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Nairobi 1975: a crisis of faith for the WCC

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Mr Nicholls, an associate editor of Themelios, *attended the Fifth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches as an observer. As International Co-ordinator of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship, he is in a good position to assess the significance of the Assembly for theology and mission throughout the world, and as a long-standing resident in India he is particularly sensitive to its likely repercussions in the Third World. What follows is a personal, not an official, view.*

This is one man's report of a very complex happening, written by one who was a first-timer at such an ecumenical gathering, like 70% of those attending Nairobi. The sheer pluralism of the WCC and its attempt to address itself to a wide range of global problems, political, economic, social and religious, in the space of eighteen crowded days, makes a balanced and fair report exceedingly difficult. Time for re-study of all the documents and reflection is needed.

The diversity of people attending Nairobi was impressive. 664 delegates from 286 churches together with advisers, delegated observers, observers from international organizations, press, staff and visitors together totalled more than 2,300. Almost half the delegates were from the Third World. Ninety-six came from the eastern European churches. 20% were women and 10% youth —higher percentages than in the previous Assemblies.

Nairobi was an attempt at a consensus of traditions in which a place was found for everybody's views, including those of the observer! With the growing influences of the eastern European churches and the diversity of Third World churches, including those of doubtful Christian orthodoxy, this search for consensus is breaking down. Outwardly it might appear that the goal of the ecumenical movement in the visible and sacramental unity of the churches is being slowly achieved, but in reality a true unity of faith is being lost. The dangers of apostasy and syncretistic theology remain as acute as ever. On the surface Nairobi was an improvement on Uppsala, but the very noticeable ignoring of biblical authority and of any serious theological discussion, causes me to doubt whether the gain was substantial.

The very structure of such a mammoth Assembly makes genuine democratic proceedings almost impossible. The gap between the obvious goals that the Secretariat had set for the Assembly and the concerns of the participants was noticeable. The reasonably strong evangelical participation received little visibility either in the plenary sessions or in the leadership of the sectional groups. John Stott's eight-minute reply on evangelism was the one clear exception! The fundamental unity and clear but limited goals of the equally large Lausanne Congress stood out in sharp contrast to Nairobi.

The WCC faces an identity crisis. The Assembly was ambivalent in its attitude on how far the WCC exists to reflect the concerns of the member churches and how far it exists in its own right as a prophetic voice leading the churches to a fresh understanding of their mission. The trend to theological radicalism and left-wing politics in the Secretariat was evident in the choice of plenary speakers, but among the participants, particularly those from Europe, there was a decided conservative reaction and a desire to give a much stronger emphasis to evangelism than the organizers of the Assembly had originally planned. Only the future will tell how responsive the Secretariat is to this concern of the member churches.

All such international conferences raise the fundamental issue of whether the expenditure of time, energy and finance on such a large gathering is justified especially when the consensus approach offers so little clarity in its message to the churches. Perhaps the future lies in smaller gatherings organized on a national or regional scale with defined and limited goals and a stronger measure of fundamental agreement among the participants.

The authority and use of Scripture

The Assembly was projected as a celebration, a participation in the *praxis* of Jesus Christ freeing and uniting. The experience-centred approach of Bangkok was taken as a model for Nairobi. The small group Bible studies, the experimentation in worship of many traditions and the brilliant use of drama, dance, films and the daily wall newspaper all contributed to make Nairobi an experience in unity and liberation. The one-page message of

the Assembly to the world, *An Invitation to Prayer*, was a summary of what the Assembly had experienced together. It called for prayer to the Creator to help us conserve the earth's resources for future generations, to the God of love to help sustain world community, and to the God of hope to struggle against injustice. But there was no reference to the authority of Scripture or to the proclamation of the gospel to the lost.

The Assembly was also an attempt to find authority in the consensus of Christian traditions. The assumption was made that the New Testament is the record of the traditions of the early church and that these have been supplemented and enriched by the traditions of succeeding generations of Christians. The Moderator, M. M. Thomas, offered a synthesis of ecumenical, orthodox, catholic and evangelical traditions, especially in the area of evangelism and mission. Yet, the orthodox delegations were intransigent in their insistence on the primacy of the traditions of the first six centuries as the only basis for eucharistic unity. In a somewhat triumphal spirit Dr Philip Potter spoke of the ecumenical tradition as embracing the whole *oikoumenē* with only the Roman Catholic Church to be gathered in. He made no reference to the vast numbers of conservative evangelicals who stand outside the ecumenical movement, or to those regions of the world, such as Latin America, where only a very small minority of the churches of the region belong to the WCC.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Assembly was the minimal emphasis given in the papers and reports to the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God. The crisis of faith in the WCC is clearly one of authority. The history of the ecumenical movement reveals a clear shift in its attitude to and use of the Bible. The founders of the WCC believed the Bible was normative for their message to the world and the unity of the Bible was assumed. The biblical-theology school, dominated by Barth, which deeply influenced early ecumenical thinking, reached a high-water mark at the New Delhi Assembly in 1961, where the phrase 'according to the Scriptures' was added to the simple doctrinal statement of the WCC. The givenness of the Bible as a testimony to salvation history and its uniqueness were stressed. Bible study had a central place in the New Delhi Assembly's programme.

The fourth conference of the Faith and Order Commission at Montreal in 1963 proved a watershed in WCC thinking about Scripture. Käsemann denied the unity of New Testament ecclesiology and raised the hermeneutical problem of the relevance of the biblical message to the modern world. The Bristol meeting of the Faith and Order Commission in 1967 further questioned the unity of Scripture and interpreted the Bible as a variety of traditions and insights which must be examined, each in its own cultural setting. There was no agreement on whether the Bible was normative, or a product of the traditions of the early church, or only one element in the complexity of Christian truth. The Uppsala Assembly reflected the same uncertainty. A study report was presented to the Faith and Order Commission at Louvain in 1971, in which the content of the faith was further questioned. The inspiration of the Bible was held to be its inspiring character. The report asks, 'Why should not Basil, Augustine, Thomas, Luther, or some modern author be inspired too? Surely it was their work of interpretation that led to the Bible speaking again with fresh authority?'

This loss of the authority of Scripture as normative produced a hermeneutical crisis. The New Delhi approach to hermeneutics as 'map-reading', by which the acts of God in biblical history provide a clue to understanding the present world, was gradually replaced by a situation hermeneutic in which the cultural content was the controlling factor. The cultural life situation determines the use made of the Bible and imposes its own unity on it. At Nairobi the new hermeneutic was evident in numerous ways. The passages selected for the small group Bible studies under the theme 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites' were chosen to illustrate the theme of human liberation, and the perspectives of the biblical writers adapted to this 'relational centre'. It was a reversal of historic evangelical hermeneutics.

The new hermeneutic was applied in an imaginative way in the parable of the prodigal son presented by the United Bible Societies. The dynamic-equivalent principle of translation was not only applied to specific cultural metaphors such as 'he fell on his neck', but also to the basic goal of the parable. The presentation suggested that the younger son was right to break with his father in the interests of self-determination and the older son was right to stand up to his father and that the parable is an open-ended story to show how the father can keep both sons. While these insights reflect accurately the tensions in modern family life, it can be seriously questioned whether any valid exegesis of the passage can support them.

The cultural context rather than the biblical message dominated the addresses of all the plenary sessions with the exception of Bishop Arias' paper

on Evangelism. In the opening position paper by M. M. Thomas, the Moderator of the Assembly and Chairman of the Central Committee of the WCC, I noted only one reference to the text of Scripture, in what was a theological and well-documented review of the issues before the Assembly. Again the report of Philip Potter, the General Secretary, and Robert McAfee Brown's address, 'Who is this Jesus Christ who Frees and Unites?', began with scriptural exposition but soon left it to deal with issues of social, economic and political oppression. None of the women speakers in 'Women in a Changing World', nor Prime Minister Manley in his address 'From the Shackles of Domination and Oppression', nor Professor Charles Birch in his address 'Creation, Technology and Human Survival' made more than a passing reference to the text of Scripture. Many of these authors quoted profusely from human authors and UN documents, but remained silent on the Word of God.

The use of Scripture in the sectional reports varied considerably. Section I, 'Confessing Christ Today', gave serious attention to Scripture while others, particularly Section IV, 'Education for Liberation and Community', and Section V, 'Structures of Injustice and Struggles for Liberation', had no reference to Scripture whatever. Similarly, it was disturbing that no attempt was made to deal with biblical principles or with passages of Scripture that had given rise to conflicting interpretations in any of the social issues debated, such as sexism, racism or the widening gap between rich and poor. It was evident that some speakers owed more to the theories of Karl Marx than to the Bible. I enjoyed the eight Bible study group sessions as times of sharing interpersonal experiences, but there was virtually no attempt at exegesis of the passage, in our case Romans 8. No reports on these groups were asked for in the plenary sessions.

Thus it was clear that the crisis of faith in the WCC is a crisis of authority. Any attempt to find a consensus of Scripture, tradition and experience will end in confusion. The subjectivism of the current approach to hermeneutics only worsens the crisis. The failure to relate Bible study to the discussion of political and social issues only accentuated the impression that Nairobi was a shadow United Nations, and as someone rather unkindly added, a 'third-rate one with few political experts'.

The unity of the church and the unity of mankind

A passionate call for visible unity has always been central to the ecumenical movement. Since Uppsala a new dimension has been added. The unity of the church is a sign of the unity of mankind. This expanded concern was given considerable attention at Nairobi.

New Delhi described God's will for unity in terms of one fully committed fellowship of all God's people in each place, in all places and in all ages. Uppsala emphasized that the search for unity is a quest for diversity in unity and continuity. The idea of conciliar fellowship was added by the Faith and Order Commission at Louvain. At Salamanca, Spain, in 1973, it was stated, 'The one church is to be envisaged as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship each local church possesses in communion with others the fulness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit.' At Nairobi the section report, 'What Unity Requires', expanded the theme of conciliar fellowship as an aspect of life of the one undivided church functioning at different levels. It is an 'interior unity' of churches separated by space, culture or time.

The Orthodox emphasis on a Christ-centred dimension to the church is welcome as an alternative to a secularized Christianity which reduces the doctrine of the church to that of a unified classless society with humanistic goals. On the other hand the Orthodox intransigence on the eucharist makes unity impossible. Although the Orthodox churches participated more fully in Nairobi than in Uppsala, with the election of Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad as one of the six Vice-Presidents of the WCC, the general disenchantment of the Orthodox churches with the prevailing secular mood of the WCC may mean that the Orthodox churches will find a new affinity with the church of Rome. It was significant that the protests against the secularized policies of the WCC, whether in plenary or in sectional sessions, came either from evangelicals or from Orthodox participants. With the continuing confusion among ecumenical Protestants, we may yet see evangelicals, biblical Roman Catholics and Orthodox believers standing together in defence of the biblical faith. The future of Roman Catholic relationships with the WCC remains uncertain. In his greetings to the Assembly, Pope Paul wrote 'May the assurance of our fraternal solidarity be a support to you in the coming years', but he gave no indication that the Roman Catholic Church would join the WCC in the foreseeable future. Many observers doubt that Rome will ever do so. At Nairobi the eucharist was

celebrated separately by the Orthodox and by the Protestant churches. At the one attempt at a united eucharistic celebration the Orthodox were present but did not receive the elements.

The Uppsala concept that the unity of the church is a sign of the unity of mankind was endorsed by Philip Potter when he said, 'I want to keep always before our minds the fact that the ecumenical movement is concerned with the *oikoumenē*, the whole human race, as it struggles to discover what it means to be human in the purpose of God.' In his address, 'Visible Unity as Conciliar Fellowship', Dr John Deschner argued that visible unity has to do with classism, racism, sexism and the segregation of the handicapped as much as it has to do with denominationalism. He and other speakers argued that this unity in the church is only the forerunner of the unity of mankind. Dr Robert McAfee Brown of California noted that Jesus Christ divides as well as unites, but even here he was thinking more of the division between the oppressed and the oppressor. Brown asserted that Jesus is only provisionally the divider, for in the end he will unite the whole human family. This universalistic hope had no eschatological content. There was no distinction between the kingdom of God now and the kingdom of God to come when the King returns. The Assembly was sadly silent on the themes of the wrath of God and the final judgment and heaven and hell.

This emphasis on a secular eschatology meant that the leadership of the Assembly, impatient with any concept of gradual reform, was open to the idea of violence in order to bring about radical change in society. On the models of the church-state alliances in eastern Europe and in Zaire, it was evident that many Third World leaders, and Africans in particular, were looking to governments to support their programmes for the unification of the church and for the achievement of social goals. I fear we are seeing the beginning of a return to a Constantinian era in which the church is in danger of losing its prophetic role against corruption in national politics and of becoming a partner in the restriction of religious liberty and freedom to propagate the Christian faith. We may see increasing persecution against religious minorities. The vigorous defence by the Russian delegates of their own government's and church's concept of human freedom, and their total rejection of a letter to the Assembly by two dissident Orthodox members appealing against the ill-treatment of religious prisoners in psychiatric clinics and nursing homes, was a warning to all at Nairobi. In the post-Nairobi era powerful church groups may seek political support for the enforcement of policies of moratorium and the restriction of evangelism by evangelical groups. At the same time political rulers will use the churches as a tool in the interests of national unity.

The New Testament teaches that unity is always unity in truth and faithfulness to the apostolic witness. It warns against the spirit of anti-Christ and denounces false doctrines. As Dr Klaas Runia has noted, when we speak of the 'true church' we must also speak of the 'false church'. This the WCC refuses to do. Their over-stress on 'the sin of division' makes it difficult for them to speak against heresy. Fifteen new churches, all but one belonging to the Third World, were admitted to either full or associate membership of the WCC during the Assembly. In accepting them there was little emphasis given to orthodoxy in belief as a necessary factor in membership. African independent and splinter churches are applying for membership; will the WCC be able to reject those with syncretistic and heretical beliefs and practices?

The priority of evangelism

Since the merger of the International Missionary Council with the WCC at New Delhi, evangelism has received less and less attention. 'Uppsala', wrote Dr McGavran, 'has betrayed the two billion who do not yet know the gospel.' At Bangkok, programmes for dialogue with other religious faiths and politically motivated projects replaced the historic understanding of evangelism as the mission of the church. In the original planning for Nairobi, no provision was made for a section on world mission and evangelization; however, the impact of the Lausanne Congress on the WCC member churches meant that this traditional concern could not be ignored.

Despite the fact that Philip Potter had told the synod of Roman Catholic bishops in Rome in 1974, 'The conviction of the World Council of Churches has been that evangelization is the ecumenical theme *par excellence*,' he made no reference to evangelism in his general report to the Nairobi Assembly. He did speak of repentance and renewal of faith but this was in the context of the struggle for a shared life in community and for a just society. The plenary session on evangelism, however, was one of the highlights of the Assembly. Bishop Mortimer Arias of the Methodist Church in Bolivia, in the keynote address on 'That the World May Believe', reminded the Assembly that 'the intention to "stay together", which was the basis of the World Council, is secondary to the indispensable task of the Church of Christ: the

evangelization of the world'. He referred to the 2,700 million who do not know Christ and live under global ideological or religious systems. He rightly stressed that the one medium for the communication of the gospel was the Christian and the Christian community.

John Stott's long-awaited reply was received with considerable enthusiasm by the Assembly. But it was disappointing that the planned plenary debate on the theme had to be cancelled as the allotted time for the session had expired. There was widespread reaction against an emotive and vindictive reporting of Stott's address in the Assembly newspaper *Target*. After acknowledging the positive contribution of Arias' address and a sympathetic reference to the twenty-seven theses of the document *Evangelism in Latin America Today*, Stott questioned whether the Bishop's address was typical of recent ecumenical utterances. He noted, 'It seems to many of us that evangelism has now been largely eclipsed by the quest for social and political liberation.' Stott made five affirmations of what the World Council needed to recover. He called for a recognition of the lostness of man and the judgment of God, confidence in the one revealed gospel, conviction concerning our stewardship to proclaim the uniqueness of Christ, a sense of urgency about the priority of evangelism, and a personal experience of Jesus Christ. In a final word that applied to all of us he said, 'I sometimes wonder if the greatest of all hindrances to evangelism today is not the poverty of our own spiritual experience. True evangelism is the spontaneous overflow of a heart full of Christ.'

The report of the section 'Confessing Christ Today' was undoubtedly the best statement of the Assembly. It affirmed the Church's evangelistic responsibility and called upon the churches to confess Christ alone as Saviour and Lord. It stressed the costliness of conversion and discipleship and deplored cheap conversions without ethical consequences. It declared, 'We regret that some reduce liberation from sin and evil to social and political dimensions, just as we regret that others limit liberation to the private and eternal dimension.' The report spoke with sensitivity on the many economic, political and ecclesiastical structures that obscure the confession of Christ and which themselves are oppressive and dehumanizing. It emphasized both personal and communal confession of Christ, the importance of worship and a Christ-centred life-style. At least a third of the participants in the Assembly asked to be assigned to this section, indicating a widespread desire for a spiritual emphasis in the Assembly. It is hoped that this report will have an effective influence on the member churches and we hope the WCC Secretariat will press the many practical recommendations of the report upon the churches. With an over-committed programme and shrinking income the WCC faces a crisis in the priorities of its programme.

On the negative side some of the theological assumptions embedded in the presentation and discussion of evangelism were disturbing. At times Bishop Arias slipped into an incipient universalism. He described his experience of an integrated evangelistic programme of proclamation and action among atheistic Bolivian tin-miners struggling to rise above their oppressive working conditions. 'All that was missing was the naming of the Name and we had to recognize that perhaps these people had more of Christ in them than we who spoke in his name', he said. He echoed the idea of anonymous Christianity when he said, 'To evangelize is to help men to discover the Christ hidden in them and revealed in the gospel. All men and all human values are destined to be recapitulated in Christ.' 'Universalism,' replied John Stott, 'fashionable as it is today, is incompatible with the teaching of Christ and his apostles, and is a deadly enemy of evangelism.'

In line with current ecumenical language, the Bishop also argued for a holistic and integral approach to evangelism. He endorsed Emilio Castro's statement that 'social justice, personal salvation, cultural affirmation, church growth, are all seen as integral parts of God's saving act'.

In a significant document entitled *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites* prepared by the elders and deacons of the Nairobi Baptist Church as an evangelical response to the pre-Assembly documents, the authors made the important distinction between the soteriological purpose of evangelism and the ethical concerns of social justice. While evangelism and social action are not exclusive of each other, they must not be confused. Nairobi did little to clear this confusion, so evident at Bangkok. The present ecumenical trend of including all of God's mission in the world as 'salvation' is but another form of the liberal social gospel, and parallels the controversy in the medieval church on the holistic nature of faith and works. The Chicago Declaration, 1973, is a significant evangelical contribution on salvation and ethics, and deserves careful study.

Another disturbing factor in the discussion on evangelism was the attempt by M. M. Thomas to synthesize the findings of recent consultations on evangelism, namely Bangkok, 1973, Lausanne, 1974, the Bishops' synod in Rome, 1974, and the

Orthodox Consultation at Bucharest, 1974. Although he noted that Lausanne clearly distinguished between evangelism and social action, Thomas argued that these consultations were agreed in their affirmation of the comprehensive nature of salvation. To my mind the theological assumptions and defined goals of Bangkok and Lausanne are as different as cheese is from chalk, and it is impossible to gloss over these differences. It was significant that Thomas's call for 'a Christ-centred syncretism' caused some embarrassment to the Assembly.

Seeking community: the common search of people of various faiths, cultures and ideologies

The section under this heading dealt with the goal of mission and with dialogue between living faiths, which is a very sensitive area in contemporary ecumenical thinking. Although Metropolitan Gregorias (Paul Verghese) of India made it clear that the purpose of this section was to seek world community and not to debate dialogue, the interrelation between the two is such that one could not be discussed without the other. For Dr S. J. Samartha, Director of the Programme for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, the concern for the unity of mankind and world community replaces evangelism as the primary concern of the WCC. He claims that the impact of eastern religions on western culture and the decreasing influence of Christianity in many countries has intensified the desire for accepting religious plurality and the necessity for co-operation between religious communities. As evidence of this concern a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jew, a Muslim and a Sikh were invited as guests to participate in the reality of religious plurality. Some of their insights were incorporated in the report.

The search for a theological basis for world community proved unsatisfactory in the light of the total absence of any attempt at biblical exegesis. In the desire to minimize doctrinal differences and to maximize social involvement at the community level, the vertical, spiritual, dimensions of the debate were completely over-shadowed by the horizontal. Some participants wanted to describe the concern for global community as 'wider ecumenism'; others felt that the term 'ecumenical' should be restricted to inter-Christian dialogue and that the wider dialogue should be referred to as an inter-religious one.

The presuppositional thinking of the leaders of this section was never openly acknowledged. It is, however, clear that a very significant change has taken place in ecumenical thinking. Hendrik Kraemer's stress on the 'discontinuity' between the religions of man and the revelation of God, which dominated the WCC since the Tambaram Conference, has given way to a sympathetic understanding of the universality of God's revelation. The emergence of a theology of 'a cosmic Christ' at the New Delhi Assembly and the popularizing of 'anonymous Christianity' by Karl Rahner and others, are factors that have prepared the way for a wider acceptance of a relativistic theology. In this climate there is little sympathy for a unique and final revelation in Christ made known through the written Word of God as the only basis for the salvation of man.

The assumption that special revelation is only a particular case of general revelation has always been the hallmark of religious syncretistic thinking. This was reflected in the discussion on common spirituality which some defined as 'seeking to understand with empathy the dimensions of worship, devotion and meditation in the religious tradition and practice of the partners'. Others rejected the term empathy on the grounds that spirituality is not a neutral factor. Christian prayer, for example, cannot be assimilated into other forms of spirituality. The final draft warned against the demonic in any religious or spiritual tradition and expressed a pastoral concern for those who feel threatened by the hazards of sharing spirituality.

A last-minute addendum to the report presented to the plenary session was a preamble to the introduction which gave a welcome emphasis on the need to proclaim the great commission, to recognize the *skandalon* of the gospel and to oppose any form of syncretism 'incipient, nascent or developed'. Strong opposition to this warning came from a number of Asian theologians, some of whom argued that Christianity itself was essentially syncretistic.

In the discussion in this section there was sharp debate on the nature, if any, of Jesus Christ's work in other religions, and also over the nature and use of dialogue. Raymond Panikkar's statement in the preparatory document that the Christian 'puts his trust in truth. He goes unarmed and ready to be himself converted. He may lose his life; he may also be born again', was parallelled by Dr Samartha's statements in a press conference.

In the areas of culture and ideologies the sectional report reflected many valuable insights shared by participants in the discussions. It stressed the diversity of culture, the secularity of technological culture, the continuity between village and city cultures. The belief that Jesus Christ both affirms and judges culture, that the church is

embodied in culture but not incarnate in it, are some of the contributions that evangelical participants were able to make to the report. It was rightly noted that the present disunity of Christians makes a mockery of the new community in Christ as a model for world community. The discussion on ideologies and the search for community was dominated by participants from Eastern Europe and Cuba. The challenge of Marxist socialism enabling the church to see its own oppressive structures was discussed. Many questions were raised but few answers given. Unfortunately there was virtually no discussion on biblical eschatology, without which any seeking of world community can only lead to a false utopia.

Christianity and cultural identity

The relationship of Christianity to national culture was a recurring theme that pervaded many aspects of the work of the Assembly. The section on Education for Liberation and Community spoke of alienation from culture and national history, and warned that educational systems and institutions are often mirror images of society, reinforcing its practices and values. The increased Third World participation in the Nairobi Assembly brought into sharp focus the tension between westernized Christianity and national aspirations for self-identity and unity. The urge to harmonize the plurality of cultures in the interests of Christian unity and world community surfaced again and again in group and plenary discussions and in experimentation in forms of worship. It appeared to many observers that the passion for cultural identity eclipsed the concern for faithfulness to biblical truth.

The Assembly was made a platform to vent feelings of resentment against the missionary movement as being western, triumphalistic and neo-colonialistic and the forerunner of new patterns of oppression and of sterile forms of theological understanding. While it is true that the missionary movement has sometimes been an unwitting tool of western colonialism and has been insufficiently sensitive to cultural values that are consistent with the biblical revelation, the contribution of the missionary movement in sacrificial service and compassion for suffering and oppressed peoples was unfortunately not recognized at Nairobi.

Ecumenical preoccupation with the plurality of gospels and with cultural theologies was very evident. The black theology of North America and South Africa, emphasizing black consciousness and the recovery of the dignity and power of the black man in self-knowledge, was given a sympathetic hearing. Similarly with the liberation theologies of Latin America and Asia. African theology, emphasizing the dignity of the African through the rediscovery of African culture and practices in African traditional religions, naturally received the greatest attention at Nairobi. Professor John Mbiti, a leading exponent of African theology, advocates transposing the immensely religious traditional life of African people into a Christian life-style in order to fill the vacuum created by modern technological society. The late Dr Byang Kato, General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar, expressed his concern that the sources for African theology are increasingly African traditional religions rather than the Bible. In the attempt to interpret the pre-Christian and pre-Muslim African experience of their gods, Kato saw African theology heading for syncretism and universalism. He declared that it is not black theology we need, but the application of Christian theology to the African situation. 'It is not a black Jesus or a black god we want, but obedience to the omnipotent God of the Bible.'

Two events that took place during the Assembly illustrate this tension. The All-Africa Conference of Churches, the co-ordinating structure for ecumenical activities in Africa, took time out of the Assembly for an elaborate and well-prepared ceremony of laying the foundation stone for their proposed continental headquarters, estimated to cost twelve million shillings, located on the outskirts of Nairobi. The colourful ceremony, involving several professional dance groups, centred around the chief guest, President Kenyatta. The proceedings had the aura of a political event rather than one called to give glory to God. The rough-hewn foundation stone dug from Lake Turkana on the Kenya-Ethiopia border, where archaeologists have found the oldest human fossils, symbolized that Christianity was being built on the pre-historic civilizations of Africa. The President spoke of the impact of pre-Christian knowledge of our fathers, which influenced and shaped early Christianity in North Africa. He called for the Africanization of the church and appealed for a return to the genius of authentic cultural traditions. As an observer I felt that Christianity in Africa was in danger of becoming a tool for the furtherance of national aspirations and the uniformity of culture and religion.

The second event was the play *Muntu*, presented on the second day of the Assembly. The AACC had commissioned a Ghanaian playwright, now working with the University of Nairobi, to present his interpretation of what Africa's past had to say to

Africa's present. Muntu, the word for man in several African languages, and his sons and daughters are searching for the essence of being free and for community identity. The play opens with scenes in the pre-Christian era symbolizing man's harmony with nature and the rhythm of the seasons. Comparative peace and happiness reign in the tribal society. The modern tragedy begins with the arrival of the Christian missionary holding the cross in one hand and a gun in the other, followed by traders offering bargains in silks, cottons, and with guns and liquor, and by a mining engineer grasping for gold and diamonds, alongside merciless Arab slave traders. The missionary, eager for mass conversions, limits his interests to the spiritual while the colonists defraud the Africans of their land and turn them into slaves. This in turn leads to a second cycle of oppression in which Muntu's second son becomes a ruthless military dictator oppressing his own people. In their increasing alienation the people long for the days of their ancestors. At last Muntu himself returns to revive the old religious pattern and a powerless messiah, Nana, synthesizing Christian and pagan traditions, hovers in the background. The play ends abruptly with despair. Nothing which Africa has learnt or suffered has brought back harmony. The future is dark and unknown. The play raised many important issues but gave a one-sided interpretation of Christianity in Africa. The implicit call to return to pre-Christian culture is no answer to the complexity of the modern world.

The call for moratorium, which has become a major issue in ecumenical thinking since Bangkok, received surprisingly little direct attention during the Assembly, though the AACC had asked for it to be put on the agenda. Evangelicals are not opposed to moratorium rightly understood, if in particular situations it leads to the strengthening of national leadership, a new thrust in evangelism and church growth and the release of resources for unevangelized areas. The Lausanne Covenant drew attention to this point. The Theological Commission of the AEAM, meeting in Nairobi prior to the WCC Assembly, published a statement asking for a theological clarification of the call for moratorium. Unfortunately the statement was given little publicity during the Assembly and provoked little discussion.

The struggle for liberation and the quest for human development

Undoubtedly the main focus in the planning of the Nairobi Assembly was the theme of liberation from political, economic, social and personal oppression. This holistic interpretation of liberation articulated at Bangkok pervaded every session of the Assembly. We were faced with the enormity of institutional evils and confronted with the specifics of oppression. As evangelicals we were convicted of our over-generalizations which often do little more than maintain the *status quo*. At the same time we were appalled by the lack of awareness of God's sovereignty in the world and that he alone can save individuals and nations from destruction. It was a heyday for Pelagianism.

The issues raised were selective. Racism continued to be the number one item on the agenda. Professor Brown pre-empted the issue with a self-condemnation of himself as one who was white, a male, a member of the affluent class and a citizen of the USA, all of which he called 'a litany of shame'. The Programme to Combat Racism, which was instituted since the Uppsala Assembly, was endorsed, and criticism of the misuse of its funds for violent programmes of liberation largely muted. Racism in South Africa was once again singled out for attack and various embargoes proposed. Several multi-national companies were named and condemned for their technical and financial involvement in nuclear collaboration with South Africa. It appears that any hope of change through peaceful reform has been abandoned.

Resolutions calling for the observance of fundamental human rights in several parts of the world were adopted. In Latin America, details of oppression were listed and the governments of Argentina and Chile were singled out for special mention. World powers were asked to respect the autonomy and territorial integrity of Angola. The three liberation movements were only mildly criticized for their failure to establish a unified government along peaceful lines. The rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination were recognized but there was no condemnation of oppressive Arab economic policies nor of the PLO's goal to eliminate Israel as a nation. A plea for the respecting of the holy places in Jerusalem and freedom for each community to worship was accepted. The Assembly appealed for the implementation of the Helsinki agreement; an amendment expressing concern about the restriction of religious liberty in the USSR was carried by an overwhelming majority, but then, following strong protests from the Russian delegation, was revoked, and after much behind-the-scenes debate and a special evening session a new motion was passed deleting the name of USSR and asking for a report at the first meeting of the Central Committee. In this failure of nerve, many delegates felt the WCC had lost its credibility and

forsaken its prophetic function by its selective indignation.

Sexism was singled out as a major social evil. It was argued that as long as women were excluded from decision-making processes, they would be unable to realize their full partnership with men, both in the church and in society. A change was needed in the theological understanding of equal participation in society, and in relationships, particularly in the family. There was a strong voice in favour of full ordination of women to the ministry. The Assembly set a commendable example in responding to this concern. 20% of the delegates were women, two of the six new Vice-Presidents are women and women shared equally with men in chairing the sessions. In all the presentations on sexism, however, no attempt was made to give a biblical basis to the new stance and only one speaker recognized the existence of deliberate sin in sexism.

The growing gap between the rich and poor nations was rightly recognized as a major issue of our time. The only solution offered to this evil was that of radical, socialistic democracy. This was particularly true of the brilliant address by the Hon. Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica. Some of the suggestions for public participation and peoples' tribunals had a familiar Marxist ring about them.

A plenary address on 'Creation, Technology and Human Survival' by Professor Charles Birch, a biologist from Sydney, was by far the most significant paper in the area of human justice. He saw the world as on a titanic collision course. Only a change in direction could avert total disaster. In a well-documented address he outlined five threats to survival, namely, population explosion, which will add a billion people in the next 15 years; food scarcity, in which the present 300 million people now living at starvation level will increase to a billion within thirty-five years; the rapid depletion of non-renewable resources such as fossil fuels; global pollution which is doubling every fourteen years; and the threat of war with stock-piling of atomic bombs. He argued that technology is an uncertain blessing and he appealed for a sustainable global society with zero population growth, zero growth in consumable goods and zero growth in pollution. He failed to deal adequately with the problem of war.

Birch is an admirer of process theology. Arguing that ecology is an essential element in salvation and evangelism, he put his hope in man's recognizing the intrinsic value of nature in which God is present. His appeal for a change of heart towards nature failed to grapple with the problem of sin against God and ignores the ultimate hope of the second coming of Christ and the new heaven and new earth.

In personal discussion, Dr Birch admitted that his position was basically one of panentheism, which sees God in everything and everything in God, an interlocking relationship between the Personal and the All. Panentheism closes the gap between the Creator and the creature, blurs the nature of sin and has no place for a biblical eschatology. It undergirded the neo-Platonism of the medieval mystics and is central to the theologies of Teilhard de Chardin and J. A. T. Robinson. It is at the heart of the movement towards universalism and syncretism and it constitutes the most fundamental theological crisis facing the WCC today.

A conclusion

The WCC faces an acute crisis of faith and ethics. David Edward commented on Uppsala, 'For the sake of the world, the next Assembly should be more theological.' This did not happen at Nairobi. Unless there is a return to truly biblical theology before the next Assembly the WCC ship is on a perilous course. As evangelical theologians we must act responsibly and by God's grace address ourselves to the issues of our contemporary world with a prophetic voice. But we must do more. Our doctrinal understanding must begin with the Word of God and not with the cultural context. We will recognize the priority of a fully-orbed theology of world evangelization which takes seriously the lostness of man. We need a fresh understanding of the church and its discipling of the nations in relation to the kingdom of God. We need to recover the first article of the Constitution of the WCC clarifying the relationship of God the Creator to God as Saviour, and a renewed emphasis on the cross, the resurrection and salvation by grace alone through faith. In the power of the Holy Spirit we need a new, confident but humble trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ enabling us to stand against temptation, persecution and death itself. We are called to be faithful interpreters and communicators of the one gospel. This will inevitably involve costly self-sacrifice.

It is of supreme importance that we evangelicals who acknowledge the full authority of Scripture stay together as a world-wide community, recognizing the diversity of gifts and ministries that God has given to each of us. We must support those evangelicals who, in good conscience and as belonging to member churches of the WCC, accept their

responsibility to maintain an evangelical witness within the ecumenical structures. We must equally support those evangelicals, who in good conscience, will continue to remain totally apart from the WCC and who through strictly evangelical structures proclaim the whole counsel of God. May Jesus Christ free and unite us to be his ambassadors of judgment and hope to a dying world.

Shalom: content for a slogan

David Gillett

David Gillett, who lectures in Mission and Old Testament at St John's College, Nottingham, England, takes another biblical term which is widely used in current theological writing, and subjects it to a careful word study to see whether its modern use matches its biblical meaning. The article is an expansion of one published in The Shaftesbury Project Newsletter, *no.* 11 *(October/November* 1975).

'Shalom': what do we mean?

' "All speak today of peace—we too," the statement often rings in our ears . . . "Leave me in peace," says the person who wants to have his rest. "Have peace in your heart," says the other who does not concern himself for the evil world. "Peace to all men who are of good will"—but not to the others who are of evil will. "Peace to the houses—not to the palaces," demand others. "There is peace only on the side of capitalism"—some say. "With Communism the only way one can relate is with weapons in one's hand," say others. The more earnestly we hear all the voices, the more we recognize that it is not enough merely to praise peace, to extol readiness for peace, and to bless every speech of peace.'[1]

Here Jürgen Moltmann expresses well both the urgent desire for peace in our world and the confusion people feel in their search for it. It is a cry which many in the church are trying to take very seriously. How can we approach our mission in such a way that we speak relevantly to this most basic felt need of modern man? A very influential answer, that has gained wide acceptance during the last decade, is the idea that 'the goal of mission is the establishment of *shalom*'.

This view of mission has within it a deeply humane, loving and practical concern for the plight of real people (not always a mark of the Christian's attitude to the world), but at the same time it has a fundamental flaw. The danger with this very widely accepted definition of mission is that an Old Testament concept is turned into a slogan. From the standpoint of Old Testament theology and semantics this use of *shalom* is so imprecise, confused and selective that it is highly misleading.

[1] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Gospel of Liberation* (1973) p. 96.

What makes the situation of even greater concern is the fact that, if a word is used long enough, people tend to accept that it is being used correctly. Consequently some evangelicals are now beginning to use *shalom* in this way, accepting it as biblically accurate.

I believe that *shalom* has a valid and necessary place in any biblical understanding of salvation and mission; the urgent need, therefore, is to rescue it from further devaluation as an all-embracing slogan which is either misleading or almost contentless.

Only half a meaning

The following extracts from *Dialogue with the World* by J. G. Davies[2] illustrate some of the basic presuppositions behind this use of *shalom*.

> '*Shalom* is a social happening, an event in interpersonal relations. It can therefore never be reduced to a simple formula; it has to be found and worked out in actual situations. The goal towards which God is working, *i.e.* the ultimate end of his mission, is the establishment of *shalom*, and this involves the realization of the full potentialities of all creation and its ultimate reconciliation and unity in Christ.
>
> 'If the goal of mission is the establishment of *shalom*, we are required to enter into partnership with God in history to renew society. When the Freedom Workers go to prison in the southern states of the USA because of their part in the struggle for civil rights, they are participating in mission and seeking to erect signs of *shalom*.'

The first and fundamental error is a careless approach to the use of an Old Testament word. There is a failure to treat the word *shalom* seriously. It is wrenched out of context and the various root meanings which it can have in different contexts are used as the authoritative and collective sense of the word in the Old Testament. This reveals a simplistic etymology and a naive approach to Old Testament study. 'The task of a word study is to follow the development and the change of meaning, not in artificial isolation from the life of Israel, but within the larger framework of the history of the institution.'[3] Von Rad[4] notes two further cautions in the study of *shalom*. As it has so many variant meanings, one can use only verses in which the meaning of *shalom* is obvious from the immediate context. There are also many other passages where the thought of *shalom* is central but where the word itself does not occur; these also need to be studied. Von Rad's experience of the difficulties in tackling the meaning of *shalom* should make anyone extremely cautious and thorough before using the word to express one of the central tenets of a theology. 'It has a certain inner impreciseness, so that the translator who has no such many-sided term at his command is often at a loss to know whether in these passages, since *shālôm* is a gift of God's grace to his restored people, he should use the more concrete "well-being", the more obvious "peace", or the theologically more comprehensive "salvation".'[5] The richness of an Old Testament word consists not in the conglomerate of several meanings from differing contexts but in a careful study which differentiates the various contexts (historical, theological, and literary) in which the word occurs.

This imprecise and over-general use of *shalom* in its this-world-orientated sense[6] means that the content of mission is often seen exclusively in terms of social and political change. Not only is this a theology based on partial meanings of Old Testament words selected according to certain doctrinal presuppositions, but it also claims to be a Christian theology while failing to take account of the fulfilment and particularity which the concept of 'peace' receives in the person of Christ.

On the basis of such a fundamental hermeneutical leap, *shalom* can then be used (as it is in the first extract from J. G. Davies above) as the basis for a universalism quite out of keeping with the New Testament doctrine of salvation. The consequence of thus bypassing the fulfilment of the Old in the New effectively means that *shalom* is 'secularized' —wrenched out of the context of salvation history. To summarize, the process is to take part of an Old Testament concept and treat it as the full biblical truth; the result is a view of the church's mission as a socio-political task which fits easily alongside

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[2] *Dialogue with the World* (London, 1967), pp. 14, 15. J. G. Davies expresses similar views in *Worship and Mission* (London, 1966). His position is representative of that held by many in WCC circles since the mid-sixties and first clearly outlined in a series of papers produced by a WCC study group and published as *Planning for Mission* (1966), ed. Thomas Weiser.

[3] B. S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London, 1962). In the light of James Barr's work *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London, 1961) and J. F. A. Sawyer's *Semantics in Biblical Research* (London, 1972), one would surely not expect to see an Old Testament word used in such a cavalier fashion as *shalom* often is.

[4] In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, II, p. 402.

[5] *Op. cit.*, p. 405.

[6] It is noteworthy that the word *shalom* is used rather than *eirēnē*, the New Testament equivalent: the former more adequately expresses the broad this-world-orientated view.

the this-worldly, near-utopian universalism characteristic of this view of mission.[7]

To be fair to an Old Testament concept

Etymologically, *shalom* is a multi-coloured word. The root meaning is 'to be whole, uninjured, undivided', and it is used in an enormous variety of ways from describing everyday things of domestic life to the most profound religious expectations. At its most basic it describes general well-being, a wholly satisfactory condition (Gn. 15: 15; 26: 29; Ex. 18: 23; Jdg. 19: 20; 1 Sa. 16: 5; 2 Sa. 18: 28; Is. 55: 12; Je. 34: 5; *etc.*). It is used of bodily health (Ps. 38: 3; 73: 3; Is. 57: 18f.),[8] as a greeting (Gn. 29: 6; 43: 27; 1 Sa. 6: 14f.), and as a word of salvation (Is. 54: 10; 60: 17; Je. 29: 11; Ezk. 34: 25).

When we consider *shalom* not only as a word but as a theological concept, we become aware of marked historical developments in usage and meaning at several points. Bearing this process in mind, the following can be isolated as the main features of *shalom*.

a. Shalom *is a positive concept*

Originally it had nothing to do with the passive or the negative. It described peace between friends, it signified that everything was as it should be (Ex. 18: 23): if you have *shalom*, then you have everything. In essence, therefore, *shalom* did not mean 'absence of war', and this negative meaning never became central in Hebrew thought. In the great days of fighting Israel, *shalom* meant victory in war, the positive goal of the conflict for Yahweh. Gideon's words to the men of Penuel are a far cry from the passive quiescent understanding we have of peace: 'When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower' (Jdg. 8: 9). When this older concept of the fighting Israel faded away, the absence of war was seen as part of the eschatological hope (*e.g.* Is. 2: 4) but *shalom* never became identified with the negative idea.

b. Shalom *is a communal concept*

There are more passages where *shalom* is used of groups than of individuals, and we are therefore justified in concluding that, at heart, peace has to do with community with others (*e.g.* Ps. 29: 11). 'Peace means total harmony within the community. It is founded upon order and permeated by God's blessing, and hence makes it possible for men to develop and increase, free and unhindered on every side.'[9] *Shalom*, therefore, denotes a relationship rather than a state, and thus we find it connected with the idea of covenant (Nu. 25: 12; Dt. 29: 19; Is. 54: 10; Ezk. 34: 25; 37: 26).

c. Shalom *is a religious concept*

At source, *shalom* is a gift of Yahweh and its religious use is foundational and primary. (In as far as it is used as a purely non-religious term, von Rad considers this a later development.) It is not surprising therefore to read that one of the names of the Messiah is *Shalom* (Is. 9: 6). But to say that *shalom* is a religious concept is emphatically not to say that it is essentially 'spiritual'. 'When we consider the rich possibilities of *shālôm* in the OT we are struck by the negative fact that there is no specific text in which it denotes the specifically spiritual attitude of inward peace.'[10] Tranquillity of mind is not the essential concept of religious peace that it is popularly thought to be. It is one of the positive gains of the modern slogan that it has rescued *shalom*, peace, from the realms of pietism and quietism where it had slumbered so long and so unjustifiably.

d. Shalom *is conditional*

At its most forthright, 'There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked' (Is. 48: 22). *Shalom* is not an indiscriminate gift of Yahweh; he consciously withholds peace if the people are disobedient or rebellious (Is. 48: 18), and, conversely, when righteousness is present, *shalom* will follow (Is. 32: 16f.; Ps. 72: 7). The recurring mistake for the Israelite was to assume that *shalom* was his irrespective of his behaviour: 'Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away this day from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations, . . . one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, "I have *shalom*, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart." This would lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike' (Dt. 29: 1ff.).

[7] J. C. Hoekendijk, a former secretary of evangelism in the WCC, gives expression to the universalism typical of this approach to mission. 'The passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the Exodus for all men. Now the whole of mankind is delivered from bondage and brought into covenant with God. By the raising up of the New Man, Christ Jesus, every man has been made a member of the new mankind.' *The Church Inside Out* (London, 1967) p. 19.

[8] The uses of *shalom* to mean bodily health and to refer to salvation are at times very closely integrated (*e.g.* Je. 6: 14). This has obvious bearing on the current debate about the place of healing within the doctrine of salvation, a debate that coincides at several points with the socio-political questions which surround *shalom*.

[9] J. B. Bauer (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Biblical Theology*, II (London, 1970), p. 648, art. 'Peace' by Heinrich Gross.

[10] von Rad, *op. cit.* p. 406.

It is therefore quite illegitimate to use *shalom* as part of any progressive, universalistic view of mission and world history. Throughout the Old Testament *shalom* again and again occurs in the context of righteousness and judgment (Pss. 34: 14; 37: 37; 85: 10; Is. 60: 17; Zc. 8: 16). Justice means a right reciprocal relationship between man and man and between man and God. Consequently *shalom* involves a right relationship in both dimensions, and if we are aiming at only one of these then what we achieve will not be *shalom*, but the false hope of the faithless Israelite.

e. Shalom *is an eschatological-salvation concept*

Hebrew thought recognizes that *shalom* is the ideal state achieved only in the final age. Their hope of this future *shalom* included peace in the animal realm (Is. 11: 6-8), peace among men as individuals (Is. 11: 9), and peace among the nations (Is. 2: 2-4). Although *shalom* is God's gift now, its fullness is still firmly in the future.

In this respect *shalom* expresses the central thought of salvation in the Old Testament. We see the positive emphasis of *shalom* in the word *yāša'* (to save) which 'denotes general health, physical and spiritual, rather than actual separation from a particular enemy or danger.'[11] The connection with justice which we have seen with *shalom* is also present in the word *yāša'*: 'It is in a situation of injustice, and in particular unjust oppression of the chosen people, that a *môšîa'* is needed.'[12] And both words fit into the same eschatological hope that expects physical, spiritual, and social wholeness. It is thus quite appropriate to describe the goal of mission as *shalom* as this is expressive of the central expectation of salvation as it develops in the Old Testament—but it is an expectation that time and time again is fulfilled in part only in the succeeding events of Israel's history.

It was indeed one of the major tasks of the prophets to defend the eschatological dimension of salvation from the desire of many to make it a this-worldly expectation to be fulfilled completely in the here and now; this is seen in their attempt to distinguish between the true and false promises of peace (1 Ki. 22: 5-18). Particularly in the case of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the question 'What is *shalom*?' was the central point at issue between them and the false prophets (Je. 6: 14; 28: 9; Ezk. 13: 8-16; also Mi. 3: 5ff.). The false prophets did not proclaim peace as the final eschatological goal but as a present political possibility for Israel; they believed that all problems would be solved to the advantage of Israel so that they could live in a peace and prosperity guaranteed by Yahweh. They failed to see judgment in the present situation, and they were blind to the symbolism of the eschatological hope of salvation, interpreting everything as material blessing for the present. When today people fail to read the message of judgment in the present situation they inevitably fail to see much of the significance of biblical eschatology. 'The world's destiny, to him who has hope, is an absolute future of peace. But this may not and cannot be anticipated, only more and more closely approached.'[13]

Together, these five strands form the Old Testament concept of *shalom*, with its two distinctive features—a positive broadness and inclusiveness together with an eschatological particularity. Both of these aspects find fulfilment in the New Testament, but before we arrive at that we must note the channels through which the New Testament received the Hebrew concept.

Shalom in Greek and rabbinic thought[14]

The Septuagint uses more than twenty terms to translate *shalom*, but *eirēnē* is by far the most common; and inevitably the meaning of the more limited Greek word influenced their understanding of the Old Testament concept of *shalom*. In Greek, *eirēnē* meant, essentially, absence of war; it was seen as an interlude in an everlasting state of hostilities, and their more negative or passive concept of peace is reflected in the New Testament. At one point Paul uses peace in the freer sense of tranquillity of mind (Rom. 15: 13). But by far the greater transforming influence is found in the rabbinic use of *shalom*. These concepts in particular affect the New Testament understanding of peace.

(i) The rabbinic emphasis is on peace as opposed to strife between individuals, rather than between nations. The absence of peace between individuals in society becomes an even greater danger than idolatry. This emphasis is largely expressed in the New Testament as the love which should be seen between individual Christians in the church. Thus the distinctive New Testament concept of *agapē* takes on part of the area covered by *shalom* in the Old Testament.

(ii) Rabbinic literature develops the new idea of the relationship between man and God as being one of conflict and hostility. This enmity needs to become *shalom*. This new dimension injected into

[11] J. F. A. Sawyer, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
[12] J. F. A. Sawyer, 'What was a *môšîav*'?', *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965), p. 478.
[13] K. Rahner (ed.), *Sacramentum Mundi*, IV (1969), p. 382, art. 'Peace' by Julio Terán-Dutari.
[14] See further *TDNT*, II, pp. 406-411.

shalom means that, in the New Testament, the Godward dimension of the relationship of *shalom* is emphasized more than it was in the Old Testament.

(iii) Peace in the messianic age is specifically limited to concord in Israel. This is reflected in the New Testament teaching that alongside the expectation of peace the believer can expect bitter enmity outside the Christian community. 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Mt. 10: 34). 'I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (Jn. 16: 33).

Peace in the New Testament

Peace in the New Testament can be summarized as follows:

(i) Peace, in its widest sense, is the normal state of all things, the outward healthy state of affairs which corresponds to the will of God (1 Cor. 14: 33; Mk. 5: 34; Jas. 2: 16; *etc*).

(ii) Peace refers to the eschatological salvation of the whole man which comes from God (Lk. 1: 79; 2: 14; 19: 38, 42) and is effected through the Christ event (Eph. 2: 17f.; 6: 15; Heb. 13: 20).

(iii) Peace is the new relationship with God which replaces the former hostility (Rom. 5: 1, 10; Eph. 2: 14-17).

(iv) Peace describes the ideal relationship between people (Rom. 14: 17-19; 1 Cor. 7: 15; Eph. 4: 3; 2 Tim. 2: 22; Jas. 3: 18).

Shalom in Christian theology

Basically, we are justified in seeing the Old Testament concept of *shalom* as a legitimate expression of mission in the world because, apart from a slight readjustment of the boundaries of the word's meaning, *eirēnē* in the New Testament means what *shalom* means in the Old Testament.

In conclusion, as we relate this study to the modern missiological debate, two factors need emphasizing.

(i) *Shalom* is a Christological concept. The New Testament adds very little new content to *shalom* but it does describe accurately its extent and location. Jesus Christ does not bring a new concept of peace; rather, he is *shalom. Shalom* is still 'a social happening, an event in inter-personal relations' but the necessary locus and centre of this is the relationship with God through Christ.

(ii) *Shalom* is a future eschatological hope, not a practical political possibility for the present. As the eschatological goal of our mission, *shalom* in all its aspects must be the model of our activity. It is the direction in which God is going; it must also be the concept which inspires our evangelistic, political and social activity. But if we replace our future eschatological hope with some mere political programme of the present we shall be false prophets in our generation. It is true that the social and political are as much part of *shalom* (and hence salvation) as the spiritual, but all alike are part of an eschatological expectation and therefore realizable only imperfectly in the here and now.

The meaning of man in the debate between Christianity and Marxism Part 2

Andrew Kirk

The first part of this paper, published in the last issue of Themelios, *studied the Christian/Marxist debate and discussed the various facets of the Marxist view of man. Professor Kirk now goes on to outline a Christian critique of the Marxist view, and to suggest how the Christian church should relate its thought and practice to the Marxist challenge. A short list of the books which Professor Kirk has personally found most helpful in the study of Marxism is added as a guide for further study.*

4. The Christian critique of Marxist anthropology

Before attempting an evaluation of the debate between Christianity and Marxism concerning man, it is necessary to set out some of those problems which the Christian faith believes that the doctrine of Marx and his followers cannot resolve.

Apart from the abysmal ignorance that Marxism has shown in its polemic against Christianity,[79] somewhat improved as a result of the contemporary debate,[80] there are various areas of Marxist thought and various premises and consequences of its theory and practice which a Christian is forced to question very deeply. Some of these criticisms, naturally, would be shared by non-Christian philosophies; others belong exclusively to the Christian faith.

Returning again to Marx's concept of man we can discover both similarities to and differences from Christian anthropology.

a. Similarities between Marxist and biblical anthropologies

The similarities belong exclusively to the third and fourth stage of Marx's thought, as we developed it earlier. Man, according to the Bible, was created to work, to dominate the whole of creation. He is a creator in his own right, a labourer, an artist. The world was created, in part, for man. Man realizes himself, therefore, when he subjects it to his own design.

Moreover, the Bible agrees with Marx that a large part of man's alienation is manifested in man's domination of man through work: *e.g.* the Hebrews in Egypt (Ex. 1: 11–14; 5: 4–19); the prophetic condemnation of the impersonal buying and selling of wage labour (Is. 10: 1, 2; 58: 3, 4; Je. 8: 10; 22: 13–17; Am. 2: 6, 7; 5: 11, 12; Mic. 2: 1, 2); the traditions of the law which 'bind heavy burdens, hard to bear' (Mt. 23: 4); James' condemnation of man's exploitation of man by means of unjust wages, *etc.* For his part, Paul considers that work is a means of service towards one's brother, never a means of acquiring power or influence (Rom. 12: 6–8; 1 Cor. 9: 12–15; Phil. 4: 14–18; 2 Thes. 3: 11–13; Tit. 3: 14).

Also man in the Bible is a historical being. The Old Testament understanding of God effectively demythologizes every kind of nature religion with its cyclical view of history.[81] Abraham, for example, when he obeyed God, believing his promises, made history. He was responsible for a fundamental shift in world history. The biblical faith is also responsible for eradicating every kind of historical fatalism and determinism. Man, in collaboration with God, is the subject and not only the object of history. Moreover, resisting the strong influence of Greek thought, the Bible rejects the false dichotomy between two worlds, preferring to speak of the radical distinction which exists between two

[79] Well documented, for example, in the book by H.-G. Koch (see note 72), *passim; cf.* also I. Lepp, *op. cit.*, p. 80; Berdyaev, *op. cit.*, ch. VIII.

[80] Garaudy, for example, however, depends too much upon the heterodox speculations of Teilhard de Chardin for his interpretation of Christianity. This is due, perhaps, to the fact that the Jesuit's evolutionary optimism fits in well with the Marxist's concept of progress. For an interesting attempt to combine the two within the context of African culture *cf.* Leopold Senghor, *On African Socialism* (London, 1968).

[81] The investigation of Mircea Eliade (*op. cit.*) in this field is definitive. It is biblical faith which has given the world the idea of linear history. Even Engels recognized the part that Christianity has played in emancipating man from the irrational forces of nature.

different ages (*e.g.* Col. 1: 13; Rom. 12: 1, 2; Jn. 5: 24).[82]

b. Internal contradictions in the theoretical base of Marxist thought

The considerable similarities between certain aspects of Christian and Marxist anthropology ought to be further elaborated. These points of contact give the Christian-Marxist debate a programme which is rich in possibilities. At the same time there exist certain very serious discrepancies.

One of the greatest difficulties which Marx had to face in his theoretical thought was how to give an adequate theoretical base to his affirmation that man is the subject of history. His difficulty lies in the fact that a strong dose of determinism seems to underlie his whole system of thought.[83] For example, if the whole superstructure of human life (*i.e.*, its value systems, religion, political life, ideas, art, *etc.*) is the immediate consequence of man's economic situation and class-position in society, is not Marxist theory also part of this same superstructure and, therefore, equally conditioned? In other words there exists a rigorous logic at work in Marx's thought (and he himself is unable to avoid its consequences for his own system) when he asserts that the superstructure changes with the material circumstances of man.

If the actual position of the workers' movement is controlled by inflexible laws of history (whose discovery made Marx think that his analysis had somehow reached scientific status),[84] then the revolution can no longer be an inflexible demand of the historical process (*i.e.* predetermined) in those countries where the capitalist system has been greatly modified in favour of the working class: *it can only be a moral requirement.*[85] Moral duties from Marx's point of view, however, presuppose an idealist philosophy which he had already rejected in favour of dialectical materialism. In other words, according to Marx's most consistent thought, the capitalist system is not evil so much because it maintains unjust relationships between the owners of the means of production and the worker who sells his labour (for in that case, according to what transcendent norms would injustice be decided?) but rather because it is destined by history to disappear.[86]

This theoretical difficulty, with its notable practical consequences, poses itself as the central problem of the whole Marxist system. Both the originality and the central force of Marx's thought lies in his transformation of Hegel, Feuerbach and the French utopian socialists into a complete materialism: every kind of sacrifice for the new society is worth while because an objective analysis has already determined history's invariable direction. History, however, obstinately refuses to move in the direction which Marxist analysis has assigned for it, and so only *moral indignation* against the grave injustices inherent in every form of capitalist society is left as a source of action. But moral

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[82] This fact is determinative for the Christian's responsibility as a citizen in society. It can also help us to discern the true dimensions of the future.

[83] *Cf.* D. McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx*, pp. 31, 36.

[84] Concerning the so-called scientific status of Marxist theory we would like to make the following comments:
(i) No scientific statement is valid unless it is in agreement with controlled and verified observation; on the scientific method *cf.* K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*; *the Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London, 1969).
(ii) Marx himself was not an experimental scientist but a philosopher (his thesis for Jena University was written on a specific aspect of Greek philosophy) who believed that his description of the dialectical nature of history was closer to the facts than the speculations of Hegel and the observations of economists like Adam Smith and Ricardo.
(iii) The fact that many of his social-political statements have been proved false by the subsequent march of history tends to undermine a too precise claim to scientific methodology.
(iv) The false understanding of how the scientific method works and what it sets out to achieve has had disastrous results in Communist societies; *e.g.*, the medieval attitude to scientific investigation in Russia in the Stalin epoch, which still survives in certain difficulties which scientists in Russia face today. *Cf.* among other authors, Mendel, 'The formation and appeal of scientific socialism', in *Essential Works*, p. 3; R. Conquest, *op. cit.*, ch. VI; Girardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 185f. The greatest hope for a more humane Marxism seems to lie in the demythologizing of its pretended scientific base. Fortunately, certain contemporary Marxists are prepared to question it, *e.g.* I. Svítak, *op. cit.*, p. 25; L. Goldmann, *op. cit.*, p. 47. Kolakowski, *op. cit.*, p. 183, says 'the expectation that social sciences can be compared with mathematics in the sense that we can always proceed from one particular collection of facts to the same unequivocable answers is a chimera'.

[85] Lenin's most famous work, *The State and Revolution*, attempts to justify, over against 'orthodox' Marxists like Kautsky, his voluntary deviation from that course of history which Marx had predicted in the context of a certain 'moralism'. Lenin's decision to use peasants in a civil war in order to gain power and his decision to withdraw from the First World War are very interesting. They are but two examples of his many resolutions to bend history on the basis of a 'populist morality'; *cf.* Mendel, *op. cit.*, p. 97. This moralism is also the basis of every kind of guerilla activity which takes its cue from Lenin rather than from Marx. As such, it needs to be evaluated by standards which are strictly ethical. It has nothing whatsoever to do with certain so-called historical stages, a kind of 'Leninist dispensationalism'.

[86] It should be well noted that Marx, because of the attempt to universalize his theories, is obliged to personalize the word 'history'. His theoretical base in dialectical materialism, however, does not permit such a hypostatization; in fact it is solely due to his *a priori* philosophical dependence upon Hegel; *cf.* Berlin, *op. cit.*, ch. 6; Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 149. Farré, *op. cit.*, p. 28, says, 'If the word progress was eliminated from Marxist terminology, the whole system would disappear . . . the constant dialectical overcoming is what explains the Marxist enlightenment.'

indignation can never find its justification in mere historical analysis.

Another of Marx's great contradictions has to do with the relation between man and matter. This contradiction can be divided into two parts:

(1) Marx's theory that man's conscience is the reflexive part of nature suggests a naturalism rather than a humanism.[87] But such a theory does not offer an adequate explanation of the *origin* of this conscience. Without this explanation it is totally illegitimate to think of human history as a process which presupposes direction, purpose and progress. Moreover, man as the subject of his own history is really a sleight of hand, because there does not exist in Marxist theory a convincing explanation of the *cause* of his unique consciousness. Marx does not give us any clue why man is capable of objectively reflecting upon nature, of which he forms a part. Indeed, on the basis of dialectical materialism it would be extremely hard to find any theory which was able to silence the suspicion and fear that man's world and history are absurd.[88]

(2) The kind of reductionism that Marx infers—matter is the only originator of being and is infinite—does not provide him with any logical reason for concluding that the world is marching towards the fulfilment of some inherent purpose. Marx presupposes (and here he shows himself to be a post-Christian humanist[89]), that history progresses by means of the overcoming of various antagonisms in inter-personal relationships. If the world did not begin in space and time, however, there can be no guarantee that one day it will arrive at some decisive culminating-point, the end of pre-history. It is only the biblical doctrine of creation which has rescued man from the alienation of cyclical history and every form of pantheism. From where then does Marx derive his idea of purpose in history? It could equally logically be argued that, even granted that matter develops dialectically, causing man to arise in the process as a kind of inexplicable cosmic miracle, it does in fact repeat itself in the same acts and moments in successive periods. Marx never demonstrated that his theory of the evolution of man in society is any closer to reality than the idea of the 'eternal return'.[90]

In point of fact the idea of man's perfectibility is more theological than scientific, a position of faith.[91] It presupposes that history is fulfilling a command which has come to it from outside. This idea, however, belongs rather to the Hegelian anti-revolutionary speculation that whatever is is there by necessity.

We would deduce the following general conclusion from our study of the internal contradictions in Marx's theory; his ideas about the class struggle, the eschatological annihilation of classes in a qualitatively new society and the withering away of the state are pre-established ideological requirements, necessary in order to inject meaning into the historical process. No kind of sociological analysis, which claims to be scientific, could possibly furnish them.[92]

[87] *Cf.* Farré, *op. cit.*, p. 48; Girardi, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

[88] For a magnificently tragic picture of meaninglessness, *cf.* the essay by A. Camus, 'The Myth of Sysiphus'. Marxists might reply that concern with the origin of man is a typical sign of counter-revolutionary speculation. Nevertheless, (a) Marxism claims, on the basis of its dialectical materialism, to be able to give an account of the whole of life; *cf.* Schaff, *op. cit.*, p. 92; (b) Marx's anthropological statements about man's being the reflexive consciousness of nature and the subject of history are equally philosophical speculations (or, if preferred, insights); they are not based on controlled scientific investigation. *Cf.* Koch, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-177, and the book by J. Z. Young, *An Introduction to the Study of Man* (London, 1971), which offers the point of view of a post-Planckian scientist on the origin of man.

[89] Zylstra, *op. cit.* Many Marxist theoreticians recognize that the analogy drawn between evolution in nature and in human history, made particularly by Engels, is really devoid of substance, *cf. Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx* (1883).

[90] Both the power and the weakness of Marx's thought reside in the fact that he chose to isolate economic factors as the most basic component of man's existence in society. The error lies in the fact that he abstracted one part of history, and then erected it into a total explanation of the world. Marx is able to demonstrate a certain evolution, a certain progress, in human history, but only at the cost of ignoring other facts. As Popper says, 'Marx shared the belief of progressive industrialists of his time in the law of progress. This naive historicist optimism is superstitious. Progress is not a law of nature. The ground gained by one generation may be lost by the next' (*The Open Society*, p. 385).

[91] On the Marxist view of reality as a religion of the here and now, *cf.* A. Dumas, *Ideología y Fe* (Montevideo, 1970), pp. 49f. The first person who noted the first seeds of a fanatic faith in Marx's thought was Proudhon who, in a letter written to Marx in Brussels in 1846, said the following: 'Let us not set ourselves up as the masters of a new intolerance, let us not rise up as the apostles of a new religion, even though the religion be one of logic or reason' (McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 30).

[92] For the basis of Marxist epistemology, *cf.* Engels, *Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. In our opinion it is grounded on a methodological misunderstanding. Basically, the Marxist does not understand the need to distinguish carefully between phenomena and their description. Thus, on many occasions Marxist analysis is really only a description about words, chosen for the moment, and not about happenings. For example, the idea of struggle is based on a verbal contradiction, as it does not necessarily reflect any genuine reality, but only a mental short-cut (an abstraction) for a supposed historical contradiction. What is ultimately in play here is the dialectical method as an adequate method of knowing. It should not really surprise us that a Marxist, in spite of his avowed historicism, is a declared enemy of every kind of positivism; nor that genuine scientists see in the Marxist method an aprioristic, anti-scientific philosophy; *cf.* Conquest, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-119; A. M. Scott, *The Anatomy of Communism*, ch. 4.

c. Contradictions between the Marxist and biblical anthropologies

The most obvious similarities, as we have noted, belong to the third and fourth stage of Marx's anthropology; the discrepancies belong to the first and second (*cf.* pp. 44f.).

There is a sense in which Marx's objection to every kind of anthropological 'essentialism', on the grounds that man cannot be understood apart from his historical circumstances and his social relationships, could also be defended from a biblical perspective.

The Bible, for example, never thinks of man as pure spirit. It recognizes that man is an essential part of creation; his physical nature belongs to him inseparably (even in the resurrection) and it is good. Neither does it admit that man is irreducible apart from his own history (as is the case in existentialist philosophy, for example). It emphasizes that man is 'total' only when his relationships with his neighbour are just and pure (and individualism, in contrast to individuality, cannot be justified by biblical anthropology). Thus, God's plan for mankind's salvation is a new community, man reproducing his new regenerated nature in perfect social relationships.[93] Man is an individual, but his significance as an individual cannot be isolated from his social relationships.[94]

The Bible, moreover, insists for another and even more fundamental reason that man is not an irreducible *esse*. Man, recognizing that he is a creature, is truly man only in a complete relationship with the one who created him. The most basic biblical presupposition of all is that man owes his existence, his being, his significance and the totality of his social relationships to an infinite and personal Creator. But it is precisely at this point, if not before, that Marxism and biblical thought totally part company. As the Mexican theologian J. P. Miranda says so succinctly, 'whilst the Bible recognizes the existence of God, Marx does not.'[95]

Finally, we will allude to the differences of opinion which centre on the subject of man's alienation.

Engels criticized Feuerbach for not having duly investigated the historical role of evil. (He could equally well have criticized Christianity for the same blindness.) Nevertheless, neither Engels nor Marx ever investigated its true *origin*, which would at the same time have revealed its true nature.

The appearance of alienation (a valuable way of describing the *effects* of evil) on the historical scene cannot be accounted for by reference to the un-historical and romantic supposition that there once existed primitive communities which enjoyed non-alienated relationships. For even if such communities existed, later becoming alienated for the first time when money (rather than goods) was introduced as the means of exchange, and when a subsequent accumulation of profits was used as a means of power and oppression, the fundamental question still remains: from where did *non-alienated* man derive the idea that he would benefit himself by oppressing his neighbour? In other words, with regard to the problem of evil and its removal, the question *why* precedes the question *how*.

The Bible also speaks constantly of sin in terms of man's oppression of man. At the same time it gives a satisfactory account of the reason for this sin: namely, that man's basic alienation is derived from the fact that on desiring to arrogate to himself the role of God he loses his true humanity.[96]

In the first chapter of Genesis (verses 28f.) we find the command given to man to subdue and have dominion over the earth. The earth includes every animate and inanimate creature; these are the rightful object of his sovereignty. *But man is excluded.* Man has no right whatsoever to subjugate his fellow man. Only God is man's legitimate sovereign. Thus man when he refuses to live in God's world according to God's will makes himself, by this act, into a pseudo-god with the right to dominate and manipulate man, to be his sovereign.[97]

Man, therefore, becomes alienated from his Creator when he attempts to overturn the true relationship which he was meant to enjoy with God. He also becomes alienated from his fellow man when he tries to be god to him (Marx did not

[93] J. Moltmann (*Man: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present*) proposes, in place of Marx's utopic vision of 'total' man, the Christian understanding of the 'new' man who has risen to newness of life through incorporation in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6: 1–11).

[94] Marxism is preferable to a non-socialist humanism in the sense that it is closer to what man truly is. Its theoretical base, however, is no more convincing than that of any other humanism.

[95] *Marx y la Biblia* (Salamanca, 1973), p. 316.

[96] *Cf.* my article 'La presencia y ausencia de Dios en la revelación de su ira' (*Cuadernos de Teología*, II, 4, 1973, pp. 328–340); Moltmann, *Man*, ch. 4.

[97] In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain, although he claims the right to the life of his brother, does not accept any responsibility for him. When Marx talks about man being the highest being for man he naively assumes, as the rest of the context bears out, that man will accept full responsibility for his fellow man; he did not really contemplate the dynamics of man's lust for domination over man. This is why it is permissible to call Marx's view of man romantic.

really contemplate the possibility of this interpretation of his belief that 'man is the highest being for man'), and from himself internally (an area which Marx hardly explored)[98] when he rejects his true humanity.

The biblical understanding of man develops both the social and individual aspects of his alienation. It is vastly superior to Marx's concept because it takes account of the depths of his alienation. While Marx described and elaborated *one* of the manifestations of this alienation with great power of penetration,[99] he never hit upon its root cause. As a result he did not understand how this basic alienation could be eradicated from man.[100] According to Marx, given the fact that alienation is only the fruit of a particular system of relationships within a certain economic substructure, when the structure is changed the alienation is also abolished.

In its failure to get to the bottom of the problem of man's alienation Marxism has been driven, almost automatically, to adopt the totalitarian structures of total state intervention.[101] One of the greatest weaknesses of Marxism is that it has no built-in system of self-criticism.[102] It represents a 'triumphalism' even more ominous than that of some churches at their worst moments. Justification for failures is generally sought for either in the external enemy—monopolistic capitalism—or in the internal enemy—the bourgeois attitudes of its own leaders. But it refuses to face the real reasons why they have arisen. Do not the celebrated cultural revolutions in China imply a tacit admission that alienation does not end with the advent of the socialist society?

[98] *Cf.* E. Fromm, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

[99] His insight, even in his earliest writings, is very striking. In a letter written in 1843 he says, 'The system of profit and commerce, of property and human exploitation, leads much quicker than increase of population to a rift inside contemporary society that the old society is incapable of healing, because it never heals or creates, only exists and enjoys.'

[100] According to Marx, alienation will cease when the capitalist system folds in on itself as the result of excess production, and when the proletariat administers the means of production in the name of its own class. 'Communism . . . is the genuine solution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man. . . . It is the solution to the riddle of history and knows itself to be this solution' (*Early Texts*, p. 148).

[101] For if the alienation does not automatically disappear as it is destined to do, it has to be banished by force. From the point of view of unique biblical realism, Lenin's 'statism' is a more logical historical step than the Communism preached by Marx; *cf.* the very opposite criticism by Berdyaev, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–230.

[102] *Cf.* Metz's criticisms of Marxism quoted by Garaudy in *From Anathema to Dialogue*, p. 61; and Dumas, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

5. What shall be done?

Much of our discussion so far has been both intricate and disputed. In this concluding section I would like to attempt some personal thinking on some of the still outstanding subjects of debate.

When all has been said and done, the basic point of departure for any debate of this nature has to be epistemology (how one can know). It is my belief that a Christian can undertake a very fruitful debate with a Marxist on their respective views of man. He is most likely to learn from him certain insights concerning the way by which unconscious influences from man's surroundings provoke his attitudes and actions (the relationship between substructure and superstructure). At the same time, the fundamental dimensions of man, including his origin, the meaning of his life (Adam Schaff) and the persistence of his alienation can be understood only on the basis of a methodology of knowledge which is both well-founded and also explicit.

Marx placed the epistemological debate within the context of the dichotomy between idealism and materialism. For a Christian this dichotomy is false, for although it is true that Hegel has exercised an incalculable influence on the epistemological development of the West in the last 150 years, not least in theology (*e.g.*, Barth; the 'death of God' theology; Pannenberg, *etc.*), nevertheless a discussion which takes his dialectical method as the only point of reference is too restricted. Marx, of course, due to his philosophical debt to Hegel, does so restrict the discussion (*e.g.*, *The Holy Family*; *The German Ideology*, *etc.*), especially in his reversal of Feuerbach's 'transcendent' atheism.[103]

It is because of this philosophical constriction that Marx can divide the world so easily into idealists and materialists: the idealist contemplates man in terms of pure being and thus makes him abstract; the materialist considers him in relation to his historical circumstances and thus makes him a concrete, real person.[104] The debate about man takes place, therefore, according to the Marxist, between the two poles of philosophical speculation and scientific investigation. It is not too difficult to predict who will win!

But the Marxist statement of the epistemological problem is much too superficial. In the first place, it is unaware of the proper limits of the scientific method. When Marxism places the debate within the terms of idealism *versus* dialectical materialism it has already gone well beyond the limits of a true

[103] *Cf.* the discussion in Althusser, *op. cit.*

[104] *The German Ideology*.

scientific method. Both idealism and materialism make reference to philosophical extrapolations which exceed the immediate competence of the scientific discipline.[105] In this context Marxism commits two basic methodological errors. (1) It shares the mistake of every humanism, when it claims that man's world is self-explanatory, being entirely knowable through scientific analysis alone. (2) It refuses to recognize that its own way of looking at things mixes empirical observation with philosophical theorizing. In the first case it ends up in an absurd reductionism; and in the second, it is blind to its own inevitably aprioristic approach to knowledge.

But Marxist epistemology, far from eliminating this philosophical debate, claims to provide a *new revelation* about man. Marx sincerely believed that on refuting the idealism of Hegel and bringing Feuerbach's utopic vision of love down to earth, he had discovered the *whole* secret of man's evolution in society. It is for this reason that Marx is able to talk about an end to actual history for man. Whether he likes it or not his concept of history, even if he projects it into a limitless future, implies a final and absolute state in man.

Methodologically, Marx confuses his own analysis of history (possessing strong and weak points like any other) with so-called historical laws which somehow exist independently of their recognition by man. It was on the basis of this belief that he made his prediction of man's future into a simple question of the unravelling of scientific laws. It should not surprise us, therefore, that on account of this methodological confusion, 'what has been partly fulfilled has not been due to any of his "inexorable laws of development" nor to his historical stages, through which it is necessary to pass'.[106] What ought to surprise us, however, is that the modern Marxist continues to confuse the scientific method, which functions with rigorous experimental controls, with a humanistic mysticism which arises out of an unconditional faith in man's progress.

It is precisely the Marxist claim to be a new revelation that provides both its attraction and its illusion. The Marxist claims to possess both an absolute ethical imperative and a scientific certainty in the final success of his version of history. This powerful combination inevitably tends, in practice, towards a combination of ideological and political totalitarianism. And it is a totalitarianism which does not differ in principle (but only in its ideological formulation) from any other. In this sense Karl Popper has pinpointed the central dilemma of Marxism when he says that Marx's ethic was just another form of the positivist ethic of Hegel (there is no ethic save that which exists), the only difference being that he substitutes the future for the present.[107]

Summarizing, we would say that Marxism is, from its very beginning, basically a collection of philosophical theories,[108] which have helped to furnish an economic-political analysis of post-industrial society which is highly suggestive. Nevertheless, this analysis, like any other, is subject to verification or falsification according to man's subsequent development in society and must submit itself to new knowledge from whatever source it may come. Unfortunately Marxism has not allowed rational criticism of either its theory or practice, because it has tended to confuse a method with a world vision, *i.e.*, to transform one possible way of interpreting history into the principle by which all history is 'expropriated'.

Without being able to enter into a prolonged discussion of the question, we would say that the dialectical method as a method of knowledge is an inadequate instrument to encompass the totality of man's existence. In practice, it tends to freeze history (confusing Communist society with the moment of eradication of all man's basic alienations) a tendency which can be overcome only by appeal to an adequate ethical absolute. The ethic based on a permanent call from an absolute future (*i.e.*, the ethic of the continuing revolution in the thought of Trotsky and Mao Tse-tung) is not adequate on a Marxist basis, for sooner or later a post-revolutionary society will have to decide between Marx's belief that a socialist state is fundamentally non-contradictory and Mao's theory of the eternal conflict of opposites.

The tension between the tendency to freeze history and the appeal to an absolute ethic is at the bottom of the polemic between the actual ideological position of Russia and her satellites and European revisionism (and, for slightly different reasons, China). But Marxism has no way of resolving the tension, not even by a fresh appeal to

[105] K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*.
[106] K. Popper, *The Open Society*, p. 385.
[107] *Ibid.*, p. 392.
[108] In general terms it is interesting to note that his first writings, up to and including 1846, largely debate philosophical issues. Then his political works began to appear, beginning with *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) and ending with *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Finally he published his famous studies on economics, *The Criticism of Political Economics* (1859) and *Capital* (1866ff.). The *Grundrisse* (1857–58), perhaps his most complete work, includes material on the three subjects. There are, naturally, exceptions to this scheme. Nevertheless, the order philosophy, politics, economics is highly suggestive for an interpretation of Marx.

Marx's writings, for *no form of 'historicism' can be made the base for ethical decision.*

We need to assess one further important aspect of Marxism. It is well resumed for us in the second thesis of Feuerbach: 'The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thought is not a question of theory but of practice. In practice, man must prove the truth, the reality and the power of his thought.' So stated, the thesis has much to commend it. In fact, in a way, it is in line with the apostolic insistence that the practical results of faith are the only proof of the genuineness of the profession (*e.g.*, Eph. 4: 17–21; 1 Jn. 2: 6, 9; 3: 14–24).

At the same time we have the right to demand that contemporary Marxism submits itself to the same principle. To judge capitalism, for example, by its practical consequences and Marxism only by its theory is neither just nor in agreement with the latter's theoretical base. Nor is the justification of today's errors on the basis of the inevitable development of tomorrow's history admissible, when the former arises only out of the truth or otherwise of today's practice.

The principle of the priority of *praxis* over theory, however, is usually formulated in another way in certain new theological movements (*e.g.*, 'the theology of liberation' in Latin America today).[109] The argument generally proceeds in the following way. It is unjust (or irrational) to criticize concrete socialist projects from an *a priori* position, without at the same time having a specific political commitment. Criticism cannot be launched from an ecclesiastical context, for example (and even less in Latin America), because the practical results of Christianity have already been judged in this context. Any kind of criticism of socialism outside of a practical commitment to the construction of a new society is totally formal because the gospel cannot be separated from political commitment in one form or another. Put in rather a different way, theological reflection is only meaningful on the basis of a previously held *ideology of practice*. The only valid criticism of concrete projects is that which comes in the course of a common commitment.

This argument would seem to be very well grounded. But in fact it suffers from various conceptual confusions which have their inevitable effect in similar tactical errors committed by the church, particularly in Latin America.

[109] *E.g.*, J. L. Segundo, *Masas y Minorias en la Dialectica Divina de la Liberacion* (Buenos Aires, 1973), pp. 79ff.; J. Miguez Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (London, 1975).

(1) In the first place, Christianity does not depend for its source of truth either on its *praxis* or on a particular historical-political analysis. The prophetic and apostolic message of the Bible which certainly demands that truth is acted upon, that the believer *walks* in truth, issues out of a previous word of God which is *irreducible*. So the practice of human justice, for example, only makes sense, in the last analysis, in the light of the one who represents justice in his own person, God himself. The 'righteousness of God', however (*dikaiosunē Theou*), is of a different order from the formalist concept of justice, whether this latter is intrinsic to the world (Marx), or extrinsic (Kant). Rather it is to be understood in the light of him who is *the* new man. It includes, as a constitutive part, the free justification of the sinner through faith in the finished reconciling work of Jesus Christ (Lk. 18: 9–14; Rom. 3: 21–26). In other words, a full practice of truth depends on a full revelation of the truth. And the truth of revelation, because it depends upon God who reveals, is objectively true independently of whether it is believed and acted upon by man or not. Nevertheless, the genuineness of anyone's commitment to this revelation, just because it demands a consistent practice, will be judged by that practice and not simply on the basis of a profession of belief (the meaning of faith and works in the Letter of James). At the same time, that revelation can also be evaluated according to the theoretical answers it gives, even prior to its being put into practice.

(2) In the second place, the decision to commit oneself or not (or with reservations) to a particular political programme, if one is going to avoid a mere pragmatism and activism, demands a responsible theoretical analysis of the programme before one acts. This is especially true if one believes it right to reject the absolute claim of politics to decide the correct responses to all man's problems. It is precisely those who have denied the legitimacy of a previous criticism of available options, based on coherent ethical principles which transcend particular political action (*i.e.*, those which can be discussed and if necessary refuted), who have finished up by elevating political *praxis* into the source of these principles and as a result justifying any kind of political practice. Indeed, it is difficult to see how it would be possible in practice to commit oneself to a political position without knowing it and evaluating it beforehand. Even the act of commitment requires a choice which, if it is to be responsible, implies an *a priori* moral decision. A Christian, especially, ought to be very careful not to be deceived by carefully directed ideological

propaganda, from wherever it may come.

(3) In the third place, it is, of course, abundantly true that the gospel cannot and should not be divorced from all political commitment. It is also true that certain political commitments better express the essential content of the gospel than others. But whether or not they do so express the gospel has to be decided by the gospel, and not by an autonomous pseudo-scientific, sociological analysis. In other words the gospel possesses its own political programme,[110] which is based on its own analysis of the global reality of man. The 'ideological' pre-understanding, or hermeneutical key, of that programme is the extraordinarily rich and highly original biblical message of 'the kingdom of God'.

The theology which the church undertakes does not depend (in the sense of sharing their presuppositions) upon any philosophy or ideology which claims an existence independent of the judgment of the Word of God. In fact, the idea that biblical exegesis has to work with an ideological or philosophical pre-understanding (*Vorauf-verständnis*) is due principally to the drastic change in man's world view which took place at the time of the Enlightenment. In other words, it is based on man's desired autonomy in the universe which leads him, because he rejects the idea of a personal creation by a supernatural being, to approach the biblical text within the context of his rationalistic presuppositions.

We believe that the authentic Christian reply to the whole latent challenge of Marxism and its basic epistemological confusion (*i.e.*, the false dichotomy posed between idealism and materialism, between theory and practice and between historical stagnation and humanitarianism) is *biblical realism.*

In conclusion, I would like to point to two characteristics of this realism which provide us with an extraordinarily powerful and unique reserve for committed action in the maelstrom of modern life.

(i) *Biblical realism is a great iconoclast against every kind of idol.* An idol can be defined in modern terms as any kind of system of thought, which also leads to action, which is based on the philosophical speculation that man is autonomous in the universe. Biblical faith then is needed to 'de-idolize' or demythologize that system when it exceeds the limits of a strict scientific methodology and converts itself into a total world view.

[110] *Cf.* especially J. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, 1972); J. A. Kirk, *Jesucristo: revolucionario* (Buenos Aires, 1974).

Marxism can demonstrate its very considerable contribution to human knowledge and to the practice of liberation only when it has passed through a process of radical demystification. When this has happened, its many strong points, which do not consistently depend upon the false aspects of its anthropological base, but respond to a genuine understanding of man's situation in the universe, may be more clearly manifested.

After some reflection the following points of the Marxist analysis seem to me either to mirror accurately the reality of our actual societies or else to coincide with the logical consequences of the biblical message. In either case they need to be very seriously considered, perhaps challenging many who would claim to be biblically-based Christians radically to re-orientate their stance and their practice with regard to social ethics and justice: (1) the disclosure of the undeniably unjust economic stratification of present society; and the ideal of a system of payment based on the principle of 'from everyone according to his ability; to everyone according to his need'; (2) the alienating character of work under any kind of capitalist system; (3) the necessary relationship between the expansion of capitalism and the imperialism of the capitalist nations (and thus the imposition of dependence upon the underdeveloped countries); (4) 'fetishism' (the 'religious' pursuit of an ever-increasing consumption of things) as the inevitable fruit of a free-enterprise industrial society; (5) the vested interests of the dominant classes as a decisive influence on much human culture (we would not, however, accept a too rigid application of cause and effect, and we would roundly deny that Marxist propaganda which interprets all opinion diverging from its own as due to class interests; (6) the critique of the bourgeois notion of private property and of freedom, when these are used simply as excuses to continue in positions of domination (riches create power) or of privilege (freedom is the space created by and for those who are owners); (7) the injustice of a system where the labour of a worker creates benefits only for the one who can afford to hire him but not for the worker himself (the theory of 'surplus value'); (8) the concomitant justice of the socialization of the means of production (but only when these are effectively put into the hands of the workers, and not when a change is used as an excuse for the enrichment of a new dominant class); (9) the criticism of all religion in so far as it gives birth to illusions or covers over glaring social sins (the negative use of religious ideologies as *a priori* inversions of reality); (10) exposure of the lie that capitalism has solved the

problem of poverty (it has not solved it, only exported it).

(ii) *Biblical realism proposes a future socio-political programme which is all its own.* Having demythologized the 'titanic' or 'faustian' nature of Marxism and having pointed out the serious limits of its pretended scientific status, Christianity can and must conform itself in theory and practice to *God's historical project*, which is nothing less than the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus Christ. The action which is demanded of Christians, either individually or collectively, will, I believe, involve, amongst other things: (1) the establishment of justice (dependent for its content exclusively on God's character) at every level of society and down to the smallest detail as the greatest moral imperative in the field of social responsibility; (2) solidarity, even if it involves conflict and suffering, with every oppressed person, group and class (whether oppressed by man, nature, disease or their own sin), struggling alongside them to fulfil their legitimate needs and expectations, and at the same time carrying to them the unique message of the gospel which freely offers complete liberation; (3) a contribution to the maturing of new communities of faith so that they may reflect something of the fullness of life in the kingdom; one of the most conclusive signs of the arrival of the new era in Christ will be a total abolition in the new communities of any distinction which is based on the pretended superiority of some people (due to cultural background, race, sex, *etc.*) over others (Eph. 2: 14–16; Gal. 3: 28); (4) a constructive effort towards the building of new superstructures based on the 'de-ideologized' substructure of the gospel. Some of the areas in which this work may be carried out will be the following: jurisprudence, politics, architecture, applied sciences, journalism and literature in general.

The purpose of Marx's book *The German Ideology*, as he later explained, was 'to settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience'. Certainly part of the conscious purpose of this study has been to try to settle accounts, from a biblical Christian perspective, with the profound and lasting challenge of Karl Heinrich Marx. We trust that at the same time it will be of some value to other Christians who likewise have felt perplexed in the face of the overwhelming plausibility of Marxist thought and the almost non-existent replies from the Christian side.

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Tucker contains a good selection of the early writings; the main work missing is Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. This is not to be found in Feuer either, though it does contain a good selection of Engels' letters as well as excerpts from the main works of both founders of Communism. Mendel includes the principal works of Lenin, Stalin, Djilas, Kolakowski and Mao Tse-tung; it was published too early to include anything by another revolutionary theorist, Che Guevara.

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