

# Pannenberg on Marxism: Insights and Generalizations

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## SUMMARY

According to Pannenberg, Christians cannot use Marxism as a scientific, sociological tool in the task of understanding the dynamic of oppression in contemporary societies.

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Over the past three decades Wolfhart Pannenberg has distinguished himself as a theologian of world renown. The German professor came to prominence in America in the late 1960s in part because of his stalwart commitment to the historical nature of Jesus' resurrection as foundational for theology. He was also hailed as an early proponent of the "future" orientation in theology, which offered fresh insights into the understanding of God. Pannenberg, together with other Europeans such as Jergen Moltmann and Johannes Metz, spoke of God as "the power of the future." This attitude earned their views the perhaps somewhat erroneous labels "theology of hope" or "political theology. "

In recent years, however, Pannenberg has voiced caution concerning one of the offspring of European political theology, South America's liberation theology. In his Taylor Lectures at Yale in 1977, for example, he criticized Gustavo Gutierrez's understanding of liberation. His willingness to speak against this movement has not endeared him to some members of the American theological community, who have become increasingly supportive of liberation theology and increasingly willing to use Marxist categories in criticizing social structures. As a result, Pannenberg's reputation as a progressive theological innovator has in many circles faded, or he has been reevaluated as a neo-conservative. This interesting development has led Gary M. Simpson to ask, "Whither Wolfhart Pannenberg? " (*Journal of Religion*, January 1987).

Pannenberg has recently explained why he has absented himself from the "Marxist Christian project." In his address "Christianity, Marxism - Liberation Theology," prepared for his United States tour this past spring, Pannenberg declared his strong opposition to Marxism and by implication any theology that appeals to Marxism for philosophical or sociological insight. By analyzing the Marxist system, he offered the philosophical basis for his cautionary stance toward liberation theology—a position prefigured in his discussion of alienation in *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Westminster, 1985). His criticism did not focus directly on liberation theology itself, but on the philosophical Marxism it employs as a sociological tool.

Pannenberg's opposition to Marxist thought is not surprising, given his own European experience. During his life he has been exposed to various negative features of Marxism-Leninism. He spent his youth in a province of eastern Germany, which at the end of World War II the invading Russian forces made part of Poland. This experience afforded him firsthand knowledge of the Stalinist Marxism exported to post-World War II eastern Europe. His early student years were spent at the Free University of Berlin, established in the western sector of the city when the older city university fell under communist control. He later observed what he considered the institution's ironic shift toward Marxism. More recently, as a professor in Munich, Pannenberg has observed the power tactics of Marxist student groups who have bullied their way into university classrooms and sought to intimidate those professors who refuse to allow them to take over class sessions. As a result of these factors, Pannenberg finds Marxism to be the archenemy of the open, liberal, tolerant society he advocates.

Pannenberg contends that there are two basic reasons why Christians cannot use Marxism as a scientific, sociological tool in the task of understanding the dynamic of oppression in contemporary societies. First, building on the work of the Polish philosopher Adam Schaff and the Swiss theologian Fritz Lieb, Pannenberg; declared that Marxism harbors a flawed understanding of the person, an understanding that is irreconcilable with Christianity. Marxism declares the person to be a function of society. Each individual is the product of social interaction and therefore thoroughly dependent on social context. This idea gives rise to the Marxist rejection of religion. The religious claim that each person is endowed with dignity from his or her relation to God alienates the person from his or her true nature. To the Marxist, therefore, the church's existence testifies to the continuing presence of alienation in the social system, an alienation that ought to vanish after the socialist revolution.

That Pannenberg himself understands the social context's significant role in the development of the person is evidenced in his *Anthropology*. However, he concluded in his recent lecture that from the perspective of Christian personalism, it is actually the Marxist proposal that results in alienation. By suggesting that the individual is exclusively social, Marx alienates the individual "from the constitutive center of his or her human life, i.e., from God." In so doing Marxism deprives persons of autonomy and human dignity.

Further, the Marxist understanding of human nature views social history as the process of the human species' selfcreation. Christianity sees in this proposal a disastrous attempt to emancipate humanity from divine providence by setting the creation above the Creator. This Marxist proposal is too optimistic concerning human nature, for it fails to recognize the problem of sin as pride.

According to Pannenberg, this atheistic orientation "is not an accidental element in Marxist thought," but is intimately connected with the anthropology underlying its social theory. For this reason one cannot "use Marxist economic descriptions without buying their atheist implications. "

Pannenberg's assertion, of course, runs directly counter to the position of liberation theologians. They claim that they can employ Marxist categories to diagnose their nations' sociopolitical order without giving up their Christian commitment. But Pannenberg points out that Christians who use Marxist categories to appraise contemporary societies must address these difficulties in the Marxist philosophical anthropology. The theologian must always be on guard against unholy alliances with philosophical systems. There are signs that some theologians have already begun this reevaluation. J. Emmette Weir, for example, has cited Juan Luis Segundo's criticism of the social ineffectiveness of the Marxist concept of religion ("*The Bible and Marx*", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, August 1982) and has also noted that current exponents of liberation theology have shifted away from dependence on Marx- ("*Liberation Theology Comes of Age*," *Expository Times*, October 1986).

Pannenberg's second point, although not as significant theologically and philosophically as the first, is also formidable. He claims that as an economic theory Marxism is an unscientific oversimplification of complex realities. Contrary to Marx's theory, labor is not the only source of economic value, especially in the current technological age. On the basis of this observation, Pannenberg asserts that the question of economic and social justice is far more complex than Marxist categories would indicate. Marxism, therefore, is not an ideologically neutral, analytic instrument, as liberation theologians claim. Nor is it scientific, as its historically false prediction of the demise of the middle class has shown.

In spite of its flaws, Marxism, Pannenberg admits, is undeniably appealing to both Western and Third World intellectuals. He maintains that this is probably so because the system imparts moral value to political involvement in the class struggle. But in the end those who engage in this movement "turn out to be victims of the seductive power of an ideology."

Although he is sharply critical of Marxism and any theology that appeals to Marxist categories, Pannenberg is not unconcerned about social justice in Third World countries. In the closing section of his lecture, he affirmed recent Vatican statements on social justice. He also called for involvement in the struggle against "examples of clear injustice" in the world. He admitted that his proposal appears modest compared with "the quest for justice in the full and complete sense of the

word." But in its defense he cited Alasdair MacIntyre's conclusion in After Virtue (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) that no generally accepted concept of justice is available therefore, "even justice can only be provisional this side of the eschatological fullness of the kingdom of God."

In the question-answer session that followed the lecture, Pannenberg called on Christian theologians to follow the lead of the early church fathers and offer a more creative approach to the task of doing theology in the face of the world's injustices than that found in Marxist-oriented liberation theologies...