

What Is Communism?

6. Communism and Religion

EARL BROWDER

WE HAVE scores of questions relating to the attitude of the Communist Party toward religion and especially asking how it is possible, in view of our opposition to religion, to enter into a united front with religious organizations. We quote from two typical examples:

Is it true that the Communist Party is abandoning its historical struggle against religion, compromising with it and even entering a united front with the church? . . . Can you explain why the Communist Party permitted the Father Divine movement to participate in the May Day demonstration and thereby open itself to such bitter attacks as those being made by *The Forward*, *The New Leader*, *The Socialist Call* and the *Trotskyites*?

No, it is not true that the Communists are abandoning the historical struggle against religion. On the contrary, it is only now that we are seriously beginning this struggle where it really counts—that is, among the religious masses themselves. The very means of taking the anti-religious struggle among the religious masses, is what has disquieted our questioners. That is only another sign of the old disease of sectarianism from which American revolutionaries have so long suffered.

It is true that the Communist Party is participating in united-front movements in which religious organizations are taking an ever more active part and, to some degree even, including churches. This is not compromise with religion on our part. Our united front is on burning social issues, mainly the struggle against fascism and war and for the Workers' Unemployment, Old-Age and Social Insurance Bill (H. R. 2827).

How does it come about that religious organizations can be drawn into such united-front actions, in spite of the active anti-religious work of the Party?

Here we reveal one of the deep contradictions among the many which tear apart present-day society. The Communists, estimating religion as "the opiate of the people" and combatting it untiringly, do so on the basis of our program of complete and unconditional religious freedom. The rising fascist movement throughout the capitalist world, which more and more presents itself as the only alternative to Communism, before the masses marches under the flag of religion (Hitler's latest speech made a special accusation against the U. S. S. R. as "unchristian"), but has revealed itself before the masses, especially in its Hitler-German example, as the destroyer of all freedom, including religious freedom. As against the anti-religious Communists who fight for religious freedom and the religious fascists who fight to destroy it, it is becom-

ing more and more the tendency of the progressive-minded sections of the religious mass organizations to choose the Communists. They tend to join in the broad united front against fascism and its accompanying accentuation of the war danger, and to be glad that anti-religious Communists are shoulder to shoulder with them in the fight.¹

Does this united front soften down the anti-religious work of the Communists? No, on the contrary, it has aroused a great interest among religious people as to the Communist position and brought about a tremendous increase in the circulation of our anti-religious literature. As a result of this united-front development, we can say, for the first time, that we are conducting *mass* work in this field. True, we are much more careful to avoid offending the religious prejudices, especially among the workers; we try not to be offensive to them, because that would only close their minds to what we have to give them. The abandonment of ineffective, offensive, rude and roughly satirical attacks upon religion, among the religious masses, is a loss for which we can be thankful.

When in the Ruhr plebiscite, last January, a united front against Hitler was formed among Catholics, Socialists and Communists, this was a serious achievement for the anti-fascist front. Its revolutionary logic was so clear, its value so apparent, that very few critics could speak openly against it. The trouble with it was that it did not include enough Catholic and Socialist workers, that it was still only a beginning.

Here in America, last August, it was the united front of religious youth organizations, together with Socialists and Communists, which defeated the fascist-inspired Viola Ilma, with her Washington support, and turned the American Youth Congress into an inspiring mass movement of the youth throughout the country against war and fascism. This Youth Congress movement contains, as its main bulk, the religious organizations of young people. At the same time it is all-inclusive, having furnished the vehicle for the first nation-wide unity of Socialists and Communists, in spite of the many difficulties in this respect (only gradually being overcome by the pressure of non-party masses). This movement has drawn *millions* of youth under its influence.

¹ Readers interested in going more deeply into this question will find a valuable contribution in *The Communist*, April, 1935. Under the title "Religion and Communism," there is a stenographic report of a discussion between Browder and a group of students from Union Theological Seminary, which goes into great detail.

Who could be so utterly stupid as to suggest that the young Communists should keep themselves "pure" and uncontaminated by association with these religious youth organizations, by withdrawing from this great mass movement? It is the outstanding merit of our Communist youth that they have plunged into the very heart of it!

An interesting feature of the Youth Congress is this, that while there are still some few young socialist leaders who try to exclude the Communists (and who would be delighted if we should isolate ourselves), there are very few with that idea who can speak for the religious youth masses. In fact, most of the religious youth will now fight to a finish to maintain the leading position of the young Communists in the Youth Congress movement. Strange as it may still seem to some people, they like us!

This brings us to the much-debated question of the self-styled "God" of Harlem, Father Divine, the participation of whose followers in the New York May Day roused so much comment.

Most of our critics, who condemn us for association with Divine's followers, are willing, strangely enough, to accept or at least condone the united front with the more respectable, more established, church organizations. But they demand that we Communists should be more discriminating, that we should be careful to associate ourselves only with "good" religious organizations, that we should avoid the "bad" ones, like that of Father Divine. They find something especially outrageous in the fact that Divine's followers locate their God in Harlem instead of in the skies or in his Vicar at Rome! Their sense of decency is shocked when Divine's flock shows its religious enthusiasms in the street! They want us to help discipline the Divine congregation into the mold of the older established church institutions!

But, dear critics, can you not understand that we Communists are so fundamental in our anti-religious position that we are unable to distinguish between "good" and "bad" religions, because for us they are all bad?

Can you not understand that, for those who have really rejected religion, the idea of God is unacceptable, quite independent of the supposed geographical location of that mythical being?

No, we find it impossible to make a choice between the object of worship of Father Coughlin on the one hand and the most deluded follower of Father Divine on the other.

We do find a difference of values, however, as between various religious organizations, when we come to judge among which

it is most important and profitable to carry on our work. While we try to carry our united-front program among the masses in all these organizations, we can see clearly that this is most important in certain ones. And these most important ones are, precisely, the youth and Negro organizations. That is because here, among the youth and the Negro masses, we find the greatest suffering from the crisis and, therefore, the greatest response to our message of organization and struggle.

What church organization has made the most complete mobilization of its members to demonstrate opposition to fascism and war? Unquestionably, it is that of Father Divine. Other churches could well be proud if they had done as much!

What church has adopted resolutions in support of H. R. 2827 and sent delegations to Washington to register this support before Congress? We would be delighted if a thousand other churches would do it, but so far the Divine church does not have much competition for first place!

Is there any one who can deny that these activities are gradually succeeding in giving a social and political education to the Negro masses who belong to Father Divine's church? Is there anyone who can deny the tremendous importance of this political education in the heart of Harlem, and spreading throughout the country precisely through this united front? And can anyone doubt that the liberation of these masses from slavery to religious superstitions is thus being carried out in the only way possible at this point in their development?

Some of our correspondents have written to us about the Divine church followers in very contemptuous terms. We want to answer all such critics, in the most explicit terms, that we have nothing whatever in common with their contemptuous attitude. Neither have we anything in common with the fantastic religion of Father Divine, in which we see the characteristic features of all religions. But we most emphatically do have much in common with the masses of Negroes who follow Divine; they are our people, they are suffering, toiling masses, they are our brothers and sisters. We will fight for them, for their interests, and we will do everything possible to draw them into a common struggle with us. We grant them the same right to their religious superstitions that we grant to the Catholic masses, the Jewish religious workers, the members of the multitude of Protestant churches and sects; while we reserve to ourselves the right to oppose all such superstitions, in the most effective ways we can find.

The next question is that posed by a certain churchman, who writes us the following:

I am heartily in sympathy with your objectives, and with your judgment on most current questions, but I am somewhat doubtful about the existence of all these revolutionary qualities that you ascribe to the working class. I see the biggest organization of labor, the A. F. of L., consistently lined up with the capitalists on all big questions and sometimes even with the most re-

actionary capitalists, as in their opposition to the recognition of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, from what I see going on in most of the Protestant Churches, I am inclined to think that the Communist Party will capture the leadership of the churches before it does that of the trade unions.

We Communists would be the last ones to deny the reactionary character of the higher official leadership of the American Federation of Labor. This reactionary leadership, however, does not arise out of, nor base itself upon, the main body of organized workers which it claims to represent. Still less is it representative of the working class as a whole. It is a product on the one hand of the narrow craft interests of the relatively small group of highly skilled or strategically placed workers who, in the pre-crisis and especially in the pre-war period, had purchased a privileged position at the expense of betraying the majority of their class brothers. This group is what we Communists designate as the "aristocracy of labor." On the other hand, it is the product of capitalist corruption, fraud and coercion extending over many years, in which the working class had not yet become conscious of its separate interests and of its historic role.

This lack of class-consciousness among the workers in America is evidenced by the lack of any separate political organization of the mass of the working class, by its subordination to the open capitalist political parties. The causes of this political backwardness are to be found in the peculiarities of American historical development. These may be indicated, without going into any great detail, as chiefly the higher tempo of American capitalist development as compared to other countries; its greater breadth and sweep in the conquest of a new continent in which pre-capitalist forms were largely absent; the accompanying feature of what is known as "the frontier," that is, over a long period the possibility of dissatisfied workers becoming settlers of new territory with the incorporation of the most active and intelligent of them into the bourgeoisie; the existence in America of a higher degree of civil rights than in most capitalist countries; the extreme heterogeneity of the American working class, as a result of immigration from all over the world; and the higher standard of living, as a result of all these peculiarities, of the American workers as compared with those of Europe over a considerable period—in fact practically up to the present economic crisis.

WHAT reason have we to believe that this political backwardness of the American workers can and will be overcome? We have many and good reasons. These are not weakened by the facts just cited, but on the contrary they are strengthened. The higher were the previous standards of living of the American workers, the greater is the consequent dissatisfaction, awakening and revolt when these workers are suddenly, catastrophically, cast down to the

European level as at present. The greater were the democratic rights that existed in the previous period when they did not threaten the capitalist rule, the stronger is the present resistance of the working class when capitalism in America is systematically curtailing and destroying these rights and moving towards fascist dictatorship. The same applies to the effects of the crisis upon increasing strata of the farmers and middle classes. Precisely because the United States was the land of the highest development of capitalism (which is the general explanation of the lateness of the working class awakening to class consciousness) the more rapid will be the speed of its development as a conscious independent class force. The problem of revolutionization of the working class is the problem of bringing it to consciousness of its class position and class interests.

In contrast with this, among the middle classes it is precisely the growing consciousness of their intermediate position and the contradictions embodied therein, which gives rise more and more to vacillations, hesitations, indecisiveness.

We have reason, therefore, to expect that, with the sharpening of all social problems caused by the capitalist crisis, the working class more and more will emerge as an independent revolutionary force struggling against capitalism, and more and more understand the necessity to overthrow capitalism. And in fact that is what we do witness going on today.

There is sometimes a certain appearance of truth given to the facetious remark of our churchly friend about middle-class church people being more revolutionarily inclined, at least for the moment and on the surface, than large and significant sections of the workers. But it would be a great mistake to be misled by such superficial appearances. The slightest probing beneath the surface would show that all of these manifestations of radicalization among the middle classes follow, and are dependent upon, the basic movements and struggles of the wage workers. It would be impossible to witness such significant signs of radicalization as the great student strike against war, the leftward movements in the churches and especially among the church youth, the growing struggles of the farmers, the growing organization and activities among technicians and white-collar workers, etc., except upon the basis of the rising strike movement in the industries: the great solidarity strikes of last year, the historic San Francisco General Strike, the National Textile Strike of half a million workers, the nation-wide struggles of the unemployed and so on.

We have every reason, therefore, to expect the continued, though uneven and spasmodic growth of revolutionary action and leadership among the workers, organized and unorganized, which can end only with the complete victory of the working class. On the other hand, much as we welcome and appreciate the expressions of the revolutionary

process going on among the churches, we cannot expect an analogous development there. Precisely because the Protestant churches in America have been, to a greater degree than in other countries, removed from direct contact with the social and political struggles as a result of the separation of church and state and of their decentralized and split-up organizations, there has been a certain opportunity for a freer expression through some of them of the revolutionary trends operating among the masses. This will find its limits, however, with the further development of the class struggle. These churches are fundamentally controlled, as organizations, by the capitalist class. Very soon we may expect to see the anti-Red campaign with its Dickstein Committees, its Hearsts and so on, carrying through a purge in these institutions. They can never become basic weapons in the hands of the toiling masses in their struggle for a new society.

The basic and leading force to resist the degradation of living standards by the capitalists is, and can only be, the working class and before all, the industrial wage

workers. This is the only class, further, that is capable of conceiving, planning and building a socialist society. In carrying out these historic tasks, however, the working class does not isolate itself from the other sections of the oppressed and impoverished population. On the contrary, it fights for the interests of all the toiling masses, and sets itself to win them in close alliance and active participation in the struggle for immediate needs and for the socialist society. *The Proletarian Revolution*, towards which the Communist program leads, is in the truest and broadest sense *the People's Revolution*. Only such a revolution can free humanity from the degradation and bestiality of the final stage of capitalism such as we now witness in Germany, free the stifled productive forces, preserve the cultural heritage of the past from destruction and lead the whole human race towards a brighter and happier future, a future of peace, plenty and prosperity.

In his seventh article, next week, Earl Browder will discuss "How the Communist Party Works."—THE EDITORS.

Questions from Readers

EARL BROWDER

Status of the Family

Question: What will be the status of the family under socialism? Is it true that the Communists propose to abolish the family as an institution? Is it true that the Communists are opposed to the social regulation of sexual relations, and advocate and practice promiscuity?

Answer: From the dawn of history, every revolutionary movement has had flung against it the charge that it would abolish the family, that it believed in "free love," that it would reduce mankind's sexual relations to the level of the lower animals. The same charge was made against capitalism and the bourgeois revolution by the spokesmen of feudalism and the aristocracy. There is only that much truth in the age-old slander, that each revolution, by changing the material base of society, brings forth new forms for all human relationships, usually higher forms, not lower. The socialist society will not abolish the family; on the contrary, it will give the family an opportunity to develop its full possibilities. That is something that capitalism never could give; for the masses, under capitalism, family life has always been crushed under the ruthless burdens of exploitation. In these days of the collapse of capitalism, the family is actually being abolished for millions, smashed by the inexorable hammer of unemployment. Under socialism, it is true, the typical family will not be, as now, based upon the special subjection and slavery of the woman and, therefore, the family will become quite different—something much higher and more beautiful. Every honest student of the actual development of the family and of sexual relations in the Soviet Union, where socialism is being built in the midst of great difficulties, has reported the new life, vigor and solidity of the family life that is growing up there upon the new social and economic foundation. A revolutionary morality in sexual and family questions, upon the principle of equality of men and women, an equality that permeates all social and

economic life, is being built up. The Communist Party, both before and after the revolution, is the sworn enemy of all looseness and laxness in personal life, which reduces the social effectiveness of the individual. It builds its moral standards upon this foundation, in contrast to those of bourgeois society, which are based upon the sacredness of private property and reduce marriage and sex to merchandise.

Question of Dictatorship

Question: How do you reconcile your statements about the dictatorship of the proletariat being a democracy for the workers, with the fact that where it exists there is only one party permitted to exist, and that Joseph Stalin is the dictator?

Answer: Our questioner is, first of all, badly misinformed (probably he reads Hearst) about Joseph Stalin being a dictator. The undoubted authority carried by the word of Comrade Stalin in the U.S.S.R. (and throughout the world among the toiling masses) has the same foundation, and is a continuation of, the authority that belonged to Lenin. It is the authority of the accepted leader of the Communist Party which has showed the way to a new life, to the solution of every problem, for the masses. It is the authority which comes from being proved correct by life itself, in every major controversy that has arisen within the Party itself. It is an authority based upon the love and confidence of the masses. Our questioner seems to think that workers' democracy can be realized only by two or more parties, on the example of bourgeois society. But capitalism needs many parties because it has no solidarity of interest, because it is composed of warring groups. The working class has no such need; on the contrary, it has every need of singleness of direction, without which it is impossible to build socialism. A dictatorship of the proletariat and a socialist reconstruction of society, carried out by two or three or more parties, alternating in direction of affairs, and competing for the favors of an

electorate according to the model of our Republican and Democratic Parties, would not be a workers' rule but a return to capitalism; its boasted socialist construction would go the way of Kautsky's famous "socialization commissions" in the German Weimar Republic; the whole conception fits only into an Alice-in-Wonderland fairy tale. United under the leadership of one Party, the Communist Party, the toiling masses realize democracy in real life for the first time. It provides the only possible means whereby the masses really take hold of their own life and rebuild it into a great social edifice, realizing step by step all their hitherto suppressed possibilities. Democracy and freedom, for the working class, means the freedom to UNITE, not to divide; means the ability to RULE with a single CLASS WILL and thus to defeat all enemies and overcome all difficulties. The tremendous authority of a Stalin is no personal dictatorship, but the symbol of a UNITED WORKING CLASS RULE.

Inevitability and Fatality

Question: If the proletarian revolution is inevitable, if the free-will of man is an illusion, if the law of causation operates continuously in human history, then what is the use of man trying to do anything about the whole business at all?

Answer: Our correspondent has confused inevitability with fatality. Communists are not fatalists; we are the first to reject the nonsensical idea that socialism is inevitable regardless of what men do; we say it is inevitable *because* of what men will do. Man is not free to will—effectively—that capitalism shall continue; all the exercise of will-power, free or otherwise, cannot keep that rotten old system going for much longer. The only direction in which the human will can be effective in guiding society to a solution of its problems, is the direction of socialism. But even the will to socialism doesn't drop down from the clouds, it also is "caused," it is a product of human evolution and, therefore, is not free in the metaphysical sense. "Freedom" is a grand old word, however, in spite of the great amount of abuse from which it has suffered. We Communists would not abandon "freedom," but rather we would rescue it from its violators. We would set free the productive forces of humanity, which are being choked and destroyed by a superannuated capitalist system. We would, thereby, set free the human spirit from its oppression by a diseased society, create the possibility for the full development of all the creative capacities of the human mind. In this historical, concrete sense, "freedom" ceases to be the meaningless, confused slogan of contradictory and warring camps; it comes down from the clouds, it stands on the earth, it takes sides in the class struggle, it stands on the barricades with the workers against the capitalists. Man makes his own history, but—and here is where Marx entered—he doesn't make it out of whole cloth. He makes such history, at each particular historical moment, as has been made possible—and necessary—by the growth of his productive forces. Freedom is the understanding of this historic process and the full participation in it that is made possible by such understanding. A real understanding of the laws of social change does not, therefore, bring the conclusion of our questioner, that efforts are futile; on the contrary, nothing *activizes* a human being so fully and continuously. For evidence, one needs only to look at the way in which our still small Communist Party in the United States is able to keep the issue of socialism, as the next step, constantly in the foreground of the whole national life.

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