

With this short essay I want to summarize some of the shared points between the social doctrine of the Church and the Marxian Thought, emphasizing nonetheless the radical differences of the two perspectives. These points are: the necessity of a radicality; the universal destination of goods and rights; the centrality of the community. In the last paragraph I will analyse in which sense Marx's critique of religion can help Christians to remind themselves their inner vocation.

1. Necessity of Radicality

"We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick"¹. With these words, during the first Italian lockdown in March 2020, Pope Francis summarized the big issues that our contemporary society is facing. With these speeches, his Encyclicals and actions, Pope Francis is showing to all the world the necessity of a structural change. A radical change that should interest all the levels of society: economic, political, cultural, environmental, and religious. According to the Pope, if we continue to conceive the progress, our relationship with the nature and with all the people of the world in the same way, we will destroy not only someone or something else, but ultimately ourselves. As the Coronavirus pandemic showed us. And choice "in the medium term" is not enough. We need something more radical and less superficial. "It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress"².

We can find this claim of a radical change in the Marxian thought as well. Marx himself wrote, in the *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach*: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it"³. This imperative to change the world for Marx arises from the tragic situation of inequity and injustice of the European industrial society of nineteenth century. According to Marx, this structural demand for change is so intense that it ends up being a historical necessity, as it is possible to see in the theory of historical materialism. Indeed, the history is a history of class struggles, in which the passage from one epoch to another is caused by the fact that the oppressed class become the powerful one, starting another epoch with the presence of other classes, always in a situation of struggle. This happened until the Capitalistic epoch, in which the two struggling classes are the bourgeois and the proletarians. In fact, the overcoming of the capitalistic epoch will lead to the liberation of humanity and to the end of the history as a class struggle. This extraordinary liberation, the end of every oppressive relationship, according to Marx can happen only starting from the degrading situation of the proletarians. The liberation of the world can take place only because of their misery. In fact they haven't any particular interest to protect, because they don't own anything. So they "have nothing to lose but their chains"⁴, and in this way they remove [Aufheben] "all the inhuman living conditions of modern society, conditions which sum up [their] situation"⁵. Thus, the urgency of a change is such a high necessity that becomes a historical necessity.

According to Marx this radical change cannot be a halfway measure, a progressive, or a just reformistic change. What interests me is Marx's criticism of Proudhon and the other "bourgeois socialists", who made a

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Moment of Prayer*, Sagrato of St Peter's Basilica Friday, 27 March 2020.

² POPE FRANCIS, *Laudato Si'*, encyclical letter, 2015, n. 194.

³ K. MARX, *Eleven Thesis on Feuerbach*, 1845, Italian translation in K. MARX, *Antologia*, It. Tr. by E. Donaggio and P. Kammerer, Feltrinelli, Milano 2015, p. 44.

⁴ F. ENGELS - K. MARX, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848, Italian translation in K. MARX, *Antologia*, cit., p. 249.

⁵ F. ENGELS - K. MARX, *The Holy Family*, 1845, Italian translation in K. MARX, *Antologia*, cit., p. 247.

mistake, conceiving the necessary change as a process that leads the oppressed to live like their oppressors, the proletarians like the bourgeois, because “they cannot imagine a society in which the human beings are no more bourgeois”⁶. In a way similar to Pope Francis, also Marx noticed the need not to think within the confines of the contemporary conception of progress, because this conception is intrinsically destructive and insane. Those who think that this type of non-radical change is possible, “want the impossible, that is, bourgeois living conditions without the inevitable consequences of these conditions”⁷.

What does a radical change mean? In order to answer this question, it can be useful to quote the conception of *radical* according to Marx: “To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter”. Following the Marxian thought “for man the root is man himself”. Evidently this materialistic conception of human being is a point of difference with Christian thought, which affirms that for human beings the root is God, through the mediation of Christ. Despite this fundamental difference, both Christianity and Marxism share the centre-staging of the most neglected members of the society. “Marx places the poorest and least educated class at the centre, declaring it to be the chosen subject of human progress”⁸. Pope Francis’ choice to place the parable of the good Samaritan at the centre of *Fratelli Tutti* is an emblematic sign of the centrality of the poorest and most neglected part of the society for the Christian theology. In my opinion, at this point, it’s important to emphasize the difference between the original thought of Marx and the Christian position. Indeed, Marx chooses not to put all oppressed people at the core of his theory of emancipation. On the contrary, he elected the proletarians as the only class that would be able to liberate all of humanity. Emblematic in this sense is the evolution of the *Communist League*, the political party on behalf of which, in 1848, Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto*. Before 1847, the name of the League was the *League of Outlaws*, and from 1836 to 1847, its name was the *League of the Just*. These two ancestors of the *Communist League* were moved by Christian - evangelic values, such as ideals of equity, brotherhood, and justice. Indeed, *League of the Just’s* motto was: “All men are brothers”. Instead, the *Communist League* chose to abandon the universal evengelic ideals in order to embrace more practical values, thus choosing to elect the proletarians as the class that would have led all humanity to freedom. The end is still open to universalism, but the means implies the struggle of only a part of society. In fact, the *Communist League’s* motto, instead of referring to brotherhood, indicates a human emancipation through the struggle of a part of the humanity: “Proletarians of all Countries, Unite!”. The Christian counterpart, in this field is more universalistic, privileging *all* the oppressed, maintaining the centrality of the concept of brotherhood, which itself is rooted in the idea of a common fatherhood. “The Fatherhood of God is certainly universal, but for this very reason it favours the least”⁹.

2. Universal Destination of Goods and Rights

Another common ground between socialists and Christians is the demand for a universal destination of goods and rights. This is evident in the Social Doctrine of the Church, which states that the earth and the goods are created for the sustenance of people: “God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity”¹⁰. This principle, formulated in another way, is the starting point of the Marxian thought as well. In an industrial society, the universal destination of goods necessarily implies the elimination of private property of the means of production. Today the desire of a universal destination of goods is far away from its fulfilment. It’s ever a problem of unfair distribution: human beings produce enough food to feed all the people in the world, nonetheless every year more than 2.000.000 people die of hunger (total certified Coronavirus deaths,

⁶ K. MARX, *Letter to Pavel Vasilevic Annenkov*, 1846, Italian translation in K. MARX, *Antologia*, cit., p. 60.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ W. BAIER, *Socialism and Community*, in W. BAIER et al., *Europe as a Common*, Lit Verlag, Zürich 2020, p. 36.

⁹ P. CODA, *Dio Uno e Trino*, edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1993, p. 94.

¹⁰ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 171.

after more than one year of pandemic, are less than 2.700.000 – thus we're speaking about two different disgraces, with evidently different visibility)¹¹.

How to move towards a more equitable world, where the universal destination of goods is no longer a mirage? The original Marxian theory states that this process can start only with the end of the private property of the means of production and through the centralization of the goods in the hands of a central entity (the State). Indeed, Marx and Engels wrote, in the *Communist Manifesto*, that some features of a future communist society would be the “[a]bolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes. [...] Abolition of all rights of inheritance. [...] Centralisation of credit in the hands of the state, by means of a national bank with State capital and an exclusive monopoly”¹². The problem of the centralization of goods is that it implies a centralization of power as well. And this process does not guarantee a fairer redistribution, as the Soviet and Chinese Communist experiments have shown us. Marx himself, after the failure of the 1848 revolution, moves away from the belief that the universal destination of goods can be reached through the centralized power of an authoritarian state. On the other hand, leave the management of the common goods to the free market, hoping that it will produce a fair redistribution of wealth, is a mistake as well. One of the examples of this mistake is the so-called *tragedy of the commons*. Commons are open-access and rival goods, which means that no one can be excluded from enjoying them. The free-riding problem arises when many people use these goods without taking care about the sustainability and wellbeing of society as a whole. In this way, everyone “tries to maximize their profits, but the resource doesn't suffice for all; [...] everyone contributes to their own ruins as well to that of the community”¹³. We can thus see that neither a centralized management of the goods, nor a completely free market guarantees a fair distribution of the goods and a sustainable use of them. The Social doctrine of the Church, in order not to risk falling in one of this two paradigms, suggests a different framework: the right on private property is necessary, but only if directed to the universal destination of the goods. “The right to private property is always accompanied by the primary and prior principle of the subordination of all private property to the universal destination of the earth's goods, and thus the right of all to their use”¹⁴. This framework is embodied in the Franciscan conception of economics: a use of goods without owning them, “*vivere, sine proprio*”.

The universal destination of rights is another demand for a more just world. With the word *right*, we do not consider only the rights of individuals, whose recognition by our contemporary societies is often considered a sufficient measure of equity. As Pope Francis noticed: “[J]ustice requires recognizing and respecting not only the rights of individuals, but also social rights and the rights of peoples. This means finding a way to ensure ‘the fundamental right of peoples to subsistence and progress’”¹⁵. We can find this demand for a broader recognition of rights in Marx's works as well. In particular in *The Jewish Question*, an article published in the 1844, in which the author polemizes against Bruno Bauer, a young Hegelian. Bauer had proposed a solution in order to solve the Jewish Question, with which we consider the lack of freedom of religion in Germany at the time, and the consequent discrimination of the Jewish people. Bauer's political proposal is very modern: secularization of institutions, religious pluralism, faith reduced to a private affair. Marx considers this proposal to be progress, but nonetheless still partial and abstract. Indeed, this would be only a *political* emancipation, thus an emancipation at a level of heaven and not at the level of the earth. “The political emancipation from religion is not a religious emancipation that has been carried through to completion and is free from contradiction, because political emancipation is not a form of human emancipation which has

¹¹ For more data: <https://www.worldometers.info/>.

¹² F. ENGELS - K. MARX, *The Communist Manifesto*, cit.

¹³ P. STEINMAIR-PÖSEL – M. BRIE, *Commons – Our Common Ground?*, in W. BAIER *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Fratelli Tutti*, Encyclical Letter, 2020, n. 123.

¹⁵ *Ibi*, n. 126.

been carried through to completion and is free from contradiction”¹⁶. This (only) political emancipation would result, according to Marx, in a scission inside the human existence. Indeed, on one hand there would be a formal equality between all the *citoyen*, exemplified in the *droits de l’homme* of the 1793 French Constitution. On the other hand, inequality would endure within the civil society, in which the same person, before considered as *citoyen*, now becomes a *bourgeois*, that is, a member of the civil society in which he acts as a private man, leaving aside any universality of rights. Thus, the *droits de l’homme* are in reality the *droits de citoyen* passed off as universal. This is the process of establishing an ideology in Marx’s thought: a particular thing passed off as universal, that in this way seems to be sacred and untouchable. Thanks to these reflections we can conclude that the political emancipation is not sufficient. The implementation of the rights that we consider as granted in our society are important, but not enough, because we run the risk of leaving aside material and more practical injustice. Therefore, according to both perspectives, a broader theorization and implementation of what we consider as fundamental rights is necessary. This must allow all people the necessary resources for “subsistence and progress”.

3. *The Importance of Community without Denying the Individual.*

Another important meeting point between Christians and Socialism is the centrality of the community. The implementation of this value, present from the beginning of both the thoughts, is today maybe more urgent, in a society explicitly individualistic. Without a community, in fact, the person himself cannot be fully realized. The urgency of a community is expressed in the urgency for fraternity developed by Pope Francis in his last Encyclical letter: “No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together’. Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth, which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all”¹⁷. Thus, the person can only flourish totally within a community, not losing his individual characteristics for the sake of the unity of the total. The colour of the community is rather than one, a set and a combination of various ranges.

This last consideration, that is, the importance of maintaining one’s individual features without necessarily conforming to the dominant characteristics of the community as a *unicum*, was seen as a point of critique for the socialism. Indeed, the real actualizations of the socialist theories (at least URSS and China) many times have led to an excessive standardization for all the citizens, normally through a campaign of limitations and punishments of the non-conformal habits and opinions. At this point, it is important to emphasise that Marx’s theory, in principle, does not consider the community as an option that leads to eliminate the individuality. The demand of a community is certainly seen as a response to an individualist society considered as a “humanity of monads”; but this response does not necessarily need the negation of the individual. On the contrary, within the community the person does not lose himself in universality, but can realize his personal freedom and his dignity as a human being. Moreover, according to Marx, without the full development of each single person, the full development of the whole community cannot be reached: “In place

¹⁶ K. MARX, *The Jewish Question*, 1844, Italian translation in K. MARX, *Antologia*, cit., p. 47.

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Fratelli Tutti*, cit., n. 8.

of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”¹⁸.

4. Critique of Ideology and of Religion. How the Christians can benefit from it.

I would conclude analysing one of the most interesting points of the Marxian philosophy, which in my opinion still is particularly important today, especially for Christians and Europeans: the critique of ideology. It is a critique present along all Marx's work, explicitly discussed in the *German Ideology*, a series of manuscripts written by Engels and Marx in 1846, but published as a single book in 1932 by Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. One of the goals of these manuscripts is to critique the precedent philosophy, considered as an expression of ideology, in particular some exponents of the Left Hegelians: Bauer, Feuerbach and Stirner. According to Marx and Engels, the ideology is a method to interpret and justify the present state of things, in order to preserve it from critiques and changes. The strategies through which ideology takes shape are manifold; here some examples: to speak about the current political and economic system as the only possible; to pass off as universal the ideas of a particular class – the one who detains the power; diverts the attention of the population to secondary objectives – critique of religion. Ideology gives us an image of the world where the human beings and their relationships seems to be upside down. And this is not only a logical inversion, as sustained by Feuerbach. The reality itself is inversed; and ideology provides a passive (a-critical and legitimizing) reproduction of a world actually turned upside down, where a few dominate and exploit the many.

One of the most famous application of this concept of ideology in Marx's work is the critique of religion as opium of the people. According to Marx, the needs that generate the religion are real, it gives voice to the lament of the world. The problem is that the religion rather than give an answer to this lament, provides a passive justification of an inversed reality, as a sort of narcotic substance, able to distract the person from his misery. The process of justification operated by religion is to suppose the presence of an otherworldly dimension where people can finally be happy. And this supposition provides human beings with an instrument of consolation in the face of the injustices that live on their skin in earthly life. In my opinion, from a Christian point of view it is important to address this critique, not to accept it in all its dimensions, but to reflect of the truth of this critique. Indeed I think that the religion runs the risk to lead the person away from the world, and from the actual problems of the world. To mention an actualization of this process: the Marcionism. It is a form of Christianity of the III century (rediscovered at the beginning of the twentieth century by the theologian Adolf Von Harnack), which emphasises the personal relation with the Christian “God of revelation” of each person. This personal relationship with God led Marcionists to an ascetic life, considering the things of the world as referring to an imperfect and inferior dimension. There was a sort of world denial, due to the salvific personal relationship with God: this form of extreme mysticism led Marcionists to refuses the earthly existence, even going to seek a form of voluntary martyrdom. Marcionism was banned as Heresy in the first centuries, and this is a sign that the Church wants to refuse this type of extremisms. The Church affirms that the relation with God through religion rather than leading to denial of the world, implies that human being realizes himself in the world, starting from the relation with the Father. There is therefore an attention and a care of the world. And each Christian is challenged by the injustices that inhabit it. The fact that a *social* doctrine of the Church exists, is an expression of this principle. Nevertheless, I think that it's an important passage to read this critique of religion of Marx, because as Christians we always run this risk of intimism, whereas it is within the full sense of Christianity is his action within the world in order to fight the injustices, in order to implement that radical change to which Pope Francis continually pushes us.

¹⁸ F. ENGELS - K. MARX, *The Communist Manifesto*, cit., Italian translation in K. MARX, *Antologia*, cit., p. 223.