

CHRISTIANITY AND MARXISM: THE CHURCH'S VIEW

TITUS ALIYU, Ph.D.
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES
FEDERAL UNIVERSITY LOKOJA.

Abstract

One of the ideological confusion of our time is the claim that Christianity and Marxism should have come to be regarded as mutually compatible, not only by some members of left-wing organizations and movements, but also within certain sectors of the Church itself. Indeed, some enthusiasts go so far as to say that Christianity and Marxism complement each other, and at the extreme end of the scale, there are a number of pundits who posited that they are fundamentally identical. This study examines the variance between Christianity and Marxism. While Christianity is described by Marxism as the ultimate religion capitalism, and viewed as a religion used by dominant class to perpetuate and justify their dominance along with the secular ideologies such as the right to private property, Marxism is described by Christianity has been intrinsically atheistic through force of circumstances, and viewed as being inconsistent. The study, therefore, attempts to evaluate the debate between Christianity and Marxism concerning man, it is to point out some of the problems which Christian faith believes that the doctrine of Marx and his followers cannot resolve. The paper also examines the massive differences between Christianity as a religion and Marxism as a law dealing with human society. The study employed a multi-disciplinary approach and concluded that Christians should sow the seed of faith, hope and love of God, for all else that is lacking in the world today, especially justice. With this, the peace we seek in our world today will come to pass.

Keywords: Christianity, Marxism, Religion, Theology.

Introduction

Christianity and Marxism belong to two distinct spheres of life and should therefore be able to coexist peacefully without mutual contact or interference. Christianity is a religion, a faith or religious way of living, and as such does not need to concern itself with formulas for the construction of the earthly city (Lischer, 1966). Marxism, on the other hand, is a science dealing with the laws of human society containing within itself the blueprint for social revolution, and is not, therefore, qualified to make pronouncement on God or a life hereafter. There should be no contradiction in having “Marxist Christians”, in the same way as there are “Marxist

engineers”, since engineering and religion are not mutually exclusive and move on separate planes. Social revolution and salvation must like-wise belong to separate spheres of life and are therefore compatible. To Christian eyes, this is suspiciously like trying to push Christianity into the background by reducing it to the purely passive state of hope in another world, while the Marxist slice of the cake contains all the plums (Lischer, 1966).

In what strikes us as an overnight phenomenon, we are suddenly surprised to read of two doctrinaire antagonists—one aged, the other youthful—sitting down to rationally discuss, debate, and search for understanding. This survey and evaluation of the conversation between Christians and Marxist humanists will operate under the basic assumption that such a meeting of minds is not only harmless but that it is absolutely necessary (Macintyre, 1996). The dialogue became necessary at that moment in history when man perfected his capacity to destroy the world. The dialogue has become necessary as Christianity and Marxism have begun to recognize the permanence of one another. Marxist inspired political philosophies govern one third of the world’s population. The Christian insistence upon the transitory nature of these regimes is both unconvincing and unrealistic. Marxist philosophy likewise teaches the necessary disintegration of religion in a socialist society, augmenting this philosophical proposition with harassment and persecution. Nevertheless, the permanence of Christianity presents itself as a fact of life to communists (Maxwell, 1989).

It is necessary to point out that a Christianity reduce to the realm of the purely spiritual with the eyes fixed solely on the hereafter, while it withdraws from history and from the task of bringing the world to God, is a pure fiction that has nothing whatever to do with the message of the gospel. A faith deprived of action in this world is the as no faith at all. To hand over history as a gift to Marxist is to concede everything. Such Christianity is the formal and total denial of the incarnation of the son of God, and also of the church. It opens up a yawning of chasm between religion and life, and totally destroys the unity of reality. It completely breaks the relation between God’s will and human action, and turns Christ into a shadowy figure no longer concerned with the life in this world, thus negating the whole meaning of his message and of the history of salvation (Maxwell, 1989).

Marxism both in theory and in practice can never admit that there are other areas of reality which do not fall under its jurisdiction. An engineer is not likely to deliver a lecture on medieval literature, for example, because such a topic would normally be outside his field. But Marxism cannot adopt this kind of attitude towards things of the spirit and eternal life. In regard to spiritual matters, the theoretical and practical stand adopted by Marxism is one of absolute denial. In this sense, it aspires to an all-embracing cosmic vision and total revolution (Gellwwitzer, 1966). It is monolith, a closed system, with absolutely no place for God or for the history of salvation (Harvey, 1968). Marxism takes on the character of a metaphysics and other religion seeks to dominate every facet of what it considers to be reality. And quite naturally, other religions cannot be tolerated, the net result is inevitable conflict, a death struggle, between Marxism and Christianity, where the whole world is the battleground and the fate of human history the outcome (Gellwwitzer, 1966).

Humanism

In different senses, Christianity and Marxism contain undercurrents of humanism. This humanism should not be confused with the historical renaissance movement, for, in present usage, it connotes all that tends to render man more truly human (Herbert, et al., 1968). True humanism recalls his original greatness by causing him to participate in all that can enrich him in nature and in history (Herbert, *et al.*, 1968). In Marx's day, the natural sciences served as the only available model for this need. The portrayal of this inherent need for self-realization also identifies Marx as a child of his age, in that he pre-supposes the 19th century doctrine of human progress, of "the principle of movement", propelling man forward (Hervey, 1968).

In most discussions of Marxist humanism scholars tend to limit their comments to the early Marx. Before he reached his high level of economic and political sophistication, Marx wrote more about the problem of human existence. According to Marx, mastery over the earth in form of work ultimately distinguishes man from the animals and defines the degree of his humanity. Man humanizes himself through work by making the object of his activity, nature, useful to him. By defining the object of his activity, man as the determinative factor in his process of humanization, he transcends crude, atomistic materialism. The goal of Marxist's humanism is a world without domination or exploitation of man by man, class by class. No ultimate goal exists in the writings of Marx, be it state or God, but lies outside man (Jacques, 1938).

The common ground for a meeting between Christian and Marxism is usually sought in the tenet of humanism, which, for present purposes, can be defined as a doctrine centering everything on man, in the life of society. On the basis of this definition, some Christians reason that both Christianity and Marxism can be considered as separate versions of humanism, each animated by its own particular view of human existence (Jacques, 1938). Why then should not these two kinds of humanism form a common front and fight the forces of alienation and dehumanization, now recognize as the common enemy of all? Man in so far as he is the end, measure, and interpreter of history, could thus harmonize two humanist conception of life: that of Christ and that of Marx (Macintyre, 1996)

The gospel message can only be called humanist in a restricted and specific sense. It is in the meaning given by Pope Paul VI when he said, "true humanism is the theocentric, that is its center and foundation are in God and not in man". In the gospel, man is seen as only attaining his full personal and social growth when he rises above himself to adore God. He must increase and I must decrease, and he who loses his life for my sake, the same will gain it (Karl, 1967). Christian humanism, if we are to use the term at all, is therefore the doctrine of the insufficiency of man, who needs to be saved by God, and who, on being saved, infinitely surpasses the limits of his nature. It is the humanism of the God, man of the cross, and of eternity. In this sense, it is more correct to say that Christianity is something over and above any kind of humanism (Karl, 1967).

Following the same line of argument, it would seem that Marxism is less than a humanism. There is, to be sure, a broad vein of humanism running through the early writings of Marx, in

which he justly denounces the human practices of nineteenth century capitalism. However, it is equally certain that with the development of Marxism, man has not finally been lifted out of his state of depression as promised. Instead, he has been absorbed into the mass of dialectical matter, so as to become an epi- phenomenon, an accident of nature (Karl, 1967). The human ideal of Marxist-Leninism does not rise above the level of the homo faber, that is, man as an economic unit, a producer of goods. The human person is seen as having a mere social function, like a single cell of a complex organism, or a cog in a wheel of a vast collective mechanism (Maxwell, 1989). We have seen that, to stretch the meaning of the term humanism so as to include both Christianity and Marxism is simply to play with words. If Christianity can be called humanism, then Marxism cannot, and vice versa (Macintyre, 1996). This is no formality, for the opposition is absolute. There is nothing in common between theocentric humanism and theism: between man as a son of God and man as a phenomenon of matter; between the humanism of adoration and that of class struggle; between salvation on high and the earthly paradise of the collective society. To try to reconcile both extremes by abusing the word humanism is mere wordplay that will accomplish nothing toward reducing the distance between two diametrically opposed concepts of human nature (Herbert, 1968).

Atheism

Atheism is simply the believe that there is no God or gods. The atheist's rejection of belief in God is usually accompanied by a broader rejection of any supernatural or transcendental reality. Indeed, the atheist is almost a naturalist believing that there is only the natural world and not any supernatural one. Materialism goes one step further than basic naturalism, and claim that the only thing that are real are material objects, made up of atoms and sub-atomic particle (Kai, 2023). A central core of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the affirmation of the reality of one, and only God. Adherents of this faith believe that there is a God who created the universe out of nothing and who has absolute sovereignty over all his creation; this includes, of course, human beings – who are not only utterly dependent on this creative power but also sinful and who, or so the faithful must believe. The varieties of atheism are numerous, but all atheist reject such a set of beliefs (Kai, 2023). Atheism, however, cast a wider net and reject all beliefs in spiritual beings, and to the extent that belief in spiritual beings is definitive of what it means for a system to be religions, atheism reject (Reding, 1965).

In our world today, there is a lot of discussion as to whether Marxism is intrinsically atheistic, or just atheistic through force of circumstances. Here we refer only to the Christian side of the fence, because the Marxists themselves do not appear to be losing any sleep over the thought of their future conversion. The founders of Marxism make themselves quite clear in this respect. For Marx religion was, as we know, the spirit of an eye without spirit of the people. In other words, it was purely and simply alien influence. Robbed of this humanity by economic exploitation, man appear inexorably under the liberating blows of communism. Adding his own commentary to this way of thinking, Lenin would later say: “any religious belief, any idea of God whatsoever is inexplicitly base. And also: religion is the spiritual vodka with which the

slaves of capitalism drawn every human aspiration. And in conclusion: Marxism is implacably hostile to religion” (Reding, 1965).

Atheism would then be the historically and temporary form taken by the original Marxism in its struggle to proclaim the dignity of man and achieve his social liberation. Thus, if religion were to clear the way for the construction of communist society, there would be opened up a religious possibility for Marxism. In other words, if God accepts Marxism, Marxism could accept God (Reding, 1965). To imagine that Marxist atheism would ever want to restore man to a state of superstition involving the idea of God, from which he supposed to have been liberated, could only be the sheer illusion of someone who is out of someone’s mind. Marxism cannot, under any circumstances, concede the slightest objective reality to God, eternal life, or salvation, without betraying everything that it stands for. To tolerate even the subjective illusion of faith in individual circumstances, no matter how Marxist the objective, and social conduct of the persons concerned might be, is viewed by orthodox Marxism as being inconsistent. And with good reason; for what purpose could possibly be served by such an individual and subjective concession to an alienating superstition? Revolution is the Marxist’s religion, and it obliges him to destroy, to the extent that he is able, every possible rival, and above all, that which comes from heaven (Reding, 1965).

Materialism

Strong materialistic values help to maintain consumer capitalism, but they can have negative consequences for individual well-being, for social equity and for environmental sustainability (Koren, 1967). Endless pursuit or increasing rate of production and consumer capitalism has contributed to environmental problem such as the depletion of natural resources, biodiversity loss and climate change enhancement (Koren, 1967). Rising material consumption has also failed to constantly improve well-being for people in developed countries (Hiley, 1968). Evidence shows that placing high importance on acquiring money and material goods may even be linked to poor personal well-being (Herbert, 1968).

It is sometimes said that the frequently mentioned theory of dialectical materialism does not come from Marx at all, but was proposed by Engels and systemized mainly by his later commentators. It should later be regarded as a thesis belonging to a later school of thought and is not, therefore, essential to Marxism. The proponents of this approach to Marxism added that the so called Marxist materialism, even in its academic formulations, has almost reached the point of becoming a case of verbal misunderstanding, for this term actually means realism in the sense of western philosophy, and should be therefore understood as a reaction against philosophical idealism. In the historical order, this so-called Marxist materialism would in turn be simply an emphasis on the economic and social conditions of life, which is, moreover, common to the social sciences of our times. After the revolution, there would be nothing left of that materialism which brutally strangles man’s dignity, but rather a true humanism. Christians should therefore have nothing to fear from the Marxist thesis (Fromm, 1961).

The Means

In origin, religion may be genuinely revolutionary, a real attempt to abolish exploitation (Karl, et al., 1968). Engel goes on to say that whereas socialism puts its deliverance on earth, Christianity puts it in heaven (Karl, *et al.*, 1968). Kautsky, however, in *The Foundations of Christianity* was prepared to go further. “The liberation from poverty which Christianity declared was at first thought of quite realistically. It was to take place in the world and not in Heaven” (Langloise, 1974). The transference of liberation to heaven only took place later (Langloise, 1974). Thus the essential mark of latter day religion (according to Marxism) is its other – worldliness. It places far off the salvation that socialism brings near. It has its origin in man’s sense of his powerlessness in the world. Engels continually emphasizes man’s feeling of powerlessness before nature in speaking of the origins of primitive religion (Kenneth, 1918). But it is not before nature that man is powerless; he is also overwhelmed by society, so that the process of appear to man as strange and terrible divinities. Thus in ancient Greek religion the power of necessity, ananke, was personified (Langloise, 1974).

This passage is characteristic of the Marxist contention that the gods are personification of the powers that dominate human life. When such power no longer dominate man, there will no longer be gods (Markus, 1967). This is how Marxism hopes to abolish religion. Marxism seems to assume from the outset that religion is palpably false (Markus, 1967).

Today’s Christians are becoming more and more aware of the need to change the world, where so many things are out of step with the ideals of the gospel (Garaudy, 1966). On the other hand, Marxist- Leninism is readily seen as one of the great contemporary forces of change, not only because of its revolutionary aims, but also on account of the tempting efficiency of the political weapons at its disposal (Rummel, 1977). Christians and Marxists aspiration is not the same, is it really necessary to agree on the desired end when things are just beginning? We are not dealing here with a problem of the distant future. The means employed already imply the nature of the ends to be achieved. In a way, the end is already contained in the means; the procedure gives more than just a clue to the result. Preaching, killing, agitation, force, prayer, are not neutral means that can be used to attain any end: each of them bear its result within it (Vernon, 1946). The Christian means for transforming the world can only be those of Christ: the conversion of the human heart which, to the extent of its interior liberation, expresses itself socially in just institutions; the moral transformation of ourselves and our neighbors, of our customs and our ways of thinking. It is a conversion from within towards the outside; from human person toward human structures; from the depths of the personal and collective conscience toward the objective systems which manifest it (Siefer, 1964). This way of the gospel, which is always thought of in terms of human liberty, possesses the obvious draw backs of every moral transformation: its slowness, its fallibility, and the inconsistency of the human will. Is it not utopia to found the new world on purity of heart, to limited, as it always is, by the effects of original sin? (Siefer, 1964).

Marxism offers the reverse path: from the outside in (Macintyre, 2023). It is based on the idea that the interior of man, his spirit and values, is a reflection of his material conditioning and

the forms of ownership and production in each age. It will attempt, therefore, to exert external, physical, and usually violent pressure on the structure and groups that sustain the status quo (Siefer, 1964). Man – the new man, that is – will be a product of this steady technical manipulation concerning the objectivity of the economic system. Neither moralizing nor utopian ideas are needed (Rummel, 1977). Marxism is not a set of ethics: it is necessary not to yield to moral indignation, said Engels (Niebuhr, 1932). Marxism is presented as a science and a technique of social action specifically aimed at fomenting class struggle to the utmost: dialectic conflict as a system containing a maximum of hatred and passion (Macintyre, 2019). This is the only driving force, the only fuel for the Marxist revolution (Markus, 1967).

The Christian way is slow and dangerous (Langloise, 1974). It lacks prescribed formulas and its results will always be imperfect, for paradise is not to be found on this earth. Nevertheless, it is the only way for the believer. The other – the Marxist way – carries inscribed on its instruments the nature of the end which it attains: a world of brute force, hatred, passion, and slavery. For the dialectics they multiply indefinitely while man remains the same: materialistic and with hatred in his heart. Social conflict can only take on dignity and humanity in the heart of one who has turned in love to God and his neighbor. And such a conversion has never been attained by hate or violence (Langloise, 1974).

Class Struggle

One of the most powerful sociological explanation of social conflict is that of Carl Marx, who posited a class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie intrinsic to capitalist, industrial society (Rummel, 1977). This notion is powerful in being dynamic, intuitively persuasive and appearing to fit well with history (Rummel, 1977). It is important to recognize that Marx viewed the structure of society in relation to its major classes, and the struggle between them as the engine of change in this structure (Langloise, 1974). A class is defined by the ownership of property. Such ownership vests a person with the power to exclude others from the property and to use it for personal purposes (Niebuhr, 1932). For Marx, distribution of power over production is determine by power over production (Langloise, 1974).

Marxism assures us that class struggle is not a human deficiency, but a dialectical necessity of the social process, which will inevitably end in a complete break with the past. For Marxism there is absolutely no possibility of reconciling the proletariat with the bourgeoisie. The idea of a common set of rules, or of some moral or religious principle linking both fronts, is dismissed out of hand as an illusion, the dead weight of a reformist mentality, or just a bourgeois trick.⁶³ The classes are conceived as closed and irreconcilable entities in total confrontation, extending to every aspect of life, whether it be cultural, ethical, or religious. And some Christians who adopt this interpretation think, analogously, that social unity is impossible in the world today, because it would disregard the objective reality of the struggle between classes (Markus, 1967).

But not the Marxist: for him the social struggle can only end in the elimination of all rivals. Therefore, he has not injected an absolute and messianic not into the conflict, a radical dimension of finality, that a Christian recognizes only in the theological battle between grace and sin, between God and devil (Heibnitz, 1918). Obviously then, no Christian can accept the Marxist meaning of class struggle. He knows that the theological drama does not revolve around conflict between two social groups, two political blocks, or two opposing world fragment. Between these fractions, which are only relatively in opposition, the Christian will rather look for reasonable agreements based on principles common to humanity, not apocalyptic clashes. He will seek a salvation, not destruction (Karl, 1967).

The really decisive conflict of life does not involve social clashes at all. It is an ethical and religious conflict that extend across all frontiers and is to be found at every social level and at every geographic latitude; for it is waged within the heart of every individual (Rummel, 1977). The Marxism would have us retreat to a position far from the battleground of conscience: to an arena where the war is waged, not inside man, but outside on the social plain: a confrontation between two classes representing the forces of absolute good and absolute evil (Markus, 1967). This is something that can never be accepted by a Christian who refuses to make absolute doctrine out of the opinion able matter of social conflict. Evil in itself is not a system. It is not capitalism or any other human group, bourgeoisie or otherwise. Evil is rooted inside each one of us. It is sin in all it many forms. Pride, hatred, selfishness, greed, and lust are not labeled either bourgeois or proletarian. Neither does goodness in itself reside in any class, in any messianic party or redeeming collectivity. Only God is good, only Christ is the redeemer (Langloise, 1974). All human groupings are steeped in imperfection and wretchedness. They do not redeem others, for they need to be saved themselves, as do the persons who form them. The love of Christ has unforeseen resources. It touches the bottom of the human heart and develops such social creativity, such a unifying force, that it alone is capable of renewing the face of the earth and the forms of all its institutions (Langloise, 1974).

Conclusions

When we realize the complete incompatibility between Marxism and Christianity in both doctrine and practice, it is hard not to be amazed that some believers support a double militancy, that is, a practical alliance between Marxism and Christianity in the struggle for social change. The phenomenon can only be understood in terms of internal crisis in matters of faith, theological hope, authority, and moral conscience, which today affects many Christians. When these Christians, handicapped by weakening in their religious faith, enter the political arena with a degree of generosity matched only by their spiritual anemia, it is very difficult for them to resist the temptation of Marxism as a theoretical basis for revolutionary action. Thus, they remain Christians at heart, though Marxists in their social and political behavior, in spite of the inconsistency of this uncomfortable duality.

Christian who lean toward Marxism are sometimes portrayed as members of the faithful bored with the unreal and other-worldly atmosphere of the church, who sally forth to do battle in the world of reality. On the other hand, Christians who resist Marxism are seen as still living in a religious limbo, because they have not crossed the threshold of the real world. A Christian does not have to give up his faith and align himself with militant atheism in order to take an active part in the life of society and the very reality of history.

Today, therefore, the church begs her children, as she has always done in times of crisis, to take an active part in public life. She asks them to sow the seed of faith, hope and love of God; for all else that is lacking, especially justice.

References

- Fromm, E. (1961). *Marx's Concept of Man with the text of Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. T.B Boltmore (Trans.). Ungar Publishing Company.
- Gollwitzer, H. (1961). "The Christian Church and communist atheism." *Ecumenical Review*, 14.
- Harvey, C. (1968). "The Christian- Marxist Dialogue; What Next?" *Dialogue*, vii
- Herbert M. and Hervey, W. (1968). Varieties of humanism. *The Center Magazine*.
- Hiley H. W. (1968). *God and Marx today*. Fortress Press.
- Henry J. K. (1967). *Marx and the authentic man*. Duquesne University Press.
- Jacques, M. (1938). *True Humanism*. The Centenary Press.
- Jackson T. L. (2005). Better by Consuming less? Is there a "double dividend" in Sustainable Consumption? *Journal of Industrial Ecology*. doi: 10. 1162/ 1088198054084734.
- Langloise, L (1974). Christianity and Marxism. Catholic Postion Papers. *Nigerian Edition, Lagos-Ibadan*.
- Lischer, R. (1966). *Marxism in dialogue with Christianity*. Herder and Herder.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1952). *Manifestoes of the communist party*. Samuel Moore (Trans.), F. Engels (Ed.). *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- Heinitz, K. (1918). "The theology of hope according to Ernst Block". *Dialog*. Vii.
- Rahner, K. (1967). "Christian Humanism". *Journal of Ecumrnical Studies*, IV.
- Kai, E. N. (2023). Atheism. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- Markus, B. (1967). "Developing Dialogue between Marxists and Christians". *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, IV.

- Reding, M. (1965). "Marxism without atheism". *Commonweal*, Lxxxii.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1964). *On Religion*. (ed.) Reinhold Niebuhr. Schocke Books.
- Macintyre, A. (2019). *Marxism and Christianity*. *Journal of the Mcgrath Institute for Church and Life*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Maxwell, J. (1989). *Christianity and Marxism*. Herder and Herder.
- Niebuhr, R. (1932). *Moral man and immoral society*. Charles Scribner's Son.
- Rummel, L. R. (1977). *Conflict in perspective*. Zed Books.
- Siefer, G. (1964). "The Church and industrial society," (trans.) Isabel and Florence McHugh. Darton, Longman, and Todd.
- Vernon, V. (1946). "Human nature: the Marxian view." Alreda. Knopt.