

Professor Hans Thirring

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends!

The paper that a physicist like myself is going to read today will greatly differ from that which a deeply religious man or even a clergyman would deliver on the subject of our Seminar "The power of Love". Do not believe, however, that we scientists were unable to feel the noble emotions of love and to be guided by altruistic and idealistic feelings. Although we are using a somewhat different language and different conceptions in our mode of thinking, we are still human beings like the others, capable of compassion and love. Anyway however, a good deal of rational thinking will pervade my lecture, and in order to build a bridge between what I am going to say here and what our friends will explain to us during the next days you will have to exercise some tolerance towards the man of good will whose reasoning differs in many respects from yours. What we have in common is the love for our fellowmen, the feeling of responsibility towards the human race and the ardent desire to terminate forever the primeval, barbarian epoch of human civilisation, lasting from the glacial age to our time, in which the organized mass murder of wars is still considered a suitable means of settling international disputes. To bring about this historical break-through is our common aim; our methods may slightly differ. Let me tell you in this lecture the way I am proposing to go.

We scientists feel inclined to operate with well defined conceptions, therefore, speaking about the power of love we may start by answering the question: What should we understand in this connection by "love"? Certainly for most human beings the climax of happiness is reached by the discovery that a beloved person is reciprocating the burning feelings of our heart. But the love between man and wife, or mother and child, wonderful as it may be in transfiguring our souls, is a powerful agent only within the tiny circle of the family. A broader feeling of love is necessary to make an impact to our society as a whole. Love taken in that sense is the genuine feeling of sympathy and affection to all our fellowmen, our readiness to help them for no other reward than just the satisfaction for being able to help and heal. To make these sentiments really efficient they should be accompanied by the devotion to the high ideal of unselfish love. For the sake of brevity I shall use the word idealism to denote the whole complex of affectionate feelings plus readiness to work and struggle for what is dear to us.

To avoid misunderstandings it must be kept in mind, however, that words like idealism or materialism are generally used in a different sense in the West than in the East. In talking of idealism we Westerners usually have in mind the ethical meaning of the word as explained just now. The idealist taken in this sense is the man doing a work for its own sake or for some higher goal, irrespective of immediate pecuniary reward. The materialist on the other hand is the man lacking any sense for nobler ideals; he is only eager to profit in wealth or power and often indulges in the sensual pleasures of life, as sex, drinking and so on.

Such a confrontation between the idealist (whom we consider a noble character) and the morally base materialist would not be made in the communist world using the same expressions because the Marxist conception of materialism is quite different. Confronting materialism with idealism plays certainly a fundamental role in communism, but these words are taken in their philosophical sense which has nothing to do with the ethical meaning we have in mind. Materialism is according to Marx and Engels the theory that