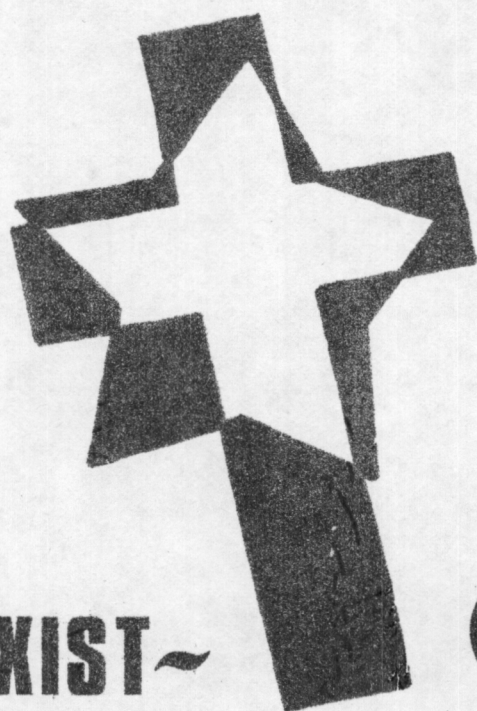


DETROIT REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT RECORDS

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MARXIST CHRISTIAN
DIALOGUE 1973



MARXIST~ CHRISTIAN
DIALOGUE

**A Position Paper of the
MOTOR CITY LABOR LEAGUE**

Detroit

June, 1973

MARXIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

This pamphlet is the continuation of a Marxist-Christian dialogue that has been taking place in Detroit between progressive church forces and the Detroit Left. The Motor City Labor League, as an organization, and many of its individual cadre, have been or are actively and closely working with progressive Christians* in a number of people's struggles. But often our work with the religious community has been action-oriented and the question of who we are, as Marxists or Christians, has been only implicitly stated, or even ignored. This paper, then, is an attempt to open the dialogue on a more theoretical basis; to provoke the questions and the struggle that will make it possible for our work to proceed to new levels.

The Motor City Labor League wants to engage in a principled political dialogue with those comrades with whom we have worked, but with whom we have political differences. We are not seeking to promote conflict nor are we seeking to impose compromise. We believe that the process of socialist struggle — dialogue within a framework of common goals, human trust, and constructive criticism and self-criticism — is the process by which we all grow in our understanding of what must be done. Thus, we do not claim to impose the "superiority" of Marxism nor do we expect that the "moral supremacy" of Christianity will be imposed upon us. We understand that neither perspective is a well defined or historically understood in the same way by all people. There are differences among forces that are Christian just as there are differences within the Left between those who are Marxist. The basis of this dialogue will not be abstract but, rather, will be grounded in the history of our struggle together against common oppression.

* Although this paper is specifically directed at those of the Christian faith, it is not meant that we ignore the contributions and practice of principled folks from the Jewish faith, Unitarians, or other religions which have often joined with us in these struggles. The term "progressive Christians" is used here to refer to that "radical community of faith" within most major denominations which have begun to question the oppressive nature of institutionalized Christianity and who have begun to build a "liberation theology" based on certain principles of early Christianity.

In Detroit, the struggle to end the war in Vietnam, the struggle for civil rights and against racism, for better wages and safer working conditions, against repression and police brutality, have historically involved Marxists and Christians working side by side. The history of this practice has led us to respect the commitment and courage of progressive Christians speaking and acting out of their religious convictions. We believe that this history of practice provides both the basis for, and the reason for, the continuation of the dialogue as a more explicit statement of what we share and how we differ.

There is another important reason for this dialogue. The Motor City Labor League believes that this society is entering a critical period of change — domestic economic crisis; continued U.S. intervention in Cambodia, Angola, the Philippines; the growing militancy of working people including women, Black people, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Indian Americans — and that progressive Christians in greater and greater numbers are seeking alternative explanations. At the same time, progressive Christians are seeking alternative life styles in response to increasing alienation on the job and isolation and fear within their communities. The institutional church has not been able to explain these contradictions nor provide the alternatives. As Christians seek solutions "outside" the churches increasingly they seek understanding of the explanations offered by the Left.

As we have increasingly come together, we have understood that we share vulnerability to the repression of the State. We have been in jail together, marched together past lines of police, seen each other in the court room and together attempted to battle the State's political "machines." We have built communities of support which have made us less vulnerable and given us greater capacity to resist.

And, finally, we have learned together from the Vietnamese. We have watched Christians and Marxists participate in a people's coalition which waged a people's war against the mightiest war machine in history and won. And we have watched a people divided by ethnic, cultural, religious and political differences struggle to develop a united culture of both strength and love.

THE "OPIATE" OF THE PEOPLE?

Contrary to common assumptions that Marxism dismisses religion as an "opiate," Marx had a serious and sympathetic

analysis of religious feelings.* Marx distinguished, however, between religious feeling and impulse and religious institutions. He believed that religious feelings were related to the need of human beings to explain a seemingly irrational world and seek good and morality within an oppressive and exploitative social system. Thus, the story of Job, who endures disaster after disaster and still maintains faith that there must be a good God somewhere, is a testament to man's capacity to believe in goodness. At the same time, the story of Job is an historical document of the incredible hardships faced by ordinary working people without modern science and technology.

Marx, however, believed that the "church," as institutionalized religion, was part of the ideological rationalization that a ruling elite or ruling class uses to persuade working and poor people to accept their oppression as inevitable. Marxism, as a theory and as a mode of analysis, argues that ONLY after human beings develop science, technology, and build a society where human beings control their own lives and understand their own histories and futures will people cease finding the answer to "why?" in a force outside of themselves.

FROM A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE, WHAT IS "CHRISTIANITY"?

From this perspective it is possible to understand and respect the history of Christianity and its message of liberation. Christianity unlike religions developed out of the intellectual concepts of philosophers in the employ of the elite, was a religion grounded in the oppression of a

* The complete quote is as follows: "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people."

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion." (Marx's emphasis) "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1844)

working people. What had been a stable and united community of faith (Israel) had been fragmented and disrupted by colonization within the Roman Empire. Jesus spoke as a carpenter to people who saw themselves trapped within the outmoded institutions of their own community and the foreign culture and barbarity of Rome. And Jesus spoke of resistance, of inner strength and perseverance, and power within community. The Hebrew community had provided its members with a rationale for life by assuring one of continuity within the on-going community even after death. But the stability and history of the community was shattered by colonization, and the belief in Christ's bodily resurrection provided the meaning and continuity of individual life that could no longer be provided collectively.

Christianity was a challenge to oppression; and that challenge rocked the Roman Empire. The inner strength of the disciples, their pooling of physical belongings and disdain of private accumulation, their commitment to struggle, their willingness to challenge the legal grounds of the State, and their capacity to "turn on" thousands of people who had previously been "apathetic" was a direct threat to Roman state power. (Looked at in modern terms, the disciples were excellent organizers!) Although initially repressed, the Christian Church was subsequently co-opted by the Roman state. The process of co-optation led to a suppression of those elements of Christianity which spoke to resistance, struggle and earthly vision and led, instead, to an emphasis upon co-operation with state powers, acceptance of one's lot on this earth, and the "superiority" of Christians to other peoples. The institutional church became an arm of the state and capitalism — paying taxes, holding and controlling large amounts of property and in some cases, ownership in factories and banks. (Witness the recent debate in the church over selling stocks in corporations in Southern Africa.) The missionaries of the church often legitimated the colonization of the third world and have continued to justify the neo-colonialism of the United States abroad. Missionaries in Latin America today continue to provide education to train a "new middle class," support the efforts of exploration teams from U.S. oil companies in Indian contacts, teach native dialects in co-operation with police counter-insurgency operations, and support AID and foreign service government programs.*

* (NACLA Newsletter, Vol. IV, no. 8, Dec. 1970; also Vol. VI, No. 5, May-June, 1972; Vol IV, no. 4, March 1970. (cont. on Pg. 5)

WHAT IS "MARXISM"?

Marxism is a theory and method for understanding human history. Marxism is also a theory and method that provides concepts for the changing of history -- the building of a new society in which human beings will understand their reality and have power over their own lives. Marxism is a science of the human society and, as a "science" stands or falls on its capacity to validly analyze and affect social development. But Marxism is more than a science because, as a science of people and history and not of "things," it embodies the belief that human beings are an "end" and not merely a "means." Thus, Marxism clearly states the means (class struggle) and the ends (human liberation) as part of one theory.

THE MARXIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE: WHAT WE SHARE

Marx wrote in a period when women and children worked 18 hours a day; when workers were packed into teeming slums to die of tuberculosis and plague; when colonization enslaved Black, Brown and Red people. Marxism and Christianity share a common history as expression of rebellion against oppression. Both perspectives share a commitment to the goal of human liberation from oppression -- psychological and material. Both perspectives believe that human beings have the capacity to become fully developed, self-determining creatures. Both Marxism and Christianity believe that human beings should not have to go hungry or unclothed and that basic material needs for all people are a necessary part of human society

Christianity and Marxism share a perspective of the potential power of the human beings who come together collectively to accomplish an end. And both perspectives share a belief that overt or covert forms of coercive power over the lives of other humans in order to accomplish someone else's end must be resisted. The manipulation of others for one's own selfish ends is something which both Christianity and Marxism speak out against, arguing instead for the coming together of people to accomplish collective ends.

Marxism and Christianity speak to a humanhood that is

It is also important to note that progressive missionaries have challenged the patterns described above, often at the risk of their lives

both desirable and possible. Men and women are responsible to not just their own kin groups, ethnic groups, or racial groups but rather responsible to all humanity. The two perspectives not only share "humanhood" but also share a common perspective on equality. Thus, men and women are not only united as brothers and sisters within the human family, but they are also equal. The parables of Jesus in which he stressed inherent individual potential and pointed out that class, privilege and wealth were not criterion involved in final judgement are powerful statements of equality. Neither Christianity nor Marxism believes that all people are the "same"; equality speaks, rather, to the fact that all contributions to the community that sustain it and support it are equally valid and equally important. Thus, status is not conferred individually on the basis of birth or class, but conferred collectively on the basis of service and struggle.

Christianity and Marxism project human possibility — that the struggle for justice and equality occurs within the context of a VISION of human potential. There is no such thing as either a "practical" Christian or a "practical" Marxist — for both perspectives critique the status quo that defines what is "practical" and argues for a transformation of human society.

THE MARXIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE: WHERE WE DIFFER

Unlike Christianity which has a religious doctrine and dogma, Marxism is a TOOL and methodology which incorporates the lessons of human history. Marxism believes that human beings are shaped by an interaction of several primary forces. Human history, which is made by people collectively meeting needs for food, shelter, family, and security, develops culture that explains and gives meaning to the life process. This history is embodied in technology, the social relationships around that technology, and the community's culture which defines for individuals who they are and what they should expect to be. But because history is made by people, people are never its pawns. Individuals, in turn, re-make history — develop new technology, new social relationships and new culture, all in the context of challenging the old. The capacity of human beings to materially support themselves and their families; to develop a culture which gives meaning to the material struggle and provides an outlet for expression in artistic and abstract form; and to creatively adapt to new conditions and resist those conditions which stifle human need and creativity — this is what makes human beings "good". Marxism does not see human beings as intrinsically "evil" and the capacity to

be "good" is not attributable to divine intervention or grace. All human beings have the capacity to creatively act upon their history, and the power and will to do so comes from the strength of human beings. The notions of "free will" or divine grace assumes that men and women are separate from history or assume that individual men and women are incapable of acting on history.

Likewise, the process by which people bring about change is the use of power that comes from collective activity and struggle and not from some outer mystical force. The love, trust, and comradeship that such struggle evokes defines what is the human soul and what we recognize as the finest in human relationships.

Marxism and Christianity not only differ on questions of the nature of human beings, and the source of power and strength. There are also differences around the question of what or who the "enemy" is. Marx did not believe that the "devil" which led to exploitation of human by human resided in the intrinsic evil of the human soul but, rather, lay in the nature of the social relationships that gave one class control over the means which produce life's necessities. Marx believed that this class system was the "enemy" and that class struggle was the process by which the developing technology of modern science would be applied to human liberation and not used for human exploitation. Unlike Christianity which sees all human beings united by the universality of divine love, Marxism believes that exploitation negates human universality. The working class, which together produces that which we use and the services we need, is united, internationally, by its class interests. The ruling class, or bourgeoisie, are also united in their class interests which are based on their exploitation of other human beings. Class struggle cannot be separated from individuals; it is a struggle against class status, privilege, and attitudes which affect individual human beings. And the power of the ruling class, based on their control over what other people need to live, is the power that stunts human development. The same power transferred to the people who do the work can be the material basis for a human society of economic equality. Freed for the first time in human history by the technological capacity to meet basic material needs, human beings can then begin to construct a truly free society. Marx understood that the Christian dictums of "love one another" and "thou shalt not kill" were preached to working people while factory owners killed spiritually and physically for profit, slumlords froze welfare mothers and children to make a few cents more, soldiers were told it was all right to kill "commies" to protect the "free world", and community and workplace resistance and militancy to forces of oppression were seen as not

loving your neighbor.

Marxists believe that the goal of the class struggle is to take away the power of the controlling class, and to return to working people control over what they produce, how they produce it, and for what it will be used. Marxists also believe that those who now hold power will defend their vested interests and attack those who question their "rights". Marxists believe that the struggle against oppression must also involve the strength and resolution to carry that resolution through. Marxists will not let those with power preach to us of non-violence, turning the other cheek, and love while they control the system which makes their murder, rape, and exploitation "legal". Marx's enemy was a class system and distribution of power which made monsters of a few human beings and crippled, maimed and broke the wills of most other human beings. Nelson Rockefeller is a monster because he cannot and will not understand what he did at Attica or what his grandfather did at Ludlow.* Richard Nixon is a monster because he cannot and will not understand what he has done in Vietnam. George Love** is a monster because he cannot and will not understand what he has done to the ravaged land and miners of Appalachia, to the dead men of Zug Island, to the peasants of Brazil, or to the workers of Chrysler who lose eyesight, arms, sanity, or their very lives. Marxists believe that one should neither feel guilt nor resignation about such perceived wrongs; one feels anger and expresses that anger through struggle to change the distribution of power. One feels love for the working people who join that struggle and grow whole again, and one feels compassion for those who do not yet understand.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, not all Marxists would agree with our definitions.

*On Easter night, 1914, the Colorado Fuel and Oil Co., controlled by John D. Rockefeller, ordered that the tents of striking miners, wives and children be drenched with oil and set afire. As men, women and children ran out of the burning tents, company-employed gunmen and the National Guard machine gunned them down. Thirteen children, two women, and five men died and many more were wounded.

**George Love is a key stockholder and corporate organizer for Hanna Mining, which controls Consolidation Coal, National Steel, and Chrysler Corporation.

Christians may not agree with our perceptions of what progressive Christianity is. This is a process by which political positions can begin to be defined and developed. The Motor City Labor League believes that when we clarify what we share and where we disagree, there will be a greater capacity for Marxists and Christians to have principled working relationships. We do not expect that people who sense the alienation of capitalism and who feel anger at exploitation will automatically be Marxists. But we believe that the ruling class has socialized us into competitive individualism, egoism, and general mistrust. People in struggle together must learn to build dialogues that create bridges that are strong yet flexible.

FUTURE PROPOSALS

We hope that this paper will accomplish several purposes. It is our intention to provoke debate and dialogue between Christians within the Christian community. We also hope that the progressive Christians with whom we work will respond to this paper with their interpretation of the issues of the dialogue. We believe that this process will clarify many ambivalent feelings that currently exist. And, if we have provoked new ideas for other folks, we hope that the responses we receive will give us new ideas and new understandings.

The Motor City Labor League would like to see the dialogue begun by this paper expanded to include the entire Detroit Area community -- perhaps a "liberation" conference or seminars. We hope that the positions developed within, and in response to, this paper will not be confined to those with whom we have worked in the past, but also to many progressive people who are seeking new definitions -- either as Christians or as Marxists.