Christians and Marxist Theory of Human Liberation

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The Constitution "Gaudium et spes" of the Second Vatican Council contains the following characteristic statement: "Among the forms of contemporary atheism we should not overlook the one which expects human liberation first of all through economic and social liberation" (GS 20). This document correctly emphasizes the main subject of Marxism connected with the concept of human liberation from various alienations. This idea evokes a wide doctrinal and social resonance in the contemporary world, which has its proof in the existence of the theology of liberation. This fact obliges Christians to a more careful analysis of the Marxist concept of liberation. In the present paper we shall leave out the presentation of this concept, which has been discussed widely both in Catholic and in Marxist literature. We shall focus our consideration on the following problem: what doctrinal, existential, and social attitudes should be adopted by Christians towards the Marxist theory of human liberation? While attempting to answer this question we should distinguish two aspects, positive and negative. The first is an attempt to show the range of possible cooperation between Christians and Marxists in overcoming all that alienates the human being. The negative aspect signifies the voicing of objections and doubts by philosophical and theological Christian thought in regard to the Marxist theory of liberation.

The Range of Possible Cooperation Between Christians and Marxists

The Marxist conception of human liberation which is integrally connected with dialectical and historical materialism in its fundamental elements cannot be accepted by Christians. This fact does not eliminate the possibility of cooperation between believers and non-believers in overcoming human alienations. Emmanuel Mounier, a French Catholic personalist, was an ardent spokesman of such cooperation. He
believed that Christianity and Marxism "mutually transcending without isolating from each other might undertake the great task of discovering the new man, who would embody everlasting values of the eternal man."³ The Second Vatican Council continued this attitude of dialogue. The Council in the Constitution "Gaudium et spes," proclaims understanding for atheism originating as a form of protest against the evil of social life and acknowledges a partial fault of believers in this respect. It also encourages both believers and non-believers to "appropriate building of the world in which they live together" (GS 21). Pope John Paul II accepts that the social teaching of the Church needs the notion of alienation which has its source in the Hegelian and Marxist philosophy (Redemptor Hominis 15). This fact is meaningful.

What is the basis for cooperation between Christians and Marxists as far as human liberation is concerned? This basis can only be the platform of humanism, that is, the recognition of the exceptional role of the human being in the universe, the defense of human rights and counteracting different forms of social injustice. Christians and Marxists often recognize humanistic elements of their ideological opponents.⁴ Vatican II, despite its criticism of "systematized atheism," that is Marxism, acknowledged at the same time the humanistic value of its economic and social postulates. Karl Marx in "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," although erroneously reducing all forms of alienation to the economic sources, nevertheless recognized the human being as the highest value. He saw the main evil of alienation in disturbing the "human essence" ("species-being"), namely when situations arise when conscious and free human activity is made impossible. The consequence of this is "dehumanization," moral dehumanization of individuals or social groups. The humanistic attitude of the author of the Manuscripts cannot leave Christians indifferent. The human being is "a common good" (bonum commune) for all people of good will.

There are many "points in common" between believers and non-believers, such as the realization of the ideas of social justice both on the national and on the international scales, the recognition of the value of work, opposing the selfish ideal of life, peace activity, strife against natural calamities, coping with social vices and pathologies. This list is far from being complete.⁵

Marx focused his attention on economic alienation, which he understood as the final primeval source of all types of human alienation and suffering. In the Manuscripts we can find severe condemnation of situations in which "work produces wonderful things for the rich, but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces, but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty, but for the worker,
deformity. It replaces labor by machines, but it throws one section of the workers back to a barbarous type of labor, and it turns the other section into a machine.\(^6\) This passionate condemnation of human exploitation is a distant echo of the sharp words which were spoken by the prophets Amos and Isaiah, St. Jacob the Apostle, and Christ himself, and which were directed towards the pitiless rich.\(^7\) Social teaching of the Church, including social encyclicals of the last popes, constitute the subsequent link.\(^8\) Pius XI in the Encyclical "Quadragesimo Anno" condemned the economic disproportion between "the few chosen ones and the unlimited number of poor ones" (QA 3, 58). He also wrote about the necessity for the "liberation of proletariat" (QA 59). Also John Paul II recognizes the evident fact of the historical conflict between "the world of the capital" and "the world of work," that is, between the privileged group of owners of the means of production and the mass of workers deprived of the due economic and social rights ("Laborem Exercens" 11). Christianity recognizes the right to private property, but at the same time it stands in opposition to its absolutization, typical of liberalism and capitalism. John XXIII ("Mater et Magistra" 10-122) pointed out the social functions of the right of the private property. Pope Paul VI ("Populorum Progressio" 23) stated that the right of property is not unlimited and absolute. Also the "Constitution Concerning the Church in the Contemporary World" condemns abuse of private property (GS 71), and stigmatizes the situation in which "workers become slaves of their work" (GS 67).

The realization of the principles of social justice is connected with the right estimation of human work. Some authors describe Marxism as "the philosophy of work."\(^9\) Even if it is a limitation of Marxism, we must admit that the phenomenon of human work is in its center. Marx opposed the alienation of work, as the result of which a worker loses his/her subject dimension and is treated as an object--a thing.\(^10\) The apology of work finds a strong resonance in social teaching of the Popes. John XXIII in the Encyclical "Mater et Magistra" (108) wrote that work "as an immediate result of human activity must be evaluated higher than stores of material goods, which by virtue of their nature should be treated as instrumentary." That is why work cannot be treated as an article of trade, for a person is not an article of trade either. Also John Paul II in his Encyclical "Laborem Exercens" emphasizes the primacy of human work before the capital, referring to human supremacy above the world of things (LE 12). The above quoted statement of the founders of Marxism and documents of the contemporary Church have one feature in common--the defense of people against exploitation and the postulate of respect for human work. Undoubtedly these points of view are not identical.
Both trends recognize the primacy of work as compared with capital and they both treat the human being as the subject of work. Christianity deduces the dignity of work from the fact that the human being is a free person. Marxism sees human dignity first of all in the fact that she/he is an effective producer of economic and social values. Marxists and Christians are in accord on some particular postulates, such as the recognition of the right of work and the condemnation of all forms of exploitation of human work. The ethos of work is also the subject of interest for both ideological trends.

Believers and non-believers cooperate also in another sphere, that is, in counteracting this form of alienation of work which is connected with the far-reaching mechanization of work. It is an inevitable phenomenon, though at the same time it often leads to the transformation of a person into a robot. Young Marx's belief that in the future work shall lose its character of toil and that it will be possible to change it at will was utopian. The division and specialization of labor has a universal character and that is why it is necessary in a society with developed technology and industry. Going back to "nature" is not possible and doing highly qualified work requires many years of preparation. Yet the founder of Marxism stated rightly the possibility of dehumanization of work. It occurs when excessive automatization and too great speed of work cause the psychological deterioration of a worker, disintegration of social groups (also of a family), along with the loss of the individual identity. People are not automatons or robots, that is why the kind and the conditions of work should be adjusted to physical conditions and psychological features of workers. Mounier, when speaking about the so-called alienation of Hercules, rightly stated that human work and external activity can cause depersonalization if they eliminate reflection and self-control. Human work should always stay human work. John XXIII referred to this problem when he wrote: "The human being cannot only demand proper work by virtue of natural right but also can enjoy the freedom in its undertaking. With this there should exist the right to such conditions of work in which neither his/her physical strength nor the moral rectitude of its habits would decline" (Pacem in Terris" 18-19). People should not lose their personality while working. On the contrary, they should develop it. This becomes difficult when people are evaluated first of all as effective producers. That is why the idolatry of work, among others in the form of artificial competition to break records, is a serious threat to the humanism of work.

The cooperation between Marxists and Christians is also necessary in an active opposition to the psycho-social alienation, which is connected with the process of urbanization and the hedonistic
attitudes of some people. People today are often entangled in situations which cause alienation: they feel lost in the big cities, they are frustrated by the soulless and formal organization of work, they feel depressed by the weakening family, neighborly, and professional ties. A person is no longer esteemed as a human being, he/she is seen as either a producer or a consumer. Spiritual culture of contemporary people is threatened by standardization of the forms of interpersonal relations, the commercial character of culture in its everyday aspects, the vulgarity of available entertainment. This kind of alienation threatens people who live in different geographical locations and under different social and political governments. That is why cooperation of all people of good will, concerned about human spiritual good, is necessary.

There exist many other menaces for the contemporary humanity, natural calamities, the danger of nuclear conflict, the contamination of the natural environment, deterioration of the interhuman solidarity, moral plagues of social life (alcoholism, drug habits, terrorism, commercial pornography, disrespect for the life of the unborn, and so on). Fighting these various alienations is a duty both of Christians as well as of Marxists who together should endeavor human liberation. Struggle against devastations of social life is indispensable in social, national, and international spheres.

Controversial Elements of the Marxist Concepts of Liberation

The possibility and necessity of cooperation between Marxists and Christians in overcoming different human alienations, suggested above, does not exclude reservations concerning Marxist conceptions of human liberation. These reservations most frequently concern the diagnosis of the sources of alienation and the method by which it should be overcome. The polemics with the Marxist theory of liberation is being carried out on different levels: social (e.g., there is the difficulty with the Marxist explicit definition of the working class), economic (the defects of radical collectivism are widely known), political (opposition between the theory of proletarian dictatorship and the postulate of parliamentary democracy), and axiological. These remarks shall be limited to the last level because the reservations formulated below have an ethical and humanistic character. This type of motivation is well founded because Marxist theory of human liberation is undoubtedly based on axiological premises. The idea of social justice is clearly an element of universal ethics.

Marxism, condemning economic and social alienation, approves completely the ideals of class struggle and social revolution. Is the class struggle, however, a satisfactory explanation of human history?
Is class struggle an irrevocable and universal duty of everybody who wants to realize social justice? Marxists and representatives of the radical current of theology of liberation suggest that the authentic love of the human being implies class struggle. Although class struggle is inevitable, it does not need to be connected with hate of people belonging to the exploiting classes. The duty of Christians is to fight against social injustice. That is why solidarity with the people living in misery is necessary. Neutrality in the class struggle would be in fact a form of collaboration with the elite of the privileged rich.

The above motivation does not seem to be right, especially in its theological and moral aspects. Christ was solidarious with all wronged people; personally he had chosen poverty, cured ill people, was interested in the life of the poor, and condemned injustice. Yet he never called people to arms, and in his Sermon on the Mountain he preached peace (Mt. 5:3-12). Jesus' life and teaching do not give reasons for the permanent use of struggle and violence. Certainly we cannot accept the thesis of capitalistic liberalism, which claims that social inequality is a natural fact and free unlimited competition is permitted. The existing unjust social structures should be immediately changed. The poor people have the right to fight for social justice and have the right to defend themselves. That is why the class struggle is a historical fact and very often is justified under special circumstances. But the main impulses of human history and life should be positive values: kindness, love, goodness, cooperation in realization of the common good. Class struggle does not need to be connected with hate of specific people but needs enormous spiritual maturity, which is not common on a social scale. The history of the last century clearly proves that the realization of the postulates of the class struggle and social revolution was often transformed into biological extinction of some classes recognized as "enemies of the people." Because of this, Christians, although refusing the alternative of the active class struggle, in principle vote for the peaceful method of solving economic and social conflicts. Realization of the principles of social justice is possible also by means of a dialogue between classes and social systems. This is the way advised by Vatican II ("Gaudium et spes" 68). This is also the most humanitarian way since it assumes the cooperation willingly undertaken for a common benefit of society. Class struggle is a sad necessity. That is why it is difficult to see in it a general moral norm. Fraternal love is more constructive than struggle.

A constant element of Marxist historical materialism is the apotheosis of violent revolution treated as an indispensable condition for social progress. Representatives of the theology of liberation
(its radical wing) share this point of view, but do not see its discrepancy with Christian axiology. The attitude of glorification of revolutionary violence evokes serious doubts of an ethical nature. The Church does not exclude the use of violence in order to defend a person or society but sees it as the final and exceptional case. That is why Paul VI, reminding readers of the principle of non-violence, added: "Apart from cases of obvious and long-lasting tyranny, disturbing the fundamental rights of a man and bringing about severe damage to the common good of a country" ("Populorum Progressio" 31). Some theologians tried to interpret this statement as a general acceptance of revolution. The Pope cut himself off from this interpretation rejecting "the aberration, which is being called the theology of violence and revolution." The present Pope, John Paul II, disavowed the theology of revolution, among others, in 1979 in Puebla. The Church calls in question the idea of revolution as a principle of violence, as a normal means of realizing social justice. It is clear from an ethical point of view, since a rapid revolution usually gets out of control of conscience and starts the spiral of hate and violence. The theory of constant universal revolution is a utopian belief in the therapeutic and liberating properties that violence has. Another doubt of Christians concerns the theory of proletarian dictatorship as the indispensable link in the act of liberating people. It is difficult to justify the global affirmation of any dictatorship on the ethical level, especially so that in its institutionalized form it contains elements of force and violence. Should the way to freedom lead through the period of suspension or serious limitation of this freedom? The theory of proletarian dictatorship implies also that one class is the moving force of all human history. Such an idealization or even absolutization of one class, in the light of historical experience, is groundless. A German Neo-Marxist, Ernst Bloch, clearly stated "the Messianic" profile of the theory of human liberation by one class, the working class. History proves sufficiently that different social groups can undergo moral or political degeneration in one way or another. It is advisable to believe in the human being but it is risky to give the status of infallibility and heroic uprightness to any social group. Proletarian dictatorship very often evolves toward dictatorship of an individual or an elite. That is why none of the power monopolies, independently of the name it bears, is the right way to make people happy.

An integral element of historical materialism of the Marxist founders is the announcement of the ideal society, knowing no class distinction. In it would finally disappear all forms of alienations. The above mentioned theory seems to be in conflict with the general dialectic of the system, according to which development of the
material, social, and human existence is to be unlimited. Development is the constant creation of new forms of life, new values, new social structures, and so on; connected with it are the possibilities of deviations and alienations of social life. The danger of alienation appears always where there is free human activity. Abuse of private property is not the only source of human alienation, that is why obliteration of this kind of property does not exclude completely the possibility of deformations of social life. Alienation is a phenomenon which has a universal nature and exists in different political systems. Many Marxists admit that the theory of the society without class distinction—which could be completely happy and perfectly just—contains an element of utopia.

In the recapitulation it should be mentioned that the diagnosis, suggested by Marx, of the origin of human alienation is one-sided. Marx interpreted human history as a result of economic and social factors, leaving out such important things as psychological, ethical, cultural, national, and Weltanschaung factors. One-sided interpretations of social life led to the reductionist idea of human liberation, focused on the transformation of economic and social structures. Lasting and authentic respect for social life needs taking into account moral and economic factors; formation of human ethos, respect for human liberty and rights, economic and technical modernization, overcoming of bureaucracy, proper methods of organization of work, and so on. Contemporary Marxism has developed an axiology and philosophical anthropology. It is a pity that they have not been sufficiently used in the theory of human liberation. Its limitation to the economic and social levels undoubtedly impoverished human persons' lives.

The Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, in its Instruction of March 1986, recognizes the necessity of individual and social liberation. However, it rightly observes that liberation from the "outside"—economic, social, structural—is not the same as the integral liberation. The latter is the liberation "from the fundamental constraint of evil and sin," "liberation means restoration of freedom. It is also the way of lifting up towards freedom" (Instruction no. 23). Christianity considers the human being in two dimensions, material and spiritual. This human complexity requires many-sided therapies in order to overcome alienations. Economic and social liberation is indispensable but internal moral liberation is also very necessary. Christian humanism is rightly called "integral humanism." That is why its concept of human liberation can also be called "integral liberation."

Though so many things divide Christians and Marxists they do share a common idea of human liberation. Marxists prefer the method of class struggle, revolution, and proletarian dictatorship.
Christians first of all want to use peaceful methods. They believe in the spiritual power of human brotherhood and sisterhood and love. Human development, discussed by both sides, should be the basis and indispensable aim of both of their conceptions of liberation.

Footnotes

1S. Kowalczyk, "Teologia wyzwolenia a Ewangelia" [Theology of Liberation and the Gospel], Chrzescijanin w Swiecie 17, no. 6 (1985), pp. 1-23.


3E. Mounier, Co to jest personalizm? [What is Personalism], Krakow, 1960, p. 228.


7"Instrukcja o chrzescijanskiej wolnosci i wyzwoleniu" [Instruction Concerning Christian Freedom and Liberation], Vatican, 1986, nos. 46-50.


10K. Marx, Rekopisy . . . [Manuscripts], op. cit., p. 548.
11 J. Waclawek, "Teoria podziału pracy i 'utopia' Marksza" [Theory of Division of Work and the "Utopia" of Marx], Kultura i społeczeństwo, no. 4 (1961), pp. 75-95.


15 Paul VI, "La Documentation Catholique" (1968), p. 1626.


