

# The New Logos

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**On Synthesizing Marxism and Christianity**, by Dale Vree, *New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1976. xxii + 206 pp. \$15.75.*

**Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life**, by Jerrold Seigel, *Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978. ix + 451 pp. \$16.50.*

AT FIRST GLANCE the grouping of these two books may appear curious. Dr. Dale Vree's is the work of a political scientist who conceives his task to be that of "conceptual analysis." Examining "the subject of synthetic Marxist-Christian dialogue," Vree weighs the intellectual consequences of efforts to Christify Marxism or communize Christianity. He advances the thesis that Marxism and Christianity are discrete systems of belief, intellectually and spiritually antithetical and incompatible. He writes his book in the tradition of analytic philosophy, treating "Marxism and Christianity as social facts, as the conceptual systems which they are." Exegesis and apologetics, as such, are outside his special purview, as he attempts to show how syntheses of Marxism and Christianity "violate the living boundaries of the living linguistic traditions" of each. His approach is critically dispassionate and discriminating; and it is invariably provocative. He focuses on hard and central issues with a relentlessness and seriousness rarely met in an age addicted to the habits of relativism and revisionism. The word dialogue, which for many defies any incongruity between aspiration and reality, has become a sacred word that, to question or doubt, has its perils. Vree addresses himself to the pitfalls of dialogue in the belief that there is a Christian orthodoxy and there is a Marxist orthodoxy. The pull of

sentiment, of empty idealism, or of muddled rhetoric has no distorting place in Vree's vindicating demonstration of his paramount goal: "[to] show how dialogical Christians and dialogical Marxists, in departing from their respective orthodoxies, place more weight on the concept of human freedom than their respective belief systems can sustain, and hence fall into philosophical confusion."

Professor Jerrold Seigel's task is that of an historian writing "psychological biography." He employs a psychohistorical approach that, also stressing, though from another perspective, the aim of synthesis, strives to interrelate Marx's public and private behavior and his thinking. "The shape of a life" is indicated by the titles of the three main parts of Seigel's book, "Becoming Marx," "Involvement and Isolation," "Economics: Marx's Fate." Seigel's purpose is summarized by Marx's own words, which he uses as one of the epigraphs to the book: "In the general relationship which the philosopher establishes between the world and thought, he merely makes objective the relation between his particular consciousness and the real world." The delineation of Marx's "exemplary presence in the development of modern consciousness" is competent and illuminating. At its worst psychoanalytic literature can lead to strange and perverse interpretations; even in the psychoanalytic community it is admitted that psychoanalysis has "landed itself in a morass of reified concepts." Seigel's book does not suffer from those clinical animadversions that one has learned to expect to find (sometimes to one's horror) in books dealing with "literature and psychology." Here, Marx's "inner terrain"—that is, the psychological themes and patterns, as well as the determinants, of his life—is examined sympathetically and responsibly. Seigel is careful

to insist that "the overall configuration of Marx's life was formed as much by the general shape of historical change in the nineteenth century as by his particular manner of experiencing it." (In terms of style, however, *Marx's Fate* has faults: throughout, the writing is tedious, dull, prolix. One feels mercilessly exposed to those stylistic liabilities associated with the writings of many American academics.)

Seigel helps one to understand how "Marx's fate" is reflected in Marx's doctrine; how and why (when one considers Vree's findings) the synthesis of Marxism and Christianity is problematic. The picture of Marx is entirely pertinent to making a psychohistorical connection with the individuating social-theological implications that Vree presents. The Marx we see before us is a man who, in conveying his vision of an "unmediated humanism," discloses commitment, single-mindedness, sincerity. Marx possessed an intrinsic religious fervor that enabled him to arrive at a social morality which he identified with an exclusively material life and, beyond that, with the absolute good. But whatever the religious earnestness behind his ideas, he did *not* deviate from his major idea that the "Criticism of religion is the foundation of all criticism." Seigel's book reminds one of the depth of Marx's hostility to religious life, and also makes one of his celebrated observations, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), more revealing: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness." Even a cursory look at Marx's life discloses a lack of any spiritual essence. One looks in vain for the slightest sympathy for the spiritual. Marx's obsession with "critiquing" the social universe precluded such sympathy, or understanding. Yet one could not expect much more from a social and economic theorist who has been revered as a "philosopher of action"—and whom his father called a "demonic genius." As one of his Young Hegelian friends said of him: "Imagine Rousseau, Voltaire, Holbach, Lessing, Heine, and Hegel fused into one person—I say fused, not juxtaposed—and you have Dr. Marx."

The fact is that Marx, like Freud, as Robert L. Heilbroner has suggested in citing the homology between the tasks of the social theorist and the psychoanalytical theorist, had therapeutic aims in mind in his diagnosis of the social mystery. One of Marx's most interweaving ideas relates to the irreducible importance of the "materialist" element in any view of the social universe or any judgment of life as it is lived, or not lived, in the world of social facts and statistics. For Marx, as for the Marxist doctrine, the materialist component is the equivalent of the spiritual component found in religious faith. Marx's vision constitutes a repudiation of any *recognition* of supernaturalist realities. "Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above," writes T. S. Eliot. "There is no avoiding that dilemma: you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist." Eliot's words alert one to the kind of dialogue that, as exponents from both sides suggest, should start from a socio-moral level rather than from the religious one. In other words, dialogue should start from the naturalist premise: "from below." Marx's own words speak volumes: "Communism as completed naturalism is humanism and as completed humanism is naturalism." If, then, Marx and the Marxists refuse any recognition to the supernatural reality, they also fail to recognize the existence of "Original Sin." Marx's conception of morality must be seen, in these contexts, as being a utopian theology, which Albert Camus rightly labeled a "horizontal transcendence." The Feuerbachian influence on Marx—"we all became Feuerbachians," Engels exclaimed—cannot be underestimated: Feuerbach's contention that religion was a "mystified" knowledge of man, its secret was "anthropological," finds its apogee in Marx and in his method of analysis.

## II

KARL MARX remains the inescapable, if many-sided, Marx, particularly for those ideologues who, sharing his desire to change the world rather than to interpret it, endorse his contention that "not criticism but revolution is the

driving force of history." That "Marx's fate" is tied up with modern man's fate accents the continuing drama of this inescapability. Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud pale in significance in comparison with Marx. Only Christ poses any formidable challenge to Marx's position of primacy, though such an admission hardly diminishes the ascendant rôle of Marx in modern society. In the secular city Marx, not Christ, determines man's fate. Twentieth-century life, examined in terms of the state of the soul, quintessentializes temptation and blasphemy: the appeal of Marx grows as that of Christ lessens; the cult of science and utopian socialism exert a fascination that transforms into the illusion and the delusion determining man's destiny and thought. The appeal of Marxism is best gauged by Simone Weil: "If you do not believe in the remote, silent, secret omnipotence of a spirit, there remains only the manifest omnipotence of matter." The social-economic situation increasingly confirms the bleak and terrifying truth of these words. Strange, new gods—whether as Marx's god of social matter or as the technologico-Benthamite god of the machine—abound; millions worship at their altars. Social necessity, as posited by Marx in both his political criticism and his economic theory, points to the "pure" truth of materialist solutions. Marxism has become, in its own right, a form of religion with its own ultimates and its own answer to ultimate questions: that answer that Simone Weil describes, in all of its dark and dreadful ramifications, as what "ultimately regard [s] matter as a machine for manufacturing the good."

A concern with the common good often brings together movements that are antipodal. This concern has led Marxist and Christian to retreat from an historical position of confrontation to one of ideological encounter. What once actuated a crisis of separability has been transformed into a demand for dialogue and synthesis. And what has been hitherto accepted as being unbridgeable in terms of first principles has been metastasized into a process of transcendence and reconciliation. The desire to "reformulate" older positions and "modernize" basic doctrines has been a powerful one among

increasing numbers of Marxists and Christians. For some Marxists the political leap over Christian eschatology has been no insuperable problem. And for some Christians the religious leap over that materialistic value that Simone Weil points to has been relatively conscienceless. The quest for dialogue has tended to blur established definitions and to topple standards of discrimination. Where economic theory ends and where theology begins are matters of little importance. Enlightenment is now the overarching word, the new *logos*: increasingly and incessantly, the eminences of enlightenment legislate an affirming "pluralism, compassion and social hope." A post-modern and post-Christian civilization, we are told, needs to adjust to the dynamic conditions of a new and radicalizing vision of man. The modern gospel of sociology, preaching as it does an orthodoxy of messianic materialism, and now allying itself to nuclear power, cybernetics, and computers, is everywhere commanding and pervasive.

If "liberation" theologians like the American Harvey Cox and the German Juergen Moltmann have their way then the chronolatry that Jacques Maritain warned against in his *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (1966) will have become a grim prophecy of our destiny. Synthesizing Marxism and Christianity can be dated, among Catholics, from the papacy of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council and, among (de-Stalinizing) Communists, the Twentieth Party Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. Among the Protestants the roots of this dialogue go back to Moltmann's "theology of hope" born in the sixties. Cox's main contribution goes back to 1965, when his most significant and influential book, *The Secular City*, was published. The anti-supernaturalist example of a Marx gradually turning from philosophy to empirical data is being reinforced by Christians turning from a biblical God to what Cox calls the God who is in and of the "social matrix"; the God who is subordinated to the *Zeitgeist*. The often passionate pleas for dialogue and synthesis can also be placed against a concurrent yearning for "the demystification of authority." The Marxist-Christian dialogue is itself a portent of the politicizing

process that grips modern life and thought, an offshoot of the liberalism and the radicalism that have become unquestioned power-centers of twentieth-century civilization. Indeed, the Marxist-Christian dialogue must be seen as the religious manifestation of the reigning ethos of enlightenment. Yet to speak of it as a "religious manifestation" is a loose description of what is, in reality, a politicized and reified religiosity. *On Synthesizing Marxism and Christianity* serves as a warning against the gradual triumph of what Vree terms "the sin of messianic atheism." The Christian-Marxist encounter, to employ the euphemism, concretizes, in its most contemporary development, Marx's demand, posited in "On the Jewish Question": "We do not change secular questions into theological ones. We change theological questions into secular ones."

The Marxist-Christian dialogue is an additional and a prescient sign of "the end of the modern world," to quote the late Romano Guardini:—the final desacralization of the world, the triumph of Mass Man. It signifies capitulation to "the materialist conception of history," as the symbolic value of existence, pointing to the divine and the eternal, is further subordinated to what Heinrich Heine spoke of as the need for "the rehabilitation of matter" and thus ultimately to the science of economics. It is Dostoevsky's "poem" of the Grand Inquisitor being written anew, with a vengeance. Marxist-Christian dialogue becomes another vehicle of giving to modern man the polity that he wants: the "normal satisfaction of all desires," as Marx put it, but for which there is another and truer term: Earthly Paradise. Marxist theories can be dispensed with in terms of their transitoriness. But the Marxist system of values, as Ignazio Silone insists, remains monolithic, on the basis of which one constructs a culture, a civilization:—the faith of a new *logos* and faith in the new age. In opposition to the rogue political theorists (*e.g.*, the Marxist Roger Garaudy) and the sham theologians, Vree focuses precisely on Marxist values as they are distinguished from Christian values. Marxist and Christian dialogists may yearn desperately for a "theology of joy," for what Heinrich Böll, the German recipient of

the Nobel Prize for literature in 1973, calls "a new tenderness in theology," but in the end a theory of theological (and political) tenderness prevails. This bridging of idealistic aspirations and materialistic conception constitutes yet another theory of liberation and desire: delusive, escapist, comforting, idealizing. (Stubborn facts, Irving Babbitt maintained, are as nothing compared with stubborn theory.) Marx's great idea, and undoubtedly his overriding value, lies in his belief that in human society whatever is to change, or to be changed, must occur through material transformations. No true Christian can accept the hegemony of this Marxist value.

Dialogists who point to similarities between Christ and Marx; who, like the Brazilian archbishop, Dom Helder Camara, encourage us to "try to do with Karl Marx today what in his day St. Thomas did with Aristotle"; who believe, with one enermumen, that Marxists and Christians, if they can only start their dialogue from agreement, will be better able "to realize a unity of praxis," become the slaves of their own theories. The fundamental clash between Marxist and Christian, *pace* the dialogical sophists, is between the natural and supernatural. No amount of word-spinning regarding Marx's "methodological atheism," which, it is too glibly claimed, transforms into "the secular complement of Christianity," can ignore this clash. This clash instances a steady yielding of the theological to the sociological and to the economic view of life. Religious tradition, as Incarnation and Revelation, is in retreat; the "spirit of religion," as Burke termed it, is thwarted by pseudo-religious arguments. To claim that there is an "equivalence" between Marxism and Christianity is a gross violation of their intellectual structures, root presuppositions, and internal language norms. To claim, further, that a religion which cannot survive enlightenment is inauthentic ideology is the kind of specious argument that surrenders to the Marxist dogma of "the truth of this world." *This* truth is a loaded truth that solidifies the tyranny of "the secular city." The dialogue itself is not a "dialogue of adversaries" but rather a dialogue of equivocators. It is no longer a matter of re-examination or re-

evaluation or of political or of religious expectations. It is a matter of "transhistorical" values: of values that return ultimately to a conception of man: to, for instance, the Marxist view of man's temporal "estrangement" and the Christian view of the "fall" in its universal framework. The most decisive contrast between Marxism and Christianity, as Paul Tillich declared, is "the realization between two possibilities of life." Neither dialogue nor any degree of synthesis can reconcile the Marxist value of life in time and the Christian value of life in eternity. "The decision between these two life possibilities," Tillich asserts, "is neither economic nor political; it is religious."

### III

IT IS PRECISELY the "religious" decision in its informing and identifying tensions that the Marxist-Christian encounter ultimately spurns. To believe with Cox and his chiliastic confreres that (as Vree writes) "politics must replace metaphysics as the language about God" is to espouse a "theology of fantasy and hope" that is of a piece with Marx's vision of "the end of the quarrel between essence and existence, between freedom and necessity." We live in an age when solutions have absolute categories. A new generation of managers, technicians, and reformist ideologues thrives in all spheres of life. There is no crisis (including the crisis of faith, which, as Tillich notes, comprises both itself and the doubt of itself) that cannot be transformed. Theologians and ecclesiastics now rush to join social-political theorists to herald the secular gospel of transformation. The consequences of this transformational syndrome are everywhere in bleak evidence as prophecies become conspiracies, proportions become disproportions, order becomes disorder. The imperative need, then, is not for a "dialogue with the modern world" but rather for a review of the table of widespread human values in their astounding incorrectness, as Solzhenitsyn has demanded. Definitions, standards, judgments, in short the hierarchy of values, are now the truly oppressed minority. The new masters of transformation prod us on to the kingdom of depersonalizing ends, when, as even Marcuse fears, there is

a glossing over of real differences. Vree helps us to assess the meta-prophetic and meta-historical dimensions of the progressive transformations that characterize the totality of the technicalization of human existence. We have gone beyond Marx and beyond Christ to a stage of history that Vree discerns in words of frightening import: "A genuine synthesis of Marxism and Christianity only takes place after both orthodox Marxism and orthodox Christianity have been dismembered—at which point dialogue turns into monologue."

Enough has been said of dialogue. Its end is that of synthesis, in which it attains its consummation and the dialogist theory is verified. The achievement of secular syntheses does have its celebrated examples, and its warnings. Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) evidences a form of synthetic progress towards a future of reconciliation. His aim, motivated by a synthesis of Marx and Freud, is "to develop the political and sociological substance of the psychological notions." Marcuse performs a marriage rite of materialisms: the marriage of Freud's sexual materialism and Marx's dialectic and economic materialism. We are given Marcuse's updated and reconstructed psychopolitical version of Marx's desideratum, the point at which man is "author and actor of his own history." Consciousness and action synthesize to create a praxis that affirms, in a Marxist sense, a dialectical ontology and a dialectical epistemology. For Marcuse such a praxis underlines the need "to learn the gay science (*gaya sciencia*) of how to use the social wealth for shaping man's world in accordance with his Life Instincts." The demand for a synthesis of Marx and Christ epitomizes the religious concomitant of what Marcuse speaks of as "the price of progress," in the contexts of his assertion that "Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the *political* fight." Synthesizing Marxism and Christianity is symptomatic of the obsession with political action that makes an idol of material value. The religious value of life, no less than the religious meaning of man, inevitably becomes a casualty of this reductivist process. Man's search for the new *logos* may indeed be a noble one. It can also be fatal.