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Marx and the Bible

José Miranda's Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the liberation theology of José Porfirio Miranda, as expressed in his *Marx and the Bible*, with a focus on the central idea (and subtitle) of this work: the "Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression." Miranda's critique is examined via certain key tropes such as "power," "justice," and "freedom," both in the context of late twentieth-century Latin American society, and in the state of the "post-Christian" and "post-Marxist" world more generally, *vis-à-vis* contemporary liberal justice theory. Close examination of the potentialities, paradoxes, and subtle evasions in Miranda's critique leads to the conclusion that Miranda does not go far enough in his application of Christian principles to justice theory.

Introduction

[1] Karl Marx is, along with Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, the most influential figure of late nineteenth century European thought, and, even more so than the other two, his works have made his a household name on virtually every continent – a name not always loved, certainly, but one that is easily recognized. In terms of sheer numbers, one hundred and one years after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, and a scant half-century after the issue of the third volume of *Das Kapital*, roughly one-third of the world's people were living in regimes overtly committed to Marxism. Even after the fall of communism in Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and its devaluation in much of the rest of the world, it remains an important critique of the prevailing liberal-democratic and capitalistic hegemony. In Latin America, in particular, the fertility of Marxism has blossomed and, somewhat ironically, "liberation theology" – the use of Marx's ideas in conjunction with Christianity – may be the last bastion of *actual* Marxism in the world.

[2] This paper critically examines the “liberation theology” of José Porfirio Miranda, as expressed in his *Marx and the Bible*, with a focus on the central idea (and subtitle) of this work: the “Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression.” Miranda’s critique is examined via certain key tropes such as “power,” “justice,” and “freedom,” both in the context of late twentieth-century Latin American society, and in the state of the post-Christian and post-Marxist world more generally, *vis-à-vis* contemporary liberal justice theory. Close examination of the ramifications, potentialities, paradoxes, and subtle evasions in Miranda’s critique, leads not to a dismissal of his work from a liberal-capitalist, secular Marxist or orthodox Christian perspective, but rather a feeling that Miranda does not go far enough. Thus, this paper concludes with an amplification rather than a denial of Miranda’s critique, but one that is not a *carte-blanche* paean to liberation theology.

Marx Contra Christianity

The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion; religion does not make man. Religion is, in fact, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of a man who has either not yet gained himself or has lost himself again (Marx 1994: 57).

[3] Let us begin by examining Marx’s critique of religion (or of Christianity, for besides the unclear and anti-Semitic article “On the Jewish Question,” Marx confined his remarks to the dominant religion in the Europe of his day, and the religion of his own upbringing). This will set the stage for a fuller discussion of Miranda and the use of Marx by liberation theology.

[4] Under the influence of the group of “Young Hegelians” to which he belonged, Ludwig Feuerbach’s provocatively atheistic *On the Essence of Christianity*, and the promptings of his own critical acumen, the young Marx came to see religion as nothing more than a human invention designed to explain the unexplainable. Religion was (as, later it was to be for Freud) little more than a product of fantasy and wish-fulfillment – man makes God in his own image, and projects his good qualities onto this anthropomorphic abstraction in masochistic glee. But Marx eventually deepened his critique, and religion is later explained in the following terms: *consolation*, *social control*, and a *reflection* of prevailing ideologies. Regarding religion’s role as consolation, we find Marx’s famous proclamation: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature . . . It is the *opium* of the people. The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of man, is a demand for their *real* happiness” (1967: 250). With regard to the second proposition, religion as social control, Marx says, in an article written for the *Deutsche-Briisseler-Zeitung* paper, “The social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of antiquity, glorified the serfdom of the Middle Ages and are capable, in case of need, of defending the oppression of the proletariat” (quoted in Elster: 506).

[5] The notion of religion as reflection brings Marx from Feuerbach to Nietzsche, whom he predates but echoes remarkably in the following passage, from the same *Deutsche-Briisseler-Zeitung* article: “The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness, in short, all qualities of the rabble, and the proletariat, which will not permit itself to be treated as rabble, needs its courage, its self-confidence, its pride and its sense of independence even more than its bread” (quoted in Elster: 506). This last statement is also an example of Marx’s hatred of the “rabble” (the word used in the original is the even more pejorative French *canaille*), which remains a thorn

in the side of the Marxian project, and to which we will return when speaking of the “poor” of the Bible. Yet this passage does evoke Marx’s concern with dignity, pride, and spiritual alienation.

[6] Several things concern us here. Jon Elster, a sympathetic but uncompromising analyst of Marx and Marxism, admits, “When discussing religion Marx gave free reign to his speculative tendencies, finding ‘functions’ and ‘similarities’ that lack foundation in individual psychology” (504). Such may be true, but the same could certainly be said for Freud and Nietzsche, along with many theologians and Christian apologists for that matter, and must not let us underestimate the power and the centrality of Marx’s critique of religion, and of Christianity in particular, to his more general critique of capitalism and its abettors. Marx says, for example, in the first volume of *Capital*: “as, in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalist production he is governed by the product of his own hand” (1952: 64).

[7] For Marx, all types of society, whether “preclass,” “Asiatic,” or capitalist, are determined by the social regulation of labor. In short, the economic structure of society determines the legal and political superstructure as well as the dominant social consciousness, the laws, and the religion of a society. Christianity is the ultimate religion for capitalism, and is used by the dominant class to perpetuate and justify their dominance, along with the secular ideologies such as the “right” to private property. Religion enforces alienation, even as it provides consolation; it contributes to the false consciousness which pervades capitalist society – the religious mind produces, and is in turn enslaved by God, its creation, while remaining incapable of understanding this reverse enslavement. It can be argued that Marx, like Feuerbach before him, sought not the abolition of religion per se, but rather a new religion in which false consciousness would not play a role. While it is difficult to conceive the form such a religion might take, it would be far from Christianity in any recognizable sect or form.

[8] One last point that must be noted is that Marx had no patience for talk of “love” with regard to justice or social action – even a generalized “love of humanity,” which he dismisses with Dostoevskian rancor¹ in a rebuttal of his contemporary, the socialist Kriege.

With this shameful and nauseating groveling before a “mankind” that is separate and distinct from the “self” and which is therefore a metaphysical . . . and even a religious fiction, with what is indeed the most utterly “miserable” slavish self-abasement the religion ends up like any other. Such a doctrine, preaching the voluptuous pleasure of cringing and self-contempt, is entirely suited to valiant – *monks*, but never to men of action, least of all in a time of struggle (quoted in Elster: 508).

[9] The question to be raised here is the one that so bothered Reinhold Niebuhr and which troubles some readers of the work of John Rawls: can love and justice be united? For

¹ “I even assert and venture to say that love of mankind in general, as an idea, is one of the most incomprehensible ideas for the human mind” (Dostoevsky: Dec. 1876). The Russian writer could not, like Marx it seems, accept the call to love such an abstraction as “humanity.” For Dostoevsky, it is not misanthropy that leads him to this conclusion so much as a recognition of the necessary embodiment and personalization of love.

Niebuhr, as, it seems, for Marx, the answer is “no,” for justice is necessarily calculative and rational, whereas love (or supererogation) is, ideally, gratuitous, not based upon contract, exchange, retribution, or redistribution. Love, Christian love at any rate, meets the needs of the neighbor without a careful computation of relative needs. For Niebuhr, this makes love “ethically purer” than the justice that is prompted by rationality; for Marx, this renders love virtually useless in the social and political sphere. For those (many, I suspect), who wish to retain *both*, this may be a bitter pill, indeed, and we will return to this in our discussion of Miranda’s critique below.

[10] One of Marx’s most famous aphorisms – “philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it” – was proclaimed in the wake of the nineteenth century’s discovery of the Death of God and the “necessity” (as Shelley put it in his century and Max Bense, among others, in our own) of atheism. For Marx, man must replace God as the “Supreme Being for Man” – he must “revolve about himself as his own true sun” (Marx 1994: 70, 58). More than any other thinker (including Nietzsche, who did not care much for what the “herd” believed), Marx turned atheism into a cultural phenomenon, a challenge, if not a prerequisite for all modern thinking people. This is a challenge all contemporary Christians must face, and particularly Latin American liberation theologians, who attempt to re-evoke a lapsed Christianity in the name of Marx, and re-establish a moribund Marxism in the name of Christ.

Marx and the Bible: Liberation Theology

[11] Though rooted in a long history of Christian struggle in Latin America (and, some have argued, an even longer distrust of capitalism latent in Iberian Catholicism), “liberation theology” was codified by the Catholic priest Gustavo Gutierrez in the late 1960s. Following his seminal *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), a range of texts began to appear, and a group of influential revolutionary theologians emerged on the Latin American scene, expanding in the following decades to other parts of the globe. José Porfirio Miranda is among this first generation of liberation theologians and his *Marx and the Bible* is an important contribution, from a formidable scholar, to the cause of radical Christianity.

[12] In some sense, liberation theology stands Marx on his head, just as Marx (by rejecting his Idealism and materializing his “dialectic”) stood Hegel on his head. Liberation theology turns the following Marxist dictum against itself, reinterpreting it in favor of rather than against religious renewal: “The question of the *relations between political emancipation and religion* becomes a question of the *relation between political emancipation and human emancipation*” (1967: 29). Liberation theology is, or purports to be, a fusion of post-Stalinist Marxism and Second Vatican theology. Miranda may be the most approachable of liberation thinkers, due, in large part, to his overwhelming and obviously deep knowledge of Marx, as well as his largely undogmatic tone, which differs from the dialectic of gloating self-righteousness and bitter resentment one feels when reading many apologists of Christian Marxism.² In fact, Miranda

² I think here particularly of the Protestant liberation theologian José Míguez Bonino, who in an article on “Love, Reconciliation, and Class Struggle” makes spurious claims and suppositions regarding the “rationality” of Jesus’ message and the poor of the Bible, putting forth all the while the hypotheses that God, in the event of revolution, would “look the other way,” “choosing to be absent” while violence, in the name of justice, is done.

has so *absorbed* Marx that he rarely speaks of him, which is at once a great strength (he does not need to resort to apologetics or self-justification) and a great weakness (in the danger of unexamined selective retrieval, particularly, as we shall see, with regard to Marx's own critique of Christianity).

The Philosophy of Oppression

All our rebellion against Western civilization and against its acute extreme called capitalism is the attraction exercised on us by a future world in which justice, authentic love, is possible (Miranda 1974: 296).

[13] Miranda's thesis is clear. He is looking, not to match the words of Marx to those of the Bible, or vice versa, but rather to elucidate the "philosophy of oppression" that *both* Marx and the Bible, in their own ways, subvert. He is working on Marx's "call to abandon a condition which requires illusions," without at the same time abandoning the central dogmas of Christian faith. Whereas Marx applied his sword against religion, Miranda turns his against the (particularly Greek) *Weltanschauung* that has dominated and continues to dominate Western societies, and to which the Church has – at least until Vatican II – too-readily submitted.

[14] Essentially, the "philosophy of oppression" is the philosophy that makes an object out of God, or anything, for that matter. It is idolatry in its most pernicious form; a fetish-worship that becomes so entrenched as to be all-but invisible, like Pythagoras's music of the spheres, unheard because it is always with us. As Miranda says in his "Preface" to *Marx and the Bible*: "The philosophy of oppression . . . does not achieve its greatest triumph when its propagandists knowingly inculcate it . . . [but] when [it] has become so deeply rooted in the spirits of the oppressors themselves and their ideologues that they are not even aware of their guilt" (1974: 11). One might go further to say that it is not only in the spirits of the oppressors but often in those who are oppressed – those who unknowingly or knowingly perpetuate the system in which they are inextricably enmeshed. This nuanced recognition of the fluidity and omnivalence³ of oppression – what Reinhold Niebuhr would call structural or systemic sin – is an important first step in fighting against such. Here Miranda connects to not only the standard Marxian tropes of alienation, fetishism, and false consciousness, but to the whole tradition of Negative Theology in Christianity, the more recent "Death of God" theology of Thomas Altizer, as well as Martin Buber's classic anti-objectification position in *I and Thou*.

[15] Furthermore, knowledge of God (which is, in effect, love of God) for Miranda does not come through subjective experience or mystical withdrawal, but only through establishing

Bonino, in this article at any rate, is the apotheosis of unreflective Marxian blindness; in one fell swoop he justifies Nietzsche's comments about Marxism and Christianity being twin "religions of *ressentiment*."

³ This term describes the Frankfurt/Foucauldian/Chomskian idea of power and oppression being deeply embedded not only in social structures and institutions, but also within speech and the very way we think and act. It is a conflation of the Latin prefix *omni* (suggesting "all": in all things, ways, places) and the root valence (from Latin *valentia*: "power," "competence") used most frequently today in chemistry's "valency" – which refers to an atom's power of combination arising out of a lack (of electrons). In other words, out of a need to encompass and attach to all which comes within reach.

justice on earth, in the here and now. His “Kingdom of God” is neither in the hereafter nor “within you” – it is (to be made) imminent and immanent. Allowing for some hyperbole, Miranda makes his commitment to Marxism clear when he says, in his self-proclaimed “manifesto,” that a Christian claim to be anti-communist “without doubt constitutes the greatest scandal of our century” (Miranda 1982: 1). Yet we can see, upon reflection, a dilemma arising here, of the sort that caught Michel Foucault upon its horns: if oppression exists in such an omnipresent, systemic, and disembodied form, how is revolution, of any sort, particularly in terms of political and economic justice, possible?⁴ Liberation theology absorbed the Christian trope to “hate the sin, love the sinner,” but how can one have *praxis* directed against an abstraction, a system, a ghost?

Private Ownership

Whatever arises from a just situation by just steps is itself just (Nozick: 151).

[16] In chapter one of *Marx and the Bible*, Miranda is concerned with the political and religious implications and justifications of private ownership. He immediately proffers an alternative definition of ownership, one based on Aquinas, which emphasizes stewardship or *care* over *use* or instrumentality. According to the Angelic Doctor: “man ought to possess external things, not as his own, but in common, so that, to wit, he is ready to communicate them to others in their need” (ST II.II Q.66 A.2).⁵ In this sense, ownership is a right not of possession but rather of management and administration. From this Miranda goes on to suggest that the “injustice of ownership depends . . . on the injustice of income,” and thus we must deepen our analysis to cover how ownership comes about, and why there are differential incomes at all (1974: 2). At this point, Miranda concurs, surprisingly, with liberal justice theoretician and decidedly non-Marxist Robert Nozick.

However much we may advocate the legitimacy of the wage system in itself (that is, the system in which some contribute only their labour and are subjected to the decision-making power of others, who own the means of production), it in any case presupposes that both parties to the contract *consent to the terms in full freedom* (Nozick: 6).

⁴ Foucault was called, with some justice, a “neo-conservative” by Jürgen Habermas for his refusal to accept revolution or *praxis* of the Marxian sort – these being, in Foucault’s eyes, remnants of Enlightenment humanism and nineteenth century bourgeois progressivism. In a televised debate with Chomsky (Amsterdam, 1971), he refused to draw a model society on the grounds that the task of the revolutionary is to conquer power, not to bring about justice. Foucault deemed abstractions such as “truth,” “justice,” and “human nature” suspect – all universalist principles were bound to be in league with “humanist myths” and (thus) ultimately with the power structures of modern society. In some sense, Foucault unwittingly became the *reductio ad absurdum* of (Frankfurt) Marxian suspicion.

⁵ Aquinas, following Aristotle and the principle of the Golden Mean, does not deny private property, but seeks to redefine it, mediating the acceptable use of property and possessions: “I answer that two things are competent to man in respect of exterior things. One is the power to procure and dispense them, and in this regard it is lawful for man to possess property. . . The second thing that is competent to man with regard to external things is their use. . . Hence the Apostle says, “Charge the rich of this world . . . to give easily, to share” (ST II-II Q.66 A.2).

[17] In short, if there is free acceptance, the wage system is entirely legitimate. However, Miranda departs here from the libertarian Nozick, who calls for a theory of justice that is “historical” (contra “time-slice” theories like that of John Rawls), but that implies a much looser sense of free choice than does the socialist perspective. Miranda questions the freedom of *any* so-called original distribution under capitalism, using the Papal encyclical *Rerum novarum* to back up his contention regarding “the weakness of the workers in entering into a contract” (1974: 5).

[18] In short, while Nozick and Miranda would agree that “*historical principles* of justice hold that past circumstances or actions of people can create differential entitlements or differential deserts to things” (Nozick: 155), Miranda has a more nuanced, even Foucauldian vision of power relations in the original distribution or contract, which, for all of Nozick’s purported historicism seems to be for him something of a Rawlsian abstraction, an a-historical moment of pure and happy freedom. Miranda’s conception of freedom is, ironically, more pristine than Nozick’s; he outdoes the libertarian at his own game, as the latter clearly fails to think of the implications of the “capitalist acts between consenting adults” that he praises and believes would be washed away by the Red Tide of socialism. For Miranda, “capitalist” and “consenting” are more than incompatible – in the same sentence they form a paradox, and as such, bespeak of duplicity; for it is “self-serving nonsense,” he says, to claim that the distribution of profits in an entrenched capitalist society is the result of a free choice by parties, “considering the multitude of constrictions, barefaced or masked, to which the workers are subjected” (1974: 10).

[19] The problem? The owners of the means of production do violence – “institutional, legal, juridical, pseudomoral, [and] cultural” – to the purported free market by artificially raising prices whenever workers’ unions make gains, thus rendering these gains hollow. (1974: 13). Miranda provides a crucial insight when he claims that what must be recognized is not only the right to organize of the *worker-as-producer* but also of the *worker-as-consumer*. If workers were free to organize as consumers (a right, Miranda says, which by natural law belongs to them), the disparity in wealth would diminish significantly. In a post-production oriented world, this is important: consumerism is not confined to rich nations, but increasingly seeps into poorer countries, where the mentality it generates can do even more harm than where there is a reasonable amount of so-called “disposable” income. Critical Marxism has, for the most part, taken into account this global shift; it is no longer (solely) the bourgeois factory-owner who is the enemy. But then who, or what, is the enemy today?

Homo Oeconomicus

[20] What prohibits a free contract and thus de-legitimizes the wage-system? Miranda suggests it is the prevailing institutional violence, which encircles the worker with the specter of hunger, and the dreaded fall below subsistence-level. Also involved are the mass media, which systematically shackles worker organization, and an educational system that perpetuates specific ideologies but renders them axiomatic, unchallengeable (such as the

necessity of earning a living in the terms imposed by the system).⁶ Miranda, echoing Marx's false consciousness, sums up his argument thus: "People's very ideals are fabricated from within and thus there occurs in history the most perfect type of slavery there has ever been: that of not only not knowing that one is a slave, but of holding as an ideal of life a situation which objectively is slavery" (1974: 8). The prevailing system forces capitulation to the spirit of calculation, of possession defined as having, of utility. This critique of instrumental reason has been developed by the Frankfurt School of neo-Marxists in Germany in the early twentieth century, and it ties Miranda into the anarchist/ecologist/humanist critique of orthodox Marxism, which questions whether classical Marxism releases or in fact strengthens the bonds of *homo oeconomicus*.⁷

[21] Though Miranda has a rightfully suspicious view of Nozick's "free original situation," we cannot help but detect some duplicity of his own in the opposing claim that, "Differential ownership *could not and cannot* come to be except by means of violence and spoliation" – from which he concludes, "*therefore* there can be no legitimate differentiating ownership" (1974: 13, my emphasis). The "therefore" in this statement seems more of an *a priori* assumption than a conclusion from the premises. Or perhaps it is simply an *ex post facto* argument: why does an unjust end mean unjust beginnings? Miranda has here revoked the spirit of Aquinas, who sought a mean between private and communal ownership; by reacting against Nozickian market apologetics, he overstates his case, and in fact renders his otherwise fertile points absurd. Is he not making a speculation into an axiom? Is it not possible to imagine differential aptitudes of the two parties coming into play?

Miranda vs. Rawls: Justice and Supererogation

[E]ven if the sense of justice is the normal outgrowth of natural human attitudes within a well-ordered society, it is still true that our present moral feelings are liable to be unreasonable and capricious (Rawls: 490).

[22] Miranda looks to the Bible in support of his alternative reading of justice and the rights of ownership. He bewails the Septagint's separation of the Hebrew word for justice into three separate Greek terms meaning justice, almsgiving, and compassion, thus stripping from the biblical injunction of justice some of its more humane elements. This mistranslation conceals the fact that, in Miranda's words, "the works which we consider to

⁶ Here Miranda concurs with the American essayist and ascetic naturalist Henry David Thoreau, who proclaims, "There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living" (78). What Thoreau did not see is that for many, the option is simply not there.

⁷ Russian writer and radical Christian Nikolai Berdyaev, for one, criticizes Marxism for its acceptance of the "economic man" of the classical liberal economists. Berdyaev realized that Marxism, for all its potentiality, was doomed to founder upon its own spiritual vacuity, one that allows it to be victim to "bourgeoisism," the spirit of *homo oeconomicus*. Marx, says Berdyaev, merely transferred infallibility from the people to the proletariat, but it exists no more in one than in the other; Marxism created a new proletarian mythology that puts fictions in place of realities, and holds to the (bourgeois) shibboleths of rationalism and utilitarianism. "The positive ideals of socialists and communists are eminently middle-class: the ideals of the dreary paradise of the factory, of power, of material prosperity. . . [While] this does not at all exclude the presence of a positive truth in communism and socialism . . . it is no good fighting the bourgeois spirit with an economic weapon (that is only a valid weapon against Capitalism), it must be fought *with another spirit*" (56, my emphasis).

be of charity and supererogation are in the original Bible text called works of justice” (1974: 15). Supererogation, or, in Christian terms, *agape/caritas*, has posed some problems for liberal theories of justice. John Rawls dismisses supererogation as unnecessary in his theory of justice, at least if such acts pose, as they often do, any threat or risk to the doer:

These are acts of benevolence and mercy, of heroism and self-sacrifice. It is good to do these actions but it is not one's duty or obligation. Supererogatory acts are not required, though normally they would be were it not for the loss or risk involved for the agent itself. A person who does a supererogatory act does not invoke the exemption which the natural duties allow. For while we have a natural duty to bring about a great good, say, if we can do so relatively easily, we are released from this duty when the cost to ourselves is considerable. Supererogatory acts raise questions of first importance for ethical theory . . . I shall not, however, pursue this matter further . . . [they] are mentioned here for the sake of completeness (117).

[23] In conjunction with these rather condescending remarks, Rawls gives us what may well be the driest and most uninspiring definition of love ever to reach paper. It is, he proclaims, “a sentiment, a hierarchy of dispositions to experience and to manifest these primary emotions as the occasion elicits and to act in the appropriate way” (487). Is this the Christian notion of love? Or the Romantic one? For all the beauty and strength of Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, reading it leaves a metallic taste in one's mouth, largely because of statements like the above. As Michael Sandel has rightly said: “Not egoists but strangers, sometimes benevolent, make for citizens of [Rawls's] deontological republic; justice finds its occasion because we cannot know each other, or our ends, well enough to govern by the common good alone” (175). Rawlsian justice, which tries to do away with *a priori*s, is one seemingly based on *a priori* mistrust, an original fear of being cheated; it is a theory of justice for scientists perhaps, or politicians, but not for Jews, Christians, Romantics, or poets – those who strive to live life in full, as something more than the pursuit of personal advantage. For what is justice if not, in some sense, the most sublime poetic manifestation of the human spirit?

The Ethics of Gratitude and the Notion of Contact

[24] For José Miranda, such acts of gratitude or supererogation are central to a concept of justice. This is important in re-evaluating Niebuhr's refusal to conflate love and justice, and it certainly goes against Marx's own wariness about the place of love in social change. Miranda seems to step away from his Marxist brethren and his own scientific claims when he proclaims that love and justice are, in fact, one and the same. The mistake, once again, is to conceive of justice as either/or: either completely rational or completely non-rational. The first leaves out the aspect of love, which should not be rationalized; the second too-easily neglects *praxis*, the struggle against injustice that implies at least some level of rationality in the rethinking of the present state of society and its institutions. Miranda looks to the Bible to bridge the gap. Following in the wake of Pascal and Kierkegaard, it is his contention that justice (reason) without love (faith) is incomplete; and that love (faith) without justice (reason) is ineffectual, and dangerous in a world of prior and deeply rooted (i.e., systemic) injustices.

[25] But this is more than a simple conflation of separate categories of love and justice. Miranda invites us to see that they are, that they have always been, in Christian terms, *one and the same*, and any separation is a false one. “The sense of justice is the only love that truly gets to the heart of the matter” (1974: 62). As noted above, Reinhold Niebuhr is more skeptical of this equivalence, arguing,

the relation of historical justice to the love of the Kingdom of God is a dialectical one. Love is both the fulfillment and negation of all achievements of justice in history. Or expressed from the opposite standpoint, the achievement of justice in history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood; but each new level of fulfillment also contains elements which stand in contradiction to perfect love (176).

[26] Perhaps we have to live with this dialectic, and the ensuing paradox of love and justice. We could posit, as many followers of non-violent resistance have done, that, if we only love “hard enough,” our opponents will see our love, extending out of ourselves to embrace them, and will eventually be converted. Niebuhr’s “sacrificial” or disinterested love, which must begin all love relations, in this way is transformed into mutual love, a love of voluntary, not contract-bound reciprocation.

[27] While this may be a beatific vision, it is also one that, like the discourse of non-violence, can only work where there is a cultural or societal fabric that in some way justifies the actions of the “insurgents” – acting upon the opponents as a kind of moral pressure. For instance, blacks practicing non-violent resistance in the antebellum south would not have fared quite so well as those under the direction of Martin Luther King, Jr. a century later, when the level of consciousness with regard to racial injustice was much more acute. At any rate, it is clear that a true Christian theory of justice must encompass the element of risk, pace Rawls.⁸ This does not mean that the fight against injustice should stop, but must rather intensify, even if victory seems distant or impossible. It is this quixotic element of Christian love that Marxism, in its orthodox form, and even within much of liberation theology, has trouble accepting, though in the work of José Miranda there does seem to be an attempt to bring a more colorful and vibrant vision of love to the sterile contractarian tradition, itself the creator and sustainer of Nietzsche’s “coldest of all cold monsters” – the modern nation state.

The Manufacture of Meaning: Miranda and Walzer

Here is a sad version of the pursuit of happiness: communal provision endlessly chasing consumer demand (Walzer: 107).

[28] In his *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer re-examines liberal justice theory in order to expand the meaning and scope of “justice.” Whereas both Rawls and Nozick speak of justice in terms of institutions, generally economic, political, or juridical, Walzer argues that

⁸ Sharon Welch’s *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (1989), which utilizes narratives of the Other, the marginalized, and the dispossessed, to promote a greater understanding of justice, is an example of a creative ethics that is not teleological nor deterministic, but quixotic.

there are many “spheres” of justice that cannot so easily be subsumed within the traditional liberal language of rights and contracts. In a sense, Walzer, like Iris Marion Young, strives to bring culture, or at least the extra-economic, into liberal theory, by freeing such from the bonds (and language) of the marketplace.

[29] “The contract,” Walzer proclaims, “is a moral bond” (82) – and tyranny arises from “a continual grabbing of things [Augustinian concupiscence?] that don’t come naturally, an unrelenting struggle to rule outside one’s own company” (318). He favors a bottom-up approach to justice, wherein, “A great deal depends upon the citizens, upon their ability to assert themselves across the range of goods and to defend their own sense of meaning” (318), but *not* one based on universals, which he (like Foucault) seems to fear, for moral as much as epistemological reasons. But here Walzer runs into a dilemma: is the manufacture of social meaning, whether universal or particular, always in and of itself “just”? Can social reality not be interposed (unconsciously or consciously), either by the media (Chomsky) or other tools or techniques of socialization (Frankfurt School, Foucault)? Walzer’s theory of spheres of justice falls prey to the dilemma of relativism; he seems, at times, to allow for the possibility of universals that cut across various spheres and transcend socially constructed meaning, but what these are, and from whence they arise, is not, and perhaps cannot be, made clear.

[30] Miranda can be of assistance here, for he, as a Marxist, and more particularly a follower of Herbert Marcuse, is more suspicious of the rôle of the media and such in socialization and reality-construction. “People’s very ideals are fabricated from within”; the “hidden persuader . . . worse than all propaganda and ideology . . . sinks its harpoon into the deepest level of the person” (1974: 8). Like Walzer, Miranda goes beyond traditional Marxism, which shares with liberal justice theory a decidedly economic bias – an obsession with *homo oeconomicus*. In *Marx Against the Marxists*, he asserts that “[t]o maintain that those [i.e., extra-economic] factors cannot alter the mode of production is to preach a message that is as antirevolutionary as any message could be. It is to succumb to fatalism” (1980: 105). Miranda’s emphasis on the universality of “love-that-is-justice” stalls the slide not only into fatalism but also into relativism: his universal is the biblical (and Marxist) injunction to fight for the poor and dispossessed, by whatever means necessary.

[31] In short, Michael Walzer tries to save liberal justice theory from market apologetics, while saving the free market from its detractors (like the Marxists), who view it as the basis of all social injustice. There are some necessary goods that are not commodities, pace Nozick – “they can be bought and sold only insofar as they are available above and beyond whatever level of provision is fixed by democratic decision making” (90). This, he insists, is perfectly in tune with a truly free market: “the more perfect the market, the smaller the inequalities of income will be, and the fewer the failures” (116). Moreover, “the gross inequalities that we see around us today . . . derive more significantly from status hierarchies, organizational structures, and power relationships than from the free market” (117). One might say that Walzer brings Max Weber in to challenge Marxian anti-capitalism.

[32] Yet, Miranda might inquire of Walzer: Even if this is so, which it very well could be, what does it presage in terms of *praxis* – i.e., real day-to-day struggle for the poor and oppressed against systemic injustice? Can the free market be extricated from the miasmic

system in which it seems to be irrevocably enmeshed, and which it appears to feed off and sustain in near-perfect symbiosis? Miranda doubts that the market was ever, or ever can be “free” in any meaningful sense – the minute it is loosed upon the world of (fallen?) humanity, power structures and hierarchies will form.

[33] Perhaps Walzer’s greatest contribution to liberal justice theory, and to Marxism, is his recognition of cultural heterogeneity. Both he and Young provide an alternative to the individualistic visions of traditional contractarian theory, and point towards a “politics of difference” – of complex equality and cultural pluralism. These are issues whose formidable weight should be felt by Marxists as well, even those in relatively homogeneous societies. For Walzer there can be no *unified* vision of justice; we must accept rather a “plurality of goods” (where goods have social meanings), or, once again, “spheres of justice.” Contra the Lockean/Nozickian view, goods are created, not by the physical labor of the individual, but by the social meaning invested in them by the community. This is, it seems, a step in the right direction, one certainly more in tune with (post-)modernity, in which the Lockean idyll of homogeneity and homestead appropriation has disappeared, replaced by a complex web of social regulators, media socialization, and the attempt to re-appropriate multicultural diversity and group traditions and identities. Yet we have to wonder if the world can be so easily packaged; perhaps we are neither solely under the sway of universals nor adrift in a sea of relative goods. Once we begin to examine how social meanings of goods are created we soon realize that Walzer’s spheres are not so mutually exclusive, and that the social investment of meaning in goods is not so pristine, but is inevitably bogged down in the power dynamics of the media-driven age, in a world of universals, real or manufactured, which have formidable hold on the way we live our lives.

Where Does Oppression Lie? Four Critiques

[34] A critical, *praxis*-oriented Marxism, one freed from the pieties of orthodox scientific socialism, yet cognizant of the multi-valence of oppression and open to an ethics of risk, may be in order. But would such be Marxism? Would such be Christianity? Before turning to these questions, let us first draw several critiques of Miranda, Marxism, and liberation theology.

First Critique: On the Danger of Scientism

[35] Miranda comments, regarding the liberal apologists of the capitalistic system, “The reality which constitutes the empirical datum under examination is recognized as *always bad*, but the conceptual abstraction made from all these extramental realities, turns out to be good ‘in itself.’ Does this not clearly indicate that such an abstraction does not correspond to reality?” (1974: 13). But what is this reality? – *whose reality*? It seems that Miranda falls into a trap here, and opens himself up to the comment “Physician, heal thyself!”⁹ He does not appear to reflect, in discussing the reality of the historical-material manifestation over the

⁹ Neo-anarchist Murray Bookchin states: “This pursuit of security in the past, this attempt to find a haven in fixed dogma and an organizational hierarchy as substitutes for creative thought and praxis is bitter evidence of how little many revolutionaries are capable of ‘revolutionizing themselves and things,’ much less of revolutionizing society as a whole” (175).

abstraction-ideal, that what applies to capitalism and the wage-system must also apply to Marxism and Christianity. If the *Wirkungsgesichte* of capitalism *cannot* be divorced from the ideal of such (whether that be a Smithian or Nozickian ideal) – then the histories of Christianity and Marxism, in all their faults and failures, cannot be divorced from their truths, intentions, or “authentic spirit.” This point brings up the frequently made critique of Marxism vis-à-vis historical determinism: capitalism, according to orthodox Marxism, *has* to founder, following in the wake of the other stages of history. This logic of deduction – where examples determine, and *solely determine* the theory – may be useful in the natural sciences, but when dealing with human life such determinism can be dangerous, for it refuses a place to contingency, possibility, alternative modes of interpretation or criticism.¹⁰

[36] In short, by postulating history as the determined truth and relinquishing the non-material in the making of history we reject what has not but may happen; i.e., we preclude hope. Some blame must go to Engels, who came up with the concept of historical materialism and vociferated with such vehemence against “utopian socialism” in the name of positivistic scientism, for this rigid and wholly unnecessary aspect of Marxism. Yet we should not completely absolve Marx from blame, for he capitulated to this process in his own lifetime.¹¹

[37] Although Miranda states in his Preface that he speaks “of Marx and not of communism,” thus properly, if optimistically, distancing himself from the Stalinist and state socialist models of the twentieth century, he often reverts to the tired rhetoric of clichés and pietisms that reflect the most dogmatically single-minded elements of Marxism at its least palatable. An example is right on the book jacket, where Miranda proclaims, incredibly, that “Biblical scholarship will sooner or later have to take seriously the results of my investigation, for my conclusions are objectively verifiable, and I propose them as such.” And this is not just a matter of tone or inflated rhetoric: to justify an interpretation of the Bible *and* Marx, two of the most complex and fertile historical experiments in world history, on the basis of “science” is not merely laughable but somewhat sinister – a feeble and anxious plea, it would seem, for legitimization. Trying to exculpate Marxism as a scientific theory is a mistake; attempting to revive the critical spirit of Marx, especially the early and pre-Engels Marx, *vis-à-vis* the critique of capitalism in terms of alienation, commodity fetishism, is both more interesting and more crucial. Miranda, at times, appears to reject the objectivity-objectification tropes of modern science, but perhaps the late-Marxian rejection of utopian socialism and anarchism in favor of the scientific socialism – and resultant denunciation of heretics like William Morris, Bakunin, and Kriege – runs too deep to be so easily disabused.

¹⁰ For example, if I drop a glass of water twenty-four times, and it fails to break twenty-four times, the theory deduced is that “the glass never breaks.” If, after this theory rigidifies, in other words, is “politicized” and thereby made dogma by virtue of determination, I drop the glass and it breaks, there is no longer a way to acknowledge this derivation from reality, and I must deny that I am wet. This is the fate envisioned by Kafka, and which, in the Eastern European experience of Marxism did indeed come to pass.

¹¹ Though legend has it that upon hearing of the use of his name by some French radicals, the aged Marx affirmed that he was certainly not, had never been, nor could he ever be “a Marxist.”

Second Critique: On the Use of Marx contra Christianity

[38] A second line of critique has to do less with what Miranda picked up from Marx than what he may have missed out of Marx. Marx's critique's of religion as *consolation* and as *social control* fit with Miranda's project, but the third element of Marx's critique, regarding religion as a *reflection* of society (or, in other terms, the *reversal* of the true nature of humanity), is somehow lost upon this apostle of Christian liberation. Alisdair Kee notes that Miranda evades what is precisely Marx's deepest criticism of religion, not of the Church (which is all-too-easy to bash), but of Christian social principles, which, says Marx, are suited only to "valiant monks." This aspect of Marx's critique is hard to ignore, as it is part and parcel of his concept of alienation and false consciousness, and as it underlies his larger criticism of Western ontology and epistemology. Miranda focuses on the critique of false consciousness, but does not address Marx's conviction that religion and false consciousness may be inextricably interlinked.

Third Critique: On Hellenophobia

[39] The tradition of classical Greece is much maligned by Miranda, an odd tactic considering Marx's Hellenophilia. Marx, like Nietzsche after him, favored Hellenic culture, art, and religion to the so-called "Nazarene" elements in Western culture derived from the Judeo-Christian Bible. Whereas Miranda would like to strip Christianity of Greek philosophy (a great difficulty after Augustine and Aquinas, and even the early fathers, who were virtually without exception middle Platonists), Marx wanted to strip Western culture of precisely its Judeo-Christian elements. This is a good example of the charge of an arbitrary and selective use of Marx that is laid upon liberation theologians. "Like Segundo [another prominent liberation theologian], Miranda would like to be able to extract aspects of primitive Christianity and join them to Marx's social analysis" (Kee: 205).

Fourth Critique: On the Use of Christ in Liberation Theology

[40] Finally, it is often the case that liberation theologians make even freer use of the Bible than of Marx. Is Jesus a revolutionary in modern political terms? And, if so, how central is this to his intended message? Is he to be seen as a scapegoat whose blood cries out for vengeance? Was he indeed a victim of the powerful? If so, which powerful? The Sanhedrin? Pilate? Romans? God? To call Jesus a "radical" is not to call him a socialist or Marxist, for several reasons: the breadth of his message, which, though in some sense socio-ethical, was also undeniably spiritual; and the poor to whom he addressed his message most directly cannot possibly be made into a proto-proletariat. Crossan notes that there are in fact two Greek terms for poor: *penes*, which refers to the majority working peasants, making a bare subsistence but incorporated into the socio-religious system of the day; and *ptochos*, the truly destitute, a family or individual pushed into begging, prostitution, crime, and those ostracized because of disease or physical handicap (60). It is these latter to whom Jesus almost always refers, and it is these who are "blessed" in the Gospels, i.e., those not only outside of the margins of society in economic and political terms, but also – and perhaps especially – the victims of socio-religious oppression. In short, these poor were not the proletarians of Marxian dreams but rather the *lumpen* so reviled by Marx, those without any

sort of legitimacy – those completely outside the prevailing social, political, economic, and religious structure.

[41] This problem is not simply an academic one; it is reflected in Marxist groups of today, who tend to ignore issues of homelessness, racism, sexism and heterosexism in favor of worker's rights, unions, and so on. Marxists, it would seem, have to be more clear as to whom, exactly, they speak – their vision of justice must be expanded to include, as Miranda, Young, and Walzer insist, those crucial extra-economic factors which, though not so obvious, can be just as pernicious and denigrating.

Is Marx Necessary for Radical Christianity?

[42] Judging by the obvious faults and fertilities of both Christianity and Marxism in terms of social justice and ethics, their capabilities and limits in the critique of the philosophy of oppression – do they need each other? Let us examine this interdependence, or lack of such, vis-à-vis two Marxian tropes: *alienation* and *social change*.

[43] “Alienation” refers to a person's condition of *being dominated by the forms it helped to create*. Unlike, say, feudal society, where at least oppression is obvious (and largely imposed by the threat of physical force), in capitalism it is money, or more correctly, capital, that relegates the majority of the population to a life of blood, sweat, and tears. Workers, Marx argues, are alienated from: a) the products of their labor (this relates to Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism – very helpful in our day of rampant consumerism); b) the forces of production, the machines at which they slave; and c) themselves and their community, against whom they must ceaselessly struggle to defeat in the perpetual quest for material gain. Alienation is largely a sense of spiritual vacuity or restlessness: since workers do not own the means of production, they lose control of their own ability to create through labor.¹² As such, the worker loses her freedom and is consequently dehumanized, trapped in the position of the principle instrument in a world of instrumentality and calculation. In similar fashion, as neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School have emphasized, the modern consumer is under the vast and prevalent control of advertising and the media, the “culture industry,” which perpetuates materialistic concupiscence by offering much and giving little; the consumer drowns in unfulfilled but constantly changing images of the good life; he becomes addicted to these images, and tries to locate them in objects – to no avail.

[44] Spiritual alienation is a critical factor in estimating the extent of injustice in our world. The “malaise of modernity” can hardly be denied, though it is often exaggerated for polemical purposes. “Death of God” theologians, such as Thomas J. Altizer, have argued that the objectified and transcendent deity of classical theism is and must remain dead, so that a new vision of God, immanent and committed to human justice, may emerge. Marxism and radical Christianity join hands in combating the fetish-worship, abstractions, and inhumanities of both traditional Christianity and the consumerist phase of (global)

¹² Marx placed much emphasis, in his early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, on the priority of creativity in self-realization, a notion that has been largely ignored by orthodox Marxists, who tend to view this as the immature idealist speaking in Marx. I see it as the human (and humane) Marx, the Marx who is for Miranda a “Christian humanist.”

monopoly capitalism. But does radical Christianity need Marx? If by “Marx” is meant the Marx of most Marxists of the twentieth century, the Marx of Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Che, or the Marx of Althusserian liberation theologians in Latin America, then the answer is a resounding “no.” However, if by “Marx” we mean the Marx of *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, of William Morris, the Frankfurt School, and of José Miranda, there is no need to dispose of a valuable asset to the cause of Christian liberation.

Is Christ Necessary for Latin American Revolution?

[45] In order for social change to come about, the proletariat must become a self-conscious group (thus the importance of “class consciousness”); they must overcome the inhibitory factors of alienation and “false consciousness” before they can effectively challenge the power of the capitalists. “False consciousness” is the contradiction between understanding and practice, as in the case of capitalist society where the people believe themselves to be free when they are not – e.g., in the rhetoric of the American Dream, the eternal carrot-on-a-stick that serves as a latter-day opiate of the people. The proletariat thus, in terms of the dialectic, becomes the antithesis to capitalism, and the synthesis will be communism, a new, classless social order rooted in material conditions – where “man comes to realize himself as man.”

[46] Now the second query: Where does Christ fit into the above picture? While perhaps amenable to, is he *necessary* for radical politics and an honest and critical pursuit of justice? In strictly pragmatic terms, the image of Jesus in Latin America is much stronger than in the West (though not always, it must be admitted, as an exemplar of liberation), and thus may have more drawing power, but this use of an image rings of falseness, of capitulation to *imagoguery*.¹³

[47] Whether the Bible’s “authentic message” coincides in all things with the Marxian message as outlined above, is highly questionable. There are, however, undeniable congruencies and specific points of contact, such as the trope of false-consciousness and the pledge for the underprivileged and disadvantaged – as well points where they are not saying exactly the same thing, but where each side contributes to a lacuna of the other, providing a rounder, fuller message of hope. Perhaps radicals do not *need* Christ, any more than Christian radicals *need* Marx, but an examination of Christianity may lend to Marxism a much-needed personalization – a recognition of the reality of the non-material in social change, and a concomitant expansion of what it means to be poor or underprivileged, as well as an infusion of utopianism, a sense of the beautiful gratuity of love and supererogation, and a feeling for the elements of risk and contingency that whelm the struggle for justice and human life more generally.

¹³ *Imagoguery*: from “image” and “demagoguery” (OED: political rule by manipulation, by “appealing to the basest instincts of the mob.” Thus, the use of images, sound bites, forms in maintaining control over people’s lives, and pocketbooks – politically and economically, through advertising and the culture industry.

Conclusions

Christianity cannot be a purely private matter, and, as soon as its implications for the wider society begin to be worked out in practice, allowances must be made for differing situations, and accommodations reached with rival schools of thought, not all of which can be dismissed out of hand as inherently anti-Christian. In particular, the “secular thought” of societies with a long history of Christian influence may sometimes turn out to have been more authentically Christian than what has been officially received as Christian teaching. Like the braids of a river, they leave the main stream when its waters are held up and feed back into it later (Mitchell: 634).

[48] “The West or Christianity, either . . . or.” This, proclaims José Miranda, “is the conclusion of our study” – a conclusion made, interestingly enough, in the Introduction. But what is Marxism if not a Western doctrine in the deepest sense, emerging out of German Idealism, Lucretian materialism, and a mix of Enlightenment and Romantic ideals of reason, hope, and progress? And what is Christianity if not the transposition of a Near Eastern Judaic sect upon a Greco-pagan world? The West has no need to make such an either/or choice; having absorbed so much of Christianity and Marx (perhaps more of the former in Latin America and more of the latter in social democracies like Canada) we could not deny either completely, even if we wanted to.

[49] According to José María Díez-Alegría, “It would be absurd to consider Miranda’s *Marx and the Bible* as a kind of unquestionable dogma.” This is true, of course, but Alegría’s further comment needs to be examined more closely. He goes on to say that it would be “the greatest absurdity” to dismiss Miranda’s book as being “ideological” in the name of a “neutrality” that would “in reality be a product of a ruling class ideology” (Forward in Miranda 1974: ix). In the twenty-first century, we can no longer afford to be so carefree in speaking of ideology and ruling-class in such monolithic and unreflective ways; these, far from being black or white, Marxist or bourgeois-fascist, Christian or atheist/idolater, are infused with innumerable shades of grey. Whatever can be said of the Bible, and its “authentic message,” it will always bring color to these shades, refusing co-optation, while chasing shadows from the corners. The Bible is, in the end, potentially more radical than Marxism, but like Marxism, it has the power to blind as well as the power to enlighten. This is its tenuous gift.

[50] We might heartily agree with Miranda that we must take Marx seriously, more so now that, thankfully, the usurpers of his name have all but withered away. But this does not entail a conversion, as Miranda seems to suggest, from anti-Marxism to Marxism, but from dogmatic blindness to an informed but wary openness. The great and immediate task of Marxism was, after all, the reform of consciousness, and Miranda evokes this, leading us to follow the directive of Pope Paul VI, who said: “It belongs to the layman, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which they live” (quoted in Miranda 1974: xvi). The question remains, whether the spirits of Marx and of Christ can coincide? Perhaps it is too soon to tell: the recent Death of Marx in 1989, a full century after the Death of God in 1888, may liberate these spirits for freer play.

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