

PRINCIPLES AND CHANCES OF A CHRISTIAN-MARXIST DIALOGUE TODAY

By Helmut Fritzsche

Dr. Helmut Fritzsche (Federation of Evangelical Churches in the G.D.R.) is professor of theology and departmental head of the Wilhelm-Pieck University at Rostock, East Germany. This was a paper which he prepared for a series of Christian-Marxist dialogues with three other colleagues from the same university and American scholars in the U.S.A. from September 15 to October 29, 1989.

I. The christian-marxist dialogue in its connection with the socio-political and church situation in the GDR

There was scarcely another issue bringing the GDR into the headlines of the world's media in the summer of 1989 but the mass exodus of mostly young people to the West.

This happening raised many questions outside the GDR but

inside too. GDR officials who were queried about what is going on in the summer of 1989 mostly sarcastically answered: there are more questions than answers available. But the GDR media kept nearly totally silence about the refugee and other issues being at stake in consequence the new policy of the Soviet Union.

The changing of so many people from the 'realm of freedom' to the 'realm of necessity' and the public silence remind me to a discussion on the 'First Scientific Council of Peace Research at the GDR Academy of Sciences' in November 1988. I was invited to give a paper about a very new pilot project at Rostock University, namely the establishing of a peace research center

which focuses on the issues of dialogue. In my paper with the title 'Dialogue - a new subject of peace research' I pointed to the ...insolubility of dialogue within and dialogue without...'

I mean the very essential connection between dialogue inside the GDR, namely dialogue between the government and the people, respectively between the ruling Communist party and the people concerned, young people, Christians or so on the one hand, and dialogue between the East and the West, capitalist and socialist countries on the other.

Here we are at the real point: There are many reasons for young people to leave behind social safety and other socialist 'benefits' and to change from socialism to capitalism. The higher average living standard and the wish to see the world, are outstandingly striking motives. Another and for many of the people very essential reason is the deficiency of a real dialogue within our socialist society. Watching on TV interviews with the refugees in the West it was striking for me to observe speechlessness of the people regarding their political motives. They are scarcely used to freely speaking about politics.

This lack of inner dialogue is not a new appearance in socialism. On the contrary, it is an accompaniment of the state socialism since its beginnings. But the Gorbachev policy of openness and perestroika opened the people's eyes for the vision of a basic democracy in socialism. He brought a stone to rolling and there is scarcely a state socialist system which can resist the new trend for ever.

The establishment of our dialogue center - a common project of the departments of Theology, Marxism-Leninism and Latin-American studies at Rostock University - is an outcome of the very slow progress to openness in the GDR. We needed a two and a half year term for preparations. We gained a breakthrough with an opening colloquy in April this year. But there are many troubles on the way on behalf of the novelty of our approach to peace problems. There is no other institution in the GDR searching in the fields of dialogue, discourse or - to use a catch-word - on the culture of mutual understanding.

The goal of our center is to encourage dialogue in a very broad sense, namely dialogue inside the GDR for gaining transformation of the system to more democracy, discourse between people of different world views, dialogue between religion and humanities and - as one point besides many others - dialogue between Marxism and Christianity, respectively between Christians and Marxists in the GDR and worldwide.

The founding of our dialogue institute does not be the very beginning in this field of research at our Rostock University. We have about ten years experience. The faculty of theology arranges since the early 1980's the conference series 'Guestrow Colloquies' gathering theologians, Marxists and scientists about issues of common interest, mostly in the fields of ethics. Furthermore, our faculty is organizing together with theologians and Marxists from Hungary the 'Conference of systematic theologians of the socialist countries'. Here the issue of dialogue is at stake in a more international horizon.

Another background of our dialogue center is the church peace movement. It started in the early 1980's after the so-called double decision to employ new rackets in Western Europe.

At this time a pan European peace movement arose. In the GDR, the churches became highly engaged beneath other activities in the youth movement "Swords to Ploughshares" which is known worldwide. From its beginnings, the church peace movement focuses on two issues at the same time, namely the questions of peace between the East and the West and the issue of dialogue and human rights within the GDR.

To sum up: The goal of our research center is advancing dialogue in a broad sense. We are not restricted to Marxist-Christian dialogue in a narrow understanding. This dialogue is to be considered a special case of a world-wide culture of understanding which let us hope will be flourishing in the years to come.

Now I should like to turn to our central philosophical issue: the question what is dialogue all about?

2. Towards a philosophically grounded understanding of dialogue: The replacement of the term dialogue by the notion discourse.

The term dialogue has become a very colloquial word during the last years. More or less all and every talk between politicians, managers and others are denoted dialogue. Thus I intend to replace the word dialogue by the more philosophical term discourse.

In a very broad sense, discourse means the art to have a conversation that is governed through the rules of logically disciplined argumentation. The replacement of dialogue by discourse joins the tradition of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century which refers to Aristotle too. The substitution of discourse to dialogue follows the understanding of 'discourse-ethics' in the way of O.E. Apelt, Juergen Habermas and others, and shares the utopian ideas of a universal unrestricted community of argumentation stressed by G.H. Mead here in the U.S.A.

Discourse may be understood as a special kind of conflict resolution. There are two modes to resolve conflicts at all: the one is the use of violation. This way to settle conflicts is by no means unusual in politics and everyday life. Nonetheless, it is the 'state of nature' and to be replaced by more cultural ways of settling conflicts.

Here, it is nearly superfluous to point to the fact that we are standing at a striking turning point in humankind's history: warfare has principally ceased to be a means for settling conflicts.

We are to discriminate three kinds of regularly cultural conflict resolution, namely the use of legal power, the practice of negotiation and discourse.

The settlement of conflicts by legal force is a necessary constituent of every body politics. The point is to use the force legally by the people in power. It means just application of the norms, rules, and laws taken for granted to the people concerned.

This way of preventing or settling conflicts includes superordination of the people in power and subordination of the people in the body politics. But in a real democracy in shape of a constitutional state, they all are equally subjected to the laws, rules and norms that are legitimately valid in the social system concerned.

Conflict resolution by negotiations aims to reach a compromise by conflicting parties which are sharing different interests. May they be different personal, social, political, materialistic or ideological interests - in every case, negotiations point to an exchange of interests reached by a regular mutual acknowledgment.

Presupposed are sets of norms, rules and laws. For example, international laws serve as a framework to settling an exchange between the interests of the poor and the rich nations or about measures to save the environment.

With regard to the norms, rules and laws legally taken for granted, the parties are equals. But conflict resolution by negotiation does not exclude but include superordination and subordination. For example, after a war, negotiations are to be settled between the winner and the loser. The former has the power to make a better job than the latter, but in a certain framework of international law.

Essential to settling conflicts by discourse are speech acts to reaching consensus between the partners concerned. Presupposed is a coercion-free space for people entering into a discourse. Partners in discourse are principally equals. Superordination and subordination are contrary to discourse. Thus, there is scarcely a discourse to be settled between the slave and his or her master. The domination-free space is the outer condition of discourse.

Essential to settling conflicts by discourse are speech acts to reaching consensus between the partners concerned. Presupposed is a coercion-free space for people entering into a discourse. Partners in discourse are principally equals. Superordination and subordination are contrary to discourse. Thus, there is scarcely a discourse to be settled between the slave and his or her master. The domination-free space is the outer condition of discourse.

The inner condition of discourse is the acknowledgement of the rules of argumentation by all the people entering into a discourse. Discourse can be described as an exchange of arguments. That what finally counts, is the better argument.

Now let me turn to discourse practice in detail. Here, I refer to Juergen Habermas. According to him, practice of discourse is changing arguments with regard to three kinds of validity claims that are embedded in linguistic utterances. In discourses, people are raising, quering, and redeeming the validity of claims to truth, rightness, and truthfulness.

I would like to give an example: The theory of historical materialism raises the claim to give a true 'scientific' understanding of the laws of history. The core of the theory is the assertion: History is history of class-struggle. In my opinion, class-struggle is besides other aspects a helpful analytical instrument to understanding social power-working consciously and unconsciously passing through the means of the market and the ideologies concerned. But class-struggle cannot, in my opinion, serve to predict the course of history. The predicting claim is in my opinion falsified by the real course of history. I only mention the happenings in our era. Marxists-Leninists today are used to defend the theory of class-struggle as a means proper to predict the time to come. Class-struggle remains to serve as a scientific truth. Thus, a truth-claim of an assertion is raised. To enter into a discourse means to raise, query and redeem such claims.

Marxism does not only raise the validity claim of truth of an assertion. Marxism holds a social perspective, namely the idea of the class-free socialist and communist society.. In this regard, Marxism does not raise a validity claim of a scientific assertion, but the validity claim of a right perspective for the humankind to come. The validity claim off rightness holds the opinion that that perspective is 'right', it means is in accord with the

values of freedom, life and justice. The discourse in this regard would be a kind of a value-discourse.

Finally, Marxists as well as Christians raise the truthfulness-claim. They both claim to live their personal lives in accord with their doctrines. Here, raising and redeeming of validity claims happens in the practice of a truthful way of life.

To sum up: Discourses are tackled to reaching consensus. People entering into a discourse acknowledge the rules of argumentation, and they are ready to enter into a learning-process, in which they correct their opinions under the pressure of the better argument only.

Discourse is a basic democratic utopia. It stands not only against the negative utopia of the speechless operating society but also against the dictatorship of the experts over the people, in any case with regard to the essential issues of human beings living together.

Contradictory to the principle of discourse is the praxis of fundamentalism, namely the principle of refusing to enter a learning process.

3. Christianity's and Marxism's capability to enter into discourse

Are Christians and Marxists today ready and able to enter into discourse with one another in the GDR and world-wide? By this I do not mean the dialogical competence of individual persons measured by what they bring with them in terms of the necessary subjective openness plus some knowledge of their opposite number. By capability for dialogue, respectively discourse on the part of Christianity and Marxism I mean something fundamental, namely the capacity, given one's own basic doctrinal views and whatever room, to leave for maneuvering, to seek consensus with one's partner and to let oneself questioned and corrected without thereby losing one's identity but, on the contrary, finding it renewed.

There are obstacles against a practical discourse and advancements in favor of practical discourses on both sides. To start with Christianity: the idea of an exclusive revelation of God's truth to the Christians or the Christian church prevented Christianity from dialogue with other religions and world views in long periods of its history. On the other hand, Christianity

shares with Judaism the idea of rational morality. It means the highest Christian moral values, laws and norms are truth-capable ideas. They are binding and reasonable rules for each and everybody capable of reason and action.

But, take both aspects together, the exclusive Christian 'story' and the reasonable general human morality, you see a fateful favoring of a two realm approach which narrows the issues to be discussed in a free discourse of moral items torn apart from the Christian story respectively the Christian belief.

Additional to this point, the German tradition of New-Kantianism stressed a still further-reaching division between the moral point of view and the socio-political reality. The latter

was thought as the reign of the market, or the "invisible hand"

which unfolds its own logic beyond morality. Moral values should be seen as an issue of the inner man only. Coming from this starting point, there is scarcely a way to enter into a discourse about moral-socio-political issues. Here, we are facing one facet of Christianity's crisis in Modernity.

Nevertheless, here we are at the point of a remarkable turning in the approach of the churches in the GDR to the issues of socio-political items. In a forty years learning process, the Protestant churches have accepted their minority status and their place at the margin of the reigned society as a place proper to carry on the sake of the people and to have a privileged access to the needs of the outcast, suffering, and speechless.

Marxism has its obstacles too. Particularly, the idea of class-consciousness or class-struggle, and its combination with the doctrine of dialectical materialism do not favor entering to discourse with others about essential political and moral issues. Historical materialism means not only that the working class and its avantgarde has got a privileged entree of the truth regarding the dynamic of history, but also that ideas contradictory between Marxism and non-Marxism are reflecting class-struggle to be solved only under the way of revolution.

Nevertheless, such antagonism scarcely is at home in the political landscape at the end of the twentieth century, where 'new thinking' has become aware that - rationally considered - neither nuclear nor conventional warfare can any longer be carried out in the centers of civilization. Thus, we now face a remarkable turning in the Marxist approach to cooperation with others too: 'Peaceful competition between social systems to the mutual advantage of both', the idea of a 'common house of Europe' are some of the new ideas which are pointing to dialogue or discourse. Here the universal tendencies in Marxism are coming to bear.

But there is still another aspect favoring Marxists to enter into a dialogue with others. I mean the urgent need of a basic consensus about what a rational socialist society could be all about.

For decades this question has been suppressed in the GDR where the supreme formula - as transparent in its power politics as it was intellectually void - was 'learning from the Soviet Union means learning to win'.

How deep a shock have Gorbachev's reforms really sent through the socialist camp, with the different developments they have led to in the various countries? We cannot tell yet, even today. In any case, I do not mean to delve into day-to-day political ups and downs here but to reflect on one basic aspect. Given the abrupt disappearance of the formula

about the Soviet Union as the teacher with all the explanations, the GDR has been practically and - what may be more important - theoretically tossed out of the warm nest, forced out of the protective shell of its prefabricated model of socialism.

To sum up: The question of capability to discourse of Marxism and Christianity cannot be answered by a simple yes or no. There are in both camps tendencies teaching in both directions. All the more depends on the practice and the moral

efforts of the people concerned.

4. The Practice of Discourse: Examples

I make four points:

1. The value discourse.

Seen from a very high level of abstraction, all the practical discourses to be tackled in a socialist country as well as in a capitalist society are more or less value discourses: People entering into a discourse about ethico-socio-political issues query the laws, norms, rules, institutions and actions whether or not they are meeting the values whose validity are acknowledged by the member of this society.

At least in European and American culture of Modernity, there exists a cluster of four universal values acknowledged by Marxists, Christians, Liberals, Conservatives and so on. Those four values are freedom, life, justice and reason. Freedom means the freedom of an unrestricted participation in the essential processes of socio-political decision-making as well as the freedom to choose his or her own way of life.

The value of life covers the best possible development of his or her endowments into talents. Justice stands for best possible distribution of the goods of freedom and life chances to all and everybody according to their merits and/or needs. Finally, reason means the rational procedure in the process of opinion and decision-making about the two supreme universal values freedom and life and the distributive value of justice.

The problem of a practical value discourse is the right application of values and concrete socio-political issues as well as the problem of ranking the values. In both aspects there are different viewpoints and accents coming from a Christian, a Marxist, a liberal or a conservative background. To tackle a value discourse means to test whether the norms, rules and practice concerned are in accord with the values and their ranking. Devaluating and revaluating of norms, rules, actions or so by rational argumentation are the procedure of a value discourse.

To give an example: In socialism, the question of speech- and press-freedom or access to higher education are permanent issues on the agenda of a value discourse. The higher ranking of the value "more life chances for all in the future" serves as a reason for lower ranking of freedom in speech and mass-media. There are many quering these rankings on

behalf of another one, Similar questions arise in behalf of education and the ranking of fairness in distribution of lifechances to people of the former disadvantaged class.

2. The issues of individuality and intersubjectivity

Of course, individuality and intersubjectivity are highly evaluated in both, Christianity and Marxism. In the latter, the development of all our endowments into talents is observed to be the supreme goal of all state education. And the socialist way of nationalization of the means of production is accompanied with educational efforts to raise a consciousness of collectivity. Unfortunately the economic constraints hamper the dreams of an all round development of the persons on behalf of the necessity to develop the special talents which are badly needed for the economics.

As known, the Christian understanding of individuality is paradoxical. It points at the same time to individual persons' capability to see himself or herself with the eyes of the others and with the eyes of God. There is a permanent surplus of the person's value on behalf of the latter.

The Christian evaluation of collective practice stresses at the same time the positive aspect of the ethos of love to one's neighbor and the danger of the loss of one's self amidst the mood of collectivism. Questions to be discussed in a practical value discourse are concrete issues of the different ways of life, for example: how to manage and first of all how to resist the constraints passing through the market's mechanisms and the state socialism's bureaucracy into the life worlds of the individualities impoverishing their life chances.

Here is the point where Christians and Marxists are going different ways, according to the different "stories" which are holding their value-concept in connection with concrete ways of life. The permanent problem is for both sides: to join a discourse about individuality and intersubjectivity to reaching consensus in practical questions as well as to stand fast in their own story.

3. The cases of alienation and sin.

Alienation or sin are two key words proper to tackle some common and different features regarding Christianity and Marxism.

But it is true for both sides: needed is a deep-rooted restructuring of the meaning of alienation and sin.

To start with Marxism: "Alienation" means the subjection of the workers to "abstract labor," it means a fateful impoverishment of human's spontaneity and its development of his or her talents. The late Marx used more or less the value-concept for reconstructing alienation only: alienation in the shape of exploitation by the surplus value illegitimately usurped by the entrepreneur. But what about a way of life and a life world free from

alienation? Here the question of the rational content of the idea of Communism has to be raised. As you know, here we face really more questions than answers.

Parallel in Christianity, to live without sin in peace between man and God, Between the humans, and between man and nature shape an utopian outlook far beyond the world. But what about the history to come? What are the orientations coming from those outlooks to people's life now?

Here, Christianity is queried a lot. In my opinion, the utopia of an undamaged intersubjectivity and its resistance against the replacement of linguistic understanding through the mechanisms of the market and the dictatorship of an administrative socialism are ideas which could help to a renewal of both, the Marxist and the Christian hopes.

4. The relationship of instrumental and communicative reason

Seen from a more comprehensive perspective: Marxism and Christianity are both challenged by the practice of instrumental reason. Both are calls to overcome the dictatorship of instrumental reason by the practice of communicative rationality, to use another word for communicative reason. Both sides have in their roots strong tendencies to both sides of human beings' essence.