx and published in London in February 1848. In this work, he had explained the development of the struggle for power between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

In those days telling people that they were bourgeois was the fiercest insult one could convey to them. The students involved in politics were criticising other students who just wanted to get a good job after graduation and to live a bourgeois life. In Italy they were joining radical movements, like "Continuous Struggle" (*Lotta Continua*), "Workers Vanguard" (*Avanguardia Operaia*), etc. They formed Residence Committees, and staged many demonstrations; sometimes they occupied empty buildings along with homeless families. Workers were organising strikes, sit-ins and other actions in order to protect the rights of the working class and change society. Politics became a sacred noun—everybody should have a political stance.

Again in 1968, at the Medellin Conference in Colombia, the Church of Latin America made a "preferential option for the poor" its priority in the announcement of the Gospel. Basic Christian Communities appeared all over the continent. The Theology of Liberation was born there and fascinated Christians internationally.

Various groups of "Christians for Socialism" already spread in many countries in the world, after Giulio Girardi's book *Marxismo e Cristianesimo* had been published in Italy in 1966. In the early '70s the dialogue between Marxists and Christians was going in full steam.

Particularly interesting for us was the attempted dialogue of Christians with Communist China in the early '70s.

At a "Salvation Today" conference held in Bangkok in 1973, someone suggested: "Through Marxism, Christian ideas that were new to it have arrived in China."

Two other conferences held in Båstad, Sweden (29 January-2 February, 1974) and Louvain, Belgium (9-14 September, 1974) were also important in that period. They showed us the original perception of the "Great Helmsman" in those times.

The continuous revolution of Mao Zedong was seen in a positive light. Mao had considered the success of the 1949 revolution as the first step in a march of ten thousand *li* (miles). It was a march of all the Chinese people towards a new society.

A number of recent visitors have pointed out that the Chinese villagers, in their communal mode of existence with intimate participation in each others' lives might very well serve as a model for Christian communities throughout the world. This community lifestyle appears admirable when viewed from our experience of individualistic exploitation in the American world, and the widening chasm between rich and poor, racism, crime, drug addiction, monetary inflation, overproduction of luxuries and underproduction of essentials, and confused educational ideals (Thomas Berry, "Mao Tse-tung: the Long March").¹

The experience of the communes in China at that time was really taken as an example of true community life, similar to that of the early Christian community described in Acts 2: 43-47 and Acts 4: 32-35. Voluntarily sharing with others everything we have is an experience of joy, not of deprivation.

¹ Berry's paper is included in *Theological Implications of the New China* (papers presented at the ecumenical seminar held in Båstad in 1974).

Unfortunately it was not yet time for the dialogue between Chinese Marxists and Christians.

In *Christian faith and the Chinese experience*, the collected papers of the 1974 Louvain Ecumenical Colloquium in Belgium, we read:

The great majority of the Christians were prepared for nothing but confrontation between the world's forces of good and evil. The same for the Communists ...

The Kuomintang, the Vatican, the World Council and the Western powers were seen as one political constellation. (Pro Mundi Vita, "China and the Churches in the Making of One World")

However, the words of Chairman Mao were also heard by some as invitations of going to the people, learning from the people, consulting the people, binding oneself closely to the masses, uniting with the masses, and merging with the masses:

"The people and the people alone are the motive force in the making of world history." (Mao Zedong, "On Coalition Government" [24 April, 1945], *Selected Works*, Vol. III, 257)

"The masses are the real heroes, while we ourselves are often childish and ignorant." (Mao, *ibid.*, 12, "Preface and Postscript to Rural Surveys" [March-April, 1941])

"From the masses to the masses" (Mao, *ibid.*, 120, "Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership" [1 June, 1943]).

"Wherever we go we must unite with the people, take root and blossom among them." (Mao, *op.cit.*, Vol IV, 58, "On the Chungking Negotiations" [17 October, 1945])

Some in the Church tried to see what could be positive in the Chinese Marxist vision.

Joachim Pillai in "Maoist Ethics and Judaeo-Christian Traditions"² wrote:

It is remarkable how restrained Mao is in his writings. He has hardly a word against God, Christ, or the Bible. His attack is

² Pillai's paper was published in *Christian faith and the Chinese experience*, the collected papers of the 1974 Louvain Ecumenical Colloquium in Belgium (Geneva: World Lutheran Federation, 1974).

on injustice—the target of all the prophets... People become free and human through revolutionary action...

Mao calls on all to have great respect for the human dignity of the comrades and even of the enemies. His injunctions on how prisoners of war are to be treated (with kindness and sincerity) is quite remarkable in the annals of military history. He wants them to be treated humanely and then released...

Just as God is not unambiguously present in the Christian political and ecclesiastical systems, so he is not totally absent in the Communist phenomenon... Christ is really present there where man is struggling to be human...

The sin for Mao were: imperialism, feudalism, bourgeois capitalism, revisionism and domestic reaction. It is unfortunate that Christianity as the official religion of the West was made to justify them in various ways.

Mao used Marxist ideology not as a dogmatic creed, but as a flexible weapon. Modesty and perseverance were the virtues needed for the long term revolution:

The foolish old man went on digging every day... God was moved by this and he sent down two angels who carried the two mountains (of imperialism and feudalism) away ...

We must persevere and work unceasingly and we, too, will touch God's heart.

Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people (Mao, op. cit. Vol. III, 322ff., "The Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains" [11 June, 1945]).

Gustavo Gutierrez wrote in "Theology and the Chinese experience"³:

The Chinese revolution is a formidable venture in turning the masses into real makers of history. This is the goal of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. As in every historical process, ambiguities abound, but a search for the road to

³ Cf. *Christianity and the New China*, Vol 2 (South Pasadena: Ecclesia Publications, 1976).

follow is under way. For Mao this historical praxis which come from the masses and goes to the masses must be placed within the context of the class struggle. ("Do not forget the class struggle"). On the basis of this view of history as conflict he can maintain a permanent critique of every achievement and make one of the most original contributions of recent times to the dialectical method of Marxism.

An understanding of the faith from the perspective of historical praxis will be a theology linked with the struggle of the exploited classes for their liberation. It is no longer possible to ignore this in our way of living and thinking about the faith of the Lord of History.

In those papers we can also find the following quotation from Wang Hongwen (spoken at the 10th Communist Party of China Congress in August 1973), inviting comrades to be consistent with their faith in Communism:

When the line is at stake, a true Communist must act without selfish consideration, and dare to go against the current, without fear of destitution, of being excluded from the Party, thrown into jail, forced to divorce, or shot by a firing squad.

Wang was to experience the above when he was arrested three years later along with the Maoist faction in the Party after the death of Mao in September 1976.

Before the death of Chairman Mao, the Great Proletarian Cultural revolution had been considered 100 percent correct; after that it was seen as 100 percent wrong. That was actually a departure from the Marxist tenet that history develops dialectically according to the principle of contradiction: there is always something wrong in what is considered good and there is something good in what is considered wrong!

In fact, we are accustomed to mourn and commemorate all our Christian martyrs in the history of China before and after the Communist takeover. Why should we not take into account people who suffered and even died for their ideals of a new world, of a new society? How many Marxists, albeit atheists, sacrificed

themselves in order to follow the call of their conscience to be really servants of the people, of the masses?

Wang Hongwen, Jiang Qing, etc., were arrested by the so-called revisionists in the Party, who then tried to mask their return to capitalism with the principles and policies of building "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

The word "revisionism" dates back to the attempt in the late 19th century by Eduard Bernstein to revise Marxist doctrine, abandoning the ideas of the imminent collapse of the capitalist economy as well as the seizure of power by the proletariat, and envisaging a type of social democracy that combined private initiative with social reform.

But social democracy was soon forgotten in China and the result was the terrible Tiananmen incident.

Having put aside the original vision of Marxism-Maoism, the revisionist leadership had to find a way to get support from the common people and they chose the nationalist way. Internationalism is at the core of true Marxist vision. During Mao's days it was forbidden to sing the National Anthem which could only be played with musical instruments. Growing together with the poor third world countries, and trying to change the world system united with the proletariat all over the world were no longer the priority for Chinese foreign policies from the '80s on.

Afterwards hundreds of millions of Chinese people worked for dozens of years in factories at dirt cheap wages, and the country's leadership soon had money to invest all over the world. Soon social classes started to appear again, though not in a formal way. The cement to keep the people united was, and still is national pride. Conscientious people who tried to defend the poor and to fight for their basic human rights, i.e. the true Communists(!), were put in jail. That was the case of the 709 group of lawyers, Christian pastors and ministers and recently of Maoist students from the north who came to support the workers in Shenzhen.

As Christians in this historical era, we have the mission to save and to pursue further the development of the new society born in China in the last century. We should criticise the leaders of the Communist Party, not because they are Communists and atheists, but because they are not Communist enough in serving the people.

Instead they force everyone to accept their worldly power. In this sense we must be ready to open an intense dialogue with people of good will, no matter whether they are believers or non believers, as taught us by the Second Vatican Council. It is a dialogue at the intellectual level, like evaluating the ideas of the Marxist vision of history, but above all it should be a dialogue of deeds. In this sense we should all become seeds of hope, ready to die to our pride, selfishness and jealousy in order to be a people of dialogue, generosity and openness among others.

One day all the people in the world will become a big family, all brothers and sisters spiritually and materially, children of God. Isn't that the same goal of the Christians and the Communists? The Church and the Party will disappear at the coming of New Earth and New Heaven, as the Old Man had envisaged, and we will be one in the Son of Man!