Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics

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Chapter Five

The Challenge of Marxism

David Lyon

CHAPTER FIVE

The Challenge of Marxism*

IT IS THE CLARION CALL OF LATIN AMERICAN CHRISTIANS which poses the challenge of Marxism most acutely: '. . . revolutionary action aimed at changing the basic economic, political, social, and cultural structures and conditions of life is imperative today in the world'.[1] Thus speaks the Argentine José Míguez Bonino. To most western Christians, who have for over a century uncritically accepted the *status quo* of capitalist development as generally beneficent to the human race, it comes as a sudden shock.

Biblical Christians have difficulties in responding to the challenge of Marxism, mainly because the challenge is so complex. Questions are raised about the nature of Marxism itself, and its twentieth-century historical record. The issue of Christian witness in different social and cultural contexts, and the importance attached to those contexts, is also highlighted. Above all, perhaps, the nature of Christian commitment (with the spectre of social gospels ever peering over one's shoulder) comes in for radical scrutiny.

The aim of this paper is fourfold. First we shall examine the resurgence of Marxism in Britain in the 1970s, especially in higher education and in the practical politics of unionism. Secondly, we shall look briefly at Marx's Marxism and the Marxism of his subsequent interpreters. What are Marxism's

*See note at end of chapter (p. 128).

1. José Miguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists* (London, 1976), p. 8.

distinguishing features, and what are the main bones of contention? Thirdly, we shall ask why biblical people have had such an aversion to Marxism and what factors are now causing us to rethink that position. Lastly, we shall attempt to outline an alternative to Marxism which is both compatible with biblical faith, and yet offers a response to the insistent challenge of Marxist commitment.

Why Marxism?

The perennial fascination of Marxism is both intellectual and moral. Marxism is a world-view of compelling force and relevance, as much today as a century ago. George Bernard Shaw admitted that Marx had touched in him and others a chord of hatred 'for the middle-class institutions that had starved, thwarted, misled, and corrupted them spiritually from their cradles'.[2] Here is the moral critique: things are not as they should be, nor even what we have been led to believe they are. But how do we know? Marx's answer was, by study. As Nicholas Berdyaev wrote: 'Marx was intellectual; he ascribed immense importance to theory, philosophy, science; he did not believe in the type of politics which is based on the emotions; he ascribed enormous importance to the development of thought and organization.'[3]

Marxism is radical and comprehensive. It attempts to account for reality as such, never limiting itself to a small component specialism. Thus its religious pretensions are unmasked. Moreover, it simultaneously evokes moral indignation and open-minded analysis, touching the world at highly sensitive points. Lastly, it integrates into one scheme disciplined thought and practical action. Marx disdained both the ivory tower myopia of utopian socialism and the mindless anarchic rebellion of a Bakunin. In Marx's praxis 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it'.[4]

Marx's intellectual critique has always appealed in the British context. Ever since evangelical defector H. M. Hyndman discovered a new gospel in Marx and founded the Social Democratic Federation, a strand of highly educated Marx-followers has influenced left-wing opinion. Literate and per-

2. N. and J. MacKenzie, *The First Fabians* (London, 1977), p. 40.
3. Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Origins of Russian Communism* (London, 1937), p. 67.
4. Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1844), *KMSW*, p. 158.

suasive academics — such as Ralph Miliband in political science and E. P. Thompson in history — are now instructing a new generation of university students in a sophisticated mode of Marxist analysis.

Working class groups are also affected by Marxism, but this has never amounted to overwhelming mass support. The Socialist Workers' Party is forever bemoaning the decline of broad class-consciousness which has in recent years been replaced by shop-floor-level do-it-yourself reformism. Their complaint is that short-term gains tend to eclipse revolutionary hopes, and that all governments tend to base their industrial relations policies on this fact. Nevertheless, the SWP have not yet tired of echoing Marx's battle-cry: 'the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself'.[5]

It is the *interaction* between theory and practice which gives Marxism continued mileage in the late twentieth century. The Socialist Workers' Party have to educate their members with analyses of current British capitalism, to enable them to see the context of their struggles. And those struggles are no longer confined to the shop-floor. Oppression has now been discovered at the kitchen sink and in the social services department. Social theory and analysis beget the discovery of public ills; the discovery of social ills begets social theory.

The notorious 'Gould Report' on Marxist penetration in higher education, published in 1977,[6] drew attention to what most people knew anyway, that Marx is alive and well in the British university. Despite the hopeful declaration of the 'end of ideology' by certain social thinkers at the end of the 1950s, academic interest in Marx has increasingly flourished. Marxism is probably at its strongest in seminar-rooms and student unions. 'Bourgeois' publishers such as Macmillan and Penguin churn out best-selling academic Marxisms of all shades. The 'what-Marx-really-meant' debate has never been so fierce.

Social Sciences

Post-war reconstruction spawned the social sciences in the

5. Marx, circular letter to Bebel *et al.*, quoted in *International Socialism* 100 (1977), p. 3.
6. J. Gould (ed.)., *The Attack on Higher Education: Marxist and Radical Penetration* (London, 1977).

late 50s and 60s, and it is this new form of social understanding and criticism which has exposed the seamier aspects of modern 'civilization', giving grist to the Marxist mill. The we've-never-had-it-so-good syndrome of the 50s gave way in the late 60s to the realization that the definition of 'good' left much unsaid. 'Good for whom?' is the question which still hangs over the statistics of inequality and the citadels of industrial alienation.

The same question is urgently raised over the so-called Welfare State. Marxists argue, with some justification, that the welfare apparatus really serves to maintain the age-old class-distinctions and divisions of British society, and ensures that certain interest groups perpetuate their hegemony. This had given rise to a new brand of (partly) Marx-inspired thinking in social policy, with accompanying practice in radical social work and community work.

The most insidious aspect of the Welfare State, according to some, is its pervasive repressive ideology. Crucial to this, it is said, is the Protestant work ethic, and a belief in the uniqueness of family life. But the weakening of moral constraints, plus the existentialist thrust to do one's own thing, radically challenges this. In particular, there is a new women's consciousness. Beveridge may have thought that the family is sacrosanct, but this is often now regarded as mere capitalist eyewash. The Welfare State not only bolsters capitalism by ameliorating the worst conditions it produces, thus defusing discontent, it also maintains the system by defining people's life-roles for them.

Women are not the only ones to have given a fillip to Marxist analysis in the 1970s; the whole gamut of sexual politics has injected new meanings into words like 'exploitation' and 'oppression'. Gay Liberation sees itself as a signpost to new relationships normally denied under capitalist rule (although not all Marxists would recognize the connection between the gay cause and theirs).

All this shows that it is very difficult to pin down the reasons for Marxism's current vogue: they are manifold. There is the undeniable influence of world affairs, especially the romantic attraction of liberation movements in the Third World, often with a strong Marxist flavour. Repudiating the legacy of colonialism and imperialism in such countries apparently necessitates a swing to the opposite extreme by way of compensation. And as China's achievement becomes more public to western eyes, the usual selective amnesia sets

in as health, welfare, and distributive equality are seen as the only products of Maoism.

Industrial relations, fraught with strife which is often encouraged by both 'sides', may legitimately be viewed as the arena of class-struggles. Groups on the left glory in the miners' strikes which 'brought down the Heath government' in the early 70s, and look forward to further major confrontations which will eventually bring down capitalism itself. That the actions of both Conservative (Industrial Relations Act) and Labour (Social Contract) parties can be interpreted as obstructive to significant social change gives fuel to the left-wing commentators and activists.

An opportunity to work out an intellectual Marxist critique of contemporary society is afforded by the growth of the social sciences and their application in fields such as social policy and town planning. It began with the desire to apply 'science' to human social welfare, but in an age when the 'neutrality' of science was still largely unquestioned. Things are different now.

Lastly, it must be said that the advanced industrial society of capitalistic Britain can afford to allow minority opinions to flourish, without fear of revolution. The holders and controllers of resources in Britain are in a strong enough position to allow such steam to be let off. The media, for example, so powerfully and faithfully reflect the *status quo* that deviant opinion is unlikely to gain a foothold, especially in places where that foothold might count.

Which Marxism?

Marx himself remained to the end of his days a revolutionary socialist. Others, while believing in the desirability of socialism, have opted for other routes to that goal. This is why many whose social eyes have been opened by Marx, would not necessarily associate themselves with his name. They wish to avoid the violent, revolutionary connotations of Marxism.

The question of 'which Marxism?' is not abstractly academic: it connects vitally with political and ethical reality. Human lives and community destinies are involved, so that the debate over 'which Marxism?' has always been intense, and sometimes bitterly fought. The fact that intolerable human misery has forced the question onto the Christian

agenda in recent years makes it more than an academic question for us too.

In the British context, various paths to socialism (not Marxism) were mooted in the nineteenth century. First, there were attempts like Robert Owen's, at the New Lanark Mills, to set up working alternatives to capitalism. Such utopian communities were intended to demonstrate the non-inevitability of exploitation and oppression in industrial development. Co-operation was put forward as a manifestly achievable alternative to competition.[7]

Secondly, there was an attitude which may be represented by John Stuart Mill.[8] Towards the end of his life, he was increasingly drawn towards socialism as a means of ensuring a better quality of life for all. His approach was an appeal to the powerful on the grounds of reason and justice, assuming, of course, that they would listen.

Britain has never boasted a popular representative leader of the third path: revolution. Marx himself, an astute observer of the British scene, more than once admitted the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism in Britain.[9] But in other European countries there were socialists who believed in a mass rising of the exploited, or a conspiracy of a revolutionary party.

The fourth path, that of the democratic and parliamentary ascendancy of a socialist party, became a viable possibility too late in the nineteenth century for Marx to comment on it at length. But movements like Hyndman's SDF and Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party were to lay the foundations of a British tradition of parliamentary socialism in the Labour Party.

Most Marxists would fall into one of the latter two camps, and this division has always been extremely important. One camp's position may be expressed by the social democracy of Eduard Bernstein. He was committed to the education of the working class in advanced industrial society towards voting a mass party into political power by parliamentary means. This 'evolutionary socialism' or 'gradualism' was branded as 'revisionism' (with regard to Marx's work) by Kautsky and then Lenin.

7. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1970).
8. Geraint Williams, 'Introduction' to *John Stuart Mill on Politics and Society* (London, 1976).
9. Speech in Amsterdam, *KMSW*, p. 594.

In the other camp, a small party of professional revolutionaries prepares for the conquest of state power by sudden and probably violent revolution. It is appropriate for non-advanced (or underdeveloped) societies with more despotic or authoritarian governments. Revolutions of the twentieth century have been characterized by this type of social condition and strategy.[10]

The obvious question is, how may so many different types of socialist strategy take the name of Marxism? Why is the situation so confused? Part of the answer, clearly, lies in the different social contexts of each Marxism. But the whole answer must inevitably include reference to Marx's Marxism, indicating both its uniqueness and its openness to ambiguous interpretation.

Marx's Marxism

It is impossible to summarize Marx. One of the last Renaissance men, as David McLellan describes him, he embraced at once the disciplines of history, economics and political science (as well as what is now called sociology), while at the same time retaining a profound interest and delight in classical literature and Shakespeare throughout his life. This, of course, is his great appeal. He offers a total understanding of the world, a way of changing the world, and a view of what the world could be like. Moreover, as we have said, Marxism touches reality at extremely sensitive points. It is, in a sense, a politics of hunger. As C. Wright Mills accurately remarked: 'The work of Marx, taken as a whole, is a savage indictment of one alleged injustice: that the profit, the comfort, the luxury of one man is paid for by the loss, the misery, the denial, of another.'[11]

Let us unpack the preceding statement about Marxism. It is first a world-view ('a total understanding of the world') which stands in opposition to all other world-views. Marx learned from the young Hegelians to criticize religion ('the presupposition of all criticism'[12]) as a prelude to applying Hegel's method to the 'real world' of man. For Hegel had done no better than the theologians, merely substituting the state for God. Marx wanted to show that the state itself embodies a false ideology which stands in the way of human emancipation.

10. John Dunn, *Modern Revolutions* (London, 1974).
11. C. W. Mills, *The Marxists* (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 35.
12. 'Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Right', *KMSW*, p. 63.

So criticism had to begin with religion, which is a projection of human need onto a God-figure, thus leading to a mistaken account of the world. Thus (in Germany, following Feuerbach), 'Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains not so that man may bear the chains without any imagination or comfort, but so that he may throw away the chains and pluck living flowers. The criticism of religion disillusions man so that he may think, act, and fashion his own reality as a disillusioned man come to his senses, so that he may revolve around himself as his real sun.'[13] Once the chains are exposed, the solution will become obvious. The flowers are any ideology. Ideology is a product of a particular set of economic relationships. The radical solution to human alienation and exploitation (the chains) is a change at the base-level of economic relationships. The particular set of economic relationships known as capitalism alienates the worker from his product, from the act of production, from his human social essence as *homo faber*, and from his fellow-workers.

The way of changing this situation, argued Marx (to turn to the second point), is through proletarian revolution, '. . . the formation of a class with radical chains . . . the object of no particular injustice but injustice in general . . . In a word it is the complete loss of humanity and can only recover itself by the complete redemption of humanity.'[14] True human destiny, for Marx, lies in the hands of the proletariat (with a little help from its friend the intelligentsia).

But there are two aspects to this. 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.'[15] There is first the subjective side of human self-creation, especially through class-conscious organization and action. At the right moment, when capitalism is collapsing through its own internal contradictions, the proletariat may make a revolution. Later Marxists, encouraged by Marx's own apparent enthusiasm for catalysing agencies such as the Paris Commune, have used this to justify speeding up the progress to the new world. But Marx also believed that the right circumstances must be awaited before his kind of revolution could take place.

13. *Ibid.* p. 64.
14. *Ibid.* pp. 72-73.
15. '18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', *KMSW*, p. 300.

This, secondly, is the objective side to history. According to observable laws of economic development, history is moving towards communist society. The material conditions of production were decisive for Marx's view of history (and this is what *he* meant by 'materialism'). Just as capitalism had developed out of feudal and mercantile society, so a new set of economic relationships would one day transcend capitalism. Capitalism will outlive its usefulness and, having created a new class on which it depends, will have to give way to its ascendancy. The surplus-value which can be extracted by various means will eventually be exhausted, and a new form of society will emerge.

This is how to change the world. As Andrew Kirk has said, 'We can only marvel at the brilliant synthesis which Marx achieved between man's longing for personal significance and a worth-while cause to live and sacrifice himself for and his hope that science really does possess the key to unlock the enigma of man's contradictions and the power to provoke an unprecedented leap into a qualitatively new era.'[16] But what will the 'new era' be like? How will human or 'communist' society (that which eventually develops after socialism) be different from what we now experience? This is the third attraction of Marxism.

An Alternative Reality

Marx offered an alternative reality to competitive, money-worshipping, unjust, and self-crippling bourgeois life. The 'redemption of humanity' is the culmination of the history of human self-creation through work. All will be free to be themselves. The benefits of capitalist technology will be appropriated for all, and all will have more time to develop themselves as people. At last society will 'inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability to each according to his needs!'[17] Finally, 'under collective property, the so-called will of the people (the bourgeois state) disappears in order to make way for the real will of the co-operative'.[18] The state will be transcended, along with all class paternalism and superiority. Participation will become a meaningful term.

The final attraction of Marxism is its alleged anti-

16. Andrew Kirk, 'Marxism and the Church in Latin America', in *Missionalia* 6 (1978), and in *Evang. Rev. of Theol.* 3 (1979), pp. 107-118.
17. 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', *KMSW*, p. 569.
18. 'On Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*', *KMSW*, p. 563.

utopianism: it is based on an empirical social analysis. Revolution and the new society are concrete possibilities rooted in specific social realities. But this attraction is also one of Marxism's greatest bones of contention. Bernstein denied that Marx's analysis was sociologically adequate, and thus a new kind of praxis was called for. This is what in fact became social democracy. In Britain, this was the stance of Marxist G. D. H. Cole, one of the greatest recent historians of socialism. The social democratic trend is also visible in the Communist Party whose programme, *The British Road to Socialism*, while ostensibly adhering to Marxism-Leninism, is pledged to the parliamentary route to socialism.

Lenin, who in many ways was as 'revisionist' as Bernstein, denied that class and capitalist analysis was sufficient. He substituted 'party' for Marx's 'proletariat' as the engineers, rather than the mere agents, of the revolution. The small élite who seek to seize power by conspiratorial and violent means has been important not only in Russia, but in other predominantly peasant countries such as China and Cuba. In this case, Marx's empirical analysis is supplemented by guerilla action to force early fulfilment of the socialist dream.

Marx's work was both unfinished and ambiguous when he died. Social Democrats and Bolshevik-style revolutionaries have been trying to finish it and make it less ambiguous ever since. For the former, the dream is still in the future. For many heirs of the latter, the dream has become a nightmare.

But it ought to be said that there are Christians who willingly countenance either the social democratic or the revolutionary political styles. They decisively reject aspects of Marxism as a world-view, but accept his analysis and its implications. Míguez Bonino in Argentina calls for a strategic alliance with revolutionary Marxists which may involve Christian participation in the overthrow of oppressive regimes.[19] And Robert Holman, in Britain, who describes himselkf as a socialist and not a Marxist, nevertheless accepts parts of the Marxist analysis of welfare capitalism, and urges grassroots collective action to bring about authentic change.[20]

Why Not Marxism?

The conventional evangelical response to Marxism has been

19. *Op. cit.* (n.1 above).
20. Robert Holman, *Poverty: Explanation of Social Deprivation* (Oxford, 1978).

aversion and rejection. Without doubt, the main reason for this has not been an intelligent appreciation and repudiation of Marxism as a world-view, but rather an opposition to regimes which harass and persecute believers. Marx the atheist is discovered via sensationalized stories of atheistic communism's anti-Christian policies (which are usually based on a core of tragic truth). But since the 1970s' reawakening of the evangelical social conscience, Marxism is on the lips of Christians once more. Many seem to be wondering, why not Marxism?

The failure of the fathers to analyse and criticize Marxism from a biblical perspective is now being visited on the children. Ronald Sider, himself a champion of biblical realism in ethics, still has to ask 'Is God a Marxist?' (which is more a reflection of his audience's attitude than his).[21] Marxist analysis appears to many to be a valid adjunct to Christian faith in the social realm. This state of affairs has two roots, ignorance of Marxism and ignorance of the Scriptures — especially in the notorious 'selective hermeneutic' sense.

I believe in the uniqueness and relevance of the Christian gospel and its social implications. There can be no synthesis or symbiosis with Marxism. But I also believe that many issues raised by Marxism are highly pertinent to Christian praxis. The price of ignoring Marxism is minimizing aspects of Christian faith. Briefly, we must ask two questions: what is wrong with capitalism? and what is wrong with Marxism?

Critique of Capitalism

The Christian critique of capitalism exists at two levels. First, there is the challenge to Christian indulgence in luxury goods and comfortable lifestyles, which was reinforced by the realization of a world ecological crisis. John Taylor's incisive *Enough is Enough*,[22] and Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* are examples of this. Secondly, Christian economists have engaged in a biblical critique of the roots of the capitalist ethos and economic system. Examples of this are Donald Hay's *A Christian Critique of Capitalism* and Bob Goudzwaard's *Economic Stewardship versus Capitalist*

21. Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London, 1978).
22. J. V. Taylor, *Enough is Enough* (London, 1975).

Religion.[23] It is no accident that neither level of critique begins with the question, 'What about the workers?'

Goudzwaard, taking a Christian philosophical stance, argues that capitalism is characterized by three things: 'economism', the treating of societal structures like land and labour in terms of their isolated economic aspect without due regard to social and ethical aspects; 'commercialism', where market criteria become all-important and economic values are simply equivalent to market values; lastly, 'competitive dynamism', where there are social constraints to combine values and resources to obtain maximum money profit in a competitive entrepreneurial struggle. All these characteristics are rejected by Goudzwaard in favour of a responsible, purposive, Christian understanding of economic life.

Donald Hay, using a more direct exegetical method, proposes a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of a creation ethic. Many of his conclusions are similar to Goudzwaard's, though he uses more theological language. Because capitalism (described both in its 'pure' form and in practice) discourages proper stewardship, which is part of human 'dominion', tends to damage the biblical understanding of work (by accepting unemployment and alienation as inevitable), and fails to produce a just allocation of resources, especially income, Hay concludes thus: '. . . capitalism, as a system, falls a long way short of satisfying God's creation plan'. And it is no use arguing that it is a 'lesser evil', because 'at its root the philosophical bases of capitalism are opposed to Christian ethics'.

Other aspects of the outworking of capitalism have also stimulated the evangelical conscience in recent years. These especially have to do with the global dimensions of expansionism and corresponding economic dependence. (And this, of course, applies equally to state socialist neo-colonialism.) As Jim Wallis succinctly puts it: 'The system of empire is based on the consumer society. . . An international economic system that keeps huge sectors of humanity at a sub-human level while permitting the minority to consume most of the world's resources can only result in conflict.'[24]

And if this American young evangelical sees Christians

23. D. Hay, *A Christian Critique of Capitalism* (Bramcote, Notts., 1975); B. Goudzwaard, *Economic Stewardship versus Capitalist Religion* (Toronto, 1972). See also A. B. Cramp, *Towards a Christian Critique of Secular Economic Theory* (Toronto, 1974); A. Storkey, *A Christian Social Perspective* (Leicester, 1979).

24. Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People* (New York, 1976), p. 84.

conniving at such a system, Míguez, speaking from Latin America, agrees. He laments the 'quite evident relation between the capitalist colonial and neo-colonial expansion into what is now called the "Third World" and the missionary enterprise'. Unfortunately, however, it is only a short step from this to the acceptance of the analysis and proposed solution (which is confrontationist and potentially violent) of a Marxist like André Gunder Frank. Such a move is logical, especially if one rejects (with Míguez) the possibility of a biblical third way.

Critique of Marxism

To argue for a third way, however, one must first ask the question, if capitalism can be shown in theory and practice to be unbiblical, then what is wrong with the Marxist alternative? I have already stated that there can be no synthesis with Marxism. The reason is that Marxism like capitalism is an outworking of western humanism, and based on a similar notion of progress. At root, it too is opposed to Christian ethics.

Marxism is a challenge because it shames Christians to a rediscovery of an authentic aspect of the Christian task. But Marx believed in the self-redemption of humanity: his way is another religion.

He held a view of personhood (a philosophical anthropology) which is not simply derived from empirical investigation in the modern sense. It is a presupposition which he took from the optimistic humanism of the Enlightenment. He believed in the perfectibility of mankind by unaided effort. For Marx, work makes us human. To be free at work is to be free indeed. Capitalism tends to reduce the labourer to a mere cog in the machine. Marxism exalts him to the status of ideal person.[25] Scripture sees work as a means of expressing our humanity before God. Is this not a third way?

Marx also embraced an understanding of history at variance with biblical faith. He derived it mainly from his philosophical mentor, Hegel. Central to it are the ideas of negation, transcendence and persistence (*Aufhebung*). The eventual outcome of the class-struggle would be the negation of class-struggle and its transcendence in socialism. But this

25. Johan van der Hoeven, *Karl Marx: The Roots of his Thought* (Toronto, 1976), ch. 5 and epilogue.

may be guaranteed only by reference to Marx's new person, thus returned to his or her true humanity, who would be transformed in the new conditions. And if the new person did not emerge? Marx did not countenance this possibility. Countries which have abolished capitalism could find themselves with new classes, new dominant élites. The philosophy of change could be exchanged for a conservative, repressive ideology which nevertheless retains the Marxist tag. Human selfishness could re-establish private accumulation and consumerism even after the official demise of capitalism. The story is all too well known.

It is at this level that the critique of Marxism must begin. Christians may rightly take note of a Marxist analysis of structural injustice, and the social constraints on fulfilled personhood. For Marx does see that economics is an inescapably *social* science, which has inevitably evaluative content. And he discerns the patterns of human domination which are built into the system. But he never goes beyond the structural analysis of humanity's chains. For Marx to concede that people themselves could be wrong — intrinsically misdirected and internally warped — would be to fly in the face of his self-confessed humanism.

One of Marxism's greatest attractions is praxis, that unique combination of theory and practice which has so challenged Christians to 'practise the truth' in recent years. But if it is not the 'truth' which is being practised, it is obviously dangerous from a Christian point of view.

This is why, for all the conscience-pricking work of the theologies of liberation, the question of their stance on Marxism is so critical. Theologies of liberation are ever in danger of being merely 'other gospels', and therefore anathema to Christian praxis.[26] While the liberationists may catalyse the timely development of an evangelical or biblical theology of liberation,[27] its current exponents tend to take too much from Marx and not enough from the Bible.

José Miranda sets out to be an exception to this in his *Marx and the Bible*,[28] where he tries to demonstrate exegetically the central liberative theme of the Scriptures. But while evangelicals have much to learn from the weight of biblical evidence produced for a God of the oppressed, Miranda

26. This is argued by Kenneth Hamilton in C. E. Armerding (ed.), *Evangelicals and Liberation* (Nutley, N.J., 1977), pp. 1-9.
27. Clark Pinnock, 'An Evangelical Theology of Human Liberation', *Sojourners*, Feb.-March 1976.
28. José Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (London, 1977).

takes this to be the supreme message of Christianity. The oppression-liberation motif, epitomized for him (and others) in the exodus, turns the gospel into a process whereby people are made increasingly free from the law. His argument is directed against the enslavement of Christianity to the Greek elevation of permanence and law above change and freedom.

Although his attempt is more biblically-based than some others, he tries to fit everything into the oppression-liberation theme. No wonder 'law' and 'permanence' have such low premium for him. Once liberation-oppression is the interpretative key, the affinities with Marxist humanism become very clear. As Alfredo Fierro puts it, '. . . more and more people are professing to be both Christians and Marxists. This confronts them with the task of elaborating a theology in line with what they now profess.'[29]

Challenge of Liberationists

There are perhaps three key areas of debate raised by the liberationists: the *context* of Christian faith, the *content* of the gospel, and the nature of Christian *commitment*.

Related to Marx's critique of ideologies is the notion of *contextualization*. It is the recognition that all theology is done in a specific socio-cultural milieu, which affects the product. Thus all liberationists deplore the unthinking Christianity-capitalism link, and plead with Gutierrez for 'sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment and illuminating history with the Word of the Lord of history. . . '[30] It leads, as he says, to a '*new way* to do theology' which not only reflects on the world (sic) but 'rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed'. While this is in some ways commendable as an alternative to the abstract and culture-bound product of some 'theologies', two dangers exist. One is that reflection on *God* can be minimized, and the other that one determining cultural context will simply be exchanged for another.

Secondly, taking the context of theologizing seriously implies that the *content* of the gospel must also be re-examined. Does it relate to personal salvation through the death of Christ, or to the redemption of social structures, or both? May one talk of 'political evangelism' or are there rather

29. Alfredo Fierro, *The Militant Gospel* (London, 1977), p. xiii.
30. Gustav Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London, 1974), p. 15.

political *implications* which flow from the gospel? Ron Sider has clarified some of these issues for us, arguing that the language of 'evangelism', 'salvation' and 'redemption' is not appropriate for social action.[31] But this is not an argument for a dualism of evangelism and social action. There is a wholeness in Christ's commission to 'make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matt. 28:19,20). The danger, again, is that of over-reaction to individualism and a-politicism which ends in an equally unbiblical form of socialism and a merely political gospel.

On this hinges the question of Christian *commitment*. From the Marx-inspired concern with praxis (which as Míguez convincingly demonstrates has biblical analogues[32]) comes a renewed emphasis on Christian practice of the truth as well as its defence. This is part of the '*new way* to do theology'. For Gutierrez, theology is 'critical reflection on historical praxis' and is committed to the building of a new, just and fraternal society'.[33] Again, while this may deepen Christian concern for authentic and radical discipleship of Jesus Christ, it could take other directions. The gospel that begins with Marxist alienation and exploitation in Christian dress, ends with a hope only in self-made people re-creating the world as it seems right in their own eyes, and calling it the kingdom of God.

Let us summarize what has been said so far. Marxism's challenge comes at several levels. It is a radical, comprehensive, critique of things as they are which demands an alternative praxis; radical, in that a structural social and historical analysis questions not only the workings of the system, but whether the system itself is human, and comprehensive, in that a total understanding of the world is offered, so that today's Marxists have an interpretation for many events outside the industrial shop-floor itself. The critique which shatters illusions about the benevolence of a capitalist *status quo* is based on a view of ideal person and an alternative society. Lastly, the praxis is a way of actively changing the world, in which neither abstract theory nor mindless activism rule; rather, theory and practice are dynamically intertwined.

31. R. Sider and J. Stott, *Evangelism and Social Justice* (Bramcote, Notts., 1976).
32. *Op. cit.* (n.1 above).
33. Gutierrez, *op. cit.* p. 15.

We have hinted at three separate aspects of a Christian response to Marxism. These may be spelt out as follows. First, humility. Marxism is a human response to Christian failure to practise the truth in every sphere. It highlights the deficiencies of Christian commitment. Secondly, deep disquiet about the roots of Marxism. Human self-redemption is the core of its optimistic gospel. *Homo faber* creates himself through work, deliberately rejecting all 'alienating' reference to power or guidance outside himelf. Marx could not be consistent here, however, and surrogate religious motifs and scarcely-veiled dogmatic judgements abound in his work. It goes without saying that the powers of evil may easily use such a system.

The third aspect of a Christian response has to do with Marxism's historical record. We have every right, on Marx's own terms, to ask why state-socialist societies have failed to fulfil their attractive promises. What we see today in state socialism is the fruit of human autonomy. Marxism emphatically does not mean bureaucratic collectivism, but Marx never suggested how such an outcome could be avoided. He saw many things. But his blind spots have proved to be fatal. His radicalism is not deep enough. His apparently comprehensive range is limited. His critique is grounded in an incomplete view of personhood and an all-too-sketchy outline of ideal society, quite detached from the creator's life-patterns for freedom. Hence he failed both to plumb the depths of alienation (as estrangement from God) and to follow the perfect orthopraxis of the creator's Son. Instead, he bequeathed to an unjust world a powerful locomotive of revolutionary activism, but only the most frail of ethical tracks to run it on.

Beyond Conformism and Confrontationism

The Christian alternative to Marxism must begin with the distinctive and authoritative message of the biblical Scriptures, that to be fully human is to be right with God our maker. Sinful rebellion against God and his ways is the fundamental alienation. At the same time, Christians should be aware of *how* this alienation is manifesting itself in contemporary social situations. Christian faith hinges on the death of sin-bearing Christ. As Andrew Kirk has rightly stressed, a personal discovery and knowledge of God, who is

the *go'el* of the poor and oppressed, is the beginning of true Christian obedience. Unless Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the focus of faith and the pattern of discipleship, any claims to authentic Christian life are hollow.

There is a need to go beyond all conformism to this-worldly patterns (especially those known to us as western Christians in capitalist countries) *and* beyond the mere confrontationism of revolutionary Marxism. This is not the way of Christ. The Christian social ethic, needed so desperately in our generation, must transcend both capitulation to capitalist logic and life-styles, *and* power-struggle belligerence and hatred without sacrificing the biblical ideals of truth and justice found in Christ. I believe that Christian discipleship entails concern for the development of a social ethic of this type.

Not being a trained ethicist, I hesitate to go further, especially as I fear that to do so would open a whole can of worms. But if the challenge of Marxism is genuinely to be faced, I must outline what I see as a Christian alternative. Clearly, there is considerable debate as to the basis of ethics among Evangelicals. Some plump for creation, others for the kingdom. Yet others, more speculatively, find the Trinity, incarnation, exodus or *shalom* to be a foundation.

It seems to me, however, that the *whole* biblical message may be brought to bear on the ethical task. (Richard Mouw's *Politics and the Biblical Drama*[34] confirmed my belief that this is an appropriate method.) Life before God is seen in the biblical drama as creation, fall, redemption and the future age (or final kingdom). Each aspect has an important bearing on what God requires of his people. Each relates to and interacts with the other. We shall glance at them in turn, also referring to themes already discussed as 'the challenge of Marxism'.

Creation

First, God's original and ongoing intentions for humankind are seen most clearly in the creation. A. N. Triton is right when he argues that behind the Mosaic law, and behind Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is the creation ideal. 'These constitute the warp and woof of the biblical picture of society as it was meant to be. Even prior to the entrance of evil there were structures and positive commands given to man to guide

34. Richard Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids, 1976).

him.'[35] This reference back to the beginning is a legitimate starting point for ethics, primarily because it is Jesus' way. Moreover, it links in with Jesus' dynamic teaching on the kingdom, which in many ways unifies the four motifs under discussion.

Applied to our particular topic, Marxism, the creation ideal[36] explodes the myth of human identity as *homo faber*. The human person is *imago Dei*. This totally different philosophical anthropology is the base line for the development of a purposive Christian social perspective. To quote Mouw, 'Social relationships (are) a central dimension of human nature from a biblical perspective . . . human beings were created for positive social co-operation with each other, to perform certain tasks with respect to the rest of creation, in obedience to the will of the Creator. It is not just that human beings were created to be social, but that they were meant to be social in certain *ways*.'[37]

The development of such a systematic social perspective, which begins with the creation, is both realistic and relevant. Just as creation references are woven into the whole biblical drama, so the whole biblical teaching on the creation must be woven into the Christian social perspective. Donald Hay's critique of capitalism, which begins with the creation pattern of stewardship, work, and so on, is a model. Until Christians follow leads like that, Christian ethics will be adrift in a stormy and hostile seascape, without the identity of port-of-origin.

Fall

Secondly, the entry of sin at the fall must be taken into account as the dimensions of the ethical task are spelled out. From seeing that God had given them 'all things richly to enjoy' in Eden, Adam and Eve were deceived into asserting their own autonomy, and accepting false definitions of life's purpose. They rebelled against the creator, thus initiating the selfish and self-destructive way of idolatry. They trusted their own way and each other above the way of God and God himself.

35. A. N. Triton, *Salt to the World* (Leicester, 1978), p. 35.
36. The phrase 'created order' is all too easily linked with 'law and order', which has connotations I do not intend.
37. Mouw, *op. cit.* p. 28.

This teaches us that as post-fall humans we are always susceptible to distorted thinking and twisted lifestyles. This is why Paul solemnly warns Christians not to be conformed to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by mind-renewal (Rom. 12:2). The purposive social theory developed from the creation perspective now takes on a critical dimension. The false definitions of reality and false dominions over others must be unmasked by a truly radical critical social analysis.

We may expect inhuman situations to emerge wherever an uncreaturely perspective is dominant in society. If it is alleged that man's chief end is to consume, or to re-make himself through work, life-patterns will be distorted and idolatrous. But if the Eden-exodus teaches us anything, it is that sin is subtle. We may expect unwitting collusion in sinful structures. We may also expect that some will be lured into an uncritical Marxist mind-set. But if Christians are being totally transformed by the Spirit's mind-renewal, then we should be willing to unmask even our own unknowing complicity in sinful life-patterns.

Marxism challenges us deeply here. We need to develop a critical social analysis and practice which is willing honestly to face issues such as: the injustice of an economically stratified society, and the power of the holders of resources (for example, via the media and the Welfare State) over those who are weak; the courageous stand for righteousness in public places alongside the almost total silence from Christians whose capitalist societies systematically exploit and keep in dependence Third World countries by their 'aid programmes'; the alliance of the so-called Protestant work ethic with a system which either deliberately allows for a large pool of unemployment, or else ensures that the benefits of labour accrue not to the labourer, but to his hirer. Biblical critical theory strikes at the very sensitive roots of sin.

Redemption

Thirdly, we turn to redemption. Those who are redeemed, in the biblical sense, are the people of God. As the church in the world, these people have a complex task to perform. Without quibbling over the relative importance of one aspect of the task over another (though it is worth saying emphatically that evangelism is different from social action), particular respon-

sibilities of the church may be mentioned.

While it is confusing and misleading to identify the kingdom of God or redemption with anyone who does not consciously acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ, there is a sense in which the church is a 'signpost' of the coming kingdom of Christ.[38] We must distinguish carefully between what R. B. Kuiper refers to as the kingdom of Christ's power and the kingdom of his grace. For example, as the church practises the abolition of ethnic and economic barriers so it may look forward to the time when the curse will be finally reversed, and the whole creation set free from sin and its consequences.

But the task of the church is to be a fellowship of those in Christ, where worship and discipling according to Christ's teaching go on. This cannot but relate to the gospel preached by the church. There is an insidious 'easy-believism' which continues to pervade Evangelicalism. This simultaneously underplays the sovereignty of God in calling out his people, and their responsibility to count the cost of being disciples of Jesus. The cost may involve family difficulties, the forsaking of work which is clearly wrong (as in the instructive case of Zaccheus) and some very painful rethinking of life's purposes, social connections and priorities.

On the one hand, the life-style of believers must be distinctively Christian if we are to be the salt of the earth. Houses, cars, eating habits, children's education, holidays, all these come under the confession, 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. Free enterprise capitalist society produces 'fetishism of commodities' as Marx rightly noted. Christians must actively demonstrate that 'a man's (or a woman's) life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions'. This involves an alternative lifestyle.

On the other hand, Christians must be seen to have a concern for justice, compatible with Christ's 'positive discrimination' on behalf of the 'wretched of the earth' of his day. This has to operate both at local level and also in attitudes to global justice. Rather like ancient Sodom we 'have surfeit of good and prosperous ease, but do not aid the poor and needy' (Jer. 16:49). Bearing the purposive perspective and critical social analysis in mind, we must corporately work out our economic and political responsibilities in these public spheres.[39]

38. C. Sugden, *Social Gospel or No Gospel?* (Bramcote, Notts., 1977), p. 17.
39. This is likely to differ from person to person and from place to place.

The extent to which the local church can do this, and its relationship to other institutions such as study groups or Christian companies is a matter for debate. The point is that discipleship of Jesus Christ is both radical and communal. If Christ's lordship is not worked out in the proclamation, defence, and practice of the gospel *in the church*, it will not be worked out anywhere.

Final Age

Lastly, the biblical drama builds up to the final age. We have already noted that the church is a pointer to this age. It is the time of fulfilment of all God's purposes and intentions in creation and redemption. Jesus taught his people to pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. This aim and goal is also suggestive for a Christian social ethic, especially as it highlights the pitiful deficiency of the Marxist ethic.

Eschatology is a great corrective and stimulus to the ethical task. It is a corrective insofar as we are reminded of an eternal perspective. Ethics can force the eyes down to earth. Eschatology reminds us to lift our eyes to the place from which our help comes. Calvin was as strong on the point that our earthly life is to be shaped by the desire for life eternal as he was in his insistence that our knowledge of ourselves is inextricably connected with our knowledge of God our maker.

But eschatology is also a stimulus in that it reminds us of ideals, and gives ground for a kind of utopian thinking. It allows for genuine hope to be articulated (as opposed to the impotent hope of Marxist or capitalist humanism in man's unaided efforts). But as Míguez perceptively notes, it also means that ethics is continually indispensable. Evil and conflict will be with us until the end of time. Over against the Marxist tendency to suspend ethics for the sake of the revolution or the party, the Christian insists that 'no human class, group, or generation can be considered as merely instrumental'.[40] This utopian thinking must ever be yoked with the purposive perspective and critical social analysis, but essentially it is promoted by the kingdom-vision.

Utopian thinking may be particularized in a social-political programme, but it must never be imagined that a programme

40. *Op. cit.* p. 129.

is enough. We need the ideals in order mentally to transcend the *status quo*, but they must be a sign *within* the situation. We must focus on specific areas of failure (in terms of the biblical ideal) and struggle to right those wrongs. There will, therefore, always be a concern among God's people for the poor and disadvantaged. This is what I understand by the term 'biblical realism'.

Whether or not we share Alan Storkey's vision of a Christian political party for Britain, Christians should be indebted to him for his insightful analysis of contemporary politics. Here is someone who has dared to think realistically through economic life, the education system, the penal system, health and welfare, and so on, with a view to articulating a new politics. I shall do no more than refer readers to this analysis.[41] Many would like me to go further at this point, but it would not be proper. If what I have written is right, then it is incumbent not merely upon isolated individuals like me to suggest ways forward. Rather it should be the task of groups within the Christian community to work out the implications of what I have said in practical detail. I reject the lust for instant answers in this complex and confusing area.

But I do wish to make two final brief points. Eschatology produces a concern for change. Christians have been paralysed by *status quoism* for so long that they have come to believe in it. The hope of God's purposes being finally fulfilled catalyses desire for change in accordance with his word. But this implies that politics be taken seriously. Probably due to the black and white nature of traditional Christian teaching, Christians have often been unwilling to enter the area of political decisions and compromises. But this leaves the door wide open for the anti-political activity of many Marxists who believe in confrontation and struggle as means to achieve power. The concern for justice and reconciliation on God's terms is thus muted in public life.

To the challenge of Marxism must come a response which is rooted in God's whole word to the whole of human life before him. Though Marxism confronts us with our Christian failures, it is in the better way of the Lord Jesus Christ that we find a totally different framework for a radically different praxis, or wisdom. That way starts and continues with a cross.

41. Alan Storkey, 'A Christian Party Manifesto', *Third Way* 2:12 (1978).

Reading List

José Míguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists: the Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (London, 1976).
Johan van der Hoeven, *Karl Marx: The Roots of his Thought* (Toronto, 1976).
Alan Storkey, *A Christian Social Perspective* (Leicester, 1979).
Andrew Kirk, 'The Meaning of Man in the debate between Christianity and Marxism' *Themelios* 1:2-3 (1976).
Bernard Zylstra, 'Karl Marx: Radical Humanist', *Vanguard,* Dec. 1973.
David Lyon, 'Approaching Marx', *Third Way* 1:19 (1977).
David Lyon, *Karl Marx: A Christian Appreciation of his Life and Thought* (Tring, Herts., 1979).

Questions for Discussion

1 Have evangelical Christians too readily allowed the atheism of Marxism and the anti-Christian policies of Communist regimes to blind them to its challenge and relevance?

2 Consider Marx's claim that religion like an opiate has induced passive submission to the harsh injustice of life. How far is it true that evangelical Christianity has steeled Christians to *endure* what they should have been seeking to *reform,* to prefer peace (the absence of conflict) rather than campaign for justice?

3 Are there any reasons why Christians should not accept the validity of the Marxist critique of capitalism?

4 'Marxism is a human response to Christian failure to practise the truth in every sphere.' What are the implications of this assessment?

*I understood my brief for the Social Ethics Conference to require chiefly an exposition of Marxism's salient features, especially as it *challenges* Christian commitment. The paper is printed almost exactly as delivered, and thus remains at the level of generality which seemed appropriate for the Conference. It needs to be filled out with concrete examples.

KMSW refers to *Karl Marx: Selected Writings,* ed. D. McLellan (London, 1977).