NOVEMBER'S GREAT EVENT was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the socialist revolution in Russia. None ignored it. Most concede that the revolution was the most important event of all in a tempestuous twentieth century. Many hold it to be the most significant in the whole history of the human race.

Enemies (of all kinds), friends (of all kinds) and those in between of equal variety said their piece, wrote articles, gave interviews, produced supplements, special features, documentaries — every imaginable form of commentary. In Australia, with the exception of a few hysterical and consequently self-defeating outbursts of hate, most assessments were thoughtful efforts — certainly from very different points of view — to come to grips with the meaning and purport of the rise of the socialist star in the modern world.

Pluses and minuses have been listed — minuses real enough, pluses monumental by any standards. But the main effort has been to put the processes set off by November 7 1917 into some sort of perspective. The very scale of the commentary — how many millions of words, feet of film? — yet recognition that not everything has been said, not by a long shot, is further testimony to the history-making nature of the occasion.

What is the perspective after 50 years — nearly a lifetime, two generations? There is more than one angle from which to get a perspective. The revolution in its historical setting — the circumstances and forces which produced it. The present position compared with the past. The impact on world development, and vice versa. And there is perspective in relation to the future. This too has received its share of attention but remains, partly in the nature of the case, less exhaustive and certainly more speculative. Yet it seems the most significant, for while the past is important and invests the mind of the living, for good and ill, socialist society has only now reached that degree of achievement and maturity which puts competition with advanced "western" societies on a roughly comparable basis.

The question presents itself: such and such has happened with and to the socialist revolution over the past 50 years — what does the next 50 hold? To many, to those without a sense of history, to friends of socialism who want to see still more improvements still quicker, to those whose political approach rests on the sands of "what about so and so", to the young whose time scale counts
five years as a lifetime and 50 as eternity, to ask this question may seem beside the point at best, or at worst evasion.

Not so. The prospects and perspectives of socialist development from here on are the most important of all. Various assessments "the unfinished revolution", "the story is not yet over", "Russia's evolving revolution" or the version of the Soviet Union itself: "the thing now is to build a communist society," all recognise this.

To form some estimate of achievement and get some inkling of potentiality, it is useful to measure the socialist revolution against other revolutions. It took 150 years after the "glorious revolution" of Oliver Cromwell, which opened the way for capitalist development in England, for the modestly democratic Reform Bill to be introduced.

More than 150 years after the French revolution for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, the French were fighting a desperate (though losing) battle to prevent their realisation in Vietnam and Algeria; French women did not get the vote 'till 1944.

One hundred years after a bitter civil war to end slavery and free the negroes in the United States, those with black skins are still depressed and oppressed, and targets of massive, sub-human racial prejudice and bigotry.

One hundred and fifty years after the great revolutions in Latin America most nations lag abysmally in economic and cultural development, their backwardness being powerfully reinforced under cover of a "Pax Americana" — an ugly reality which the US is fighting in Vietnam to enforce elsewhere as well (and a great advertisement for it to be sure!)

In this sphere of the colonial, under-developed world, the impact of 1917 has been and remains immense, providing still today a road forward for which capitalism provides, judged purely on the record, no viable alternative. Since that world comprises two thirds of humanity, this alone would more than justify speaking of the historic impact and vital relevance of the socialist revolution.

This is not to suggest that the socialist road for the under-developed countries is a straight one, still less one strewn with roses. Far from it. But it is to assert that any other road is still more circuitous and strewn with still larger and more numerous thorns, with less, if any, prospect of decisive success. It is equally a tribute to the existence of socialism that it affords not only some sort of model, some sort of know-how as well as extensive and suitable material assistance for rapid development of the backward, but provides a counter weight to the gun-boat diplomacy which would otherwise be running riot everywhere, not to mention its decisive part in restraining the forces making for world war.
While these aspects alone would be more than enough to justify speaking without one whit of exaggeration of the enormous and continuing impact of the Russian socialist revolution of 1917, they are not the whole — perhaps, in a way, they are only the more outward and noticeable expressions of something still more far-reaching for man's social advance.

Because if a world war is averted and the dangers of a “race war” overcome, and all countries get on the road to the relative economic abundance which advanced countries by and large have the capacity to produce (however differently used in socialist and capitalist countries) the social and spiritual problems posed in these conditions will become of universal concern. In any case they are understandably of foremost concern in countries like our own.

It is natural that common problems of human relations and attitudes should arise on the basis of similar types of production (in many ways, a factory anywhere is a factory; issues raised by the advance to automation are similar). The big question in the contest between socialism and capitalism in advanced countries is how these similar problems will be tackled. Which form of social organisation is the better based to meet these great challenges in the interests of man? One formulation of the way in which marxists view this is as follow:

“The moment science and its practical applications become decisive factors of growth the release of man’s creative powers acquires a new social and production connotation.

“A higher level of technology will enable man for the first time in history to pay the attention to himself that he rightly deserves. In time the most effective way of expanding the productive forces of society will be the development of the human personality for its own sake.” (From a document produced by a research team of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and the Academy of Sciences. Published in abridged form in ALR No. 3 1967).

Of course this has yet to be actually achieved; there must be big changes in the economy and in social relations, and no big social change is easy. There are obstacles in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, as well as in the capitalist countries. But are they of the same kind?

Conservatism, bureaucracy, inadequate development of democratic processes may be picked out everywhere. But in addition to these, there is in capitalist society a further and most powerful obstacle — that the main wealth and sources of wealth are mono-
polised by a tiny minority. These owners get absolutely and relatively richer, even if the non-owners may not get absolutely poorer. (It is easier, so the saying goes, to make the second million than the first thousand). And who doubts that wealth is the main measure of influence and status in our society?

And there are no available democratic forms or processes within capitalism by which this can be altered. A bureaucratic union official, party functionary, manager of a public enterprise can be removed, but a bureaucratic owner (how many are not bureaucratic?) cannot. This is inbuilt in the system, and beyond the reach of the people as long as that system lasts.

In a socialist country there are no such inbuilt and irremovable obstacles, which is not to deny that there are obstacles. There were obstacles to removing Stalinism yet it was removed, many economic and other improvements made, and democracy greatly expanded. Further progress will be no more difficult. If the advanced social forces could find the strength for the one, they will surely have it for the other.

In contrast, in the last 50 years, what expansion of democratic rights has taken place in Australia or other "Western Democracies"? The lack of expansion of such rights is hardly because democracy has reached the limits of development! And in fact the currents have been all the other way — usually stemmed only by mass opposition. Yet the threats are continually renewed, at a time when far-reaching changes in economic and social life demand a great new advance.

The Dialogue

AN IMPORTANT EXPRESSION of the seeking for answers to the problems of today and reaching towards a new understanding of man, is found in the growing cooperation and communication between religious people and communists, roughly summed up under the term "dialogue". In this issue we introduce to our readers a number of writers on this subject which, far from being a passing fashion, will be with us for a very long time.

On an increasing scale, and on a growing number of issues, communists and a section of religious people are finding themselves moved by similar concerns. World peace or the alternative of nuclear armageddon. Problems of the colonial and underdeveloped world. Race and national relations. Poverty in the affluent society. Unemployment and economic instability and who is to bear the burdens. Respect for the dignity and democratic rights of human beings in today's conditions of big institutions and enterprises, and of sweeping social change stemming from the scientific and technological revolution. The commercialism and
self-seeking of our society in which those concerned with the spiritual and moral qualities of man, and imbued with the need for new steps in man’s infinite progression, whether conscientiously religious people, communists or others, often feel themselves “embattled”—these are some of the deep sources from which the cooperation and communication spring.

At the same time, both the viability of socialism as an alternate form of society, and the crisis in religious ideology stemming from the advance of science and the cultural level of the population, has also worked in the direction of impelling many to re-seek what is most basic in religious belief. Communists likewise have been driven by big events which they had not envisaged, to re-study and re-assess what is most basic in their own outlook.

While all sections of society are affected by the problems posed above, giving the social foundation for the emergence of a movement seeking in one way or another far-reaching social change—a movement described, not so completely and not so accurately in the phrase “coalition of the left”—there is a particular feature distinguishing religious people and communists and marxists. This is (without in any way claiming exclusiveness) that both, in Australian society at least, are by and large unable to divorce their concern with individual social, political and moral questions from their general philosophy regarding man, his history, fate, and place in the universe.

All the above influences combined mean that the two are driven together of necessity and not because of manoeuvrings, “front” work, undercover reds who have wormed their way into the bosom of the church, or (still more fanciful) secret believers who have white-anted the ranks of the Communist Party. The questions will not go away by incantations about the trickiness of communists, or their relative weakness (“derisory”, said one eminent journal, hopefully) in Australia.

There is no sign of any relatively developed new philosophy of man, of life, being thrown up by the capitalist social order. The extent to which religion once met or seemed to meet this need has been greatly lessened both by the crisis of religious thought in face of the advance of knowledge, and the new turn of elements within the churches away from endorsement of that order. So far the only more or less developed non-religious ideology produced by capitalism has been fascism. The “social-Darwinism” (survival of the fittest in the rat race) prevalent in the United States can be made scarcely more attractive, even if theoretically elaborated further than it is at present.

The fact that much of the dialogue involves highly generalised and abstract principles on the moral and philosophical plane may
make it appear rather rarefied or high falutin' to the average person (particularly in the English-speaking countries which have an "anti-philosophical" or perhaps more accurately, an empiricist tradition). The resulting lack of communication even within the ranks of the participants themselves is of course a problem, but one to be faced both with patience and continued effort at self-education.

Some will want to confine dialogue or cooperation to specific issues. But they should reflect first, that this has spontaneously developed and will continue to do so (and is, in fact, a long standing tradition — in the unions for example), and that only deeper probing can give it greater strength and depth. Second, that the specific and the more general are not divorced from each other, but are different aspects or expressions of the same thing approached from different starting points.

In all denominations those considering entering into the dialogue (as yet quite few) have to face powerful opposition within their orders. And another obstacle may well be that since the Roman Catholics have been traditionally (again, in Australia at least) more "ideological" and philosophically inclined than most Protestant denominations, the "dialogue" may develop unevenly, thereby running into the shoals of sectarianism, and even generating a modicum of what might, with apologies, be termed "Protestant backlash".

A further obstacle is the lack of understanding of each side’s real positions. This is partly because of the past habit of mutual anathema, which has made it still easier (it is always easy!) to tackle the straw, rather than the real man or argument. Understanding of actual (and especially of new) positions is likely to develop a healthy mutual respect. As a rough generalisation it might be said that in Australia the leaders on the religious side of the dialogue have a better understanding of the communists’ real position (witness the articles which follow) than vice versa, while at a rank and file or lay level the position is probably the opposite. Clearly, there is much study to be done.

One thing stressed by all concerned with the dialogue is that they neither seek nor want some cheap "togetherness", or ideological hybrid as an end-product. Some ultimates appear irreconcilable. But the participants are moved by the same problems, they share the same concern for man, they participate in the same quest. And since they are deeply moved, since the concern is genuine and the quest real, the answers cannot be considered to be already possessed readymade by anyone. Cross-pollination of ideas in this field too, may result in the long run in a new advance.