

I

INTRODUCTION

In Latin America today, base Christian communities, liberation theology and active Christian participation in revolutionary struggle (Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala) and post-revolutionary Marxist states (Cuba, Nicaragua) represent the first popular and large-scale appropriation of Marxist analysis for Christian action and theologizing. The contribution that Marxism has to make to Christianity and the tension between them are themes that recur constantly, both in the Latin American church and in Latin American theology.

For a variety of reasons, the relationship between Christianity and Marxism has reappeared on the theological agenda in almost all parts of the world, particularly for Christians with a strong commitment to social justice. These reasons include increased contact among Third World theologians in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians and other regional and international ecumenical organizations; the widespread translation and publication of Latin American liberation theologians and their inclusion in theological college curricula around the world; the growth of church educational programs (both denominational and ecumenical) in North America and Europe on development and

human rights in Latin America and other parts of the Third World and, not least, the broad media publicity given to the whole Latin American situation, including the role of liberation theology and the "popular church". Other important factors, such as the re-emergence of the Christian church in China, the deep Christian involvement in liberation struggles in South Africa and the Philippines, the failure of traditional western theology and politics (whether conservative or liberal) to respond to the enormous human suffering in the Third World (including that within the First World), the continued strength of the church in other Marxist states (the Soviet Union, eastern Europe, Mozambique) and the emergence of an anti-Communist pope from Poland have also contributed to this development.

That North American Christians must learn of the relation of Christianity and Marxism from Latin American, Chinese or Filipino theologians is ironical, for much serious action and theologizing took place on the same issue in North America (not to mention Britain and Europe) in the thirties and forties. For North America, names such as Vida Scudder, Sherwood Eddy, Harry F. Ward, Reinhold Niebuhr, William Howard Melish, Claude C. Williams, F. Hastings Smyth, Joseph Fletcher, Mary van Kleeck, William B. Spofford, Kenneth Leslie, A.E. Smith and James Endicott come to mind. In Britain, Conrad Noel, John Macmurray, Hewlett Johnson and Stanley Evans stand out. One must also mention

Alexander Miller, a New Zealand theologian who worked in both Britain and North America. Because of a break in continuity that was theological (for example, the neo-orthodox rejection of the social gospel), political (the Cold War and the rise of "political realism") and philosophical (the rise of positivistic and linguistic analysis detached from moral commitment), these figures (except for Niebuhr, and then not for his openness to Marxism) are largely unknown today.

As a result, North American Christians who today seek to use the insights of Marxism in their Christian action, community life and theology often do so unaware of an earlier North American theological tradition with which they are actually in continuity. This continuity is most obvious for North American protestants as the earlier tradition was almost entirely non-Roman Catholic, rooted in the social gospel or Christian socialism. However, even North American Roman Catholics who today seek to bring the insights of Marxism into their thought and action and are unaware of this tradition risk repetition of work that has already been done in the North American context and ignore much rich experience of both success and failure. Less importantly, Latin American and other Third World liberation theologians, because they have frequently come out of an almost entirely Roman Catholic context, often under the influence of French and German theologians, are unaware of

the earlier North American Christian-Marxist activity and theology.

Yet a highly developed theology of Christian Marxism did exist in North America in the period of 1930-1960. This thesis will examine the life and thought of one such Christian-Marxist theologian, Frederic Hastings Smyth (1888-1960), an American Episcopalian, and the religious community he founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1939, the Society of the Catholic Commonwealth. I intend to show that many of the theological problems and issues faced by Christian Marxists in Latin America and other parts of the world today were also faced, with considerable creativity, by Smyth and members of the S.C.C., though, of course, in a different context. Likewise, I intend to show that small groups of Christian and secular Marxists did cooperate closely in joint action during this period. In my discussion, I hope to make accessible to contemporary theologians and historians of Christianity and Marxism the Christian-Marxist theology and action of Smyth and the S.C.C. I shall point out both the strengths and weaknesses of this theology and action in the various phases of their development.

I shall begin with two chapters of biographical and historical discussion, tracing the development of Smyth's Christian Marxism from its unlikely roots in a wealthy, late nineteenth century, upstate New York manufacturing family through the formation, growth and decline of the (avowedly

Marxist) Society of the Catholic Commonwealth. For these chapters, I have relied primarily on the archives of the S.C.C. (which include Smyth's personal papers) and interviews and correspondence with Smyth's family, friends (including many former S.C.C. members) and other contemporaries.

In the next three chapters, I shall discuss three major theological themes in Smyth's Christian-Marxist theology -- materialism, dialectics and the revolutionary cell -- tracing the development of each. Taken together, they cover the full range of the Christian-Marxist theology of Smyth and the S.C.C. Here I have relied primarily on Smyth's theological writings, both those published and those privately circulated, and his correspondence. In the final chapter, I shall make an assessment of the Christian-Marxist theology of Smyth and the S.C.C. and its value to Christian-Marxist thought and action today.

Very little scholarly work has been done on Christian Marxism in North America in the inter-war years or after. Scholarly attention has tended to focus on the earlier period of Christian socialism and the social gospel beginning in the last half of the nineteenth century. The most complete account of the relationship between Christianity and Marxism in the U.S. in the early and mid-twentieth century is Ralph Lord Roy's Communism and the Churches

(1960). It contains much valuable information but its ideological bias gives one cause for distrust. While the book (underwritten by the Fund for the Republic) rejects hysterical anti-Communism, its smug liberalism conveys the view that Marxism has little to contribute to Christianity.

However, in recent years, scholars have begun to discover and explore more sympathetically the Marxist thought and practice that appeared in all disciplines (literature, politics, economics, theology, the arts, etc.) in the inter-war years. Alan M. Wald's recent book on the Christian-Marxist poet, John Brooks Wheelwright, The Revolutionary Imagination (1983), is one such example. In theology, Harry F. Ward, the longtime social gospel-Marxist Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Seminary, New York, though long eclipsed by Reinhold Niebuhr, has begun to attract scholarly interest, with a doctoral dissertation by David N. Duke (1980) and a biography by Eugene P. Link, Labor-Religion Prophet (1984). Francis H. Touchet has written a doctoral dissertation on John Howard Melish and the conflict in his Brooklyn parish and the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island in the late forties over his Marxism (1981). Vida Scudder, of an earlier generation but very open to Marxism in her later years, has been the subject of a recent biography by Theresa Corcoran, Vida Dutton Scudder (1982). Only one article has been written on Smyth (John Kater, 1973) but it is based on very limited use of primary sources

and is inaccurate.

In Canada, there have been dissertations or theses on the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order by Roger Hutchinson (1975) and the Anglican Fellowship for Social Action by E.J. Morgan (1974) and Stephen Hopkins (1982). However, Marxism was peripheral rather than central to both these groups. There has also been a biography of James T. Endicott, a United Church of Canada missionary who ardently supported the Chinese Revolution, Rebel out of China, by Stephen Endicott (1980).

Likewise, little scholarly work has been done on twentieth century English Christian Marxists. They receive only brief mention in general histories of English Christian social thought. Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement by Reg Groves (1967) and Thaxted Quest for Social Justice by Jack Putterill (1977) are anecdotal accounts by participants. Maurice Reckitt's Maurice to Temple (1947) and For Christ and the People (1968) discuss Noel and the earlier Anglo-Catholic socialist tradition; however, Reckitt's own participation in the anti-Marxist Christendom Group does not make him an impartial observer. More recently, John Orens has traced the Noel tradition in an article on "Politics and the Kingdom" (1981) and an essay on "Priesthood and Prophecy" in Essays Catholic and Radical, edited by Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams (1983). John Macmurray has begun to receive

some attention but mostly from philosophers. Kenneth Leech has collected the papers of Stanley Evans. The papers of Noel, Hewlett Johnson, John Macmurray and Maurice Reckitt have only recently been deposited in university archives and begun to be available to scholars. Because of the strong influence of the English developments on Smyth's formation, future scholarly studies of English Christian Marxism will likely shed further light on the development of Smyth's Christian Marxism.

As an Anglo-Catholic, Smyth occupies an unusual place in the history of the encounter of Christianity and Marxism in the U.S. Many American theologians or Christian activists regarded themselves as Marxists (or at least positively influenced by Marx) at one point or another during the period between the wars. I have already mentioned Scudder, Eddy, Ward, Niebuhr, Melish, Smyth, Fletcher, Spofford, Leslie, Endicott and others. Many of them came out of or were deeply influenced by the social gospel tradition of Walter Rauschenbusch. Only a few were Roman Catholics (Stanislaus Orlemanski) or catholic Episcopalians (Scudder and Smyth). Most were liberal protestant idealists, repulsed by the injustices of American capitalism and attracted to the Marxist vision of a just society, exemplified by the Soviet Union and post-revolutionary China. (This characterization is true of most of the Episcopalians, who tended to be evangelicals or liberals -- Spofford, Melish, Fletcher, Robert

Muir, Warren McKenna.) They were often more interested in political or social action than in deeply probing the broad expanse of Christian theology and Marxist theory and the relation between them. Theological reflection that took place often centred rather narrowly on the "kingdom", identifying post-revolutionary socialist orders, at least in some measure, with the kingdom of God. Such theological reflection is still useful today but is limited by its narrow focus.

As protestants, these theologians, including most of the Episcopalians, were frequently hostile to the catholic tradition, suspicious of traditional catholic doctrines, sacramental practice, religious communities and the Roman Catholic church generally. Here they followed the example set by Rauschenbusch in Christianity and the Social Crisis and later books. The Roman Catholic church's official opposition to socialism and frequent alliance with fascism in these years reinforced this opposition. These theologians often represented a synthesis of the "theological left" (liberal protestantism) and the "political left" (Marxism), aimed toward social action but without much awareness of the catholic tradition except to reject it, without deep or nuanced reflection beyond the theology of the kindgom and with little critical analysis of Marxism.

Smyth, however, tried to synthesize the catholic

tradition and Marxism. As an American Episcopalian educated and ordained in the Church of England, his theological and political roots lay in English Christian socialism rather than the American social gospel, and more particularly in the Anglo-Catholic socialist tradition represented by Charles Gore, Henry Scott Holland, Stewart Headlam, Conrad Noel, W.G. Peck and organizations such as the Community of the Resurrection, the Guild of St. Matthew, the Catholic Crusade and the Order of the Church Militant. The roots of twentieth century Anglican socialism in turn lay in the revival of Catholic theology and practice by the Oxford Movement in the middle of the nineteenth century led by John Keble, Edward Pusey and John Henry Newman and in the theologically more liberal Christian socialism of F.D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley.

Of the English Christian socialists, Smyth was closest to Conrad Noel (1869-1942), founder of the Catholic Crusade and author of a Life of Jesus (1937) which portrayed Jesus as a revolutionary. Noel's parish in Thaxted, Essex, during his years there (1910-34) became a centre of Eucharistic worship integrated with radical social and political action. There Noel gained notoriety by hanging the red flag in the church during the time of the Russian revolution. Smyth visited Thaxted, joined the Order of the Church Militant (successor to the Catholic Crusade) and corresponded with Noel until his death; in turn, Noel wrote an adulatory

review of Smyth's first book, Manhood Into God (1940), in the Church Militant, the O.C.M. periodical. In his roots in English Christian socialism, Smyth resembled the American Episcopalian feminist and socialist of a generation before, Vida Scudder (1861-1954), with whom he maintained a long friendship.

The roots of Smyth's Christian Marxism were not, however, entirely in English soil. The American Episcopalian, James O.S. Huntington (1854-1935), founder of the Order of the Holy Cross (1884), a religious community for men, also exerted a strong influence on Smyth, particularly on his decision to found a radical religious community. Originally a socialist -- though later an advocate of Henry George's Single Tax -- Huntington had founded the O.H.C. in the slums of New York City at a time when the Episcopal church was becoming more aware of its social responsibilities. In 1887, Huntington's father, Frederic Dan Huntington, bishop of Central New York, and Henry Codman Potter, bishop of New York, joined in the founding of the Church Association for the Advancement of the Interests of Labor (C.A.I.L.), dedicated to the promotion of organized labour. Smyth certainly regarded himself in the Huntington tradition. However, again both Bishop Huntington's interest in labour and his son's socially conscious monasticism owed much to English models.

From this very short survey of his theological background, I would again emphasize that Smyth was one of very few American theologians working in a catholic context (albeit Anglican, not Roman) in this period to take seriously, struggle with and eventually appropriate Marxism for Christian theology and practice. Most catholics (Roman Catholics or Anglo-Catholic Episcopalians) simply were not interested or were hostile to the whole enterprise. (Of course, many protestants were equally hostile.) As much Christian-Marxist theology, action and dialogue today involves Roman Catholics, I believe it is especially important to look carefully and critically at how Smyth and the Society of the Catholic Commonwealth, prophetic voices in the development of a Christian Marxism from a catholic perspective, faced many of the same issues that catholics wishing to use the insights of Marxism face today.

North Americans who today seek to integrate Marxism into their theology -- for example, Arthur F. McGovern in Marxism: An American Christian Perspective (1980) or Cornel West in Prophesy Deliverance (1982)-- do so in a context that is unremittingly anti-communist. The anti-communism is shared by workers, the middle class, the wealthy, oppressed racial minorities and intellectuals. Much of this anti-communism is built on a hatred of the Soviet Union and its "expansionist" tendencies. North American Christian Marxists must turn to the third world for popular, indeed, even per-

sonal, support and theological leadership. Small groups of secular Marxists remain from both the "old left" of the thirties and forties and the "new left" of the sixties, particularly among workers and intellectuals. However, these secular Marxists are largely marginalized, except in a few labour unions, the university setting and (in Canada) the New Democratic Party. Significantly, however, many have begun to recognize third world liberation theology and its increasing influence on North American Christian consciousness as supportive of the revolutionary changes in North American society that they have long advocated. The new openness of the secular Marxist journal Monthly Review to liberation theology and Christian Marxism illustrates this emerging alliance between North American secular and Christian Marxism.

North American Christian Marxist theologians in the thirties and forties, however, did not work in such a strongly anti-communist context. The massive failure of the North American capitalist economy, symbolized by the Great Depression; the enormous poverty, unemployment and human suffering that resulted, the slowness of recovery, the rise of fascism in Europe and the emergence of the Soviet Union from its isolation pushed many people towards a Marxist solution to North America's economic and social problems. Workers, students, intellectuals and artists, particularly

in urban centres, turned towards Marxism, the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. American Communists sought dominance in labour unions and John Reed clubs became active on university campuses. Novelists and critics such as John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks and Dwight Macdonald identified themselves as Marxists. This movement towards Marxism was largely secular and usually accepted Marx's rejection of religion as escapist and illusory.

The popularity of the Communist Party in North America in the thirties and forties was both facilitated and hindered by developments in the Soviet Union. James Weinstein in Ambiguous Legacy (1975) argues that the Communist Party in the U.S. in this period was marked by its subservience to political developments within the Soviet Union. During the "Third Period" of Communist Party history (1927-35), in which Stalin pursued increased industrialization and collectivization of agriculture, the Soviet Union was put forward as the only model of progressive social development. Communist parties outside the Soviet Union broke with all liberal and socialist movements and began to organize specifically Communist labour unions and other organizations. During this period, liberals and progressives (including Roosevelt and the New Deal) were seen as the main enemies, for they produced alternative models to that of the Soviet Union.

1935 marked the beginning of the Popular Front, a major shift in Soviet and Communist Party policy. After Hitler's destruction of Germany's Social Democrats and Communists, the Soviet Union realized the threat that Germany posed to itself and the need to build an anti-fascist alliance. Liberals and progressives now became allies and defenders of human rights against the fascists. Communists began to work with liberal and progressive political and labour organizations, including the Democratic party. Numerous front groups were organized to gain liberal and progressive support against the fascist threat to the Soviet Union. The Popular Front also marked a change in the Communist attitude towards working with religious groups and individuals. Politically liberal or radical clergy and church organizations were now seen as potential members of the Popular Front.

On August 23, 1939, Stalin signed a ten-year non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany and invaded eastern Poland, necessitating another change in American Communist Party policy. The campaign against fascism turned into a campaign for peace and non-intervention by the U.S. in the struggle between Britain and Germany. The abrupt shift from condemnation of fascism to alliance with it, combined with the Soviet invasion of Poland and Finland and the disclosure of Stalin's brutalities within the Soviet Union, left many

on the radical left disillusioned with the Soviet Union and the Communists. But others, recognizing the priority of protecting the Soviet Union, despite its faults, from invasion and possible defeat, accepted the alliance and began to campaign for peace. By 1940 a host of new fronts and organizations had sprung up, supporting the new Communist position.

On June 22, 1941, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, necessitating another major change in Communist Party policy. The party quickly began urging U.S. intervention in the war on the side of the Soviet Union. By November 1941, the U.S. was providing economic aid to the Soviet Union. With the entry of the U.S. into the war in December 1941, the Communist Party gave Roosevelt its full support. New groups arose emphasizing Soviet-American friendship and Russian War Relief. The war years were the period of maximum cooperation between the U.S. Communists and the U.S. government. The Communists disbanded as the Communist Party and reorganized themselves as the Communist Political Association to emphasize their freedom from foreign domination. Pacifists were attacked as pro-fascist. The Communists in the U.S. emerged from the war in good condition. Weinstein suggests that at the end of the war (May 1945), the C.P.A. had 70,000 members, an all-time high.¹

With the end of the war and the beginning of the Cold War, American Communists again changed their policy.

During the war, the C.P.A. had rejected any direct challenge to American capitalism in favour of a policy of "working within" capitalism. Earl Browder, General Secretary of the C.P.A. and advocate of this policy, favoured continuing it in the post-war years. In 1945, after criticism from European Communists (apparently representing the new Soviet anti-Cold War position), the party expelled Browder for "Revisionism". The C.P.A. was dissolved and reconstituted as the Communist Party with the ideologist of the 1930.'s Popular Front, William Z. Foster, as its leader. Thereafter, the party sought to build an alliance between the Party and (now out of power) anti-Cold War liberals. In the late forties, the party came under major attack by media and the U.S. Congress as a subversive group controlled by the Soviet Union. Outlawed by federal legislation, defeated by its own policy of subservience to Soviet priorities, lacking any popular base, the party disintegrated.

I have included this short sketch of the Communist Party in the U.S. to emphasize that at least from 1935 through the end of the war, the party had some measure of popular support, particularly among urban workers, students and intellectuals. As I shall illustrate, Smyth developed his Christian-Marxist theology, not in isolation from a North American Communist movement, but in the midst of it. In this respect, the context of Smyth's theology is closer

to a third world revolutionary one than that of most North American Christian-Marxist theologies today. Here it may be helpful to third world Christian-Marxists.

However, I would not want to over-emphasize the difference between the context of Smyth's theology and that of North American Christian-Marxist theologians today. Ironically, some of the differences in the situations make them more similar. Because of better transportation and communication, today's North American Christian-Marxists work in a much more international setting; many have spent years working in the third world. The lack of a popular Marxist movement in North America, present in the thirties and forties, is alleviated by the presence of such movements in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Many elements of the context of Smyth's theology and that of today's North American Christian-Marxist theologians remain the same. Widespread poverty, unemployment and racism, the dominance of the middle class and the difficulty of building a popular revolutionary base remain a part of the North American reality. Indeed, in Reagan's America, certain elements of today's economic situation more and more resemble that of the thirties. Likewise, even in the thirties and forties Communists represented a very small percentage of the North American population, greatly distrusted by the majority. Marginalization is still common to the North American setting, whether 1936 or 1986. In terms of rela-

tions with the church, tension and conflict with conservative hierarchies and laity also continue. Yet both situations also contain signs of hope.

Frederic Hastings Smyth and the Society of the Catholic Commonwealth, despite many flaws, represent an early major and creative North American attempt to bring together the insights of Marxism and catholic Christianity. This dissertation will narrate, explore and critique this attempt. I write both to tell an important story and to seek the insights of faithful people who have struggled with faith and justice in their time.

Note

¹Weinstein, Ambiguous Legacy, pp. 95-6. I have largely followed Weinstein's analysis in my short history of the American Communist Party. Weinstein argues that the party's blind obedience to the model of the Soviet Union (and thus its need to follow Soviet policy) prevented it from developing as a popular movement in the U.S. and ultimately caused its disintegration. I shall return to this argument in later chapters.