

EVANGELIZATION OF MATERIALISTIC ATHEISTS REPORT

1. Materialistic atheism may be a useful definition of some people's beliefs; it can also be a misleading one. Many atheists will be materialist in one sense or another; but this should not disguise the fact that atheism takes a number of forms. Our approach to these people requires a sensitive appreciation of their particular situation.

2. Four divisions of materialistic atheism were suggested:

a. *Morality without God.* This will tend to degenerate into either ethical relativism or into hypocrisy. Either the absence of absolute values or their corrupt pretense provides strong reasons for the attraction of Marxism outside communist societies.

b. *Daily labor without God.* The Puritan concept that godly man should receive a just reward for his labor becomes, when God is removed, either practical atheistic capitalism or communist atheism.

c. *Nature without God.* When nature is divorced from its Creator, scientific atheism with its concept of autonomous man leads inevitably to a mechanistic meaningless world.

d. *Society without God.* This produces the materialist in the most evident sense, and also communities that are useless, impersonal, and superficial.

3. Communism, as a major form of atheism, calls for the Christian's special attention. One-third of the world lives under communist regimes. In non-communist societies various types of Marxism attract many more. We are therefore compelled to take communism seriously, both as a system of belief and a revolutionary strategy, in its impact on both individuals and whole groups.

Communism is a world view which consists of philosophical, political, and economic theories welded into a consistent whole. It is materialistic, for it teaches that man is no more than nature consciously reflecting upon itself. It is atheistic, for it teaches that all religion is an inverted freedom on this earth. Its optimistic hope for the future is based on the belief that man is perfectible by man, and on an evolutionary view of the dialectical nature of human history.

In practice it presents a dynamic critique of the inherent evils of capitalist society, sometimes using biblical categories, and a vision of a new world of man's solidarity with man. In this latter sense it often has a special appeal for those societies, like the African, which are built on the notion of a community of goods.

In the non-communist world, at least, there are three basic categories of Marxists: those who are dedicated to working for the party; those who are concerned to eliminate the evils within society, and those who tend to protest against everything. In the first case there is a real commitment to Marxist theory; the second and third may only be based on a petit-bourgeois guilt complex for the injustices of society.

4. a. The Christian response to materialistic atheism must be first a listening response. We need to hear what the atheist or communist is actually saying.

This will mean that some on an academic level should do a profound study of what different forms of atheism and in particular, communism, have to say. Marxism especially is a complex system and will require careful study.

b. The Christian response must also be a perceptive response. The altruist, either in his theory within his group or as an individual, will have his particular objections to Christian faith and also personal problems. It is important to answer the point or thesis he is actually presenting, not the one we may mistakenly assume he is presenting. In some cases the response will be academic; but more often it will be direct and practical — set out in ordinary terms.

c. The Christian response must be above all a biblical response. If it is important to know the atheist's beliefs and attitudes, it is doubly important that the Christian know his Bible and be able to present God's entire revelation to man. The Gospel's full content, which involves an integrated care for man's mind, his well-being, and his fundamental spiritual relationship to God, will be more compelling than a one-sided, other-worldly Christianity.

d. The Christian's response will involve the searching out of common ground with the atheist: this being their common humanity and their deep concern for it.

e. But such a response will not involve an unbiblical accommodation. It will be a Christian responsibility to show the inadequacy of a view of creation without God, to challenge the falsely optimistic views of man which fail to take into account his sinful condition, and declare true redemption offered in Christ to man and the world in which he dwells.

f. As a Christian faces the Marxist system and, more particularly, converses with individual Marxists, he must bear in mind the following facts: (i) the Marxist's materialism built on the premise of a chance universe is no more rational than the Christian view of a personal creation; (ii) history does not bear out the Marxist's evolutionary optimism, ergo, 90 per cent of human living has been the history of war; (iii) the depth of man's alienation, evident in every political and social system, cannot be discovered on the basis of natural revelation; only God's special revelation supplies an adequate cause; (iv) the church has too often shared individualistic bourgeoisie attitudes and life styles. It has tacitly supported the vested interests of the rich, instead of being an influential force on the side of the oppressed. Therefore, although the church rejects violence as a shortcut to a new society, it must at the same time demonstrate in concrete ways its nature as a servant - community of caring love, willingness to suffer for righteousness' sake and a personal and corporate holiness of life. (v) The Christian's response will involve the seeking out of common ground with the atheist, this being their common humanity and their deep concern for it. (vi) But such a response will not involve an unbiblical accommodation. It will be Christian responsibility to show the inadequacy of a view of creation without God: to challenge the falsely optimistic mind of man which fails to take into account his sinful condition; and declare the redemption offered in Christ to man and the world in which he resides.

5. Those general principles need to be applied appropriately in different cultural and geographical areas. The group spoke of different needs here:

a. Atheism in the setting of Western culture.

Probably the greatest single cause for Western atheism is that loss of cultural identity which results in an existential rejection of all forms of reality. Escape may be taught in hypocrisy, materialism or a reversion to paganism.

In this situation the Christian must proclaim the creative activity of God in nature and personality, the redemptive activity of Christ in receiving man from his sinful lostness, and the reality of Christian hope.

We would call for a greater use by Christians of some of the available apologetic aids on a simple level. We see the need for evangelicals to engage in much greater research with the aim of producing an appropriate apologetic at a more advanced level. We also see the urgency for a greater awareness of our biblical-theological heritage.

b. Reaching people in Communist Countries.

The state of the church varies greatly in Eastern Europe, with more freedom in some areas than in others. In theory, according to the various laws and constitutions, much freedom is proclaimed but in practice it is quite different.

The concept of the oppressed and the oppressor is expressed only when the party is in the minority.

The general view among people under communism is that they are against religion. The church's reputation and past mistakes have allowed the atheist to prosper.

As knowledge and convictions vary greatly, we must approach people beginning where they are and explain our belief slowly, with real compassion for our listener.

Those who live in the free world should be careful when they comment on the situation in communist societies and not accept every report even when it comes via one who comes from a communist country. Solzhenitsyn, in reply to praise received for his courageous stand against brutality, said, "Why do you praise me? The ones who stay are the real heroes." We strongly affirm that the Gospel is the only solution for oppression in every part of the world. Our responsibility is therefore clear. The question is, how? As far as Eastern Europe is concerned the radio is the only thing that cannot be stopped. This, it was suggested, is possibly the best medium for both spreading the Gospel and encouraging Christians in their present hour of suffering.

c. Roman Catholic Cultures

In Latin America and certain European countries, influenced by the Roman Catholic system, materialistic atheism is usually encountered as some indigenous form of Marxism. Its attraction is due largely to the gross failure of the church to respond to the inequalities in society; the capacity of Marxist analysis to explain the causes of dependence and oppression and the latent moralism inherent in a Roman Catholic upbringing. Evangelical churches in these countries are also guilty of lack of concern for the desperate poverty of the down-trodden. They need to show, by a complete revision of their life-style and by a message more closely conformed to the whole biblical pattern, that Christian faith is the only really radical answer to man's alienation in society.

d. Present-day Japan

Much has already been said in the original paper concerning our approach to the communists in Japan. It suffices to add only a few more points.

Five years ago, 1969-1970, violent riots took place on many college campuses across Japan. Some pastors were afraid of receiving students into their churches. However, it is clear that the reason why many students were engaged in such violent riots is that they cried out for the dissolution and destruction of their own universities. Their cry reflected their denial not only of the university to which they belong but also of themselves as students. Japanese have been people who accept themselves rather easily. But those riots revealed a situation in which many young people began for the first time in history to radically question their positions.

It is clear that their questioning only goes deep enough to reject being molded into an established social order and not deep enough to accept the fact that they are sinners in the sight of God. It is precisely here that we can build a bridge to cross over to where they are.

Right in the midst of the riots a meeting was held under the auspices of IVF on the campus of Tohishba University. Several hundred students turned up and 50-60 stayed for a second meeting to really seek the Lord. In spite of the violent destruction going on all around and the fact that the Christianity officially represented in the theological department of the university was liberal, many students professed their faith in Jesus Christ.