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# THE IMPACT OF MARXIST IDEAS ON CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY\*

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**RÉSUMÉ :** *L'objet de cet article est d'indiquer certaines idées marxistes qui ont influencé la théologie au cours de ce siècle. On mentionne plus spécialement : l'indignation morale face à la situation de la classe ouvrière, une vision de la société du point de vue de ses victimes, l'idée d'une perversion affectant les structures sociales elles-mêmes, la critique de l'idéologie religieuse, le concept de la praxis.*

**ABSTRACT :** *The topic of this essay is to examine the impact of Marxist ideas on Christian theology. Among them, the following are worth mentioning : moral outrage towards the condition of the working class, the vision of society from the perspective of its victims, the awareness of sinful social structures, the critique of religious ideology and the concept of praxis.*

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If this were an essay on the impact of Marxism on the Christian Church, it would have to describe the oppression inflicted by Marxist governments upon the Churches in Eastern Europe, China and other parts, and the hostility to the Churches exhibited by Marxist political parties in Western European countries. Such an essay would have to honour the sacrifices made by believing Christians under Marxist rule who remained faithful to their religious commitment. If this were an essay on Marxist-Christian dialogue, it would have to report on the efforts made by Christians to negotiate agreements or enter into conversation with Marxists. Such a report would include the *Ostpolitik* of the Vatican,<sup>1</sup> i.e. the diplomatic effort of the Vatican to negotiate agreements with communist governments that would protect the survival of the Catholic Church in these countries. It would also include the organization of Marxist-Christian dialogue, the best known among them being the *Paulus Gesellschaft* in Germany, which, in the sixties, brought into conversation of mutual respect Christian theologians and Marxist thinkers of Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> If this were an essay reflecting on believing Christians who came to regard themselves as Marxists and actively supported a Marxist government or a Marxist political party, it would have to

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\* This article will be published in Gregory BAUM, dir., *The Twentieth Century : A Theological Perspective*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books.

1. Eric HANSON, *The Catholic Church in World Politics*, Princeton, NT, Princeton University Press, 1987 : see index under "Ostpolitik."

2. See Peter HEBBLETHWAITE, *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue*, New York, Paulist Press, 1977, p. 17-37.

deal with theologians such as Giulio Girardi<sup>3</sup> who sided with the Italian Communist Party or with groups like "Christians for Socialism,"<sup>4</sup> founded in Chile in 1972, which supported the Marxist government of Salvador Allende. If this were an essay on the reaction of the Christian Church to Marxist socialism, it would have to treat the condemnation of Marxism by the popes and the bishops of the Catholic Church and the critical statements made by other Christian Churches. A discussion of all these topics would require an entire book.

The topic of this essay is quite different. What I wish to examine is the impact of Marxist ideas on Christian theology or, more precisely, on Christian theologians who were impressed by certain ideas of the Marxist tradition, who tested these ideas with the truth of the Gospel and who then adapted or modified them so as to be of service in their theological exploration of Christian revelation. Dom Helder Camera believed that just as Christians were at one time impressed by the ideas of Plato and Aristotle and made use of them in their theology, so were Christians of his generation influenced by ideas derived from Marx.<sup>5</sup> While Plato and Aristotle were regarded as heathens by the Church and their work contained positions diametrically opposed to Christian teaching, these thinkers provided ideas that appealed to Christians, were rethought by them, and then found helpful in the interpretation or Christian revelation. Such a procedure is not without danger. The Reformers of the 16th century thought that the mediaeval Church had swallowed too much of Plato and Aristotle and in doing so obscured, rather than illumined the biblical message. It is also possible to swallow too much of Marx. Yet what interests me in this essay is the impact of Marxist ideas on Catholic theology that wanted to remain true to itself and faithful to the Gospel. Lack of space prevents me from reporting the parallel development that has taken place in Protestant theology.

The theologians who have allowed themselves to be influenced by Marxist ideas have also felt the need to be critical of these ideas and to explain how Christian thought differed from them. An impressive example of this approach is Nicholas Lash's *A Matter of Hope : A Theologian's Reflection on the Thought of Karl Marx* and Arthur McGovern's *Marxism : An American Christian Approach*, two books that offer an appreciative and critical reading of Marx and Marxism respectively.<sup>6</sup> Even under the conditions of discrimination existing in Communist East Germany, the Lutheran Bishop Albrecht Schönherr, an important thinker of the East German Church, repeatedly made the double affirmation that Christianity was separated from

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3. Giulio GIRARDI, *Marxisme et Christianisme*, Paris, Desclée, 1968.

4. See Peter HEBBLETHWAITE, *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue*, p. 57-73.

5. Helder CAMERA, "What would St. Thomas, the Aristotle commentator, do if faced with Karl Marx?," Lecture given at the University of Chicago, 29 October, 1974, *Jesuit Project for Third World Awareness : Resource Services*, 1, 12 (1974).

6. Nicholas LASH, *A Matter of Hope : A Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982 ; and Arthur MCGOVERN, *Marxism : An American Christian Approach*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1980. See also David MCLELLAN, *Marxism and Religion*, New York, Harper & Row, 1987 ; Wayne STUMME, ed., *Christianity and the Many Faces of Marxism*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1984 ; Alasdair MACINTYRE, *Marxism and Christianity*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

the official Marxism by an unbridgeable gulf and that, at the same time, Christians were challenged by, and had much to learn from, certain Marxist ideas.<sup>7</sup> While these theologians responded positively to the challenge of certain Marxist ideas, they also warned against being “insufficiently critical”<sup>8</sup> of these ideas. In this essay I shall follow their example. In spite of the errors of any consistent Marxist ideology, the authoritarianism exhibited by most Marxist political parties and the totalitarianism of Marxist-Leninist regimes, I am persuaded that many ideas of Marx and his followers have had a creative impact on the intellectual life of the West, including Christian theology.

### MORAL OUTRAGE AS STARTING POINT OF REFLECTION

Karl Marx was deeply outraged by the conditions of the working class created by the industrial revolution. This outrage was shared by conservative thinkers and the romantic poets. Yet Marx made the outrage the starting point of his scientific investigation. Émile Durkheim, who had little use for the scientific analysis provided in *Das Kapital*, honoured the outrage felt by its author. “It is passion that has been the inspiration of these systems : what gave them life and strength is a thirst for a more perfect justice, pity for the misery of the working classes, and a general feeling for the distress of contemporary society.”<sup>9</sup> Some writers have likened Marx to the ancient prophets of Israel who, in the name of God’s justice, condemned the oppression and exploitation of the poor. What Marx added to the prophets was that, as a child of the Enlightenment, he made his outrage the starting point of his critical, scientific investigations. For him distress over the misery of others gave rise to thought.

Making moral outrage the starting point of reflection differed from the traditional Christian response to the distress of the poor, which expressed itself in acts of charity and the corporal works of mercy. Marx’s approach also differed from that of the classical philosophical tradition which regarded astonishment or wonder, not moral outrage, the starting point of reflection.

One may well ask why Marx was so scandalized by the exploitation of workers and the dehumanizing culture created by the capitalism of his day ? Why did he feel so strongly that people must be dedicated to the transformation of society ? He wrote : “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways ; the point is to change it.” Behind the outrage and the imperative to act stands an ideal of a non-alienating society and an ethical commitment to justice and human dignity. Marx was haunted by a utopian vision. The only Marxist thinker who clearly recognized the utopia behind Marx’s thought was Ernst Bloch, who argued that the vision of a truly

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7. Gregory BAUM, *The Church for Others : Protestant Theology in Communist East Germany* Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1996, p. 40-42.

8. Even Cardinal Ratzinger, in his 1984 Instruction warning of the abuse of Latin American liberation theology, only complained that some theologians made an “insufficiently critical” use of Marxist ideas. See Gregory BAUM, *Theology and Society*, New York, Paulist Press, 1987, p. 105.

9. From Émile DURKHEIM, *Le Socialisme*. See *Émile Durkheim : Selected Writings*, Anthony Giddens, ed., New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 157.

humane society was ultimately derived from the biblical promises.<sup>10</sup> Marx himself did not formulate his ethical convictions nor did he marvel that in this cruel and unjust world the same convictions also existed in the hearts of many others. By contrast, Christian theologians do marvel at the capacity of people to be moved by the suffering of others, transcend their personal self-interest and act on behalf of the good of others. Theologians attribute this capacity to divine grace.

To begin rational reflection with outrage over the massive suffering inflicted upon human beings has appealed to many Christian theologians. The various forms of liberation theology have followed this approach. The Latin American bishops at the Medellín Conference began their statement on justice by referring to the misery inflicted upon the masses as “an injustice that cries to heaven.”<sup>11</sup> Outrage was here the starting point of their theological reflections.

According to Edward Schillebeeckx, outrage over the sins that cry to heaven has repeatedly raised the moral conscience of humankind and of the Church. He designates as “contrast experiences”<sup>12</sup> the overwhelming feeling that the massive harm done by society is totally unacceptable, that it must be stopped, that it can be stopped, and that all energies must be oriented towards its cessation. This is how humankind and the Church have learnt that slavery must be abolished and that torture must be outlawed. In this manner recent popes have also learnt to condemn colonialism and imperialism. An example is the outrage over North-South relations “crying to heaven,” expressed by John Paul II in a speech given during his visit to Canada in 1984: “Poor people and poor nations — poor in different ways, not only lacking food, but also deprived of freedom and other human rights — will sit in judgement on those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expense of others.”<sup>13</sup>

Since outrage can also give rise to bias, a prejudiced analysis and the desire for revenge, Christians do not want to surrender themselves to outrage in a manner that brackets the call for love and justice. Christians have become painfully aware that the outrage over the crucifixion of Jesus, the Son of God, has prompted the Church almost from the beginning to create a biased myth, indifferent to love and justice, that blamed the Jewish people for this deed and invalidated their inherited religion, a myth that has had terrible consequences in history.

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10. Ernst BLOCH, *Geist der Utopie* (1923), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1971.

11. ‘Justice,’ “Medellín Documents,” *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, Joseph Gremillion, ed., Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1976, p. 445. The expression, “an injustice that cries to heaven,” was used by Paul VI in *Populorum progressio*, n° 30, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, David O’Brien and Thomas Shannon, ed., Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1992, p. 247.

12. *The Schillebeeckx Reader*, Robert Schreiter, ed., New York, Crossroad, 1987, p. 54-56.

13. See Gregory BAUM, *Theology and Society*, p. 96.

## SEEING SOCIETY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS VICTIMS

Marx looked upon industrial capitalism from the perspective of its victims. Because he concentrated his analysis on the harm done to the working class, he arrived at an evaluation of industrial society that was quite different from that made by social thinkers who focused on the achievements of that society and who trusted in the progressive dynamism built into it. The perspective from which observers look upon a society largely determines what they see and how they evaluate it. This insight of Karl Marx has influenced a great many social scientists who do not regard themselves as Marxist at all. They argue persuasively that the social sciences, while following an objective methodology, are never completely objective: they are inevitably guided by a subjective element, i.e. the perspective from which they approach their object. Every perspective is historically conditioned. The conscious or unconscious solidarities of social scientists influence the questions they ask, the data they regard as pertinent, the paradigm they choose for organizing their data, and thus their final conclusions. The Frankfurt School, a team of scholars who regarded themselves as critical Marxists, argued that social science research that is not guided by an emancipatory commitment disguises rather than reveals the uncomfortable truths about society. Following this line of thought, many social scientists defend the idea of engaged scholarship.

Christian theologians have listened to this argument with sympathy, and this for two reasons. First, they recognize that many sections of the Bible are written from the perspective defined by solidarity with the poor and oppressed, especially the story of the Exodus, the proclamations of the Prophets, and the preaching of Jesus Christ. Contemporary authors agree that the men and women in Palestine to whom Jesus preached the Good News were, on the whole, the marginalized people, overtaxed by the empire, threatened by the hellenization of their culture, and, on top of it, excluded from the official religion.<sup>14</sup> Jesus brought good news to the poor. Secondly, theologians, remembering the writings of the Church Fathers, have lamented the separation of knowledge and love, characteristic of modern rationalism. Theology sees itself as guided in its search for truth by the love of God and the longing for God's approaching reign. Theology is always engaged scholarship. Doing theology out of solidarity with society's victims seems to many Christians in keeping with the biblical witness, the example of Jesus in particular, and with theological tradition according to which Christian truth becomes fully available only through the continual conversion to greater love. Following this line of thought, Gustavo Gutiérrez has called theology the second step, the first step being an act of love, i.e. solidarity with society's victims.<sup>15</sup> The same approach has also inspired feminist theology, black theology, and others theologies operating out of an emancipatory commitment.

The question theologians have always asked themselves is whether Marx's analysis of who these victims are was correct. Marx and, after him, European Marxism de-

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14. Gerd THEISSEN, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1978.

15. Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, *A Theology Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1973, p. 11.

defined the victims as the working class. Marx anticipated that capitalist society would eventually be made up of two antagonistic classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He did not foresee the emergence of an ever-growing sector of office employees nor did he fully realize that technological development and the unionization of labour would create a many-levelled working class. Marxism, moreover, was insensitive to the plight of peasants and farmers, who were to be transformed into agricultural labourers. Nor did it pay adequate attention to the feminist perspective. The inadequacy of the Marxist analysis became even more obvious in parts of the world where industrialization was in an early stage, where industrial labourers were few, and where the great majority of the population were the poor living in a subsistence economy on the land or under conditions of misery in the shantytowns of the large cities. Third-World Marxism came to differ drastically from Marxism in the industrialized countries.

Christian theologians realized that if the Marxist analysis was incorrect, the political action guided by it would keep certain sectors in the margin and possibly create new forms of injustice. At certain moments some Christian theologians did accept the Marxist analysis, thought of themselves as Marxist Christians, and joined a Marxist political project. I referred to this at beginning of this article. Yet these were, on the whole, brief episodes. Christians in Latin America and other parts of the world re-wrote the Marxist option for the proletariat as "the preferential option for the poor."

The Latin American Bishops Conference at Puebla (1979) defined the option for the poor as the double commitment to read society from the perspective of the poor and give public witness of solidarity with their struggle for justice.<sup>16</sup> The Puebla Document called upon the entire Church to be converted to this option as the contemporary form the discipleship. The option for the poor differs from the option for the proletariat in as much as it embraces all marginalized people, i.e. people prevented from participation in the wealth and power of society. In Latin America, the great majority of the population refers to itself as "the people" or "the poor." In the developed world, Christians wrestled with the question who in their country were "the poor." In his encyclical *Laborem exercens* (1981), written at the time when the Polish union movement "Solidarnosc" tried to transform Polish communism, John Paul II described the necessary option as solidarity of and with labour: "There is a need for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers."<sup>17</sup> In their pastoral letter on economic justice, the American Catholic bishops defined the poor largely in economic terms and demanded that government protect their material and social well-being, while in their pastoral statements the Canadian Catholic bishops argued that in their society the option for the poor meant solidarity with the various social movements in Canada demanding justice, peace and the protection of the environment.<sup>18</sup>

16. "The Final Document," n° 1134-1140, *Puebla and Beyond*, John Eagleson and Philip Sharper, ed., Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1979, p. 264.

17. *Laborem exercens*, n° 8, see *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, p. 363.

18. For the interpretation of "the option for the poor" by the American Bishops, see their 1986 Pastoral Letter, "Economic Justice for All," especially n° 87 and the following, which outlines what society must do to

## THE CONCEPT OF STRUCTURAL SIN

Responding to the social preoccupation of French Marxists, Henri de Lubac and Marie-Dominique Chenu developed, in the nineteen fifties, a theological approach that brought out the social dimension of the Christian message.<sup>19</sup> Divine redemption aimed at the transformation of people as well as their societies. Later, in the sixties, Johann-Baptist Metz, in dialogue with the thought of the Frankfurt School, developed what he called "Political Theology," i.e. the systematic theological effort to recover the social dimension of Christian doctrine, which an individualistic reading of the Gospel had obscured.<sup>20</sup> Metz was accompanied in this endeavour by two Protestant theologians, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Soelle.<sup>21</sup> Sin, conversion and new life, the basic concepts of the Pauline message, had to be rescued from the privatized understanding dominant in Christian piety and the dominant theology.<sup>22</sup> It was important to recognize that sin had personal as well as social meaning.

Social sin is above all structural. There are institutions created by humans that have destructive consequences on people's lives, consequences that are independent of the personal intentions of those now in charge of these institutions. The dehumanizing consequences are often disguised by an ideology that persuades people to accept the status quo without questioning it. The notion of social sin played an important role in liberation theology and the teaching of the Latin American bishops, which analyzed the plight of the poor in Latin America as a result of internal class oppression and external economic neo-colonialism.<sup>23</sup> The task of the Church, according to the bishops, was to raise the consciousness of the population — they called it "concientización"<sup>24</sup> — i.e. to awaken all classes of society to the structural sin that produced poverty and misery among the poor, the great majority.

This theology of sin soon influenced the social teachings of the papacy. According to Paul VI, Christian communities must "analyze with objectivity the situation of their country" so that they come to understand their pastoral mission.<sup>25</sup> The preaching of the Gospel, according to the 1971 World Synod Bishops, must include the call to "social justice and the transformation of society." Why? Because the Paschal Mys-

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provide justice for the poor. The 1982 Pastoral Statement of the Canadian Bishops, "Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis," interprets "the option for the poor" as the call to Christian "to follow Jesus by identifying with the victims of injustice, by analyzing the dominant attitude and structures that cause human suffering, and by actively supporting the poor and oppressed in their struggles to transform society" (*Do Justice! The Social Teaching of the Canadian Catholic bishops*, E.F. Sheridan, ed., Montreal, Paulines, 1987, p. 399).

19. Henri DE LUBAC, *Catholicisme. Les aspects sociaux du dogme*, Paris, Cerf, 1953; Marie-Dominique CHENU, *Pour une théologie du travail*, Paris, Seuil, 1955.
20. Johann-Baptist METZ, *Theology of the World*, New York, Seabury, 1973.
21. See Dorothee SOELLE, *Political Theology*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1974; and Jürgen MOLTSMANN, "Towards a Political Hermeneutic of the Gospel," in his *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, New York, Scribner's, 1969.
22. Gregory BAUM, *Religion and Alienation*, New York, Paulist Press, 1975, p. 197-213.
23. See 'Peace, n° 1-10,' "The Medellín Documents," *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, p. 455-457.
24. 'Justice, n° 17,' "The Medellín Conference," *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, p. 452.
25. *Octogesima adveniens*, n° 4, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, p. 266.



tery of Christ promises “the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”<sup>26</sup> The concept of structural sin was eventually taken over by Pope John Paul II, especially in his encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), in which he denounced as sinful structures the political, economic and ideological imperialism sustained by the West and the East. “‘Sin’ and ‘structures of sin,’ he writes, are categories that are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. Yet one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils that afflict us.”<sup>27</sup>

At the same time Christian theologians do not sever the concept of social sin from that of personal sin. The two are interrelated. “Human limitations and personal sins compounded have created social sins, and conversely social sins create an environment that promotes personal sins in all classes.”<sup>28</sup> The wounds inflicted on the victims, who are the sinned-against, tempt them to transform their struggle for justice into a campaign of hatred and revenge. Liberation movements must remain self-critical.

### THE IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF RELIGION

Marx’s critique of religion is well known. “Religious suffering is the expression of real suffering and at the same time the protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions : it is the opium of the people.” Marxist commentators have stressed the ideological role played by religion, yet they have neglected Marx’s awareness that religion can also be the source of social protest. By ideology Marxists refer to the ideas, symbols, customs and institutions that legitimate the economic structures of exploitation and oppression. The dominant culture, including religion, Marxists argued, blesses the existing order and reconciles people with unjust institutions built into this order. Wrestling for social revolution is never simply a political struggle : it is at the same time a cultural struggle raising people’s awareness of the ideological dimension of their culture.

While Christian theologians reject the idea that culture and religion are nothing but ideological formations, they willingly admit that culture and religion have often played an ideological role. Matthew Lamb invented the word “sacralism” to designate the use of religion to legitimate injustice.<sup>29</sup> Christian theologians have recognized that an exclusive emphasis on the rewards in the world to come and patience and obedience as the virtues for the present world distorts the full Christian message and makes religion into a kind of narcotic. Political Theology and the various Liberation Theologies have instituted the critique of ideology — “Ideologiekritik” is the term used by the Frankfurt School — as a necessary step of theological reflection. To

26. “Justice in the World,” Introduction, *Catholic Social Thought : The Documentary Heritage*, p. 289.

27. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n° 36, *Catholic Social Thought : The Documentary Heritage*, p. 419-420.

28. Gregory BAUM, *Religion and Alienation*, p. 204.

29. Matthew LAMB, *Solidarity with Victims*, New York, Crossroad, 1982, p. 18.

uncover the emancipatory content of the Gospel they are willing to engage in a critical reading of Christian doctrine and piety. The contemporary emphasis in theology, supported by the Church's official teaching, is that the biblical message is Good News already for the present world and that while patience and obedience have their place, the call to the love of God and neighbour summons the believing community to stand against injustice and support the reconstruction of society.

Prior to Pope John XXIII, Catholic social teaching was based on a particular understanding of the natural law and made no reference to the Scriptures. As a consequence, social justice appeared as a natural virtue, not directly related to the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and love. In this context it was possible to think of oneself as dedicated to Christ and striving after holiness, without adopting a political perspective critical of social injustices such as discrimination, exploitation and oppression. To overcome this ideological inheritance, Catholic social teaching, following political and liberation theology, has learnt to relate the call to social justice to the imperative of the Gospel. In the contemporary understanding, Christian life includes taking a critical look at society, entering into solidarity with the marginalized and excluded, and, if political involvement is impossible, at least supporting a culture of resistance and hope.<sup>30</sup>

Wrestling with the ideological dimension of religion, some Christians have interpreted the Christian message by bracketing the Resurrection and the age to come. This phenomenon is found especially in the middle classes of the Western world where Christians are grateful to God for a meaningful and interesting life and in old age are quite ready to enter an eternal sleep. By contrast, in liberation theology, which is the product of the poor and the marginalized who live frustrated lives and often die young, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ holds a central place and is interpreted as the rehabilitation of all the victims of history. Faith in the Resurrection summons these Christians to act courageously in this world.

### THE HUMAN AS WORKER

According to Marx, humans differed from animals because humans had to create the conditions for their survival by labour. Animals act according to instinct, while humans are guided in their actions by intelligence. To interpret the human as worker was at odds with the philosophical tradition of antiquity and modern times which defined human beings in terms of their spiritual or rational dimension. The philosophers were representatives of a culture that looked down upon manual labour and assigned it to the lower sector of society. Marx argued that humans create their world by labour and in doing so constitute themselves. Labour is a creative activity. Yet the master/servant relationship in the process of production marks the entire society and

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30. Reflecting on the contemporary political impotence and the postmodern deconstruction of the self, David Tracy has formulated Christian spirituality in terms of resistance and hope: "On naming the present," *On the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, special edition of *Concilium*, Philadelphia, Trinity Press International, 1990, p. 83.

produces material conditions under which work ceases to be creative and instead becomes alienating. Alienating labour was a particular characteristic of industrial capitalism.

While the Scriptures depicted Adam as a farmer and honoured manual labour throughout its pages, the Church's theological tradition, influenced as it was by Greek thought, looked upon reason and the spirit as the defining element of human being and had next to nothing to say about human labour. It was Christian piety in the guilds and monasteries that continued to give religious meaning to manual work.

It was only in this century, as a response to Marx's understanding of labour, that we find in the Church the development of a theology of work, from M.-D. Chenu's *Pour une théologie du travail* (1957) to John Paul II's bold encyclical, *Laborem exercens* (1981). The Pope, while a declared enemy of communism, has no hesitation whatever to listen to Marx's ideas and modify them to make them fit into his own theology of work. Invoking the creation of Adam, John Paul II defines the human as worker. Humans produce their world by labour and in doing so enter into their own self-realization. He distinguishes between the objective pole of labour, i.e. the object produced by it, and the subjective pole of labour, i.e. the self-realization of the worker, and boldly affirms the pre-eminence of the subjective pole. The division of labour and the conditions of labour must be such that they rescue the workers from oppression, exploitation and alienating labour and instead serve their creative self-development. The organization of labour in society, John Paul II argues persuasively, is "a key, probably the essential key" of the entire social question.<sup>31</sup> Christians, faithful to the Gospel, must make an analysis of the economic system in terms of its effect on workers and society as a whole.

John Paul II condemns any economic system, socialist or capitalist, that looks upon the worker simply as an instrument of production. Justice demands that worker be treated as responsible subject of work and as true maker with claims on the work of his hands. Yet the encyclical insists — against Marxism — that the labour movement and the movement of the excluded are not expressions of class struggle, but rather struggles for social justice to be supported by people of all classes, committed to an ethical vision of society. John Paul II thus calls for "solidarity of labour and with labour."

### THE CONCEPT OF PRAXIS

Since, for Marx, reflection begins with outrage over the suffering inflicted upon the working class and solidarity with its struggle for emancipation, he believed that the entry into truth must be preceded by taking sides, i.e. by practice, by commitment and action. Here practice precedes theory. On this basis, Marx criticized Feuerbach and philosophers in general. Their indifference to the plight of the exploited and op-

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31. *Laborem exercens*, n° 3, *Catholic Social Thought : The Documentary Heritage*, p. 355. For an analysis of the encyclical, see Gregory BAUM, article "Laborem exercens," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, Judith A. Dwyer, ed., Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 1994, p. 527-535.

pressed majority gave their theories an abstract character, the impact of which left the damaging society unchallenged. "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, Marx wrote, the point is to change it." For Marx — at least Marx of the early writing — truth liberates : it supports the social forces of emancipation. Truth is to be tested by its weight and power in history. The path to truth is initiated by the practice of solidarity and guided by the ongoing interaction between theory and practice, i.e. between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. This interaction is called "praxis." Truth here is the praxis oriented toward human liberation.

While Christian theologians disagree with this purely secular understanding of emancipation and the Promethean character of Marx's proposal, they find the notion of praxis very enlightening. Christian faith surely is a praxis : it begins with action, the surrender to God's Word, and continues through an ongoing interaction between its cognitive and agapic dimension. Seeing faith as praxis, as discipleship, rescues it from a purely cognitive understanding and from an understanding that neglects the cognitive dimension. Living faith then is the praxis that supports the healing and redemption of the world.

Many theologians — this writer among them — regard theology itself as a praxis. For them theology is not the rational exploration of divine revelation to increase its intelligibility : for them the task of theology is not to provide abstract knowledge independent of the historical situation of the believing community. Instead, according to these theologians, theology is a rational exercise that follows upon the option for the poor and searches for an understanding of God's revelation that discloses its redemptive and liberative power. Theology as praxis is historically rooted ; since history changes, praxis theology must move forward, through the interaction of the cognitive and agapic dimensions of faith, in an effort to formulate God's revealed Word of rescue and hope addressed to people in the present.<sup>32</sup>

### A CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

In the dialogue with modernity Christian theologians have always kept a critical distance. This is true also of the theologians influenced by the ideas of Marx. In particular, these theologians reject the veneration of reason as the single organ of human liberation and refuse to endorse the idea of necessary progress. Not only do these theologians lament, with the Frankfurt school, the collapse of Enlightenment reason into instrumental rationality (reason dealing with means), but they are also keenly aware that even substantive rationality (reason dealing with ends) can be grounded on false presuppositions and be in need of redemption. Only reason grounded on love and solidarity — which is a fruit of divine grace — is a reliable guide in the struggle for emancipation. Postmodern thinkers have a point when they suspect that the arrogant affirmation of the universality of reason hides the wish to dominate the world.

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32. See Matthew LAMB, *Solidarity with Victims*, p. 61-99.

For similar reasons, the same theologians are also ill at ease with theories of necessary progress, be they of Liberal or Marxist origin. While they believe that God is graciously at work among human beings, enlightening and empowering them to struggle against oppression and build a more just society, they also recognize that any social progress that is achieved remains vulnerable to human sin and may in time take on oppressive features. Relying on God's redemptive presence, these theologians entertain a view of history that supports the human struggle for justice, peace and ecological responsibility ; yet they refuse to draw the conclusion that this divinely sustained struggle leads to the definitive emancipation of humankind within history. They share the postmodern suspicion of all grand narratives that promise a happy ending in time. The theologians offer a message of unshakable hope because they hold that after every failure, God's presence stirs up new struggles to create a more just and more responsible society. Yet ultimate liberation lies beyond history.

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The collapse of communism was a great relief for the peoples of Eastern Europe. Marxism was a failure not only because, under the impact of Leninism, it produced oppressive, totalitarian regimes, but also because the centralized economy, which it had set up, led to a complete bankruptcy. The deadly experiment has demonstrated that markets are necessary, the remaining question being how they can be guided by society so as to serve the common good.

Yet in fact the collapse of communism has led to a new world order. Because of the absence of an alternative, capitalism is now able to show its ugly face, promote a world based on competition and the quest for gain, and become indifferent to the growing sector of people excluded from society's wealth — massively in the poor countries, and significantly in the rich ones. A single, unchallenged military superpower is now protecting the ongoing globalization of the self-regulating market system. Thanks to the power of the large corporations and the international financial institutions, national governments have lost the capacity to protect the material and cultural well being of their citizens. The dominant neo-liberal ideology persuades people that the ideas of Marx have lost their relevance.

In my opinion the ideas of Marxism discussed in this article have, in one way or another, become part of the Western intellectual tradition and hence are not likely to lose their validity. The modification of these ideas in the light of faith has greatly enriched theology and helped to enroll theology in the service of God's coming reign.