



Marxism

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One may approach radical Marxist theory and its relationship to theology from two sides—the extensive *engagements with* theology by Marxists, especially in Europe and Russia, and the influence of Marxism *on* theology. Here I opt for the latter approach, which covers four types of engagement with Marxism by theologians and religiously committed people, designations which will guide this discussion: (1) those who reject Marxism and socialism as antithetically *opposed* to religion; (2) those who *use* Marxist economic and social analysis to identify problems, but keep the solution for religion; (3) those who see a *fusion* between the two; and (4) those who take a more dialectical approach in which Marxism and theology are vigorous but distinct interlocutors.

OPPOSITION

The first group, which rejects Marxism, may appear in many forms. The most obvious is in the decrying of “atheistic communism” in the former Soviet Union and currently in China. But we also see it in the mass executions of communists by Muslim forces, whether in Iran or in Indonesia. And we see it in the foreign policy of some states that claim to be Christian. However, I am interested in a subtler version, relating to Roman Catholic Social Teaching.

Specifically, I refer to the tradition which begins on May 15, 1891, when Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*. Subtitled “On Capital and Labor,” *Rerum Novarum* is counted one of the most significant statements made by a pope. Many more followed: *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931); *Mater et Magistra*

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(1961); *Pacem in Terris* (1963); *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes* (conciliar documents from Vatican II, 1965); *Populorum Progressio* (1967); *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971); *Laborem Exercens* (1981); *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987); *Centesimus Annus* (1991); *Evangelium Vitae* (1995); and *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). The dates of their promulgation are significant: the statements were made in periods of social and economic unrest, particularly labour unrest with a distinctly socialist tinge. But what also ties these together is a thread of strong opposition to communism.

Specifically, in *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII took aim at socialism, composing the text as a response to the appeal of socialism to the working class. He states that

To remedy these wrongs the socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies. They hold that by thus transferring property from private individuals to the community, the present mischievous state of things will be set to rights, inasmuch as each citizen will then get his fair share of whatever there is to enjoy. But their contentions are so clearly powerless to end the controversy that were they carried into effect the working man himself would be among the first to suffer. They are, moreover, emphatically unjust, for they would rob the lawful possessor, distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community.¹

But What Did Leo XIII Mean by Socialism? Did He Mean Simply Hard-Line and Atheistic Communism or All Types of Socialism?

Forty years later, Pope Pius IX sought to clarify matters regarding the definition of socialism in *Quadragesimo Anno*. Even the gentlest type of socialism, Pius concluded, has nothing in common with the church: "Whether considered as a doctrine, or an historical fact, or a movement, Socialism, if it remains truly Socialism, even after it has yielded to truth and justice on the points which we have mentioned, cannot be reconciled with the teachings of the Catholic Church because its concept of society itself is utterly foreign to Christian truth."² The message is that despite class conflict, exploitation of workers, concentration of capital in the hands of a few, and the organisation of workers in trade unions, Roman Catholic social thought is resolutely opposed to socialism of any hue. As such, Roman Catholic Social Teaching seeks to prevent the appeal of socialism to the working class by staking the ground as an either-or opposition. Not so much a third way, Roman Catholic Social Teaching sides firmly with capitalism, albeit humanised by the church.

As an aside, I should say that many Marxists have taken a similar position, although in reverse. They have found religious institutions such as the church to be inherently reactionary, supporting whatever tyrant, despot, or unjust economic system there might be—so long as the institution in question claimed approval from the tyrant. But a more nuanced approach may be found with

Friedrich Engels. He grew up as a devout Reformed Christian, knowing his Bible well and attending church faithfully. However, he underwent a painful process of losing his faith, first in response to new directions in knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century (in philosophy, science, and biblical interpretation) and then with his discovery of communism. The two, he felt, were incompatible, even though he kept a lifelong interest in biblical and religious matters.³

LIMITED ENGAGEMENT

The remaining three categories all involve some level of engagement with Marxism. Before proceeding, we must deal with a preliminary question: why would theologians or indeed religious people be interested in Marxism? Is it not an atheistic creed, focusing on material reality and denying the existence any other world in which God or the gods may reside? And does not Marxism see religion and its institutions as inherently reactionary?

This common caricature of Marxism needs to be emphatically laid to rest. Theoretically, a Marxist approach does not necessitate atheism. The historical fact that many Marxists have been and are atheists does not mean that atheism is a Marxist absolute. It makes sense that a Marxist might remain sceptical of religion, even on a metaphysical level, since a properly materialist approach (which is dialectical) should be able to account for what is not materialist. And practically Marxists and religious people *have* worked together in countless situations; they both share—though often for different reasons—an awareness that a world of exploitation should be overcome for the sake of a more fair and just world.

I turn now to the second approach, which involves making a limited use of Marxist analysis, seeking to contain its usefulness to the zone of description rather than prescription.⁴ A good example is provided by the Latin American liberation theologians—of both Protestant and Roman Catholic varieties—in their efforts to understand in a new way the social and economic problems in their part of the world. They did so by deploying Marxist analyses of capitalism and colonialism, with a focus on systemic disparities, exploitation, expropriation, class conflict, and ideology.⁵

In this way, the different economic policies of the centuries since colonisation made sense. Initially, Latin America was seen as a source of raw materials for European industries, which would then sell the finished products back to the captive markets of the colonies. This was followed by drives to independence from colonial masters and the consequent desire to emulate the United States, which seemed to have followed a similar path. The next phase was the dominance of a development model, according to which “undeveloped” economies such as those in Latin America would follow the same path as “developed” economies in order to catch up. By contrast and in light of Marxist approaches, liberation theologians argued that each phase was structurally geared to keep their economies dependent upon and subordinate to the centres of global capitalism in the northern half of the globe.

The situation offered a clear benefit to, for example, the political and economic ruling classes of Latin America, who had vested interests in keeping the system running as it was. The liberation theologians also argued that the churches had similarly, by and large, made a pact with the great idols—foreign debt, gross domestic product, current account balance, and growth by appealing to the status quo—in return for favourable treatment.⁶

This dabbling in Marxist analysis was enough to send the Roman Catholic hierarchy into a frenzy. This was in part due to the cosy arrangements honed over centuries with the ruling class and also in part due to the trenchant resistance to the appeal of Marxism noted earlier. It seemed to those in lofty positions of power that some theologians, religious orders, and priests had sided with the many Marxist revolutionary movements active in Latin America at the time. In particular, the successful revolution in Cuba some years before was seared into their memories. As for the Roman Catholic Church itself, liberation theology was seen as a way of turning the spiritual truths of Christianity into materialist categories. Thus, orthodoxy was replaced with orthopraxis, political messianism dominated, and class struggle challenged the hierarchy of the church.⁷

However, what this criticism missed was the very partial and limited engagement with Marxism by liberation theologians. They clearly kept their distance from Marxism, preferring to focus on the church's traditional teachings and the Bible to make their arguments.⁸ The point they wanted to make was that the apparently radical positions they took actually arise from within the teachings of the church. Indeed, one can come to the insights of liberation theology by following the Bible and the Christian tradition. If these are in congruence with Marxism, then Marxism is heir to the same tradition.⁹

Above all, they sought to deploy an ontological reserve. Mild types of Marxist analyses might be fine for interpreting the economic and social ills of Latin America, with a focus on “the poor” rather than class. But Marxism could not offer a solution. For that theology is far better, so much so that “revolution” and “liberation” themselves were understood in theological senses. Only God can provide true liberation, for society, economy, and the individual. To offer any other solution would be to fall into idolatry, whether of a creed, a person, or a collective agent of history. Without a robust form of ontological transcendence, idolatry lies waiting to seize the unwary.

FUSION

A third group takes the next step and seeks to fuse Marxism and Christianity. This theology arises out of what may be called the Christian revolutionary tradition, which was first laid out by Karl Kautsky.¹⁰ Let us remain with liberation theology for a moment, since here we find that a significant number of individuals joined revolutionary movements, who believed, as J. Guadalupe Carney put it, “To be a Christian is to be a revolutionary.”¹¹

Perhaps one of the most interesting individuals with this type of approach is Camilo Torres Restrepo, who joined the revolutionary peasant movement in Colombia.¹² Torres may have been killed in 1966 in his first engagement with the National Liberation Army of Colombia (ELN), but his example became a lightning rod for others to join such movements. As a priest, theologian, and guerrilla, Torres saw his religious faith lead naturally to revolutionary practice. After theological study in Belgium and a brief period as sociology lecturer, his activism among the poor indicated the path he was to take. In 1965 he joined the ELN.

Within Torres' example we see a demonstration of a path which turns around the questions of violence, the nature of the Christian "call" to a vocation, and the relationship between theology and revolution. Here we should underscore that Torres did not undergo a process of converting from Christianity to Marxist activism; rather, the latter grew out of the former. For Torres, the Bible is central, as a Christian expression. Luke 12:49 and 51 were crucial: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Or from Matthew 10:34 and 38–39: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ... and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

In our time, of course, Torres would have been quickly labelled as a terrorist, as indeed would Jesus. It is worth noting that the ELN, founded in 1964, has recently been listed more as a terrorist organisation by the US State Department and the European Union. Yet ELN continues, with Torres an official martyr and other priests since him joining the movement. The most notable was Father Manuel Pérez, or "El Cura Pérez," the leader in the 1970s and 1980s. Pérez was deeply influential in shaping the movement's blending of Marxism and liberation theology in its ideology and practical focus on eliminating systematic corruption and poverty.

DIALECTICS AND TRANSLATION

The fourth and final approach is perhaps the most interesting. Seeking neither a selective engagement nor a complete fusion of horizons, they take what may be called a *dialectical* or *translational* approach. Here we must be clear that Marxism and the radical tradition of Christianity have much in common, and they seek freedom from the slavery of wage labour and exploitation. Yet they cannot be completely fused with one another. Many of the key ideas may be translated into one another, such as miracle (or grace) and revolution, eschatology and history, church and party, idolatry and fetishism, the Gospel (*evangelion*) and the ideology of the party, ontological transcendence and temporal transcendence, the delay of the *parousia* and the designation of socialism as the

transitional phase to communism, the myth of salvation history and political myth, the worship of the saviour and the veneration of the revolutionary leader.

At the same time, Christian theology and Marxism do not speak the same language. As with any translation, one finds that something is left over with each term, a dimension that cannot be rendered in another language. This resistance means that one must move constantly back and forth, seeking ever new angles on how such a translation may be made. In other words, the relationship between theology and Marxism is a dialectical process that never quite comes to rest. Theology has a distinct contribution to make that is not found in Marxism and the same applies in reverse, but the search for those contributions is an ongoing process.

One perhaps unexpected figure representing this approach is Reformed biblical theologian and member of the Dutch communist party, Dick Boer. He argues that the mainstream of accepted biblical interpretation—*regula fidei* (the rule of faith)—is the key to understanding both the Bible message and, as a consequence, the church's message as well. Boer does not seek a marginal position in his interpretation of scripture simply to challenge a conservative or traditional approach. Instead, he argues that the canonical message is one of liberation, led by a liberator God.¹³

While this might seem to be a fairly straightforward shift in biblical interpretation from a liberation theologian, Boer offers one crucial difference. Namely, Boer does not simply point towards or advocate revolution but is far more interested in what happens after the revolution, after socialism has seized power. This Boer calls the “real Israel” (a play on “really existing socialism”), or, as Brecht puts it, this is the time of “travails of the plateau.” This is to say, we have climbed the mountain and are now on the plateau, where the real work begins.

As Lenin and Mao said repeatedly, winning a revolution is relatively easy, but infinitely more complex is the task of actual construction. This is when many mistakes are made and when the project must be reshaped in light of unexpected developments. For Boer, this is the story of the “real Israel,” which also makes many mistakes and does not live up to the expectations as they are provided in the Torah. Indeed, many would suggest that it had “failed,” especially in light of its sorry end. Too soon did Israel fall under the sway of imperial powers of the first millennium BCE, becoming a mere provincial plaything of Persians, Greeks, and Romans. In response to such verdicts of failure, we should point out that any liberating project which achieves power and is able to begin the process of construction for a time is a success. It may end before its time, but this is only temporary: the experience itself encourages us to try again.

This focus on “real Israel” comes from Boer's experience of really existing socialism in Eastern Europe. He was called in 1984 to be a minister in the Dutch Ecumenical Congregation in the DDR (*Niederländische Ökumenische Gemeinde in der DDR*). This was in East Berlin, the capital of East Germany. He worked there until 1990, witnessing the “fall” of the Berlin wall. The congregation that

called Boer had about 100 members, who were Christians of a left-wing persuasion. It had been established in 1949, when East Germany was established in response to the declaration of West Germany. The church comprised Dutch workers who had moved to Germany as *Fremdarbeiter* during the Second World War. With the raising of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the part of the congregation in the east developed into a community of left-wing Christians. They found in the Bible deeply political messages and developed their own liturgy—the hymn book included “The *Internationale*” anthem and “*Solidaritätslied*” (“Solidarity Song”), also known as “*Vorwärts und nichtvergessen*” (“Forward, and Not Forgetting”)—in which God was seen to be at work in the world, outside the boundaries of the church. This congregation regarded itself as a communion of “Christians for socialism.”

The challenge for the new minister was to preach within the context of actually existing socialism. In the liberation and political theologies from elsewhere in the world—Latin America, North America, Europe—the biblical promises of an Exodus out of slavery or of a “Kingdom of God” that offers healing, release from hunger, and freedom from exploitation were made in the context of seeking liberation or working towards a successful revolution. The Exodus and the New Jerusalem were still in the future. Everything changes when the Exodus has already happened and one is involved in the process of building a new society.

For this reason, Boer began to focus on the period after liberation. In the Bible he found that the “historical” books, such as Joshua, Judges, and the books of Samuel and Kings, became crucial. So also did the works of Ezra and Nehemiah, coming after the exile in Babylon (sixth century BCE) and the need to rebuild a “Torah Republic.” Here one could find all manner of “travails of the plateau,” of the many problems facing “actually existing” or “real” Israel.

In the wider world, much was happening. The East German government had officially recognised the church as an organisation with a special relationship to the Netherlands. Thus, the church was permitted to arrange seminars, with speakers from the Netherlands who debated with Marxists from East Germany. Topics included “The Alliance of Communists and Christians,” “Faith and Atheism,” “Socialism and the Third World,” “The New Economic World-Order,” “Media,” and “Gay Theology.” The secular Marxists involved in the seminars engaged in debate with religious Marxists, as well as offering robust criticism of the official communist positions of the East Germany state. This was Christian-Marxist dialogue in full flight, carrying on well beyond the 1970s when the dialogue first began (despite the official banning of such dialogue by the East German government).

With this type of engagement, Boer met with many of the secular Marxist participants in private, which gave plenty of opportunity for further discussion. They became his friends and comrades, since they shared the common experience of being members of communist parties. They also shared disappointment in the failures of socialism along with their hopes for renewal. In light of such discussions, Boer began a major initiative to reform and thereby “save” East Germany,

which took place during the time of the “turn” (*Wende*). Inspiration came from the Dutch peace movement’s efforts to “Stop the N-bomb”: begin with a manifesto, which is signed by leading figures and ordinary citizens who have no obvious political commitment. In the Netherlands, this action led to the largest mass movement since the Second World War.

Boer proposed a similar approach in the DDR (the German Democratic Republic, also called East Germany). He organised a manifesto and had it signed by well-known people from the new civic movements (such as *Das Neue Forum* and *Demokratischer Aufbruch*), people from the churches, and members of the communist party—albeit those keen on renewal and not part of the stagnant party apparatus and state. The manifesto was called *For Our Country* (*Für unser Land*) and was written by Christa Wolf and Volker Braun. It became the most significant mass action during the *Wende* in East Germany. The manifesto gained 1,167,048 signatures! As Boer points out,¹⁴ the sheer size of the movement (one among many) shows that East Germany was supported by the majority of its citizens.

Opposition, containment, fusion, and dialectical translation—these sum up the major types of engagements with Marxism by Christians. I have attempted to show through specific examples how each has and continues to work. If I may, I will close with a statement of my own preferences. I identify with the Christian communist tradition and find that a dialectical approach is the best and most fruitful one.

NOTES

1. Leo XII, *Rerum Novarum* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1891), 4.
2. Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1931), 117.
3. Roland Boer, *Criticism of Earth* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012 [2014]), 233–306.
4. Some historians take a similar approach, suggesting the immense usefulness of Marxism for historical analysis, but its failures in offering viable solutions (Chris Wickham, ed., *Marxist History Writing for the Twenty-First Century* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007]).
5. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. C. Inda and J. Eagleson (London: SCM, 1969), 106–110.
6. Franz Hinkelammert, *The Ideological Weapons of Death*, trans. P. Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 5–42; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America* (Eugene, OR: Wipf, 1982), 57, 146, 165–167; Jung Mo Sung, *Desire, Market, and Religion* (London: SCM, 2007).
7. See esp. Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”* (Rome: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1984).
8. Alistair Kee, *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology* (London: SCM, 1990).
9. José Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, trans. J. Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974); Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates; Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, trans. J. Drury (Eugene, OR: Wipf, 1976); *ibid.* (1982); *ibid.*, *The True Church and the Poor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1985).

10. Karl Kautsky, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus*, vols. 1 and 2 (Berlin: Dietz, 1895); *ibid.*, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, trans. J. and E. Mulliken (London: Fisher, 1897); Karl Kautsky and Paul Lafargue, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus III* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1922).
11. J. Guadalupe Carney, *To Be a Revolutionary* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 441; see also Néstor Paz, *My Life for My Friends*, trans. E. Garcia and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1975).
12. Hildegard Lüning, *Camilo Torres Restrepo*, trans. J. Diaz (Bogota: U Nacional de Colombia P, 2016); Camilo Torres, *Revolutionary Writings* (New York: Herder, 1969).
13. Dick Boer, *Delivery from Slavery*, trans. R. Pohl (Leiden: Brill, 2009).
14. This information on Boer's time in East Germany was provided by private communication.