CONCLUSION

NOTHING is gained, in any discussion of communism, by treating it as a wicked doctrine which would never have arisen if a handful of criminal adventurers had not devoted themselves to its propagation. Like any other system of belief, its rise is the outcome of its environment, and its acceptance by large bodies of men is no more unnatural than their acceptance of other creeds. Those to whom it appears either wicked or impossible, too impotent either from the quality of its adherents or the stubbornness of the facts it seeks to transform, to be worth sympathetic analysis, will do well to remember that in the early history of Christianity, the futility of its proponents and the folly of its doctrines probably seemed as obvious to the supporters of the Roman system.

It is, of course, a dangerous doctrine. Its application involves tremendous risks, even on the showing of communists themselves. If we assume the possibility of its success, the cost of establishing it would be enormously high; while an attempt that ended in failure might easily, by the scale of conflict it would arouse, come near to the destruction

of civilised life. Neither prospect, it should be said at once, is any guarantee that the effort will not be made to give it application. As few doctrines in the world to-day, it commands a devoted service of which no man is entitled to underestimate the significance. Its adherents are not turned from their purpose either by imprisonment or death. In Germany and in Bulgaria, in Hungary and in the Far East, there is no danger they have not been willing to face in the desire to communicate their faith to others. They have the passionate zeal of the Jesuit missionary who sets out to conquer a new world for his creed.

The communist, moreover, is playing with combustible material. Even those who reject his principles must admit the large degree of truth in the indictment that he brings against the present social order. Neither our methods of production, nor our principles of distribution are capable of explanation in terms of social justice. The glaring inequalities that surround us on every side are hardly capable of overstatement. The liberation of the human spirit has not nearly kept pace with the conquest of nature by scientific discovery. The gain of living is denied to the majority of those who toil. And the more widely the realisation of these disparities is spread, the more intensely do men feel that they are intolerable. That is the more natural in the

disillusion that follows upon a great war. Men feel that if they are to risk their lives for the State, its benefits should be proportionate to the danger.

It is in that mood of doubt that the masses meet the idealism of the communist faith. They hear an indictment of the conditions under which they live, which largely corresponds to their own experience. They are warned that they cannot trust to their rulers for the changes which will meet their needs. They are promised, in return for their energetic solidarity, an equal share in the gain of living as well as in its toil, a world in which there is principle instead of chaos, justice instead of privilege. To men whose environment is poisoned by insecurity, and for whom, in general, there is little hope of future benefit, the only wonder is that the promise has not proved more seductive.

Certainly, to counter its seduction means the alteration of the present social order by concessions larger in scope and profundity than any ruling class has so far been willing to make by voluntary act. It means allowing the democracy to have its way in every department of communal life, an acceptance, wholeheartedly, of Matthew Arnold's prescription, to "choose equality and flee greed." Yet it can hardly be denied that there are, in every community, groups of powerful men who make it a matter of principle to deny the

validity of all concession. They display an ignorant hostility to change every whit as dangerous and provocative as the challenge they confront. They are as satisfied with the world about them, and as unconscious of its inadequacies, as the Duke of Wellington in 1832. They equate doubts of the world as it is with something like original sin; and they treat them with the same self-righteous cruelty as religions have in the past treated dissent from their announced principles. They feel, like General Cavaignac, that a social order which allows its principles to be examined, and, still more, rejected, is already lost. Their blindness drives the timid to despair and the bold to desperation. They are as unprepared for the politics of rational compromise as the most extreme of their opponents; and, by their obstinacy, they produce the very situation they desire to prevent. They do not see either the inevitability of large change, or the fact that it is desirable, and possible, to concert those changes in terms of the plain wants and needs of men. They talk of the rights of property as though these were some dread Absolute, instead of principles as shifting and inconstant as anything in the historic record. They arrogate to themselves liberty to deny while they refuse to their opponents liberty to affirm.

Yet the demands they confront do not

decrease in volume; and every arrest of their satisfaction is a victory for the forces of disruption. The only way to defeat these is to prove to their audience that you can the better respond to its wants and propose to do so. For we cannot postulate the basic identity of human nature and continue to refuse an adequate response to similar need. We can do it the less as men at once grow conscious of their powers and aware of the irrational differences in response to need.

It is thought by some that the dubious results of the Russian experiment, the cost, further, of what success it has won, will ultimately persuade men of the errors of communism. That, it may be suggested, is a mistaken calculation so long as there exist large classes of men and women who are conscious of inadequate and frustrated lives. The French Revolution lit flames in the hearts of mankind which, because it responded to something fundamental in human nature, neither its errors nor its crimes could quench. What the working-classes of the world see in Russia is less what its revolution denies than what it affirms. They see a State which, with all its faults and weaknesses, seems to them to lie at the service of men like themselves. They recognise in the demands it makes, and the principles to which it gives allegiance, their own demands and principles. We may admit that they are uncertain whether its

gains outweigh the price paid for them; we may, also, agree that they resent the efforts of its leaders to force them to imitate the Russian example. But the indignation they display when (as in 1920) the security of Russia is challenged is evidence that, in an ultimate sense, the idea of the Russian Revolution stands for something of permanent value to them. The business man sees the inefficiency of Russian production; the worker sees the exaltation of the common man. The supporters of the old order warn the workers of the low level of wages, the discomfort of bad housing, the absence of political and intellectual freedom. To the workers, however, the things of import are the facts that all must toil, that communal experiment is in the interest of the masses, that no one is preferred save in terms of principle; and they have an uneasy suspicion that this atmosphere may largely compensate for the merits of the older way of life, so far as they share in them. The world, in fact, has to find response to the promise of communism in alternative forms; or it will discover that neither the crimes nor the follies of the Russian experiment will lessen its power to compel kindred action.

In a general sense, doubtless, the error of communism lies in its refusal to face the fact that this is a complex world. Its panacea is unreal simply because the world is too intricate for panaceas to have universal significance.

Any solution that is offered to our problems is bound, at its best and highest, to be but partial and imperfect; no single method of social arrangement will meet the diverse needs we encounter. That means, of course, that we need not, as communism offers us, the formulæ of conflict, but the formulæ of co-operation. The sceptical observer is unconvinced that any system has the future finally on its side; that it is entitled, from its certainties, to sacrifice all that has been acquired so painfully in the heritage of toleration and freedom, to the chance that its victory may one day compensate for a renunciation that, on its own admission, is bound to be grim and long. He has the more right to his scepticism both from the dissatisfaction with the economic dogmas of Marxism and from the knowledge of the cost which attends its application. He may admit the possibility that, in the end, the communist may prove right, even while he retains his doubt whether success implies the realisation of the ends he postulates. He may suspect whether any régime that is built on hate and fear and violence can give birth to an order rooted in fraternity. For these create an environment of which the children are, equally, hate and fear and violence. The spirit of man ever takes its revenge for degradation inflicted upon it even in the name of good.

But, whether we take the economic or the

political aspects of communism, it is far more important to grasp the truths it emphasises than to be merely denunciatory of the methods by which it seeks its ends. It was no answer to Luther to excommunicate him; the ignorant rhetoric of Burke hindered Europe rather than helped it in the understanding of 1789; and those who have sought the destruction of the new Russia have only added to, and not subtracted from, the problems of our generation. That a wide distribution of political power is worthless unless there is a similar distribution of economic power; that there can be no effective moral unity in a State divided, in Disraeli's phrase, into the two nations of rich and poor; that the absence of such unity means a violent attempt to destroy, and a violent attempt to preserve, any social order so distinguished; that men think differently who live differently and, so thinking, lose their sense of kinship through the frustration of impulse; these are the obvious commonplaces of history. Nor is it possible to deny that, with the general tendency of governments to degenerate the lesson of experience is the continuous need to preserve by associating the widest interests with the benefits conferred by social systems. But that means a thoroughgoing reform in the direction of widening the basis of effective consent. Effective consent, in its turn, means the revision of the rights of property towards

an equality greater than we have so far known; for in no other fashion can we obtain that equalisation of privilege which has become the purpose of the modern State.[1]

This is, clearly enough, to argue that it is possible and desirable to attain the ultimate aims of communism by alternative paths. And this, in a broad way, will be accepted by all who remain dissatisfied both with the achievement of capitalism and the motives upon which it rests. The compelling strength of communism is that it has a faith as vigorous, as fanatic, and compelling as any in the history of religions. It offers dogmas to those whom scepticism troubles; it brings to its believers the certitude which all great religions have conferred; above all, perhaps, it implants in its adherents the belief in their ultimate redemption. If it is said that, like other religions, it destroys and persecutes, it can make the answer—which mankind has always found a convincing answer—that it destroys and persecutes in the name of truth. It is fatal to underestimate the strength of this temper. It is the thing that moved the early Christians, the Puritans of the seventeenth century, the legions of Mahomet, to victory, against obstacles which must have seemed insuperable to their contemporaries. To those who do not accept it, it may seem a

[1] Cf. my *Grammar of Politics*, Chaps. VI and VII, for an amplification of this view.

joyless creed which takes from life its colour, and a relentless creed which takes from the hearts of men the sovereign virtues of charity and justice. But to such an attitude there are at least two answers. The Puritan creed did not seem joyless to those who embraced it; on the contrary, there was for its devotees a splendour in its stern renunciation more emotionally complete than any other experience it was possible to know; and when the mind, secondly, becomes possessed of a truth it believes to be exclusive, it no longer admits that charity and justice are sovereign virtues.

"Its emotional and ethical essence," writes Mr. Keynes of communism, "centres about the individual's and the community's attitude to money . . . it tries to construct a framework of society in which pecuniary motives as influencing action shall have a changed relative importance, in which social approbations shall be differently distributed, and where behaviour which previously was normal and respectable, ceases to be either the one or the other." This is a transvaluation of values in the degree that is the essence of religious faith. And it is worth while observing that, with all its difficulties, it has an enormous psychological appeal. The idealism of youth responds to it. It is of that inner citadel of conviction which moves the artist, the poet, the scientist, the philosopher, to their achievement. It is the mark which

distinguishes those historic gestures which, as in St. Francis or Savonarola, or George Fox, have given great leaders the power to command the loyalties of men. Even its partial success would make an epoch in the history of the world, and, even if it prove Utopian, it is clearly an ideal both high enough and intense enough to win from those who accept it the ultimate service of heart and mind.

One cannot help insisting upon this aspect of communism because its implications are what primarily strikes the detached observer who comes into contact with it. Its power to communicate the will to serve, its sense of exhilaration through contact with high purpose, its ability to make all alien from itself seem mean and unimportant, these, certainly, are beyond discussion. It gives something of the mental and moral excitement that is felt by the reader of the poetry inspired by the French Revolution, the unconquerable hope, the heedless and instinctive generosity, which makes great ends seem worth working for because they are attainable by ourselves. Most Europeans had something of that sense when the news came of the first Russian Revolution in March of 1917; it brought to them a new elasticity of mind which made the effort of victory seem emotionally easier. Most Englishmen had it again in the days after the Armistice of 1918 when it seemed

possible to transfer the comradeship of co-operation in war to the days of peace.

The question that this raises for ourselves is whether capitalism is likely to inspire in the hearts of even those who live by its results emotions of similar intensity. We live in a civilisation which avowedly separates its economic practice from its religious and moral faith. That means that its economic practice must, as Mr. Keynes has pointed out, be enormously successful if it is to survive. It must be able to leave men so circumstanced that there is room in the lives of the rank and file as well as of leaders to be ends for themselves as well as means through which others move to their appointed purpose. In no other fashion can the capitalistic system win the loyalty of the mass. It is no longer either optimistic or self-confident as it was in the days of Nassau Senior and McCulloch. It acts, in almost every sphere, as a body of ideas and practices that is permanently on the defensive. It is significant, for instance, that whereas a hundred years ago it did not have to square its accounts with the Churches, because these were prostrate before its achievement, to-day the Churches increasingly insist that the economic system must be judged in terms of their religious message. It is significant because the ultimate dogma of the Churches is the conviction of the basic equality of men. And for those increasing numbers

to whom official religions of all kinds make little or no moral appeal, capitalism, certainly, has nothing of spiritual significance to offer. The Puritan could be hard and grim in riches or poverty because his real life was not of this world. But those who lack the conviction such confidence brings will not be content with an economic system which limits to so few the possibility of an inner harmony. That is why, it may be urged, there are so many Russians who regard the economic failures of the Revolution as insignificant alongside the spiritual liberation it has brought them. And it is not improbable that others, weary of material failure and spiritual inertia, may be persuaded, with all its dangers, to think likewise.

Therein, certainly, is the lesson that the communist theory enforces; and we have either to learn that lesson in other ways or to admit the prospect that no means of avoiding its consequences are at our disposal. Communism has made its way by its idealism and not its realism, by its spiritual promise, not its materialistic prospect. It is a creed in which there is intellectual error, moral blindness, social perversity. Religions make their way despite these things. Mankind in history has been amazingly responsive to any creed which builds its temple upon spiritual heights. The answer to the new faith is not the persecution of those who worship in its

sanctuary, but the proof that those who do not share its convictions can scan an horizon not less splendid in the prospect it envisions nor less compelling in the allegiance it invokes.