

GOD, FREEDOM, AND GRACE
Reflections on the Essentiality of Atheism for Marx and Marxism

Dr. Miroslav Volf

Dr. Miroslav Volf (Pentecostal Evangelical Church) is a professor of systematic theology at the Evangelical Theological School in Osijek, Yugoslavia. He is a graduate of that school and received his Ph.D. degree at the Evangelisch Theologische Fakultät in Tübingen, West Germany. He was a lecturer at the Fuller Theological Seminary in California and has lectured widely throughout the world. This article was first published in the Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie ed. by Oswald Bayer, Verlag de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, Vol. 31 (1989). pp. 213-229. Used by permission of the author and publisher.

Whether atheism is essential for Marxism is one of the key questions in the Marxist-Christian dialogue. Both Christian theologians and Marxist philosophers have written extensively about this problem. Unless they belong to the dogmatically-minded segment of either group, they tend to deny the essentiality of atheism for Marxism. After long years of mutual denunciation, a growing consensus of open-minded Christians and Marxists on such a significant question is a hopeful sign. But if the unanimity is not to be short-lived, it is necessary to investigate carefully to what extent Marxists (or Christians) are true to Marx when they maintain that atheism is not essential to Marxism.

By raising this question I do not intend to suggest that Marxists should feel bound to the letter of Marx' texts. But neither should one assume that Marxism can disregard the thought of its founder without losing its own identity. For this reason I believe that the success of the Marxist-Christian dialogue depends partly on the ability of both parties to differentiate consciously and carefully between what Marx actually said and what marxists are ready or not ready to accept. Without such differentiation the tendency is to sweep Marx' unacceptable theses conveniently under the carpet. The foolishness of such a procedure becomes obvious, of course, at the first spring cleaning. It is necessary to deal first with the problem of the essentiality of atheism in Marx' thought and then to state clearly to what extent and for what reasons one should or should not follow Marx.

Marxists must define how they identify with or differ from Marx. As a theologian I want to contribute to this process of self-definition by critically examining the place of atheism in the thought of Marx himself. My purpose is not to give a comprehensive analysis of Marx' views on atheism and Christianity, but to deal mainly with those aspects of his critique of religion that are essentially linked to his theory of alienation and emancipation. Against the thesis that Marx' atheism can best be explained by the negative social influence of Christianity, I will argue first directly and then indirectly that the foundation of Marx' atheism lies in his anthropology (II and V) and answer two of the most common objections to such view (III and IV). In the last part I will draw some conclusions about when it is acceptable from a Christian perspective to talk about

Christians that are Marxists or Marxists that are Christians (VI). But before embarking on an analysis of Marx' thought it is necessary to define the main terms discussed and note the reasons for a new investigation of the topic(I).

I

(1) It is impossible to give a meaningful answer to the question whether atheism is essential to Marxism without defining the central terms of the question. They are equivocal both in what they connote and what they denote. As for connotations, the terms "atheism" and "Marxism" are in some circles potent pseudo-religious symbols. Their emotional charge makes the investigation of Marxist atheism a risky endeavor. Since the risk can be avoided only by remaining silent, however, I ask the reader to distinguish carefully between the subjective connotations the terms may have for the reader and what they denote objectively for this author.

The term Marxism does not stand here for dialectical materialism as a closed materialistic world-view of either Engels', Lenin's or Stalin's type, but for a humanistically oriented analysis and theory of society. This I also take to be the main thrust of Marx' thought. Atheism in this study signifies a view that is incompatible with the conscious affirmation that a personal God, Creator and Redeemer of the world, exists. It includes active anti-theism, indifferent theoretical atheism, and a-theism as the absence of God-consciousness. When it is necessary to differentiate between mere methodological atheism and atheism that is incompatible with the objective existence of God, I use instead of "atheism" the term metaphysical atheism. Finally, I call those characteristics essential without a phenomenon cannot exist without losing its identity.

(2) The fundamental importance of Marx' and Marxist atheism for the Marxist-Christian dialogue stems from the fact that the question whether atheism is essential for Marx and Marxism is the flip side of the question whether the Christian faith is essentially alienating. Marx' atheism is a challenge not only to the intellectual but also the moral integrity of Christians. It is thus imperative to investigate whether Marx' critique of religion is directed against every form of Christianity which does not want to deny its own identity and to what extent Marx' critique of religion is justified (whether it is pertinent only to some historical forms of Christianity or to the essence of Christianity). But the question of Marx' atheism is important also for Marxists for similar reasons. To the extent that Marx' critique of Christianity is mistaken (or at least is not justified for every form of Christianity), the question whether atheism is essential for Marx is at the same time a question whether Marx' thought is essentially alienating. For if Marx' (unjustified) atheism is an integral aspect of his humanism, then Marx' thought essentially contributes to human alienation.

Much, however, has already been written about the important topic of Marx' atheism. Why another study? First, there are reasons of a purely scholarly nature for a reexamination of Marx' atheism. The thesis that I will defend is not new, but it is unpopular among both open-minded Christians and Marxists. Of more than twenty representative authors who wrote about Marx' atheism in a recent and laudable edition of

the Journal of Ecumenical Studies, only a small minority agrees with my position. Hence the need to respond to objections raised against the thesis and to reinforce it with additional arguments.

A second reason for a reexamination of Marx' atheism is found in the recent religious and political developments in countries where the Communist Party is at the helm. Beginning with the People's Republic of China in the mid-seventies, almost all socialist societies (some more and some less cautiously) have started implementing the policy of open hand toward religion, which is an integral part of a general economic, political and cultural opening of these societies. At the same time it is becoming apparent that secularization in socialist societies is not advancing as fast as Communists had hoped and Christians feared. As sociological investigations show, it slowed down, possibly even halted, giving way to the process of the revitalization of religion. These political and religious developments might be trends of a short or long duration, but in any case they demand that the dialogue between Christians and Marxists which was carried on in the late fifties and sixties be revived. In this dialogue the question of atheism will be central and Marx' views on it pivotal.

It could be objected that the investigation of atheism in Marx' and Marxist thought is more or less irrelevant to the problems of the social co-existence of Christians and Marxists. The key question, one can argue, is not whether (or to what extent) atheism is a logically necessary component of Marx' and Marxist thought, but whether Marxists will continue to insist on atheism in the foreseeable future. This indeed is the key question but not the only important one. Having learned something from Marx about the influence of social reality on thought, I believe that in most cases political reasons contribute decisively both to the insistence that atheism is essential to Marxism (by most Communist Parties in power) and to the concession that it is accidental to Marxism (by most Communist Parties which are fighting for power). Hence it is necessary to analyze the practical reasons for clinging to essentiality or for advocating accidentality of atheism for Marxism. But such a task does not make the present investigation of the place of atheism in Marx' and Marxist thought superfluous. Unlike dogmatically minded Marxists I believe that the relation between social reality and thought cannot adequately be described as the (ultimately) unilateral determination of thought by social reality. It is to be expected that the quality of Christians' and Marxists' co-existence will be influenced significantly by their attitudes about the place of atheism in Marx' and Marxist thought.

II

Many open-minded Marxist philosophers and Christian theologians advocate the view that Marx' critique of religion "pertains exclusively to its social function." For Marx religion is problematic only insofar as it prevents integral human liberation. Corresponding., it is believed that Marx' atheism does not deny every god (especially not the one true God), but only the god of the dominant historical forms of Christianity with which Marx was familiar in the nineteenth century. Marx' universal atheistic declarations, it is claimed, rest on an illicit generalization about every god on the basis of ideas of god that were familiar to him. If this generalization is the main source of Marx' atheism, then

the god Marx denies and the God Christians affirm are different gods; then also the expectation is justified that marxists will revise their critique of religion if it is shown that the notion of god that Marx criticizes does not correspond to the reality of the Christian God.

The way in which the young Marx embraced atheism, however, suggests that such an interpretation of his atheism is incorrect. The correspondence of Marx at seventeen with his father shows that "the reasons for Marx' change to atheism were not of a moral nature, which is frequently the case with young people, nor was it caused by a sociopolitical rebellion against reactionary Christianity of that time, but it was due to serious personal reasons of an intellectual and emotional nature." But Marx need not have remained an atheist for the same reasons he became one. The decisive argument against the claim that Marx' atheism denies only the god of reactionary forms of Christianity is to be sought elsewhere. I suggest that the conflict between Marx and the Christian faith stems primarily from the fact that they operate with a different understanding of the agent of human liberation. Marx raises the objection not only that in the Christian faith God (allegedly) hinders human liberation and the realization of human potentialities. Even if Marx were faced with indubitable proofs that belief in God functioned as a stimulus to human liberation, this would not be a sufficient reason for Marx to abandon atheism. For every liberation action of God implies an experience of God's grace. This is unacceptable to Marx because he maintained that a person who lives through the grace of another is a dependent, and thus an unfree, being. Christian faith is thus problematic for Marx not only because it impedes needed social changes, but also because it does not insist on human beings as the exclusive agents of their own emancipation.

Marx' polemic against God's grace, which is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, clearly shows that atheism is essential to Marx' humanism and consequently to his theory of emancipation. Marx defines emancipation from the outset as liberation from God, whether or not God functions as a cunningly disguised enemy or a manifest friend of human beings. To think that Marx' critique of religion ends with the "categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken despicable being" is to misread Marx. He explicitly states that it ends with "the teaching that man is the highest being for man", or, differently stated, that "the root of man is man himself." Marx' categorical imperative follows ("hence"!) from this radically atheistic thesis.

There is one important anthropological notion of Marx which seems to deaden the sharpness of his polemic against God's grace. If developed by Marxists, it could prove valuable in the Christian-Marxist dialogue. It is his belief that human existence is always partly a result of grace. At first glance it might seem that the text in Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts in which Marx polemicalizes against God's grace refers to the individual and his self-constitution ("A being is independent...A man who lives by the grace of another...and I live completely . . ."). In that case all human dependence would be anthropologically unacceptable. But the context makes it clear the Marx does not think of the individual, but of "man" in the generic sense. An individual human being does not "owe" his existence to himself, but to "man". To owe one's existence (first to one's

parents and then to the whole human race) is to have it through grace. Given this acceptance of grace by Marx, it would seem that a Marxist anthropology that does not want to stray away from Marx' path but dares to modify some aspects of his thought could accept the thesis that human beings can live as free and unalienated beings in relation to a loving God who created them.

III

Two basic objections can be raised against the argument that atheism is essential in Marx' thought, given his polemic against God's grace. One can object(1) that it disregards the fact that Marx' humanism presupposes the erroneous competitive understanding of the relation between God and human beings, and (2) that Marx' polemic should not be understood as an expression of metaphysical but only methodological atheism. I will examine these two objects in the present and the following section.

Like the young Engels, Marx combines his fundamentally atheistic anthropological thesis that human beings are the highest beings for themselves with Feuerbach's understanding of the relationship between God and human beings. According to Feuerbach, God and human beings stand in a relation of inverted proportion: the more qualities human beings invest through faith in God, the fewer qualities remain for themselves. It follows that human beings develop integrally only if God does not exist. Since Marx adopted the Feuerbachian dichotomy between God and human beings, if he decided in favor of human liberation he had to decide against God. Thus, some philosophers and theologians have concluded, the Feuerbachian dichotomy "is the ultimate foundation of Marx' atheism".

If this interpretation of Marx' atheism is correct, then his atheism rests again on an erroneous generalization. Only now this generalization is not based on a particular historical form of Christianity but on a particular philosophical understanding of the genesis of religious ideas in the human mind. Since in the biblical revelation God and human beings are partners and not competitors over a set amount of desirable attributes, Feuerbach's view of the creation of religious ideas is not applicable in this case. But even without Feuerbach's theory of projection Marx' polemic against God's grace remains. This polemic is not logically dependent on the theory of projection (although it is necessary to the theory of projection), and is based on an aspect of Marx' anthropology that he developed under the influence of Fichte.

In accordance with his understanding of the absolute I, Fichte maintained that for the individual human I is nothing more "unbearable than only to exist... for someone and through someone else". A human being can be free only if he is "his own creation," if he is "absolutely independent, and through himself perfect and complete". There is an important difference between Fichte's and Marx' understanding of freedom and independence. Marx is not pleading for a complete independence of human beings from their human and non-human environment. Such an independence would contradict his materialistic understanding of human beings as natural beings. Differing from Fichte, he does not plead for "absolute independent self-activity". But, apart from a certain form of

dependence between human beings and dependence of human beings on nature, for Marx nothing is more unbearable than to exist through someone else and for somebody else. He insists that human beings can be independent and free if they owe their existence exclusively to themselves. For this reason the creative and redemptive work of God stand in an irreconcilable contradiction to the creative work of human beings. The contradiction is not Feuerbachian: the more one ascribes to God, the less remains for human beings. The contradiction is Fichteo-Marxian: the more one depends on God, the less one is free. Formulated differently: as long as one is in the least way dependent on God, one is not completely free. The independence of human beings as the only authentic form of their existence demands that "there be no other [God]" besides them.

Marx' polemic against God's grace, which rests on his understanding of human beings and their freedom, indicates clearly that his critique of religion is not directed only against an erroneous concept of God as human beings' parasitic competitor, but against every belief in God who graciously acts in their favor. In spite of some important disparities between the God that Marx denies and the God which biblical and authentic Christian traditions affirm, the object of reflection is in part the same God. Moreover, the common feature in Marx' and Christians' concept of God (God's grace) is one of the most fundamental characteristics of the authentic Christian understanding of God.

IV

It is sometimes asserted that Marx' polemic against God's grace does not demand metaphysical but merely methodological atheism. Marx' atheism would differ from atheism inherent in the modern sciences in that it dispenses with the "hypothesis God" not only in the process of the theoretical explanation of the world but also in the process of its practical change. If one understands Marx' atheism in this fashion, then the purpose of his polemic against faith in God would be to direct people "so that in their activity, especially in their sociopolitical activity, they rely on themselves, on their knowledge, on their mutual help and solidarity". Such atheism could be called a "postulate of a practical reason" because its sole justification is its function of making people depend completely on their own powers. Belief in God would be unacceptable only insofar as it prevents such self-reliance. But as long as human beings act as if there were no God, they are free to interpret religiously their deeds as if they were the result of God's grace.

Such methodological atheism is incompatible with the Christian understanding of salvation by grace. Salvation takes place "without [human] works", exclusively "by faith" in God's work for human beings. Salvation is accomplished by God for human beings (however, not apart from their subjectivity as those who believe and live in accordance with their belief) and thus it is and must remain a result of God's grace. Because it is not possible for salvation to take place as if there were no God, it is not possible for salvation to take place as if there were no God, it is also impossible merely to interpret it as a result of God's grace. In relation to the very core of Christian understanding of salvation, i.e. in relation to Christians becoming and remaining Christian, methodological theism is not the only theology desirable but indispensable. Methodological atheism, however, has an important place in relation to Christian living in the world. As Luther pointed out in his

interpretation of Psalm 127, God's help and provision does not relieve the people of their own planning and working. On the contrary, God's provision takes place in that human beings "behave as if there were no God and as if they had to save themselves and rule by themselves".

But the question is not only to what extent methodological atheism (if we assume metaphysical theism) is compatible with Christian faith, but to what extent methodological atheism(again if we assume metaphysical theism) is compatible with Marx' humanism? The second question must be answered in the negative. Marx questions not only God's grace which helps human beings in their sociopolitical activity, but also the grace of God which is expressed in the very relation of God as Creator to human beings. The belief in God's creation is in Marx' view the most radical expression of human dependence on God. In one of the most fundamental texts of his whole critique of religion Marx says: " A being does not regard himself as independent unless he is his own master, and he is only his master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the grace of another considers himself as a dependent being. But I live completely by another person's grace when I owe to him not only the continuance of my life but also its creation; when he is its source. My life has necessarily such a cause outside itself if it is not my own creation." No matter how strongly we stress it is desirable that human beings live for themselves (which, except in relation to salvation, is in a certain sense imperative in Christian theology). The reason is simple: even what a human being is "through himself he is through God who created him to be such". Marx rightly maintains that a being which owes its existence to God "lives completely by another person's grace". A person who lives by the grace of another being "does not stand on his own feet" but has a "foreign foundation", which can only mean that in and of itself it "has no foundation". As creatures human beings necessarily praise their creator through every one of their achievements. As Marx says in "Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts", instead of confirming (bestätigen) themselves in their action, created human beings are, as everything "established", "only confirmation of the act of establishing".

Since human dependence on God necessarily follows from the acceptance of God as creator of human beings, Marx' atheism cannot be considered a mere postulate of the practical mind. Metaphysical atheism as the denial of the objective existence of God the Creator is the necessary implication of consistent methodological atheism. Marx' humanism is thus not only a-theistic in the sense that God is simply absent from it, but in the sense that it is incompatible with the objective existence of God the Creator.

It seems that there are only two ways of conceiving God that could escape Marx' critique of human dependence on God. Both would amount to a radical reinterpretation of the Christian notion of God. Moreover, the first is inadequate from the perspective of any religion. Those who declare that atheism is not essential for Marx and Marxism, in that they suggest precisely these two concepts of God, indirectly confirm the thesis that the denial of a personal God, Creator and Redeemer, is an essential aspect of Marx' humanism.

It is possible to understand religious consciousness as one of the many forms of human production, say as a "poetic metaphor". In order to come to an understanding of religion which would be compatible with Marx' humanism, it would in addition be necessary to differentiate between alienated forms of religious production and those that are "alienated, creative, human". The latter would be an acceptable form of human religious production, the former not. The distinction between alienating and human forms of religion is indispensable for Christian theology; however it is impossible in the context of Marx' understanding of religion as a human product and his theory of alienation. Human forms of religious production would be only those that are immune to his critique of alienation. The distinction would only be possible within the framework of Marx' thought provided that human beings were aware that the "God" in whom they believe is (1) their own product (2) to whom they are not subject but over whom they rule. A "humane God" would thus be a god without transcendence and without holiness. As the phenomenon of secular religion illustrates, religious consciousness is possible without transcendence. The presence of the holy is, however, constitutive for it. For religious consciousness as religious consciousness it is essential not to include the awareness of ruling the object of religious worship : it is impossible religiously to relate to a "god" over whom one has power. Moreover, in the context of monotheistic religion the very notion of such a "god" is contradictory: a god who is not the Lord of Lords is not God(irrespective of, for instance, God's lordship being expressed paradoxically in the form of God's service to and suffering for human beings, as in Christianity). It seems reasonable to me that Marx did not envisage the possibility of unalienated forms of religion in an unalienated society, as he did unalienated forms of art. If we do not want to deprive religion of what constitutes it as religion, then, given Marx' basic paradigm of alienation and emancipation, religion necessarily represents a form of alienation.

Marx' critique of human dependence on God could be averted by understanding God in an impersonal way, say as "an infinite open room that challenges and invites, an ever expanding possibility of newness and future". Such a description of God is compatible with the attribution of personality to God, but is relevant to the question of the essentiality of atheism for Marx only if it is taken to imply that God is impersonal. Given an impersonal God, human dependence on God would be analogous to dependence on nature, which in Marx view did not call into question the humanness of human beings. Belief in an impersonal God could be compatible with Marx' denial of human dependence on God. The difficulties with the notion of personality when applied to God notwithstanding, in Christian theology personality is an inalienable attribute of God because to address God as "Thou" is constitutive of the Judeo-Christian experience.

V

That the polemic against human dependence on God the Creator and Redeemer--a polemic that follows from Marx' thesis that human beings are the highest beings for themselves--is the cornerstone of Marx' atheism can be demonstrated indirectly by showing how all the different aspects of Marx' critique of religion can be seen as selections of a building erected on this cornerstone. A sketch of this demonstration follows.

By arguing that the polemic against God's grace is the unifying center of Marx' thinking about religion, I am not suggesting that his thinking did not develop during the course of his life. My contention is that this development does not contain contradictions and ruptures, which must be ascribed to Marx if one understands the cornerstone of his atheism differently (except in the case of taking the Feuerbachian dichotomy between God and human beings, for which the polemic against human dependence on God is integral, to be the foundation of Marx' atheism). If, for instance, one maintains that Marx' atheism is merely methodological, then the reason for his uncompromising polemic against God's grace expressed in the doctrine of creation is unclear. Or if one maintains that Marx' critique of religion relates only to the social function of religion, then one must assume a rupture in the development of Marx' critique of religion after his Dissertation.⁴⁵

(1) The fundamentally atheistic thesis that human beings are the highest beings for themselves is compatible with Marx' understanding of the mechanism of the creation of religion, according to which religious concepts are a reflection of the alienated reality in which human beings live. Since human beings are not actually the highest beings, they need the "fantastic realization of [their] being" in religion as a "festive supplement" for what is lacking in their everyday lives.⁴⁶

Moreover, the theory of the social "production" of religion contains a denial of the existence of the Christian God. True, since the theory does not imply anything about the objective existence of God, but only explains the genesis of what is predicated about God and denies that what is predicated has an objectively existing object of reference, it is not strictly atheistic but agnostic. But it is atheistic in relation to the Christian God in that it implies that everything Christians ascribe to God and ever could ascribe to him cannot be taken as attributes of an actually existing being.

(2) The polemic against dependence on God can explain well the importance Marx ascribes to critique of religion. This polemic is an important presupposition of every other type of critique for it represents the paradigm for the critique of all other forms of alienation, especially economic alienation.⁴⁷ Like religious alienation, these other forms of alienation are various types of human beings' dependence on their own creations. (3) My thesis on the foundation of Marx' atheism in his anthropology fits well the way Marx describes the negative function of religion in society. Acceptance of dependence as the fundamental characteristic of humans' relation to God corresponds to acceptance of self-despise and subordination in relation to the world. According to Marx, these are the main features of the devious behavior that religion, as the opiate of the people, produces.⁴⁸

(4) The above-mentioned thesis explains well the (relative) importance Marx ascribes to the ideological struggle against religion. As can easily be shown from his article, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie", this struggle is important for Marx as an indirect form of the struggle to overcome human alienation on the political and economic level. But religion itself represents also an important (though derivative) form of alienation which consists in the consciousness of human dependence on God. Besides the social there are thus also important anthropological reasons why the ideological struggle against religion is an integral (though not the primary) aspect of the struggle for the

humanization of men and women. I suspect that Marx' "special disgust for Christianity", his desire to "deliver the law blow to Christianity" and his glorifying the Parisian revolutionaries as "assaulters of Heaven",⁴⁹ can best be explained by his view that the Christian faith is intrinsically and not only extrinsically alienating.

(5) Taking the critique of dependence on God as the foothold of Marx' atheism fits well with the fact that Marx criticized religion not only when it hindered social liberation and social progress, but also when it desired to be an ally of Communists in the realization of their goals (although dependence on God is not the only reason why Marx rejected so called "religious communism").

(6) If we take the statement that human beings are the highest beings for themselves as the foundation of Marx' atheism then we can easily explain the centrality of the critique of earthly gods in Marx' thought. Earthly and heavenly gods are unacceptable for exactly the same reason. The demand that "there be no other" god besides human beings necessarily implies the denial of "all heavenly and earthly gods"⁵⁰. Marx' refusal to reorient completely his critique from heavenly to earthly gods does not mean that his atheism is "contradictory", stretched "between heaven and earth". On the contrary, it would be inconsistent had he completed this reorientation, since -- from the perspective of his understanding of religion as a form of human "production" -- he would have failed to criticize one essential aspect of human dependence on their own creatures⁵².

(7) Since the actual existence of God the Creator is incompatible with the postulate of human independence from God, it is understandable why Marx explicitly denied the existence of God from the beginning of his philosophical development to the end of his life. In his doctoral dissertation he says that besides human beings ("man") there can be no other god⁵³, and toward the end of his life in an interview of 1871 he explicitly states : "I myself am an atheist."⁵⁴ Throughout his adult life Marx was a "naturalistic materialist" in whose thought there was "no place for the objective existence of a supernatural being and of otherworldly powers"⁵⁵.

(8) Marx' atheistic polemic against dependence on God's grace is comparable with an explicit statement in his early writings that atheism is only a transitory form of human consciousness⁵⁶. The atheism which will not exist in socialism refers to the absence of the concept of God in the human mind. By its denial of God, atheism as a conscious attitude in one sense affirms God (namely as the object of denial) and is not appropriate in a state in which human beings will allegedly be the uncontested highest beings for themselves. As the critique of idols is unthinkable in the eschatological Kingdom of God, so also is atheism as a conscious denial of God unthinkable in Marx' kingdom of freedom. On the other hand, as the objective existence of idols is unthinkable in the Kingdom of God, so also is the objective existence of God unthinkable in Marx' kingdom of freedom. The atheism that is essential for Marx' vision of socialism refers to the absence of the objectively existing God.

Such atheism is compatible with the absence of the subjective denial of God.

VI

The above reflection on the essentiality of atheism for Marx allows us to draw certain conclusions about the compatibility of Christianity and Marxism. Under what conditions is it possible for Christians to be Marxists? One can answer this question from two perspectives. The answer could contain the conditions under which a Christian would be acceptable to Marxists as a Marxist. Marxists themselves need to answer this question from this perspective. A Christian theologian does better to answer it by investigating the conditions under which a Christian would be acceptable to Christians as a Marxist, or a Marxist as a Christian. I will take this approach to the question in the final section of this study.

If the investigation of the essentiality of atheism for Marx and Marxism is placed within the framework of the question about the conditions under which an individual can be both a Christian

and a Marxist, then we are striving after a maximum in the relations between Christians and Marxists. Such an approach has its strengths and weaknesses, which I do not intend to examine here. In any case, it assumes that the dialogue between Marxists and Christians and their practical cooperation are both desirable and possible⁵⁷.

If the previously mentioned arguments are cogent, from the Christian perspective a Christian can be a Marxist (or a Marxist can be a Christian) only if revisions of Marx' theory in three important areas are acceptable to Marxists.

(1) Marxists would have to concede that two aspects of Marx' critique of religion are not essential for Marxism. First, one would have to consider Marx' theory of projection as accidental for Marxism. Religion is, no doubt, always historically mediated. Social factors influence the concrete forms of religious consciousness and it is important to investigate the character and extent of this influence. But religious consciousness cannot be reduced to an immediate or mediate reflection of the alienated world.

Second, Marx' general statement about religion as the opiate of the people has to be given up. It is less appropriate to describe the authentic Christian faith as an "opium, lulling people with the promise of an afterlife" than as "a cup of coffee for the present"⁵⁸. This does not mean that Marx' critique becomes indispensable the moment Christian faith abandons its task of serving concrete people.

(2) One important aspect of Marx' anthropology needs to be revised. Marx' persuasion of the incompatibility of dependence on God's grace and human freedom must be taken as an accidental element of Marxist humanism. Marx himself prepared the way for such a broader understanding of humanism by considering certain forms of human dependence on nature and society compatible with human freedom.⁶⁰ But, of course, not all forms of human dependence on God are acceptable. There are alienating forms of human dependence on God which one must criticize in the name of God's holiness and human dignity. Furthermore, dependence on the one true God cannot justify dependence on

various secular gods. On the contrary, with respect to secular divinities only an atheist, we must insist, can be a good Christian 61. In the name of exclusive dependence on the one true God we must reject all sacralization of secular realities.

(3) As regards Marx' theory of emancipation, Marxists have to give up the requirement of methodological atheism in all spheres of human life. Such atheism is incompatible with some central aspects of the Christian doctrine of salvation. The keys of human salvation are not in human hands. Hence the hope of human salvation cannot be only a hope in human efforts but above all hope in the "liberating transcendence of God's grace"⁶². Such a hope, however, demands active human involvement in carrying out socio-economic liberation.

Further, in order to speak meaningfully from a Christian perspective about Christians who are Marxists (and vice versa), Marxists need to consider the absence of the consciousness of God as a marginal element of emancipated humanity. The consciousness of God as the subjective side of God's objective "dwelling" among the people of God (cf. Revelation 21:3) is an inalienable characteristic of Christian eschatological hope. Indeed, the conscious relation to God, described often in the Christian tradition as "vision" and "enjoyment" of God, is the final goal of human existence.⁶³

If the divergences from Marx' own views stated above were accepted as legitimately Marxist, then Christian faith and Marxism would not be separated by an unbridgeable gap. Whether or not Christians would become Marxists in this case would depend primarily on the persuasiveness of Marxism as an analysis and theory of social life. In any case, the Christian faith as such would not hinder Christians from becoming Marxists.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Eine der Kernfragen des Marxistisch-Christlichen Dialogs, der angesichts der neueren politischen und religiösen Entwicklungen in den sozialistischen Ländern von neuem auf der Tagesordnung steht, ist die Frage, ob der Atheismus für den Marxismus wesentlich ist. Zwischen den undogmatischen Marxisten und Theologen scheint ein Konsensus über die Akzidentalität des Atheismus für den Marxismus zu herrschen. Unter der Voraussetzung, daß der Rekurs auf die Marxsche Theorie für den Marxismus unverzichtbar ist, wird in dieser Studie gezeigt, daß dieser Konsensus nur dann berechtigt ist, wenn die Marxisten bereit sind, sich von einigen wesentlichen Aspekten der Marxschen Religionskritik, Anthropologie und Theorie der Emanzipation bewußt zu distanzieren. Um dies zu zeigen wird die schon bekannte These von der Verankerung des Marxschen Atheismus in seiner anthropologischen Annahme, daß der Mensch das höchste Wesen für den Menschen ist, mit neuen Argumenten untermauert und gegen kritische Einwände gesichert. Die Studie, in der hauptsächlich mit den jugoslawischen Marxisten ein Dialog geführt wird, ist mit der Absicht geschrieben, die Bedingungen zu nennen, unter welchen es von der christlichen Perspektive her sinnvoll ist, von den

Christen, die zugleich Marxisten sind oder umgekehrt, Marxisten, die zugleich Christen
sin zu reden.