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Christians and Marxists In Dialogue Building Confidence in a Time of Crisis

By Charles C. West

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Let me begin by questioning the obvious. Why should Christians and Marxists be in dialogue with one another? It is of course important in a world of real and potential conflicts for people on all sides to build some confidence in one another. A certain amount of mutual trust is essential to our basic security. We may say that in a time of crisis the building of this confidence is all the more important in order to deflect the violent actions that might destroy us all. But dialogue is only one form of encounter between people of different faiths and ideologies. Is it in this case the most useful and effective? Is genuine dialogue even possible given the central convictions and the policies of the parties involved? Or if it is possible, is it central to their theory and practice, and therefore fruitful in changing the world?

I take it that all of us engaged in this enterprise would answer roundly in the affirmative to all these questions. It would be well to do so, however, with reflection. This essay, therefore, will try to do two things: first, to locate dialogue to deal with some of the obstacles to it in the whole context of relations between Marxists and Christians in our world; second, to define some of the issues at stake in that dialogue as we search together for a new form of relationship with one another.

I. The Problems with Dialogue

Let me begin with two opposing reasons for rejecting dialogue altogether. The first is the point of view which says "not dialogue but *negotiation*." Christians and Marxists live in the same world. Whatever their views of the rightness or wrongness of that world, or their hopes for its transformation, they must reach sufficient agreement to prevent its destruction in the course of conflict among the various powers at work there. Christianity is expressed in an institution, the Church. Marxism is expressed in another structure, the Party. Both of these claim space in the world, often at the expense of one another. The boundaries of this space must be negotiated. Each must try to secure itself by agreement over against the other, since neither can destroy the other by force. For the sake of survival, the terms of mutual toleration must be set.

The assumption behind this point of view is, of course, that both Church and Party, in their various manifestations, are earthly institutions interested in as much power and influence as possible.¹

Another assumption is that Church and Party do not trust each other, except in the context of clear and carefully monitored agreements which set the terms and limits of their rivalry. If what I am describing here sounds like the echo of disarmament negotiations between the great powers, this is no accident. The only difference would lie in the fact that the church is usually, and indeed in essence, somewhat at a disadvantage in any political power struggle, and that both Church and Party have a second front which they treat with varying seriousness over against the privately controlled powers of the market economy in most of the world.

There must be negotiation. To ignore the power relations within which Christians and Marxists operate is to falsify the conditions of dialogue and to make it an unrealistic and abstract enterprise. The terms, then, of mutual respect which make fruitful conversation possible must be worked out on two levels.

1. The power of either side to coerce the other must be mitigated. The freedom of Marxists to advocate their understanding of class struggle and to organize to achieve their goals must be secured and defended in societies where Christian churches dominate the ethos and support the dominant powers, whether dictatorial or democratic. The freedom of Christians to evangelize as well as worship, and to advocate and organize for a Christian social policy, must be secured in societies where the dominant power is Marxist. It is not the purpose of this essay to explore these problems but only to note that we are involved everywhere in a constant process of struggle and negotiation to mitigate ruling power and to provide space for free and mutual encounter.

2. Between Christians and Marxists the terms of dialogue are constantly in danger of being falsified within the process, unless the ways in which our respective ideologies coerce and take advantage of each other is recognized and dealt with. Let me cite just two examples.

A dialogue without practical consequences is for the Marxist a mirage, something which does not bind him—. The practical consequence means, for the Marxist, cooperation in changing society; it means (don't be alarmed!) revolutionary practice.

Thus did the Swiss Marxist Konrad Farnet throw down the gauntlet to a group of Christians and Marxists engaged in dialogue under the auspices of the World Council of Churches in 1967.² Some Christians were prepared to agree, and saw the occasion as an opportunity for a ringing declaration of Christian-Marxist solidarity with the struggle for the peoples' liberation against the oppression of imperialism and international capital. Fundamentally, however, the conditions set destroyed dialogue for all those who were not prepared to accept these terms without critical analysis, and whose movement from faith to social action was a different one.

My second example is from the Christian side.

"In a socialist democracy, governmental positions result from open, free elections and depend upon majority vote. Violent revolutionary changes should likewise be eliminated in a highly industrialized capitalist state; they should no longer be the means of political struggle and political debate."

This was one of nine theses which Professor Udo Bermbach proposed as the basis of Christian-Marxist dialogue at the Congress of the Paulusgesellschaft in 1977.³ The others, including an ideologically neutral state, inalienable human values, political checks and balances, and other familiar liberal democratic principles, expressed what might be called a social democratic consensus in the Western world. The author quoted many Marxist writers in support of them. But here again an agenda was set as the basis of dialogue which needed to be critically examined for the ideological bias in its apparently self-evident expressions. Nothing was said about the powers which can manipulate democratic processes, about exploitation, about class warfare, about the real centers of power, or the sources of violence. Here, too, the dialogue was coerced by the terms set forth for its conduct.

There must be negotiation wherever coercive power is at work, whether political or ideological. Negotiation, however, is not a stable compound; it either breaks down again in conflict or it points beyond itself to a new relationship. Already the fact of negotiation recognizes a transcendence which neither side can control, but within which they must live together. It invites exploration and definition of this transcendence. This may be expressed in the simple acknowledgment popular a few years ago that the future will not be built without the Christian Church or without the Communist Party. It may begin with efforts at accommodation with the least possible compromise. But despite itself, it raises the question of the theory of this accommodation in practice, and this begins to modify both Marxist and Christian self-understanding.

Second, the opposing objection proclaims not dialogue but *cooperation*. It comes primarily from Christian theologians in Latin America, but it has a long tradition in Marxist thought as well, going back to the days of the Popular Front in the 1930's. José Miguez-Bonino, one of the few to write directly on the subject, puts it quite bluntly: "The European 'dialogue' frequently begins with the existence of two 'systems of truth', two self-contained and self-sufficient conceptual entities, almost two ideologies which confront each other, compare their views, and derive from them certain practical conclusions, on the basis of which cooperation is either possible or excluded."⁴ It is, he says, abstract and idealistic. By contrast, Latin Americans have "not a Christian-Marxist dialogue, but a growing and overt common participation in a revolutionary project, the basic lines of which are undoubtedly based on a Marxist analysis."⁵ Christians and Marxists are involved in a common struggle. Marxism is the language of that struggle. It defines the strategy and tactic of human liberation in the light of the dynamics of social change in history.

Christians and Marxists therefore share a solidarity in practice, opposing a common enemy and fighting for the same liberation of the poor. Beside this their different worldviews are of secondary importance. Marxists as well as Christians must prove themselves to each other by their dedication to the common struggle and their intelligence in promoting it.

Miguez is certainly in one sense right. There are times and places where cooperation must take precedence over differences in faith and ideology. This is true not only in facing a common enemy, but also in seeking peace and reconciliation between the world's two great power blocs, poised, should some false move occur, to destroy each other and the world. But cooperation, like negotiation, does not survive by itself, not even if Christians, with Miguez, surrender their Christian conscience completely to Marxist analysis. Within the common movement questions arise. Who has the authority to interpret Marx? Can one turn him from a dialectical materialist into a humanist thinker open to the transcendent, as some theologians have attempted? If so, what does this imply for the place of religion, not only in a socialist society, but also in the Communist Party? What is the relation between Christian and Marxist views of the right and effective way to carry on the struggle? Who shares power in a socialist society? Who participates in the forming and the execution of policy? Questions like these cry out for dialogue within the context of a common cause.

Both negotiation and cooperation lead from opposite sides into dialogue. With this, however, the deepest obstacles come more clearly into focus. Marxists and Christians both believe in the unity of theory and practice. The first line of behavior for both is response to the reality which we respectively believe controls the world and determines its history. Whether it is labeled theology, ideology, or science, theory is critical reflection upon that active response in order to render it more faithful, more true, to the ultimate power which we believe determines and rescues human life from its enslavement and leads toward freedom and fulfillment for all. We believe in different ultimate realities, and therefore our understanding of the practice required of us differs as well. We have different understandings of the relation between political, social, and spiritual power and human liberation and salvation. Both sides, then, risk a great deal in opening themselves to the ultimate claims of the other. Let us look at these risks from each side in turn. They are not symmetrical.

Why should Marxists seek a dialogue with Christians? Karl Marx's own view of religion clearly excludes it as a meaningful activity. The criticism of heaven, to be sure, must precede the criticism of earth, but the object of that criticism is to remove it from intelligent discourse once and for all. Religion was for him a defect even of the alienated consciousness. Humanist philosophers, anarchist agitators, and liberal economists Marx though worthy of his powerful analytical polemic. Theologians he ignored, after

having dealt with them all in his criticism of Hegel. It was left to Engels to discover revolutionary substance in primitive Christianity and the left-wing Reformation. For Marx the very subject was a diversion from the task at hand. Lenin's accommodation to the Christian left—let them participate with their prejudices as long as they are effective revolutionaries and do not propagate their religion within the movement—is basically in tune with Marx's direction.

Much thought has been given to the question whether Marxism and its founder are essentially atheistic. An entire issue of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Vol. 22, #2, Summer 1985) was devoted to the subject. The results reveal, however, that it is essentially an argument among Christians. One can say, with Arthur McGovern (p. 498), that under the historical conditions in which Marx worked the full dimensions of Christian humanism were not available to him, and that he might have not found God an intolerable limit on human development if they had been. One can maintain, as does Franz J. Hinkelammert, a Costa Rican theologian and economist, that the essential thrust of Marx's criticism was iconoclastic, not atheistic, that the fetishism of commodities, money, and capital was his object, and that there are intimations of openness to transcendence, even in the pages of *Capital*.⁶ But all of this is essentially Christian *cisgenesis* of Marx. The essential point is that the founding prophet contributed to Marxism a radical humanism which is beyond theism and atheism, except where it is still necessary to argue the God question in order to establish the human being as self-creator through labor and self-redeemer in the solidarity of social struggle. Some Marxists may acknowledge, with Esad Cemic, that self-transcendence is a dimension of human aspiration, and that it may be symbolized in religious form (*JES* 523-524), but the agenda worth talking about is not a possible divine-human encounter, but the human struggle to realize a universal social self.

If this is the case, one could expect Marxists only to be interested in dialogue with the humanism of Christians, not with their faith. Human beings as agents of change, not divine action and human response, is the agenda. Basically religion co-opts, deflects, neutralizes the human struggle. Religion itself does this, not just certain churches in some times and places. Even radical Christianity carries revolutionary fervor in a spiritual container, which tends to stifle it. Why, then, a dialogue with Christian faith as such?

Christians in encounter with Marxists face a different problem. Integrists and fundamentalists aside, responding to the living word of God gives a certain hopeful confidence in human words, faithfully spoken. The experience of being brought to repentance and receiving new hope from the word of another is the basis of Christian worship and community. To be open to the Spirit's leadership means not to control the terms or conditions of a dialogue, but to be witnesses within it, commending the results to God.

It is this distance, however, sometimes this contradiction between human witness and the word of God, which poses for Christians the problem. It is an age-old problem, dating from the experience of the apostle Paul in Athens on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34) which here takes new form. How is evangelism--bearing witness to God's work redeeming the world in Christ--related to a dialogic openness to all that is human in the faith or ideology of one's neighbor and a willingness to be changed by learning from that dialogue?

That the Christian church has often failed in this openness, that it has evangelized many times by coercion rather than by witness, is evident to every historian. We cannot help but ask, therefore, of ourselves and of our Marxist partners, how we both understand the distance between human action in the world's power struggle and the source of truth which guides and corrects us. If we present the God who judges and redeems us as the guarantor of this distance, we must ask how the reality of that judgment and grace can be made credible to those who do not believe in such a God. When Marxists speak of their ideology as a radical humanism, a science of history, or a strategy for the total liberation of humanity from oppressive power, we need to ask how the reality of the human, the objectivity of science, and the vision of transformed society operate to limit the power and correct the ideology by which they operate on the human scene.

In short the question is: How can we learn to trust one another not to coerce and misuse the relation between us? What are the foundations on which that trust can be based?

II. The Drive Toward Dialogue

In spite of all this Christians and Marxists cannot leave each other alone. Despite all our logic and all our fears, we cannot withdraw into separate spheres of life and consciousness. Even when we pursue our separate goals, how much more when we negotiate about power and influence, or cooperate on a common project, we find ourselves challenging each other at the center of our being. Examples abound. In 1949, when the Communist Party took over China, Christians numbered less than one percent of the population. Yet a basic text in the re-education sessions which took place in every village, factory, school, and city block was Friedrich Engels' *From Ape to Man*, whose message was human self-creation through labor, in repudiation of the Hebrew-Christian belief in God and creation. In the Philippines today, a Marxist rebellion is afoot which owes more to the devoted fervor of radical Catholic clergy and children of the Protestant manse than to aid and guidance from overseas Communist parties of any sort. There and in Latin America the struggle is just beginning over defining and directing a social revolution.

But why go so far afield? The Protestant Church in East Germany has gone through years of self-redefinition in "critical solidarity", to use its term, with, and evangelical witness to, a state dominated by Marxist-Leninist power and ideology. Churches in other countries have experienced in various degrees the same transformation. At the same time Marxists face the continuing puzzling challenge which Christian vitality presents in a society where Marxist policies and ideas are so often met with indifference or cynicism. Whether they respond with unremitting atheist propaganda, with administrative repression, or with pragmatic accommodation the challenge goes on, just as does the challenge of Marxism in the midst of Christian-dominated societies. Most Christian-Marxist dialogue does not take place in conferences where the table is level, but in daily life where people respond to the powers that push them around, bear witness to the truth that gives their lives meaning, and struggle for each other's souls in the full, material, spiritual, earthy meaning of that word. Here the negotiation of spheres of influence is never stable; it leads only to deeper engagement and more intimate struggle. Cooperation is never merely practical; it leads always to deeper levels of both self-questioning and mutual confrontation.

This is the story of Christian-Marxist interaction. Why is it so? There are, I think, two fundamental reasons.

First, we share the same history, both in its material and its spiritual dimensions. I mean by this not the obvious fact that Marxism is the recent flower of the particular cultural tradition of Europe, rooted in the Greek or Roman civilization of the Mediterranean basin and given form, in large degree, by Christianity. What we share is not so much spacial as temporal: a sense of the dynamics of a world moving from the past to a promising future. It is the sense of being historical which is common to our tradition, and which permeates both its ideas and its institutions.

This means, on the level of ideas, that we share an anthropocentric orientation concerned with the realization of an open-ended promise for all humanity in its struggle against the powers of evil. That ultimate reality is concerned with human beings, that we are engaged in a struggle against powers with their roots not primarily in nature but in ourselves, and that this drama, with its struggle and its hope, is essentially that of all cultures and all peoples, however their religions and customs may disguise it—these are the common beliefs that Christians and Marxists owe to the history in which they arose.

Materially we share participation in the political conflicts, the scientific and technological developments, and the shifting class conflicts which expanding forces of production have produced. We participate in the spread of this complex of power and inner conflict throughout the world, with its strange combination of destructive imperialism and the vision of a new humanity. Christian missions and Marxist politics ride the wave of this expansion while they battle its corruptions. We are part, in short, of the same

movement of the material forces of history, and we face them with the same awareness that they are not eternal, not mythical, not natural, but historical.

Second, we differ fundamentally about our interpretation of the powers that work in history and about the way human self-realization in this world expresses itself; but our differences are structurally analogous. Furthermore, the analogies are closer than those between Christianity and other religions, or between Christianity and liberal idealism. They are closer than the analogy between Marxism and conventional social science on the one side, or revolutionary anarchism on the other. Christianity is analogous to Marxism in that it is not religious in the sense of contrasting the eternal with the temporal, or the orderly with the changing. Its theme is creation, redemption, and the hope of a coming kingdom. Christianity does not contrast the ideal with the real, the ought with the is, but responds to the incarnational judgment and grace of God in the midst of human events. Marxism is analogous to Christianity in that it is neither a science alone nor a revolutionary movement alone, but a combination of the two in a program in which human striving combines with objective historical conditions to liberate humanity from the powers that oppress it and establish a new creative harmony among free human beings, and between them and nature.

The analogies are close. It is just their closeness that often makes the Christian-Marxist relationship so polemical, and yet which drives us to borrow ideas back and forth and to formulate our policies with an eye on one another. Ours is a sibling conflict in the context of a sibling mutual dependence. The conditions of dialogue are forced upon us. We are exposed to one another, threatened and challenged by each other's fundamental beliefs, however we may conceal it by the way we categorize each other. We do learn from one another, though that learning may be indirect and unadmitted. Can we learn to respect each other as persons who live in response to the same reality differently conceived, driving us sometimes to common, sometimes to opposing policies and actions? This, if it is possible, builds the confidence needed for a real dialogue in which anything can happen: the recasting of the Christian ethic, of Marxist strategy and tactic, of our understanding of what is human, liberating, and just, of our concepts of the laws of history, or even of our fundamental Christian or Marxist beliefs.

The remainder of this essay is an attempt to contribute to such a dialogue. It explores two areas in which the present writer, as a Christian, owes a profound debt to Karl Marx and his followers, followed by a statement of some continuing questions which arise from this debt.

III. Economic Power and Promise

Marxism has made and still makes an indispensable contribution to Christian understanding of human economic behavior in a sinful world. It still challenges the church to develop a realistic and effective economic ethic for a society dominated by industrial-technological methods of production.

It is not that the Hebrew-Christian tradition has lacked an economic ethic. The covenant community of the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and of the church in the New, understood material possessions as among the gifts of God's mercy and grace, to be shared with the whole community. "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the Apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4:35). Economic prosperity was understood as a blessing, but the test of that blessing was the inclusion of the poor as full participants in the community as a whole. Private property could serve a relative purpose in protecting the poor, but the basic purpose of economic enterprise and the wealth it produced was understood to be witness to God's love and God's promise for the whole people of God, and for the world to which the church is sent with the message of God's reconciliation.

The church through the centuries has made valiant efforts to uphold this vision of material and spiritual community in its strong condemnation of avarice and greed, of usury and monopoly, and in its attempt to regulate the rising commercial civilization of the Middle Ages through a responsible guild system, and the establishment of just wages, prices, and profit. Contrary to the common misreading of Max Weber's thesis, Calvinism provided early modern Europe and America with a strong system of social controls over business practice, and of care for those in need.

The church's problem in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not a failure of ethics, but a failure of social analysis and a loss of social control over its members. In 1637 a Boston merchant could be condemned both by the civil authorities and by the church for taking 50 to 100 percent profit on the wares he sold, and excusing the action by claiming that he must make up on some items his losses by sea in the transportation of others. A century later this was no longer possible. Catholic and Protestant writers still attempted a moral casuistry for economic behavior, but it was in the form of advice governing the personal discipline of individuals involved. As late as the turn of the nineteenth century, Christian conscience and outraged public opinion combined to reform the poor laws of England providing everyone with basic economic security within the parish of residence. The result may have held back the industrial revolution somewhat, but it was disastrous for the British economy and in a few years was repealed. The teaching of the church, whether Protestant or Catholic, had failed to penetrate the dynamics of economic power linked with the industrial development, harnessed to the energy of coal and steam.

In this situation it is not surprising that some Christians capitulated, and that out of this arose the comfortable dichotomy between an ethic of individual character and obedience to the so-called objective laws of the economic system. Not surprisingly also, however, a Christian protest arose, which found itself more and more at odds with the basic trends of industrial capitalism and ever more radical in proposing alternatives. Fourier and Saint Simon both claimed their socialist Utopias to be a form of Christianity. Wilhelm Weitling, founder of the League of the Just, out of which grew the First International, was at the same time a revolutionary agitator and an evangelical Christian. By the mid-nineteenth century there were strong Christian socialist movements in both Britain and France. Even the humanist Robert Owen inherited many of his ideas from the seventeenth century Quaker John Bellers and his predecessor, the radical reformer Gerard Winstanley. In short, the Christian church was, despite its official incoherence, a breeding ground for socialist ideas from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, and the principal Utopian socialists which Marx encountered were so, directly or indirectly, out of Christian moral conviction. Furthermore, this trend continued into the twentieth century. Blumhardt in Germany, Herron and Rauschenbusch in the United States, and Kutter, Ragaz and the young Karl Barth in Switzerland were all supporters of social democracy in varying degrees of collaboration with the Marxist leaders of the movement. In Britain the Labor Party became an amalgam of Christian-Marxist and Fabian socialist elements. Among all of these, the revolutionary movement which Marx began was understood as a moral imperative, a power seeking to realize the justice and human community rooted in the demand and promise of the Christian gospel.

What was missing in this whole trend, however, was a rigorous analysis of the operation of corrupted human nature in the power dynamics of an expanding capitalist economy. Christian social theory has a long history of realism about political power, but, before Marx, very little about the economic forces also at work. This is what Marx has provided.

The stage, to be sure, had already been set by the liberal economics of Malthus and Ricardo. The science of economics had already been established as that of the relations between commodities and money rather than human beings themselves. The labor theory of value, originally a moral concept concerned with the right of the worker, had become a theory about commodity prices. Labor itself had become a commodity, the basic price of which was the minimum physical maintenance and reproduction of the worker, modified only by supply and demand. The inherent conflict of interest between worker and employer, in other words class war, and the drive of the system toward ever more intensive-exploitation of the worker, limited only by the starvation and therefore shortage of laborers--all this was present in the

science of liberal economics itself. Only there it was mixed with unbounded optimism about the progress of a developing economy as a whole toward ever-greater prosperity and possibilities for human life.

It was Marx who cut through this strange marriage of inhumanity with humanism, with his catastrophic analysis of the same economic forces which the liberal economists had defined. In so doing he developed an alternative, more realistic picture of the conflict of powers at work in the economic sphere. It was the picture of an idolatry, or, in his words, of fetishism, whereby human products--commodities, money, and capital--are given the status of absolute value and truth, which real human beings must serve and obey. He revealed the inhumanity of such a world, which affects both the exploiters and the exploited. He traced its conflicts to their ultimate destructive consequences, and raised in all seriousness the question: What power can save us from this demonic system? For Christians who took him seriously, he exposed both of their illusions: (a) that the exploitation and injustices of technological capitalistic expansion throughout the world can be defended or excused by the philanthropic use we make of their fruits, or (b) that the economic powers in our world can be brought to responsible service of the public good by ideals and moral persuasion. The full force of this last point did not really penetrate Christian ethical thinking until the depression of the 1930's, when Reinhold Niebuhr developed a realistic power analysis, both economic and political, as a guide to Christian action in the context of the judgment and the forgiving grace of God.

As strictly economic analysis, Marxism can, of course, be challenged. Most of his predictions concerning the fate of advanced capitalist economies have not come true, partly because of the creative response of those economies to the power struggle initiated by Marxist Social Democrats. Much has been made of the failure of socialist societies developed on Marx-Leninist principles to release the forces of human productivity or to eliminate economic greed and exploitation. It is not my purpose to discuss these issues here, but to make a more basic methodological point: Whatever its inadequacies as a total explanation of human behavior, Marxism still remains a reminder of and a tool for understanding the way in which human greed and lust for power express themselves in the powers and principalities of the economic sphere, distorting the human consciousness as well as social relationships in all their dimensions, including the religious dimension. The paradox of Marxist economics, which brings it so close to Christian thought, is that a ruthlessly objective analysis of human economic behavior in a sinful world is combined with an implicit confession of the underlying realities which will bring judgment upon that behavior. These realities include at least the following:

(1) Production is the reflection of human persons at labor and should be referred for its value to those persons. The economy is not a reality by itself; it is human beings at work. All that is produced, then, should enhance the dignity and freedom of that humanity.

(2) The essence of economic life is mutual sharing of the social product so that the needs of all are met, and no one uses property to exploit another.

(3) There is in truly human society no opposition of private interest to the public interest, of private goods to the common good. Each individual participates in the universal species humanity and embodies the universal in him- or herself.

One can raise questions about the adequacy or ultimacy of these realities. Christians would have a different list. Important for our purposes here, however, is that the way of moving which Marx demonstrated, between basic or ultimate realities and the dynamics of social relations in an alienated society, is profoundly analogous to the method of Christian social ethics. We are concerned not with principles which are standards for judging behavior, but with the dynamics of behavior itself in the light of the judgment and grace of God. Marxism brings us back to this understanding in the economic sphere.

IV. The Social Determination of Consciousness and the Problem of Ideology

Perhaps the deepest revolution which Marx began, and which Marxists continue to bring about in the world today, is critical understanding of the human consciousness in such a way as to lead not to positivism but to commitment and involvement with others as the context for understanding truth. Christians can only be profoundly grateful for Marx's doctrine of the social determination of the consciousness, including its extension to the criticism of religion. It reminds us of the determination of Christian consciousness in the response of faith to the revelation of God incarnate in the person of Christ, and of the ever-present danger that we may turn that revelation into the dogmatic servant of our own interests and our social orders.

The question of the objectivity of human reason is not new to the Western world or to the Christian church. When the apostle Paul spoke of Christ crucified as foolishness to the Greeks (I Corinthians 1:23) the issue was already joined. In the context of what relationship is knowledge, especially knowledge of human affairs and our place in them, reliable and true? Marx is heir to one line in this tradition, the line which, coming from the apostle Paul, is expressed in Augustine and in the Reformers, affirming that reason is not only weakened by the fall of humanity in Adam but corrupted, so that it expresses not general truth, but the interests of human beings in their self-centeredness, distorting knowledge, even the knowledge of God for their own purposes.

But Marx is also heir to the tradition of Enlightenment skepticism about knowledge which in a secular way reflects this Christian insight. Unlike Kant, he applied this skepticism also to the moral reason. Using but overturning Hegel, he used it to dismantle all talk about the work of the Spirit. He

restored to social philosophy the Christian insight about the corruption of reason, and became the nineteenth century's most consistent critic of what is known in theological terms as idolatry. His analysis of the fetishism of commodities, money, and capital is a prime example of this secularized prophecy. The economic determination of the human consciousness is a human fact. Religion, far too often, does function in the way which Marx described, as a substitute, illusory reality which hides from us the inhumanity of our actual condition. Ethical principles and systems to reinforce too much the organized dominance of those whose interests they serve. Marx used the term *ideology* in its pejorative meaning to describe this phenomenon. The question of the ideological character of the moral, religious, and secular knowledge we obtain by whatever method, is now a permanent issue in our search for reliable truth.

For Christians coping with the Marxist criticism of religion, this raises the central question of revelation. If consciousness is determined by social existence, how does God enter into this existence in such a way as to be its determinant? How do we discern the word of a God who speaks to us from beyond our self-justification, our search for security, our desire for power and wealth, or our yearning for fulfillment in any form, whether in this life or the next? How can the reality of God so grasp our reality that our lives in fact cannot be explained as a function of our production relations, but only in the light of the one who calls and saves us? These questions, posed by the challenge of Marx and the Marxist movement and deepened by the events of twentieth century history, underlie the theological revolution of this century. They are the reason why so many of this century's major theologians are post-Marxist. If there is a truth beyond ideology, if there is a reality to which we can respond, in whose light we understand the ideological character of our own response and can be changed and corrected thereby, that reality is not one which we can attain by our own struggle, however justified, or by the projection of our own ideals and hopes, however purified. A credible witness to the God in whom we believe will be demonstrated by the way in which we are judged, changed, and brought to new life in Him. The Marxist challenge at this point is continually searching and purifying the church.

This having been said, the question can be turned around. Ideology has come to have, in both Marxist and Christian circles, a positive meaning as the form of theoretical understanding which guides human practice to realize hopes and discern responsibility in society. It is understood as being relative, partial, and in some ways biased, as the self-understanding of one class or social group. It is at the same time necessary and good as a way by which that group understands and guides its action to realize true humanity for all. This paradox, that ideology is necessary and inevitable given the social context of thought, and that it is at that same time relative and subject to correction, is an issue with which both Christians and Marxists wrestle.

For Christians, this means to raise in all seriousness, and in ever new ways, the ecumenical question, concerning mutual correction among believers in different cultures, classes, and experiences as they seek to discern, interpret, and actively respond to the word and will of God together. In this connection some speak of "the hermeneutical privilege of the poor" as the social context in which the Word is most truly understood. Others speak of the experience of an oppressed race, of a subject culture, or of innocent suffering. The context is of course the struggle of the Christian community to understand its own Gospel as a saving message for the world. But the lasting contribution of Marxism has been to remind us forcefully of what we should have known by participation in the servanthood and suffering of Christ, that in God's revelation of justice and truth to the whole community, all our ideologies need the correction and guidance of the poor, the oppressed, and the disabled.

V. Some Issues at Stake Between us

In this paper so far I have deliberately refrained from drawing sharp issues. They are, however, present in what has been discussed. Let me conclude by mentioning a few of them.

1. How is the alienating influence of economic power related to other powers which dominate and distort human life in the late twentieth century? Christians have developed over the centuries a sophisticated political ethic in this connection, the modern fruit of which is an understanding both of the dignity and the limitations of the governmental power and function. At the same time we have often failed to grasp the way in which economic power distorts and uses political power. Am I correct in noting that Marxists in many cases have the reverse problem? The doctrine set forth by Marx that the state is nothing but the instrument of the dominant economic power in society tempts one not to deal with the problem of political power as such. This, as I understand it, was the burden of Professor Stojanovic's paper for the conference at Weggis last year. How do these two forms of power interact, and how might they balance each other in the interest of justice?

2. In the light of this question, the further issue arises of the proper form of control over the forces of private interest and greed for the public good, of the proper distribution of the social product, of the proper incentive for economic development, and the proper relation between property and personal freedom. In posing this question, I deliberately avoid using the words *socialism* and *capitalism* in order to probe the issue behind those words. Within societies which carry both labels, the same set of questions arises.

3. The question of a proper understanding of the non-human environment in relation to human freedom, human labor, and human goals is one which poses a central challenge to the whole Western historical tradition, in which both Christianity and Marxism are embedded. Whatever potential there may

now be in the Japanese or Chinese economy, the drive to exploit nature's resources and subject it to technological control for human purposes is peculiarly rooted in Western Europe and America. Both Christianity and Marxism have encouraged it. What is our understanding of the limits of this exploitation, of the proper interaction of human and non-human nature, and how do we derive this understanding from our fundamental perspectives?

4. The question of the roots of human alienation, the drive toward exploitation, and the power conflict which results remains for both Christians and Marxists. Policy, in an ongoing corrupt world, in the light of the future promise given us however we express it, needs more careful development than either side has given it so far. We have not yet found the social conditions which will effectively change human nature. We know, however, that what Christians name sin can be controlled, and society can be moved toward justice and humanity, by right social action. How should we balance freedom with social control so as to minimize human alienation?

5. The question of a source of truth and authority which transcends our interests, and the social determinisms within which we think, which is capable of correcting and transforming us, of judging and redeeming us, and of giving us hope, is a common one for Christians and Marxists. We believe together that social reality in fact determines our consciousness and claims our loyalty. We are profoundly at odds about what that social reality is. For Marxists it must be in some way an expression of the universally human in the solidarity of the class which embodies that humanity. For Christians, it is first of all the relation established between God and his people in Jesus Christ, expressed in his community the church, but for the whole world. In both cases the question must be asked how the transcendence of this reality over the actual behavior of Marxists and Christians operates. What authority do we really acknowledge, and how does it determine and correct us?

6. Flowing from this is the question: What constitutes true humanity? The covenantal and Christocentric model of the Hebrew-Christian tradition is essentially relational. Human beings are constituted as persons by the creative and redemptive act of God and find life and freedom through that relationship. Analogously, persons in relation limit and give life to each other, and this limiting interaction is in its essence gracious and liberating. The problem of the conflict between individual and community is never absent from Christian thought and action; it is redeemed and made creative by the promise of God. For Marx such language was intolerable. The self-creation of human beings through their labor was a fundamental doctrine. The universalization of each individual by participation in the species, and the complete lack of tension between the two is fundamental to his understanding of Communism. Striving toward as yet unconceived goals of human power and self-expression has been a guiding force in

the development of socialist societies. There are, of course, many modifications on both sides, and not all either Christians or Marxists would agree with the dichotomy I have drawn. The question remains for us, however: How is the hope of the kingdom of God related to the hope for a classless society?

1. I mean by Church all the organized manifestations of Christianity, from the ancient liturgies and hierarchies of the Eastern Orthodoxy through the formal authoritarian structure of the Roman Catholic Church and the representative organization of Protestant denominations, to the vast array of relatively independent congregations of varying theological emphases. I mean by Party all political organizations which profess allegiance to Marxist and Leninist principles and try to realize them in policy and action.

2. "The Christian and the Marxist: A Marxist View of Dialogue" in *Background Information*, No. 39, April 1968.

3. "Socio-Political Theses for Christian-Marxist Dialogue", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Winter 1978), pp. 87-99.

4. *Christians and Marxists*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1976, p. 29.

5. Ibid. P. 16

6. *The Ideological Weapons of Death: A Theological Critique of Capitalism*. Maryknoll, New York, 1986.