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Marxist Analysis by Christians

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"This carefully thought out letter of the Superior General of the Society of Jesus was addressed to Jesuit superiors in Latin America. It does not reject the use of elements of Marxist analysis, an issue that was to surface again in the 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'" (1984). It was first published in the Jesuit review, Civiltà Cattolica, on April 4, 1981. The text here is from Origins 10 (April 16, 1981), pp. 689-93." (Prof. Thomas Kelly, Creighton U.)

1. Last year you requested my help in discussing at greater depth the problem of "Marxist analysis," on which the bishops of Latin America had just published important guidelines (Puebla Document, nos. 544-45). This letter, based on wide consultation, attempts to meet your request. I am also sending a copy of it to other provincials in the society since I believe it will be of service to some of them as well.

2. I shall not deal with the whole problem of the relationship between Marxism and Christianity. This is too large a theme and it has already been developed in many documents, both of the sovereign pontiffs and of several episcopal conferences. The question I shall treat is more specific and limited: Can a Christian, a Jesuit, adopt Marxist analysis as long as he distinguishes it from Marxist philosophy or ideology and also from Marxist praxis, at least considered in its totality?

3. **The first thing to note in this question is that not everybody understands the same thing by the words "Marxist analysis."** Whenever the expression is used, it is necessary to seek a precise explanation of its content. In addition, there are sociological or even philosophical aspects of this problem which are outside my competence as superior general. However, bearing in mind the way the question is generally raised today, I have no hesitation in offering some guidelines and directives which are needed for the good government of the society as an apostolic body.

4. I am well aware that some may not recognize themselves right away in the way I have often heard it expressed in your provinces. But there are some Jesuits, few enough in Latin America but more in some European countries, who find themselves immersed straightaway in an atmosphere of convinced Marxism and sometimes of long Marxist tradition.

For example, some priest-workers feel that for the sake of inculturation and solidarity they cannot avoid sharing a number of viewpoints in common with their

fellow workers. It is only out of such a situation that they enter into a faith discernment to which, moreover, they attach great importance. They note that it is often a far cry from theoretical Marxism to the actual behavior and attitudes of Marxist workers. Thus they put us on guard against giving too much weight to the intellectual aspects of the problem.

These observations are very helpful. However, we must acknowledge that even in a more intuitive type of faith discernment, problems continue to arise at the level of reflection, which is where I wish to locate my discussion here. And so, in the case of the priest-workers as well, the guidelines given here are important.

5. First, it seems to me that in our analysis of society we can accept a certain number of methodological viewpoints which to a greater or lesser extent arise from Marxist analysis, as long as we do not attribute an exclusive character to them.

For instance, an attention to economic factors, to property structures, to economic interests which motivate this or that group; or again, a sensitivity to the exploitation that victimizes entire classes, attention to the role of class struggle in history (at least of many societies), attention to ideologies which can camouflage vested interests and even injustice.

6. In practice, however, the adoption of Marxist analysis is rarely the adoption of only a method or an "approach." Usually it means accepting the substance of the explanations Marx provided for the social reality of his time and applying them to that of our time.

And so we come to our first observation: In the area of social analysis, we cannot admit any a priori. There is room for hypotheses and theories, but everything should be verified, nothing can be presupposed. Now it can happen that someone will adopt Marxist analysis or elements of it as a set of a priori principles which need no verification, but at the most some illustration. At times these are identified in an unwarranted way with an evangelical option for the poor. They certainly do not flow directly from the gospel. In matters of sociological and economic interpretation, we Jesuits must carefully verify facts and be outstanding in our efforts at objectivity.

7. We come now to the heart of the question: Can one accept the set of explanations that constitute Marxist analysis without subscribing to Marxist philosophy, Marxist ideology, Marxist politics? To answer this question we must bear some important points in mind.

8. According to a good number of Christians who are themselves sympathetic to Marxist analysis, even if it does not imply either "dialectical materialism" or, a fortiori, atheism, it nonetheless encompasses "historical materialism" and, in the

view of some, is even identical with it. All social reality, therefore, including the political, the cultural, the religious, and the area of conscience, is seen to be determined by the economic factor.

Admittedly, even in Marxism itself, the terms thus employed are poorly defined and open to a variety of interpretations. However, historical materialism is most frequently understood in a reductionist sense. **Politics, culture, religion lose their own substance and are perceived only as realities wholly dependent on that which occurs in the sphere of economic relations.** This view of reality is prejudicial to Christian faith, at least to the Christian concept of humankind and to Christian ethics.

Thus even if it remains true that we Christians should be particularly attentive to economic factors in every account we give of social reality, we must keep our distance from an analysis which entails **the idea of economic determination in this reductionist sense.**

9. Furthermore, a criticism of religion and of Christianity is connected with historical materialism, and Marxist analysis generally does not succeed in freeing itself from it. Of course, such a criticism can have the effect of opening our eyes to cases in which the abuse of religion conceals situations that are socially indefensible. Nevertheless, if one's reasoning assumes that everything is intimately a function of productive relations, as if these determined reality, then the content of religion and Christianity is very quickly relativized and diminished. Belief in God the creator and in Jesus Christ the savior is left fragile or at least regarded as serving no useful purpose. A sense of gratuity gives way to that of utility. Christian hope tends to become unreal.

10. Sometimes an attempt is made to distinguish direct faith in Jesus Christ himself, to be preserved from its various concrete doctrinal and social expressions which do not survive the onslaught of such an analysis. But then the danger often arises of a radical criticism of the church quite beyond the limits of appropriate fraternal correction within the *ecclesia semper reformanda*. At times there even appears a tendency to judge the church as if from the outside and even to refuse any longer to recognize it as the true source of one's faith. In this way it is not a rare occurrence that the adoption of Marxist analysis leads to judgments about the church which are extremely severe and even unjust.

11. Even in cases where it is not taken as implying a rigorous historical materialism, Marxist social analysis contains as an essential element a radical theory of antagonism and class struggle. It is no exaggeration to say that it is social analysis in the service of class struggle. The fact of antagonisms and class struggles should be realistically and fully recognized--the Christian sees here some relationship between this evil and sin. It should not, however, be generalized. It has nowhere been proved that all human history, past and present, can be reduced to a struggle, still less to a class struggle in the precise

meaning of the expression. Social reality cannot be understood solely in light of the master-slave dialectic: there have been and still are other factors in human history (alliance, peace, love), other deep forces which influence it.

12. We must also take note here of the fact that Marxist analysis often does not remain mere analysis but leads to action programs and strategies. Recognition of the class struggle does not necessarily imply that the means to end it should also be a struggle--that between the working class and the bourgeoisie. But it often happens that those who adopt the analysis also adopt this strategy. And such a strategy cannot be fully understood apart from the messianic role of the proletariat which belongs to Marx's ideology and already formed part of his philosophy before he undertook his systematic economic analysis.

In addition, even when Christians recognize the legitimacy of certain struggles and do not exclude revolution in situations of extreme tyranny that have no other solution, they cannot accept that the privileged method for ending struggle is struggle itself. They will rather seek to promote other methods of social transformation, calling for persuasion, witness, reconciliation, and never losing hope in conversion. Only as a means of last resort will they have recourse to struggle, especially if it involves violence, in order to combat injustice. There is a whole philosophy--and for us, theology of action that is at stake here.

13. In brief, although Marxist analysis does not directly imply acceptance of Marxist philosophy as a whole--and still less of dialectical materialism as such -- as it is normally understood it implies in fact a concept of human history which contradicts the Christian view of humankind and society, and leads to strategies which threaten Christian values and attitudes.

The consequences have often been disastrous, even though perhaps not always or immediately. Moral considerations are of great importance here. Christians who have for a time tended to adopt Marxist analysis and praxis have confessed they have been led bit by bit to accept any means to justify the end. There are many instances which still today corroborate what Paul VI wrote in *Octogesima Adveniens* (n. 34): "It would be illusory and dangerous ... to accept the elements of Marxist analysis without recognizing their relationships with ideology." To separate one from the other is more difficult than is sometimes imagined.

14. In this context the bishops of Latin America meeting at Puebla noted that theological reflection based on Marxist analysis runs the risk of leading to "the total politicization of Christian existence, the disintegration of the language of faith into that of the social sciences and the draining away of the transcendental dimension of Christian salvation" (Puebla Document, n. 545). This triple risk becomes evident in light of the observations I have just made.

15. To adopt therefore not just some elements or some methodological insights, but Marxist analysis as a whole, is something we cannot accept. Even supposing someone, with a whole series of careful distinctions, could legitimately speak of Marxist analysis without accepting a reductive historical materialism or the theory and strategy of a generalized class struggle' -- but would this still be Marxist analysis?-- most people, including the majority of Jesuits, would be incapable of doing this. So there is real danger in defending the position that it is possible to undertake a Marxist analysis separate from its philosophy, ideology, or political praxis. This is all the more true in that, with a few exceptions, Marxists themselves reject any separation between the analysis and a Marxist worldview or principles of action. We have to make this practical discernment, as well as the theoretical one. We must, however, give young Jesuits in training instruments for critical study and serious Christian reflection so that they can understand the problems of Marxist analysis. This analysis certainly cannot be offered them during formation as a basis for understanding reality.

16. I wish to mention another point which I would like our specialists to study in greater depth. It is the question of property structures (specifically, the means of production), which occupy such a key position in Marxist analysis. There is no doubt that a bad distribution of property, uncompensated by other factors, leads to and facilitates the exploitation pointed out by Marx and also denounced by the church.

All the same, is not the institution of property itself confused with its bad distribution? It is important to continue investigating, with the help of experience, what forms of distribution of property rights, as of other powers (political, trade union), will bring about greater justice and more development for all people in different types of societies. Far from forgetting the contributions of the church's social teaching in this practical field, we should study them in greater depth, work out their applications, and help in their development.

17. Finally, before concluding I would like to make four observations. First, whatever the reservations with regard to Marxist analysis, we should always understand well and appreciate the reasons that make it attractive. Christians readily and rightly sympathize with the aim and ideal of liberating humankind from domination and oppression, of doing the truth while condemning the ideologies that conceal it, of ending class divisions. What we cannot admit is that this can be achieved by means that are facile or in contradiction with the final aim; but neither can we ever allow ourselves to be discouraged in the continuing quest for these objectives, for they are intimately related to the charity that characterizes the Christian enterprise. Besides, we must have compassion for those who are suffering in their own flesh the degradation of social injustices.

18. In the second place, it should be very clear that in our day Marxist analysis is not unique in being affected by ideological or philosophical presuppositions that have permeated its system. In particular, the type of social analysis used in the

liberal world today implies an individualistic and materialistic vision of life that is destructive of Christian values and attitudes. In this connection, are we giving enough attention to the content of textbooks used in our schools? In using elements of social analysis of whatever type, if we want to remain faithful to the gospel, we must be critical of them, trying always to purify them before selecting what genuinely helps us to understand and describe without prejudice existing reality. Our efforts should be guided by the criteria of the gospel, not by ideologies incompatible with it.

19. Third, as regards Marxists themselves, we should remain fraternally open to dialogue with them. However, true to the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes* (21, para. 6), we ought not to refuse practical cooperation in concrete cases where the common good seems to call for it.² Naturally we must keep in mind our own special role as priests and religious, and never act like lone rangers in our dealings with the Christian community and its responsible leaders.

We must ensure that any collaboration on our part is only concerned with activities acceptable to a Christian. In this whole area we always have the obligation to maintain our own identity; because we accept some points of view that are valid, we should not allow ourselves to be carried as far as approval of the analysis in its totality; we must ever act in accordance with our faith and the principles of action that it inspires. So let us behave in such a way that Christianity can be seen to be a message that has greater value for humankind than any concept, however useful, of Marxist analysis.

20. Finally, we should also firmly oppose the efforts of anyone who wishes to take advantage of our reservations about Marxist analysis in order to condemn as Marxist or communist, or at least to minimize esteem for, a commitment to justice and the cause of the poor, the defense of their rights against those who exploit them, the urging of legitimate claims. Have we not often seen forms of anticommunism that are nothing but means for concealing injustice? In this respect as well, let us remain true to ourselves and not permit anyone to exploit our critical assessment of Marxism and Marxist analysis.

21. I ask you all to act with limpid clarity and fidelity. I ask you to strive with all your energy, in the context of our vocation, on behalf of the poor and against injustice, but without allowing indignation to obscure your vision of the faith and always maintaining, even in the heat of conflict, a Christian attitude that is characterized by love and not hardness of heart.

22. To conclude: I appreciate that the presentation of Marxist analysis may eventually be modified on one point or another in the future.' Besides, there is still room for further theoretical studies and empirical investigations concerning the various problems on which I have touched. At the present moment I want everyone to observe the indications and directives contained in this letter. I hope it will allow you and other superiors to help more effectively those of ours whose

ministry puts them in contact with men and women of Marxist conviction, among whom I include those Christians who refer to themselves as "Christian Marxists." More generally, I hope this letter will help all Jesuits who feel the need to analyze society and cannot avoid facing the problem of Marxist analysis.

Along these lines we can do better work in the promotion of justice, which is inseparable from our service of the faith.

Very fraternally yours,
Pedro Arrupe, S.J.
Superior General

NOTES

1. Cf. *Populorum Progressio*, 31 (AAS, LXIX, 1969, p. 272). 2. Cf. *Mater et Magistra*, IV (AAS, LIII, 1961, pp. 456-57). 3. *Pacem in Terris* (AAS, LV, 1963, pp. 299-300).