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## Encountering Marx: bonds and barriers between Christians and Marxists

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# BOOKS IN REVIEW

## *ENCOUNTERING MARX: BONDS AND BARRIERS BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MARXISTS*

JAN MILIC LOCHMAN, tr. Edwin H. Robertson  
Published by Fortress Press, Philadelphia,  
1977, 136 pp., paper, \$4.25

Chapters: "Introduction," "From Anathema to Dialogue," "The Image of Man in the Young Karl Marx," "The Challenge of Marxist Criticism of Religion," "The Dispute Over the Biblical Heritage," and "Future and Hope in the Christian-Marxist Dialogue."

The author, formerly a member of the Comenius Faculty at the University of Prague, writes out of the context of the discussions that culminated in the "Prague Spring" of 1968. His purpose appears twofold: to show Christians the ways in which Marxism has common points with Christianity, and to show how the Marxist analysis and prediction differ from the Christian.

One finds references to Ernst Bloch, Roger Garaudy, and Jurgen Moltmann — some of the same authors mentioned by Harvey Cox in *On Not Leaving It to the Snake* (MacMillan, 1964, 1965, 1967). But in comparison with Lochman's exhaustive treatment, Cox appears superficial and "trendy."

In order to follow the argument of the book, it is necessary to understand Marx's statement that religion is the opiate of the people. This statement has often been interpreted as an incorrigible and radical atheism on the part of Marx and Marxists. While it is true that Marx was an atheist, the statement itself is not necessarily atheistic. Marx's atheism was derivative, not primary; a product of his social analysis not a precondition of it. As Lochman expresses it (p. 83), "(T)o Marx (r)eligion is not the root of all evil — a perverted world is the root of religion." He saw religion not as the villain but as a tool of villains, along with philosophy, popular culture and patriotism.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the recent Marxist-Christian dialogue in Europe surrounded Marx's early writings — *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Written in 1844, these writings were not published until 1932 and were suppressed in Russia by Stalin's "orthodoxy." In these early writings, Marx discussed man in his social relationships, using categories similar to those of the New Testament. Work is fulfilling, but man has come to worship the product of work, i.e., "money" (later called "Capital"). Man has allowed it, and its manipulators, to direct his life; under such conditions, work is no longer fulfillment but has become slavery. "The natural aim of economy is to satisfy human need — (u)nder the rule of money all this changed. The purpose of economic activity now becomes,

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1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: New World Paperbacks, 1969), p. 39. (This work dates from 1845-46.)

not to satisfy needs, but to create them" (Lochman, p. 61).<sup>2</sup>

It is in this situation of the distortion of ends and means that those who control Capital use religion as an opiate for the people they control, claimed Marx. He saw private property as the root of all evil. Taken this way, the parallels with Jesus saying, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24) and Paul's "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (I Tim. 6:10) in the context of his criticism of those who considered godliness a means of gain (I Tim. 6:5,6), are obvious.

In Europe, however, sincere Marxists have been forced to re-examine their position. If private property is the root of all evil, of all unhappiness and alienation, then the abolition of private property should have brought happiness, equality, and the end of the exploitation of power-relationships. This has not happened in those countries where private property has been abolished.

In Czechoslovakia, with its tradition of the Hussites and the concept of Christian brotherhood, many young Marxists then looked for Christian comparisons, e.g., hope for the future, eschatology, transcendence. As well, they re-examined Marx's explanation of alienation. These Marxists had found the earlier "orthodox" rejection of all metaphysics and of all religion inadequate.

Some of this new trend among Marxists, Lochman points out, has led to strange interpretations of the Bible. Some of them read the Bible as a document composed of two strands — an equalitarian, revolutionary strand of the common people, and a repressive "official" and "priestly" strand. Passages which stress revolution are then emphasized. The serpent's words, "You shall be as gods," are interpreted by Ernst Bloch as the true goal of man (Lochman, p. 102).<sup>3</sup>

In criticizing the position of these young Marxists, Lochman points out that the theme of the Bible is God's reach for man, the incarnation, not man's promethean seeking to be equal with God (p. 108). The way to God is more appropriately described by Irenaeus ("He became as we are so that we might become as he is.") rather than by Ernst Bloch, for whom original sin is to *refuse* to become like God (p. 102).<sup>4</sup>

In general criticism, Lochman makes several points: Marxism's erasure of God removes the criterion for a proper valuation of man (p. 127); its substitute, the historical process, is inadequate. Secondly, Marx rightly recognized *one* source of alienation — the economic — but he felt this was the only one. This, Lochman says, is an oversimplification and an illusion (pp. 71, 72; cf. p. 17).

Thirdly, Marx too easily identified the corruption of Christianity in "Christian states" which resembled the use of religion in oriental despotisms (pp. 83, 124) rather than seeing the other possibilities in Christianity (p. 85). Fourthly, Marx too easily adopted the view of religion and the glorification of the autonomy of man (thus, too, the atheism) of the bourgeois Enlightenment, whose economic and political ideas he had rejected (pp. 85-90).

One would hope that Lochman will write more on the subject. Though there is depth in examination, the range covered seems less than it might have been.

Vincent E. Eriksson

2. The same point was made independently by the British 19th-century art critic, John Ruskin. See his *Political Economy of Art* (1857).

3. Perhaps it was. See Jesus' words in John 10:34,35 — but Christians have believed that the devil encouraged a "snatching" at this status — see Philipppians 2:6.

4. Cf. Cox, *On Not Leaving It to the Snake*.