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KIXL - WFAA, April 1, 1962

From: Temple Emanu-El Brotherhood
Dallas, Texas

COMMUNISM AND THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

Ours is, to put it mildly, a time of high tension. The changes taking place come faster than we can digest them and the problems they hurl at us seem too complicated for our limited talents. The front page greets us in the morning with the threat of a nuclear war, the prospect of vast unemployment due to automation, the imminency of a paralyzing labor strike, the increase in juvenile delinquency and of divorce. It seems like a maddening nightmare which ought to go away as soon as we are really awake. But it doesn't go away - in fact it becomes worse. That men are frustrated, and angry at the world and other men is understandable. Thus we find the day full of sound and fury, noises made by helpless people who want it all to go away. It is a time when ignorance and passion are fused into some exciting slogan which purports to save men from all the wickedness in the world. Whatever it is that these frustrated people do not like they give the damning label of Communism or fascism. The pity of it is that we reveal our fears and anxieties at the very time when we need common sense and confidence.

There is the frightful possibility of our destroying ourselves long before Russia has a chance to drop a bomb on us. A people living in a constant state of fear may in a moment of desperation pull the trigger to set the bombs bursting in air. One of the most unfortunate conditions in our country is our refusal to face up to the truth. We ought to be reminded of one of the perceptive insights of the Christian Testament - "Know ye the truth and the truth shall make you free." It should be apparent to sensible people that if we are to meet the challenge of the Communist world we ought to know what it is. It has swayed one-third of the world toward its banner, and it is passionately believed by hundreds of millions of people on this earth. It is poor strategy to meet the thrust with angry denunciations and name calling. It is not helpful, to say the least, to stir our audiences with the passionate cry that Communism is the devil. A military leader who fought an enemy with such weapons would be called ridiculous. He, if he is a true general, wants to know the whole truth about the enemy. The trouble with some proposed programs for the study of Communism is that they do not truly reveal its real nature or appeal. To send young people out with the image of Satan who is fictional is poor preparation for what they later will have to confront.

It is time to stop the emotional explosion which cries Communism at whatever is not liked. Federal aid to education may be impractical, unwise or unnecessary but it is not Communism. This is true of urban development, medical aid for the aged, or integration. We may debate these issues on the basis of their wisdom or foolishness, their possible success or failure, or whether they are necessary or not. But we resolve nothing by calling those who differ with us either Communists or Fascists. The people who advocate Federal aid to education are honest, loyal Americans who may be either right or wrong, even as are those who differ with them. The angry passions which have gotten hold of many people today can only weaken the nation. These people are as much a threat to our destiny as is Russia itself.

If we can ever get out of the fog which the psychotic anger of our time is generating we may then recognize the true nature of the Communist challenge. Russia is not a Communist country - it is rather an expansionist, imperialist power not unlike any in history. One of the basic teachings of Communism by its Marxian textbook is "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Russia is far from exemplifying this ultimate kind of society. Instead, it is a place of fierce competition, of rewards and punishments for success and failure, and it is a land of a rigid class system. If we accepted Russia for what she really is, a country with the old hunger for power, and stopped confusing ourselves by fighting anyone who differs with our political, economic, or social theories, we would give a better account of ourselves in the struggle. Before we jump on a horse and charge off fighting everybody who disagrees with us, we ought to know what Communism is and what it really threatens in our way of life. It is the most

serious challenge to the Biblical faith which is the foundation of our Western culture since the days of the Goths and the Visigoths. It takes issue with some of the basic beliefs about the universe and man which are the bulwark of our faith. It is a revolutionary philosophy, if not a religion, and is the bearer of radical implications for the future of man in history. Let us look at some of the differences which are crucial between Communism and the Prophetic faith of the Bible.

Communism as propounded by Karl Marx denies a spiritual reality in the universe. It accepts what it calls 'dialectical materialism' which recognizes matter as an independent object of social forces. Essentially this means that history is determined by material forces over which men as free spirits have no control. There is an inevitability in life to which men must submit. The idea of a spiritual power which religion calls God is positively rejected. When the Communists came to power in Russia they stripped the church of its power and property. They circumscribed the functions of the priests and officially declared atheism as the belief of the new regime. It was unfortunate for religion that the Church of Russia had for centuries become the hand-maiden of an autocratic Czaristic dictatorship which exploited the peasants and was insensitive to the hardships of the people. In what was once the St. Isaac's Church in St. Petersburg the Communists established an anti-religious museum which exhibited the rich and prosperous church feeding off the oppressed poor of the land. It demonstrated the superstitions which the church encouraged among the masses while it kept them in ignorance about the new developments in science and culture. In a sense religion itself played into the hands of the atheists to which Communism is dedicated. Nevertheless the vital fact is that Communism as a theory rejects the reality of a spiritual universe.

Basic to the faith of the Biblical Prophets is the conviction that there is God and that men dwell in a creative universe which has a purpose and a goal. It projects what the Bible calls the kingdom of God on earth which men can achieve as they grow in moral knowledge and will. The universe is a place where men are free to bring near the day when swords will be turned into plowshares, but they are free also to reject their role in history. There is no determinism in the Biblical faith.

The conflict between these philosophies of history is of the essence. In the Communist faith the universe is at best a machine driven by social forces which are beyond the control of men. Indeed man himself is not distinguished from matter, he is as much the object of the material forces of the universe as are the atoms. This stands squarely in opposition to the faith which proclaims man to be more than matter, a creature who because of his mind and spirit joins with God in the work of continuous creativity. The practical consequences of each position are significant and crucial. Where there is no spiritual reality, no purpose or meaning to the universe, then the moral structure is the whim of men and the result of the opportunism of the moment. Then, what is right or wrong is determined by the state, the leader, the party or the ruling power of the moment. However, when men acknowledge a spiritual reality, which has purpose and goal, then the moral question asks "what doth the Lord thy God require of thee?" Where there is no God, men play the role of God and when men become gods let all men beware.

Communism and the Biblical faith are in conflict over the primary issue of the nature of the universe and man's role in it. Communism is in essence secular, the prophetic faith is basically spiritual. One of the distressing facts of our time is the increasing secularism which is increasingly taking hold of our life in this nation of ours. It is true that we still use the language of religion and officially we think of ourselves as a nation which is under God. It is also true that we support and maintain churches and synagogues to which most Americans belong and in which many worship. But, we are deluding ourselves with a formal declaration. How many of us truly accept the fact of God in our lives? How many of us are guided by the reality of a God in our dealings with our fellow men? Those who are suspicious of a few Communists taking over America are blind to the greater threat which comes from a secular materialism in our midst, which is little different than that of Soviet Russia.

These two philosophies are also in conflict over the nature of man. When human nature and matter are indistinguishable such ideas as the dignity of man, or the freedom of the human spirit are meaningless. In a materialistic view of life what happens to any person is of no real consequence because it is the collective good which is the primary value, and that is not determined by men but by material forces. Within this frame of thought the destiny of the individual is totally immaterial. The Biblical faith not only posits the importance of the human creature in the achievement of a better life on earth and endows him with the freedom to choose and fill his role in history, it proclaims that every individual is a sacred creation, unique, distinctive, and precious. If you kill one man, said the sages, it is as if you destroyed the whole world; if you save one person it is as if you have saved the whole world. In the story of creation, God is described as creating only one man, Adam and from this the Prophetic faith teaches that each person is a special creation and therefore sacred.

This conflict between Communism and the Biblical faith over the nature and place of man is determinative as to what kind of a community men create. In one the state is supreme and the individual has his vocation only as he serves it. In the other all values are determined by the sanctity of the person. Prophetic religion does not sanction any one kind of political organization, it can live with a republic or a monarchy, all the Biblical faith asks is - how does it respect the dignity of each person? This is, likewise, the conflict over the kind of economic society which men develop. In Communism what matters is the production of goods as ends in themselves. The welfare of the individual is of no concern. Under the moral code of the Bible an economic system is not judged by the prosperity it creates but by how it respects the sanctity of each person. The plain truth is that the difference between Marxist Communism and the Prophetic faith is so impressive on this issue that men are apt to lose sight of it as they are blinded by minor issues of the moment.

Here again, Americans tend to become agitated over the petty differences and themselves fall away from their own faith. Our country has too many instances of our failure to respect the worth of the person. The millions who still work for inadequate wages in a rich nation is no testament to our faith. The discrimination against a man because of his color is basically the Marxist doctrine in which men are like matter - not the creation of God. The materialism of the Communists of our time should remind us where we have fallen short in our commitments to the faith we proclaim.

It has been said that Communism has all of the characteristics of a religion except a belief in God. It has fanatics who believe ardently in its materialistic philosophy and who bring great sacrifices in its behalf. Its language sounds idealistic as it champions the poor and oppressed of the world. It has a very strong appeal to a world in which two-thirds of the people are the disinherited and the hungry of the earth. It promises a kingdom of plenty and of peace to hundreds of millions who are disillusioned and frustrated. The tragedy of it is that as men respond to this dream they fall more and more into a growing secularism and materialism which augurs little good for the free growth of the human spirit. Those of us who still cherish the reality of a spiritual universe and the dignity of the human being had better recognize where the real conflict of our time resides. What should arouse us is the continued growth of materialism and secularism in our own midst. The menace of Communism is real but it does not come from a few misguided agitators. The threat derives from our failure to take seriously the Biblical faith we proclaim.