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Contribution to the Christian -- Marxist Dialogue

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MODERN SOCIETY AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTIES
CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHRISTIAN—MARXIST DIALOGUE

By Zdenko Roter

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The problem of religious liberties in modern and postmodern societies is certainly expressed differently and more radically than in previous societies. Religious liberty as it is accepted today was of no use to the pre—technological, pre—industrial, and primarily rural civilizations. Such civilization neither accepted it nor desired it. Modern concepts of religious liberties for which the majority of humankind opted underline human rights as individual and personal as well as the rights of social groups, so that according to the dictate and in accord with one's conscience persons freely choose this or that religious or non—religious worldview. Such freely chosen convictions can be publicly expressed without impediment and without fear. For the purpose of realizing their goals they are able to freely associate and organize. The only limits to these rights can be only the rights of those whose attitudes and thoughts are different. In other words, the limits of religious liberties of one person can only be the liberty of others, of those who differ. Government and public institutions, regardless whether they can be described as bourgeois, socialist, neocapitalist, or non—aligned are obligated not only constitutionally to guarantee such liberties but also to make them attainable in practice and to defend them, should that be needed. This must be emphasized because in our time the main problem is not to what degree a state has legally guaranteed religious liberties, but to what degree the state is willing and able to fully provide the opportunity to practice these declared religious liberties. This applies primarily to the majority of the countries of Europe, North and South America in which the Christian civilization is dominant. An analysis of the constitutional regulations of the U.S.S.R. and other Eastern European countries would show, however, that the concept of religious liberty as defined has not been adequately and completely enunciated. Such limitations also exists in countries of the Islamic civilization in which Islam is constitutionally designated as the state or national religion. If there are limitations of religious liberties on part of the state these must be
very precisely formulated and enacted only in the interest of the common good (bonum comune)
and for the advance of the people, the state, and the citizens.

Sociological evidence shows that the so-called folk religions in primal or primitive
societies were somehow the possession and an exclusive privilege of well defined ethnic
communities. These communities jealously guarded their gods from other communities. In this
manner they accomplished the complete identification of their ethnic and religious community;
certain social institutions only begin to develop in these societies. In the Middle Ages, at least in
Europe, the so-called sociological type of Christianity came to full expression according to the
principle cuius regio eius religio. Societies and states of that time used numerous mechanisms of
formal and informal social control over social groups and individuals to determine automatically a
certain religious and ecclesiastic affiliation. These were determined for each person either by birth
or by parental decision as was the case with the variety of Protestants since the second half of the
sixteenth century. Those were already the so-called universal religions, which, in distinction from
the folk religions, in accordance to criteria established by social sciences, were characterized by an
expansionist, missionary orientation rather than a jealous guarding of their gods.

The transition, the development of the industrial civilization (of bourgeois and later
socialist type) brought with them great turnarounds and profound changes in regard to the content
of religious liberties as components of the totality of human rights. Because of the irresistible
expansion of all forms of individual and personal human liberties, which is manifested also in the
mass participation of all social classes and strata in politics, economy, and culture, there is an
inevitable retreat and marginalization of systems of open repression, brute force, and terrorism. But
parallel with it is the simultaneous development of centers of power on the national and
international level which develop new, even more pernicious mechanisms of hidden, indirect
repression, especially the very elaborate manipulations with human needs and rights. This is the
so-called system of the "fishermen of human souls." One should never forget this phenomenon
when one polemizes, dialogues or analyzes this most important theme of human rights, of the
rights of the human being as an individual and a person.

In the modern and postmodern society the national or multinational state is definitively
constituted and developed as the fundamental form of the existence and development of human
communities. This state definitively (and without remnants, despite the phenomenon of the so-
called civil society as the alternative to state monopoly) decides the basic conditions of the limits
of being human as a citizen. Civil society as an alternative form of human community breaks
through into life and public awareness with great difficulty and remains, earlier or later, in a
subordinate position to the state. Also in respect to religious liberties the state appears both as the
decisive constant and the simultaneous variable.

Due to the high degree of the institutionalization of all human (and religious) activities
for the space and content of religious liberties the decisive factor becomes and remains the
relationship between the state and the church, namely between the state and all religious
organizations from the cult, the sect, and the denomination to the church. A sociological approach
to the problem of religious freedoms requires and makes possible a scholarly analysis of these
freedoms with the help of models of the relationship between the state and religious organizations.

In my earlier investigations I proposed to the scholarly community a theoretical and
empirical analytic model, which consists of four clear types of the relationship between the state
and the religious organization.

1. The first is the type of state religious organization (church). The essential characteristic
of mutual relations in this type consists primarily in the acceptance, support, and legal
legitimation by the state of only a single religious teaching, only one, selected religious
organization. On the other hand, such a selected and by the state preferred religious organization,
determines by means of its definitions and teachings, what is evil, mistaken, good, bad in accord
with norms and values of the state. G. Mensching stated convincingly that the relationships
between the state and the church are most intimate when a certain state raises a certain church to
the level of state religion and when such a state religion divinizes the state. The social and political
might of the state and the church are joined, adapted, and coordinated in such cases. By mutual
agreement they formulate the patterns of thinking and behaving of citizens. In this type of
relationship between the state and the religious organization, religious liberties, as we described
them at the outset of the article, are basically limited. The form of religious thought and behavior
are determined externally without regard to the individual’s personal, internal views and attitudes.
There is freedom for only one religious orientation; all others are either prohibited or somehow
degraded. There is no freedom for the non—religious orientation. In the European and American
social arena this type of relations belongs to the past rather than the present. Currently only the
Islamic states are characterized by and closely approximate the ideals of this type.

2. The second type is the one in which the state supports and prefers religion as such.
Historically this type follows chronologically the first type. According to this type the state is
positively inclined toward all active religions, religious groups, and churches. However, its
benevolence, and sympathy toward religion as such the state can realize only by establishing
constitutionally the principle of separation of church and state. Thereby the state decides in favor of
religious pluralism. The religious lifestyle is declared as being desirable and supported by the state.
When we compare this type with the first type we must affirm that it is an advance over the first one since it broadens the field of religious liberties. Still, even this type, retains limits and contradictions in the functioning of religious liberty. First comes the question whether the state can be really supportive of all religious groups equally no matter what their strength, size, and composition. Sociological evidence points to the conclusion that the sympathy of the state, despite declared equality, is still inclined in favor of the more powerful, influential, and thereby more useful religious organizations (the pragmatism of the modern state is here very obvious). Sociological evidence also illustrates that such a state is more or less negatively disposed toward all forms of non-religious orientations, especially toward theoretical atheism, regardless whether it directly represses the non-religious orientation or whether indirectly the state contributes to the creation of a mass public sentiment that atheist thought is undesirable. I believe that this constitutes an essential limitation upon religious liberty in the modern sense of the word.

3. The third type is when the state rejects religion as such. This type is diametrically opposed to the type just described. The state, more or less openly, proclaims that religious thinking and behavior are undesirable or even forbidden. But usually it proclaims that non-religious formulations are desirable, supported or even mandatory. Sometimes it proclaims as desirable the cult of the state and its leaders. There is a variety by which the state ways of rejecting or removes the religious elements, encompassing legal prohibitions or imposing extreme or moderate government restrictions of religious manifestations thus removing them from the public into the entirely private spheres of life. It is clear that in this kind of state there is no religious liberty or, at least, that religious liberties are fundamentally restricted or fettered. It is also clear that one can not determine concretely whether a state follows this model primarily by means of a comparative analysis of its constitutional i.e. legal framework. Modern states, namely, are fairly reluctant to state any limitations of human, including religious liberties in their constitutions. An analysis of laws of “lower” rank may prove to be more useful. But only by an analysis of the behavior and actions of government agents and of other institutions can one see the real situation. A very successful sociological criterion for such an analysis can be the possibility or impossibility of social, economic, and particularly political advance of citizens regardless of their religious or non-religious convictions and behavior.

Sociological investigations show that countries which have more or less explicitly rejected the religious orientation, have a parallel manifestation of various forms of so-called secular religions, including the direct deification of the state, the cult of their leaders by means of carefully spelled out ceremonies of their adoration and veneration, and the religionization of the ideology of political parties or of other associations. I do not mean here the so-called civil religion as described
by Robert Bellah. I am rather pointing to the artificial formation, maintenance, and support of only a single ideological system as a religious one, starting with “holy” books and “prophets” to ceremonies with pronounced religious symbols. The Nazi and Stalinist societies are excellent examples of this type.

4. The fourth type is the one in which the state is neutral and indifferent toward religion. I defined this type in my earlier works as being "historically—potential," namely a type which we can only discern, prognosticate, and also hope for as a referential frame, which could broaden the space of religious liberties to unimaginable extents. It should make no difference to the state whether and how people believe or do not believe. Decisions about it, without exceptions, should be in the hands, conscience, and hearts of people, human beings as individuals and persons and as members of various social groups. The state would be neither enthusiastic nor unenthusiastic about religious or non—religious orientations; neither prohibit nor limit them, nor would it be inclined or disinclined toward them. The state (or the wielders of power in the state) would consciously step back from any mixing or involvement in religious or non—religious convictions and from any conscious or unconscious manipulation of these convictions. Certainly, one of the basic conditions for the realization of such behavior by the state and its leaders is also the explicit willingness and attitude by religious organizations to reject any external preference of their teachings and specifically any involvement and participation in political processes. Religious organizations would reject the involvement in public governing as well as from exercising any influence upon their membership as to how they are to act in political life. Sociological analysis points to certain changes in modern and postmodern societies, which may be indicators of the creation of broader social conditions for the promotion of this fourth type, which I called earlier, a "positive utopia." One of these conditions could certainly be the process of the socialization of the state. Sociological analysis of this process in various societies of the contemporary world could certainly provide a more exact answer to the question whether and to what degree there may be a transfer of political power to citizens as such. The above mentioned concept of civil society as an alternative to the state can without any doubt be considered as a conscious activity of people and a significant theoretical reflection about this process.

In my opinion the key question in this regard is the question of social institutions and their role in modern society. Through important the state is only one of those institutions. Another one is the church which is the most developed form of a religious organization. Social institutions (in the sociological sense of the word) are certainly the result of “natural” development of human society, but they are somehow, also in a certain respect also an alienated form of human activity. They were created “by human hand” and somehow serve human interests because they
regulate relations between people. At the same time they also fetter and limit the possibilities of further spontaneous human action. Social institutions are in principle rigid. They are very suspicious toward any innovation and always press like a nightmare upon an individual human being. Social institutions likewise, with great difficulty and with great delay, adapt to social changes. Institutions tolerate human spontaneity with difficulty, because spontaneity in principle go beyond the limits of institutionalized human relations. However, modern, and even more so postmodern society is marked by the awakening of spontaneity, that which is humanly impulsive yet meaningful behavior and activity. This awakening is displayed in many instances of popular protest, contesting, and refusal to cooperate both within as well as against institutions. Sociological evidence points to these protests within religious organizations, political parties, families, the state, and specifically also within the Communist movement and parties. Human enthusiasm and the favoring of spontaneity, of meaningful impulsiveness (one might say, as an alternative to the norms and standards of institutions) in principle does not mean choosing anarchy. Thoroughful impulsiveness means first of all that the person alone select ways and means of achieving one’s concepts according to the criteria of one’s own conscience. Thus the only reasonable limit are the ways and means of other people who seek to realize their own concepts. These ways and means must be consciously and conscientiously mutually adapted and coordinated and thereby seek to achieve a freely coordinated activity for the attainment of joint goals and values. These foster development and progress in the accomplishment of social justice and mutual respect.

If we prognosticate that the future development of society will include on one hand institutional retreat but the advance and broadening of the spontaneous then we can prognosticate certain possibilities for expanding the area of religious liberties. Until now the relationship between society and religion had been expressed primarily and traditionally as the relationship between the state and the religious organization. Under the conditions of the advance of the spontaneity this traditional relationship of church and state will increasingly retreat and be abrogated. It will simply lose its meaning. Again, it seems to me that this is a utopia. But the principle of utopia is one of the foundations which gives meaning to our life. The principle of utopia—and the principle of hope which is related to it (Ernst Bloch)—are the one’s which give strength, happiness, and satisfaction to many people, to be able to see opportunities for the future in the troubles of daily life and to be able to work for the future. Utopia is to be able to see that kind of future, which would provide greater human possibilities and space, one where in daily life they would realize all their dreams. Thus we can say with great certainty that in a future spontaneous society there will be a fuller measure of religious liberties. That will be a freedom
like an ocean without shores, without present limits. The only limit, which at the same time is also the most open horizon, would be another human being rather than regulations, norms, and reflections which are prescribed by social institutions. Such hope is finally based also on the fact that previous human developments, among them religious liberty, were constantly enlarged and extended beyond established limits.

The theme of religious liberties is very important also for socialist societies, which can certainly be classified as modern. However, we must state at the outset, that socialist states as we know them in their empirical reality have not yet passed their historical test in regard to religious freedoms. The space for these freedoms is pretty closed, limited, and full of obstacles. There were and still are practices which point to the existence of real religious persecutions. The same situation exists also on the “other side.” Many religious organization show in reality that they did not transcend many stereotypes about socialism, and even more so about Marxism and communism, toward which their attitudes range from distrust and indecisiveness to opposition. Certainly there are differences among socialist countries as well as among religious organizations. My basic interpretative hypothesis for the religious situation in socialist countries is that in regard to religious life there is the decisive intervention of **modus operandi,** namely, the concrete activity and behavior of both the state and the religious organization. This should not be interpreted as an attempt to balance the responsibility of each for the situation with which we surely cannot be satisfied. The concept of a balanced responsibility is directly contradictory to my statements above by which I incontestably affirmed that the state, especially the socialist states, has achieved the greatest possible concentration of social and political power, and this directly affects the limits of religious freedoms.

It is not due to some patriotic emotions or some personal conformity that leads me to assert that a comparative analysis shows that the amount of religious freedom is greater in Yugoslavia than in the U.S.S.R. and other Eastern European countries. Thereby I do not wish to negate that even in Yugoslavia in this respect there are a number of open themes and questionable behavior which unjustifiably limits religious liberties.

It is not the purpose of this article to specifically analyze the religious situation in Yugoslavia yet as an illustration, a few key issues can be identified. The leading role of the League of Communists is maintained, at least for the time being, by means of a political monopoly by this party. This restricts the social and political advancement of citizens who are not party members. Empirical investigations have shown limitations of religious freedoms especially in the advancement in the political careers of believers, in the upbringing and education, in the Yugoslav People’s Army, and in the mass media. Marxism still functions as a preferred ideology; in the
promotion of this goal sometimes all means seem acceptable. Limitations have been played upon
the traditional charitable activities of religious organizations. And there are certain undefined areas,
the so-called "mixing of religion into politics" for which the professional leadership of the
churches is more or less accused.

Without going into a detailed and concrete analysis of the religious situation in socialist
countries I must state that in those countries religious liberties will continue to be restricted as
long as they retain their preference for the so-called Bolshevik (Leninist) model of social
organization and rule. As Leninist I consider that model, which is based on the principle of the
obligatory political, economic, cultural and ideological monolithism and dictation, based on the
principles of democratic centralism (not only of the party but also of society), on the concept of an
increasing class struggle within socialism, and clearly also on the axiomatic assertion that the
struggle for the abolition of religion is the conditio sine qua non of the struggle for a socialist,
humanistic society. In the U.S.S.R. Gorbachev's perestroika certainly facilitates the evolution of
this model. However, already in the 1950s Yugoslavia abandoned this model with the help of the
concept of socialist selfmanagement. Nevertheless one must admit that even in Yugoslavia certain
components of that model still continue to act either as a conscious orientation or as a tradition
which is difficult to uproot. This phenomenon can be observed in the U.S.S.R. and in other
countries of "real socialism," despite perestroika and other visible changes. It survives there for the
very same reasons as it does in Yugoslavia.

Without attempting a concrete analysis of activities of various religious organizations we
must also conclude that conflicts between socialist states and religious organizations will continue
as long as these organization keep reproducing the prestige and the power of the tradition of
militant anti-communism, antisocialism, and of an exclusivist anthropological worldview. When
the prevalent conviction and deliberation in religious organizations continues to hold that the
social order and organization can be just only if it is based on religious values, they will continue
to regenerate the tradition of spiritual and religious totalitarianism.

I am concluding these thoughts with the expression of my deep conviction both as a man
and as a sociologist, that in the very structure of the modern and postmodern society (whether of
the “Western” or “Eastern” variant) many social, political, cultural, and ideological mechanisms are
at work, which limit human freedoms and the full realization of all recognized and known human
rights, among them also religious. The humanistic convictions is that in the contemporary world
peace is indivisible. Therefore we cannot tolerate or be indifferent to wars or other forms a ruthless
physical violence in one part of the world and at the same time be enthusiastic promoters of peace
in other parts of this interdependent world. The same humanistic conviction ought to hold sway in

respect to human freedoms. They too, cannot be divided. We cannot be enthusiastic and promote, for instance, economic or political freedoms on one side while on the other be indifferent to cultural, national, or religious unfreedom. Likewise we cannot defend religious or cultural rights and be indifferent to the flagrant infringement of economic or political rights of people. And so forth.

The defense of full human liberties and rights will be successful only when all dimensions of liberty, its creation in all parts of the world will be promoted by all people regardless of their worldviews or (non)religious personal orientation and organizational affiliation or membership. The paths for the creation of such a humanistic project are difficult. One among them is certainly the unconditional mutual respect of people regardless of their worldviews, and one might add, having a fanatical love for those who are different. The dialogue between Christians and Marxists is a very appropriate referential framework for such efforts.

Translated from Serbo—Croatian
by Dr. Paul Mojzes
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1 How difficult it is to maintain this balance by the state toward religious pluralism is obvious also in the U.S.A. in its relation toward Catholics, Protestants, and Jews as the largest and most influential among religious organizations.

2 Earlier sociological literature mentions Nazi Germany and the cult of Hitler as a pure historical example. The same is the case of the practice of socialist states of Eastern Europe and particularly of Albania, which has simply legally prohibited all religions.

3 This criterion is being applied in our empirical sociological research in Yugoslavia.

4 Namely, real civil religion is not "reserved" only for the state and society which reject traditional religions but is viewed as an "alternative religion" which appears in all modern and postmodern societies.

5 In my previous publications I called these changes "social conditions which are alive," identified them concretely and even quantified them.

6 [Translator's note: the key term which Roter uses is proizvoljno which connotes a voluntary decision for which the self may not wish to account to anyone. The closest synonyms may be, freely selected, arbitrary, willful, unpremeditated, spontaneous. The antonym would be predetermined or deliberate. I have chosen "impulsive" as the closest in meaning.]
Both the state and the church have the responsibility for their actions and have no rights to justify their actions by the blaming the behavior of "the other side."

I am certainly among those who distinguish between Leninism and Stalinism. However, I believe that there are structural limits of freedom even in Lenin's conceptualizations. In my opinion the recent time period more or less requires transcending Lenin's theorizing.

[Translator's note: Roter here uses the coinage dirigizam, which comes from the term dirigirati, to conduct, as in an orchestra, namely to dictate from the top what the entire group must do.]