

BOOK REVIEW

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution. By José Míguez-Bonino. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, 154 pp., \$6.95.

According to Orlando Costas, dean of Biblical Seminary in Costa Rica and noted Latin American theologian, this book by Míguez-Bonino is one of the most important books of 1976. While such judgments are personal and difficult to verify, I can testify to the considerable help this book gave me in facing up to and seeking to evaluate the meaning of Marxism in the contemporary world.

Although it is not unusual to read authors who advocate a strategic alliance between Christians and Marxists, it is unusual to read one who delivered his case first under a lectureship sponsored by British evangelicals convened under the chairmanship of J. R. W. Stott. It will be interesting to see how many of the "young evangelicals" in North America who are heavily into social ethics and political activism will respond positively to the invitation to work alongside the Marxist left in a pursuit of justice in society. According to Costas again, Míguez-Bonino represents the clearest interpretation of the Marxist-Christian encounter he has read anywhere.

Reviewing this book in the context of North American conservative Protestantism, I am perfectly aware of how shocking the author's thesis appears to be. To most of us Communism is atheistic and has proven itself to be a brutal tyranny wherever it has come to power, and we wonder instinctively how an evangelical could possibly toy with the notion of an alliance with Marxists. Is the writer blind to the most obvious and elementary facts?

Let me try to explain Míguez-Bonino's thesis and try to create a greater sympathy for it, because this is a book we badly need to read. He is well aware of the sorry record of Marxism for the most part; he makes no defense of Stalinism and deplores the often unrevolutionary stance of the movement in power. But he is also convinced that even in Russia, and certainly in Cuba and China, Marxism has proved to be a powerful motor for social change and economic amelioration. More important, he does not interpret it as a completed set of theoretical tenets but rather as a flexible and evolving struggle for greater social justice. Because of this view, the writer is able to envisage Christian input into the development of the theory and the outworking of its applications. Although it has usually been atheistic and anti-Christian, he does not believe it must necessarily be so and can cite some contemporary Marxists to support his interpretation. Marxism and Christianity are not natural enemies but share a certain kinship in their mutual concern for human rights. He believes that Marxists need the mobilizing power of the Christian faith for revolutionary change, and that Christians need the Marxist analysis of society and its social vision.

What kind of Marxist can a Christian be? Certainly not a dialectical materialist, for whom all reality is understood in immanent terms. He will be a Marxist who, while making use of Marxist analysis and strategy, sees in it a way to implement faithfully the prophetic message of Scripture. It does not seem all that different in principle from what many North American Christians are doing when they espouse the basically secular and dubiously Christian economics of

Adam Smith. In fact, as Míguez-Bonino explains it, the alliance with Marxism is easier to defend than the alliance with capitalism, a point I am not inclined to deny.

And what specifically Christian contribution might a believer make to Marxism? Only a motivating force propelling a secular ideology? Faith enables us to hope for the kingdom of God when all shall be brothers and stirs us to move in the direction of this utopia. It permits us to endorse the liberation of the oppressed without hating the oppressor and without falling into the terrifying self-righteousness of many would-be revolutionaries.

I welcome the appearance of this book and predict that the subject matter it raises is going to move higher and higher on the agenda of social ethics which, according to the Bible, is on the top of God's agenda.

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