



Religion A N D  
Communism

By EARL BROWDER

*The following is the text of the address of Earl Browder, General Secretary of the Communist Party, U.S.A., delivered at the regular morning service of the Community Church in Boston on March 5, 1939.*

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# RELIGION AND COMMUNISM

BY EARL BROWDER

**T**HERE is an extensive newspaper campaign being conducted in the United States, designed to unite all persons of religious belief in a common front against Communism and the Communist Party, on the ground that Communism and the Communists threaten to destroy their religions and their religious freedom. I have taken advantage of your kind invitation to address you today, in order to give the Communist view of this question. I am assuming that we occupy at least this common ground, to begin with, that we all agree that both sides of the question should be considered fully before minds are closed and final judgment rendered; that is, I assume that I am not addressing myself to those whose views are already fixed and final, not to be reached by reasonable discussion.

Allow me, first of all, to make a clear definition of the Communist Party attitude to religion. My Party stands for unconditional freedom of religious beliefs and worship, as a matter of principle, for the complete separation of church and state, for the removal of every element of coercion in matters of conscience. That is its fundamental principle in all questions of public, of governmental, policy. Within our Party we place no tests of religion whatever upon our membership, which includes, as a matter of fact today, persons of all shades and tendencies of religious belief, as well as skeptics, agnostics and atheists. The Party reserves the right, in relation to its own members, of calling up for discussion any particular opinions of any kind, religious or otherwise, which involve

formulation of policy toward social and political problems, but this can never result in coercion because of the purely voluntary nature of membership in the Party.

This being the Communist position, not a new position but going back to the foundation of our movement in the teachings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels from the middle of the nineteenth century on, the question arises, upon what basis has it been possible for misconception to arise, for the Communists to be pictured as proponents of forcible destruction of religion and religious freedom?

Two facts have served to lend some color of credibility to these charges against us, and to make possible widespread misunderstanding.

First, the repression of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Russian Revolution which founded the first socialist republic of the world under the leadership of the Communist Party; second, the insistence of all Marxian philosophical authorities upon the exclusion of every element of the supernatural from the explanation of the world and of man's history, and from the policies which are expected to mold and direct future history—the insistence that these questions must be dealt with as matters of scientific inquiry as rigorously as questions of astronomy, physics, chemistry or biology. Let us, therefore, examine these two facts more in detail, to see if they conflict with the principles of religious freedom.

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The Greek Orthodox Church was deeply involved in the Russian Revolution, and suffered from it, first of all because it was a *State Church*, a political instrument in the hands of the tsarist autocracy, as corrupt, rotten and unspiritual an institution as history records. It was the *antithesis* of religious freedom, as well as the symbol and instrument of political despotism. Any steps toward freedom, religious or political, on the part of the Russian people, no matter how limited, could only be taken over the ruins of tsarism and the Church which was its unlimited instrument; the role of the Church was summed up in the sinister figure of the Monk Rasputin, who dominated the last years of the reign of Nicholas II. For full documentation of this phase of the problem, no recourse is

needed to Communist authorities; the case was fully established by historians of all religions (except of the one under examination), before the socialist revolution of 1917 caused them to lock up their books in forgotten archives, so as not to embarrass the anti-Soviet political fight of the Church, with which they were in agreement.

As a matter of simple historical fact, the disestablishment of the Greek Orthodox Church in Russia, and its elimination from political life, was part of the bourgeois-democratic revolution and not specifically of the socialist revolution, even though it was realized only under the Soviet Republic, as were most of the simplest democratic achievements. But it was an historical task strictly parallel to the disestablishment of the Catholic Church in France, a feature of the bourgeois revolution, and was carried through with much less violence and incidental hardships precisely because it was so long overdue that only the socialist revolution completed it. It was an historical task strictly comparable to that which the United States carried out over the sixty or seventy year period following the Declaration of Independence. It compressed in a few short years for Russia the hundreds of years required for the Reformation in Central and Western Europe, which had left Russia almost untouched.

It becomes further clear that the struggle against the church was a necessity of the simplest aspirations to political liberty, and not a special item of the socialist or communist program, when we see how today it repeats itself in other lands fighting for democracy and independence, for example, in Spain and Mexico. I know quite well, of course, that all Tories point to the conflict between church and state in Spain and Mexico as signs of Communist influence in those lands, but such propaganda is so obviously untrue that it should not confuse a single educated person. Every period of Spanish history, when its people were striving toward democracy and civilization, saw the church hierarchy (always with honorable exceptions) on the side of reaction; and the repressions of the popular movement always resulted in movements against the church, marked by church burnings and so on.

When the Spanish Republic arose a few years ago, the same

struggles set in again, as they had so often in Spanish history; that the Communist Party did not create this struggle is proved by the fact that it was not strong enough, before 1936, to elect a single deputy to the national legislature, and when it did become stronger its influence was consistently a moderating one on the religious issue (not, of course, conciliatory toward the pro-fascist section of the Church hierarchy). Similarly in Mexico, the conflict between church and state has been a permanent one since the 1911 Revolution, and was sharpest in the period before the Communist Party was formed, or while it was a small and persecuted sect. President Cardenas is the first Mexican executive to have the epithet "Communist" flung at him (he has the consolation, if he needs it, of knowing that President Roosevelt suffers at the same time from the same accusation), but he is also the first President since 1911 to have succeeded in softening this conflict considerably without compromising the program of the revolution written into the Mexican Constitution.

And finally, citizens of the United States, before they accuse Communists of being church-burners and persecutors of religion, should study the history of our own country more carefully, for they will find that church-burnings and persecutions in this country have occurred, but always on the part of one religious group against another, never as the act of anti-religious groups or of Communists.

An illuminating and valuable book has but recently been issued, *The Protestant Crusade*, by Ray Billington, dealing with the anti-Catholic movement in America in the first half of the nineteenth century, from a pro-Catholic viewpoint, which is sufficient by itself to absolve the Communists from any responsibility for the origin of bigotry or intolerance on the religious question in our country.

So much for the first of the two grounds upon which Communists have been accused of being enemies of religious freedom. Overwhelming evidence proves that all the great struggles between church and state which have been so lightly ascribed to Communist hostility to religion are nothing of the kind; they arose out of the general democratic movement of the people for both *political and religious* freedom, and char-

acterize the *bourgeois-democratic revolution* against feudalism and semi-feudal survivals, and that these struggles are carried over into the *socialist revolution* only there where, and to the extent to which, the bourgeois-democratic revolution was delayed or was incomplete.

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Now for the second ground for accusation against us, namely, the insistence of Marxian ideology and philosophy upon the exclusion of the supernatural from the world-view upon which we base our program, the insistence upon an exclusively scientific consideration. First of all, let me repeat, there is no religious or anti-religious test of membership in the Communist Party, and an increasing number of Party members are active communicants of the various churches, finding in the Party program and activities, as distinct from its background and base of Marxian philosophy, what they themselves describe as "the nearest we can find to applied Christianity."

And, indeed, it cannot be denied that Christianity and most other religions have communistic traditions and ethical teachings which can be realized in the modern world only through the program of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, there is a conflict between the Marxian philosophy which is the dominating influence in the intellectual life of the socialist and communist movement, and the distinctly religious, ethical, or philosophical-idealist approach to social and political questions, even when these latter approaches result in the acceptance of the same immediate political program of the Communist Party.

We Communists would be the last to evade this issue, or to belittle its significance. But we insist upon keeping it, insofar as we are able, upon its proper plane as a conflict of ideas, which does not necessarily, and should not, result in a *conflict between persons who agree upon immediate program* while disagreeing upon the intellectual path by which they reached that common point. We are determined not to allow any disputes about the Marxian philosophy to be used by anyone to break the unity of the people in their struggles to realize an immediate, agreed-upon program, whether that is a simple program of the democratic front or even the program of estab-

lishing socialism. In fact the highest evidence of the validity of Marxism, in our view, is its effective contribution to the *unity of the working class and the toiling masses of the population.*

We are not sectarians or dogmatists. We know that there is every likelihood that even when the time comes when the majority of the American people decide to establish socialism according to the program of the Communist Party, the greatest part of that majority will not understand or consciously accept the Marxian philosophy, but will be moved by immediate needs which will be expressed in their minds in religious, ethical, or philosophical-idealist forms of thought.

It would therefore be the extreme of stupidity on our part if we should raise dogmatic barriers between our Party and the great masses who do not understand Marxism, and who will not have the opportunity to understand it for some time to come. And Marxians are not stupid, at least not as a rule. A dogmatic Marxism is, in our understanding, foreign to the whole teaching of Marx and his great successors, Lenin and Stalin, and was what Marx himself had in mind when, on an occasion of being pestered by dogmatists trying to quote him against himself, impatiently declared that he, Marx, was no Marxian.

No, we are not dogmatists. But neither are we weak-minded opportunists or conciliators, who try to patch up a united movement of the people out of mutually contradictory fragments of ideas or the colorless common-denominator of the rich and multiform popular thought. We use our Marxism as an instrument to discover the effective forces that can and will unite the people in struggle for the needs of their life, despite all differences in ideas, and through such common struggle gradually achieve more and more unity of ideas.

For it is the essence of our thought, and that is why we are called materialists, that the universe and life come first, and out of it grows the idea, not the other way about; and it is also of the essence of our thought, and that is why we are called dialectical, not mechanical, materialists, that the idea, when it corresponds to reality and is taken possession of by the masses, becomes such a power that can shape, direct and guide the

human race to complete freedom, which is the same thing as to say the full realization of its capacities.

With increasing frequency I have the question put to me by religious persons with a communistic tendency of thought: why does not the Communist Party drop its Marxism, toward which the churches are hostile, and frankly adopt religion as an approach to the masses, even if only from practical and opportunistic motives. I believe that this question can be answered in such a way that everyone, including the advocates of religion, will understand the impossibility of such a proposal. All that is necessary is to begin to visualize the steps that would be necessary, and what would result from these steps.

These proposals usually come from Christians. They really propose that the Party should adopt Christianity. But if we did, that would immediately exclude the Jews, Mohammedans, and the horde of small non-Christian sects, not to speak of a great mass (the majority of the population in the United States) who profess no religion at all, as well as smaller groups of professed atheists. That would only be to fix arbitrarily a division of the people instead of greater unity.

But then our troubles are only begun. The outstanding characteristic of the Christian community, from the viewpoint of influence upon social groupings, is its schismatic character. The largest of the Christian churches is less than one-third of the total, while the remainder is divided up among a score of Protestant denominations. The Catholics are convinced that all others are but disguised forms of atheism, and all the more dangerous because disguised; while most Protestants continue to look upon the Catholics as idolaters and subjects of a foreign potentate, even when they allow the issue to lie in abeyance. Not even all Methodists have been able to remain in one church, and the same is true of Presbyterians and Baptists, not to mention the lesser denominations.

If the Christian community is so demonstrably unable to unify itself, or even to move in the direction of unity, what reason have we to think the adoption of Christianity by the Communists would help to unify the people around our political program?

It is, of course, idle to apply the same test to other faiths, as for example the Jewish. And of course the religious Jewish community would indignantly protest against the Communists endorsing their religion, since the fascists have so terribly revived the cannibalistic anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages, and intensified it, precisely under the completely false identification of the Jewish religion with Communism.

Incomparably larger numbers of people are religious-minded than are scientifically minded, due to the educational defects of our present social system. Yet, while the religious approach to our political problems opens up the doors to schism without end, the strictly scientific approach gives the maximum of unity, and contributes most to realizing the brotherhood of man. There has never yet been found a test of religious faith acceptable to all religious people; but there are such tests for all who agree upon the scientific approach. That is why all sciences, except the social sciences, have largely liquidated opposing schools of thought; while in the social sciences, where there is as yet only the beginning of unity in America, this is only because their scientific possibilities are by and large denied, because to admit them would be to admit the tabooed premises of Marxism or Communism. But scientific thought is a mighty force, which it is very difficult to outlaw, and that is why the Communist Party, comparatively very small indeed, exercises an influence in our country which is quite broad and is extending rapidly.

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By maintaining this scientific approach, while scrupulously refraining from all offense to the religious preconceptions of all men and joining in the guarantee of religious freedom to all, the Communist Party finds the road to the maximum unity and effectiveness of all who agree with the practical program of Communism, and the greatest possibility of cooperation with the broadest progressive and democratic masses who constitute a majority of the population. And our cooperation with the broadest circles, on a minimum program of amelioration of social conditions under capitalism (a minimum program typified by the New Deal), is growing every day. In this process we more and more find ourselves in cooperation with

groups united on the basis of their religious beliefs. We welcome this cooperation, and do our best to make it more fruitful.

Sometimes there are by-products of this cooperation, which are embarrassing to our friends. I have in mind a recent article in the *American Magazine*, which set out to prove that the Communist Party was "boring from within" the Protestant churches, with such success that we are supposed to be within sight of a majority influence already. Of course, such fantastic conclusions are reached by the simple process of identifying "Communists" by the same standards Mrs. Dilling used to "expose" the "Communism" of the President, Mrs. Roosevelt and Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter. And you can hardly blame the Communists for this embarrassment, because even if we should remove ourselves entirely from the American scene, Mr. Dies and Mrs. Dilling would only insist all the more that we had merely "gone underground," and would all the more insistently "expose" every serious progressive as a "hidden Communist."

An interesting fact, to offset the fantasies about "Communism" in the Protestant churches, is that we have more communicants of the Catholic Church as members of the Communist Party than of any other denomination. While we make many sympathetic contacts among active Protestants, they seldom become Party members; but among Catholics, the speed with which a sympathetic contact develops into a loyal and active Party man is much greater, and the proportion much higher.

When I asked one of our Catholic Party members to explain the reasons for this to me, he replied that his religious education and discipline had contained a recognition of the reality of the material world, which he found largely lacking in Protestant churches, but which he found compatible with the Marxian dialectical materialism. He considers himself first of all a Catholic, but he is intellectually convinced that communism is the inevitable next stage of society, and he believes that if he helps to bring it about he will thereby contribute most effectively to the continuity of his religion. He points out that his Church, despite all difficulties, did learn to adapt itself

to capitalism, despite its ties to the old feudal society, and he hopes it will, with less resistance, accept the new society of socialism. His views are at least interesting, and I pass them on to you for what they may be worth. This much I can testify toward their soundness, that in the trade union movement the Communists have found no more harmonious and effective co-workers than among those circles predominantly Catholic.

From such facts, you will understand why the Communist Party does not reply in kind to the furious diatribes directed against us by the reactionary clergy of the Catholic Church, typified by Father Coughlin and the Rev. Edward Lodge Curran. They are not representative of the Catholic community, and as their links with foreign and native fascism become clearer, they are doomed to repudiation by their own flocks. Meanwhile, there is a valuable by-product to their ravings; inasmuch as they are of such low intellectual caliber, most of their audience are left unsatisfied, but curious to really learn something about this much-talked-of Communism, with the result that the circulation of our literature among Catholics is increasing by leaps and bounds. A growing number of Catholic youth, who are sent to my meetings by Rev. Curran in order to scoff, remain, if not to pray, yet to enter into reasonable discussions from which they almost always emerge with thoughtful visage, minus the cocksure aggressive intolerance with which they were sent.

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All these growing friendly contacts between Communists and religious communicants are more than casual and accidental incidents. They are symptoms of deep currents beginning to move among the people. They reflect a deepening uneasiness before the rising menace of fascism within the United States, and alarm before the aggressions of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis which are engulfing the world in the second World War. When they witness the alliance of the war-makers marching under the flag of "Anti-Communism," their long-ingulcated prejudices against the Communists are undermined, at least to the extent of recognizing that they share a common enemy with the Communists, and that enemy an extremely aggressive one, and dangerous beyond anything hitherto seen in history.

The distressful conditions of all loyal and active communicants of both Catholic and Protestant churches under Hitler, and the cannibalistic pogroms against the Jews, have served to awaken and frighten all intelligent church adherents in the United States. They are no longer able to accept the old formulæ and ready-made answers of the pre-Hitler time. They are asking questions, serious ones, and demanding serious answers.

With the fascist powers setting themselves up as *the church*, violently assimilating into themselves all existing churches, our American church members can no longer be satisfied with superficial comparisons with former conflicts between Church and the democratizing states which sought the disestablishment of the church and its removal from politics. Here is something quite different, opposite in fact, something which threatens to turn back the clock of human progress not to the Middle Ages, but to pre-civilization.

With the fascist absolutism, no longer content to oppress in the name of God, but claiming to be God himself, personified in Der Fuehrer, disposing of the fate of whole nations with iron hands and the kick of rough-shod military boots, American churchgoers can no longer be frightened by the menace of a few quotations from the philosophical writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin which combat the conception of supernatural influences, in the realm of ideas. Here is something quite different, opposite in fact, something which transforms the whole concept of religion and of God himself into a monstrous military machine, raining death and destruction from the skies upon men, women, and children alike.

That all America is aroused and frightened by this horrible menace is attested by the current rearmament program now getting under way, and which seems destined to reach colossal dimensions before any relief comes. Does any one doubt whence comes the danger before which America is arming?

Surely the danger does not come from "Godless" Soviet Russia. It has existed for twenty-one years, and not one of its neighbors has ever had cause to fear its armed forces, even if some ruling classes have shivered with fright before its ideas.

The stronger the Soviet Union grows, the more it has been able to prove in deeds its undying devotion to international order, to peace, and to the inviolability of agreements between nations.

No, there can be no doubt in the mind of any intelligent person, even one who is only most superficially informed. The world is being plunged into war by the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis, the "Anti-Communist" alliance. There are the enemies of all mankind, of civilization itself. Thence comes the menace to all culture and all freedom, including religious freedom.

If that is true—and who can deny it?—what then are we to think of those who continue to shout from the housetops the alarm about the "menace of Communism"? Communism will and can be nothing but what the majority of the people make of it, and if we cannot trust the people then all talk of human liberty has become so much hypocrisy.

And what are we to think of those who, more slyly, talk of the "menace of dictatorships" and lump together Germany, Russia, Italy, and Japan? That is only to make the enemy look more powerful, throw panic among the democratic peoples, and deny to us the natural and inevitable cooperation of a natural and inalienable friend, in the most dangerous moment of world history.

The brutal truth, which needs to be spoken with brutal frankness, is that every public man who agitates today against the Soviet Union is thereby taking the path toward the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis, toward submission to its plans of world conquest.

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The issue is submission or resistance. Can anyone think of resistance, but at the same time wish the United States to bear the burden of such resistance alone? Certainly not, for such ideas are clearly nothing but a disguised form of submission, putting off the decision until the rest of the world has been conquered.

Can anyone think of resistance, and not want among America's friends every power, great and small—but especially great—which can be aligned against the war-makers, for peace and international order? Certainly not, for to refuse friends in the

face of world cataclysm is only the road of self-destruction, of national suicide.

Can anyone deny that the Soviet Union is a great power? Only those who take their thoughts ready-made from the *Volkischer Beobachter* of Berlin, as an increasing number of Republican spokesmen from Herbert Hoover down are doing.

A nation that multiplied its national wealth and income by ten times since 1928, the same period in which even the United States declined in wealth and national income, cannot be described other than as a great power. A nation which occupies the eastern half of Europe and the northern third of Asia, with half the surveyed mineral resources of the world, cannot be described other than as a great power. A nation which has raised its general standard of living five-fold in ten years cannot be described other than as a great power. A nation that stands second in wealth and income only to the United States itself cannot be described other than as a great power.

This great power, the Soviet Union, has proved in its entire existence that it never broke an agreement, never deserted a friend, never uttered a threat, and never violated a border. In a world of chaos and destruction, a world in which the United States government with the overwhelming support of the people considers it necessary to multiply armaments to guarantee our simple national existence—in such a world, such a great power offers its friendship and cooperation to the American people and government.

Should America accept, cultivate and cherish such a proffered friendship? Men are speaking in the name of religion and religious freedom to advise us no, to refuse this offer. May I be allowed to point out, to Catholics, Jews, and Protestants, to men and women of all religions and of none, that it was such advice, which was followed in Europe, which raised this Frankenstein that threatens our destruction, and if followed in the United States will destroy us also.

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