

Socialism – the true Kingdom of God?

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from the book 'Must Christians be Socialists? Between belief and politics.'

translated into English

It holds true that it is rhetorically skilful to prove to an opponent that he, without having realised it, has said the opposite to what he wanted to say. The glamour of this line of argument can admittedly be self-serving, if it is not grounded in fact, and remains an empty rhetoric style, as the example of Helmut Gollwitzer against Eberhard Jüngel demonstrates.

Gollwitzer thought that the claim of a situation in which “all people together are masters of the house of their assets” is “undoubtedly a socialist objective.” That looks roughly like the assertion that only a particular brand of laundry detergent washes linen white. The vision of a societal condition of general freedom and equality as a condition in which all people in freedom establish their lives, and no-one is oppressed by another, is at least as liberal as it is socialist. It is by no means an objective that only socialism has imparted upon humanity. It has much more to do with a peculiar stoic philosophical conception of human nature, that Christianity links with the prophetic future promises of a Godly kingdom of peace and justice. The democratic ideology of modernity after the English revolution of the 17th century lives out of this future vision of the Kingdom of God, understood as a reign of freedom.

If the idea of a revocation of the control of people over one another belongs to the Christian hope, the light of which also already illuminates the problems of the present to Christians, then it is by no means said that Christians must intrinsically be socialists. The differences between liberal and socialist ideas arise where it is a matter of the way to causation of such a condition. And it is not a foregone conclusion on which side the discussion of Christ will be rediscovered, and if he could

even side with either of the parties in conflict, without claiming substantial reservations.

Liberalism holds that the free development of all individuals themselves also promotes general welfare, because self interests, in the long run, are not against the other members of the society being able to achieve their goals; instead, proper self-interest promotes the flourishing of the whole society. The free development of all is the conditional upon the free development of every individual. Unfortunately, this emotive freedom of liberalism adheres only to the current residual earthly circumstances. Because of this, self-interest and selfishness rule the world. The limits of the “well-understood” self-interests are seldom held to. It is also not a foregone conclusion how this or that group, by this or that individually developed measure, will understand what their own given social status is. The benchmark for this is always the subject matter of political struggles. Such political struggle depends on the recognition of the necessity of rules and standards that must apply to all individuals. The principal of the free development of the individual in their own right can only lead to the fight of everyone against each other.

Classical liberalism holds that one needs only the regulatory interventions of the state and the inherited privileges to be removed, for the freedom of everyone and the general wellbeing of all to be in harmony. Socialism sees through the illusory nature of this concept. Classical liberalism also holds to the idea that the unimpeded development of all is the condition of freedom for the individual. As a means to this end one cannot apply the idea of the promotion of the free initiative of individuals, because classical liberalism understands this to be isolating. The “private” individual then de facto constricts the freedom of others, above all through the private ownership of goods, that are indispensable means for the realisation of the freedom of all. The urgent task of the society should be the true freedom of each individual, assessed in contrast to privatism, despotism and arrogance.

While liberalism considers the free development of each individual as a way to freedom of all - towards the condition in which, considering Jünger and Gollwitzer, “all people together are masters of the house of their assets” – socialism sees a reversal in the freeing from private property the means of production as the only way through which alone the true freedom of each individual can come. There the classical socialist has a close relationship to the classic liberal idea of man, as it anticipates that after the removal of the private ownership of the means of production will usher in what classical liberals hold as already presently possible, which is that the self-interest of individuals, without compulsion, can be harmonised with one another towards a common interest.

The socialist then falls victim to the optimistic conception of the person, to almost the same extent as can occur in liberalism. Neither can see that, as the Bible says, the person is “evil from their youth.” Neither can recognise that people constantly use their own freedom at the expense of others and thereby can only in be curbed in meagre measure and through careful inspection of the dependence of one’s own welfare on the welfare of others. The development of one’s own freedom at the expense of others is not by any means limited to the private ownership of property, which socialism holds, rather it occurs in the pursuit of power, influence and societal recognition.

The tragedy of socialism is that after the socialist revolution, after the socialisation of the means of production, that no unconstrained harmony of the individuals occurs, which should occur according to the theory. One gives all possible explanations for this, of course, and postulates longer and longer about the duration of expected transition phases. In the meantime the individual human person, living within the socialist system, which does not want to adjust itself, is compelled to subordinate themselves to its claim upon their life, and to those who enforce its claim, at the expense of all others, and who take to themselves the authority to adjudicate the claim regarding what the true interests of everyone and what the inevitable future fulfillment of those intentions will be.

Therefore it is not accidental of socialism, which was inspired by the determination to see the realisation of freedom for all, wherever the social revolution succeeds, that it leads to political circumstances, that belong to the least free society that humanity has encountered in modernity. It is not simply about unfortunate historic undesirable developments, which would be, in principle, avoidable. Rather, it involves consequences of a false conception of human nature, which is foundational to socialist theory itself. Socialists today are no longer excused by naivete, even with the sincere assurances that it will go better next time, after the series of socialist revolutions that have taken place, which all led to the establishment of totalitarian regimes. There are hardly any empirical indicators for such expectations. On the contrary, the present and historical experiences speak against this claim.

Must a Christian be a socialist, as Gollwitzer asserts? The expectation of the Kingdom of God as a reign of freedom and justice, in which all oppression of people by others is set aside, is inseparable from Christian belief. But that does not mean that this state will be reached by the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production. Gollwitzer may eagerly allow his argumentation with Jüngel to become carried away, to mistake the contents of the Christian hope of the Kingdom of God as though branded socialist.

The Jewish and Christian hope of the Kingdom of God is connected with a deep scepticism against all political revolutions brought about by people. If humans no longer exercise rule over one another, rather, God reigns directly with them, peace and justice will finally set in. It is not by the elimination of the private ownership of the means of production that Christ expects the realisation of a just society, rather, by God alone. In this lies not an empty promise of a better world to come, rather this world to come is now already the strength of this world. However, this looks different than it reads according to Gollwitzer. Only to the extent to which God comes to reign in the hearts of His people are peace and justice in their full human sense already possible.

The socialist belief in miracles, which the realisation of humanity as a consequence of the elimination of the private ownership of the means of production expects, is on the other hand disarmingly naïve, as it required only the elimination of these obstacles, in order that the good nature of humans could unfold itself freely. However, this belief in miracles is not a harmless illusion, because it has become connected to a fanaticism in our century, wherein this illusion has brought about millions of victims, without having removed the ruling of people over others or having changed the fundamental accompanying exploitation. It stays a purely verbal assurance, worse, an official story, which itself has perpetuated such a regime, when it is said that instead of slavery as a correlation of exploitative rule after the socialist revolution there is only “functional subordination”.

With such expressions it is concealed these days, that the hope of the “reign of freedom” spurs thoughts of Marx and Engels after the socialist revolution, and serves the legitimisation of the rule and oppression. Marx already observed the connection between liberalism and early capitalism as an example of this. The truth of his diagnosis is not limited to just this case. It is a mistrust in the place of the so-called emancipators, too, because from among their ranks come the dictators of tomorrow.

The thesis that Gollwitzer pushed onto Jüngel, in order that he may then applaud – a Christian must be a socialist – to this thesis one must answer with at least one question: Can a Christian today, after the experiences with the socialist revolutions of this century, still in good conscience be a socialist in the strict Marxist sense? In light of the disappointing shifts of socialist revolutions to new forms of repressive control of people over one another, should a Christian not remember the realistic anthropology of the Bible, so that it is the only the future reign of God himself that will ultimately fulfil the desire of all people for a just society?

If socialism can after all not be said to involve this large change of human behaviour, which has so long been the brilliance of its promise, then the possibility of socialism in light of the enormous risks and victims, which after all historical experiences are associated with socialist revolutions, it can only be understandable in the context of a deep desperation of the state of western democracy. The requisites of the Marxist relics, which Gollwitzer uses to justify his negative prejudice about what the civil democracy of the west has to offer, are much sooner to be regarded as the overwhelming irrational expression of his despair, because from rational reasoning, such an expression could only require condemnation of the circumstances at hand.

Concepts such as class rule and exploitation lend themselves excellently today for use as demagogic catchphrases. Their use as academic, precise descriptions of circumstances have been extensively forfeited. After a critical dissolution of the Marxist labour theory of value and theory of added value, it may hardly be objective. Political disputes about economic fairness in relation to social groups indicate what is “equivalent remuneration” in each case for the work of each individual, where, after all, a reverse exploitation is present, in that “foreign labour without equivalent remuneration will be exploited”.

This assumption is also entirely and especially baseless: that such exploitation after the implementation of the socialist revolution will cease. The increased dependence of the individuals on one another brings with it that everyone lives at the expense of one another, and the rank and value of the contributions of the various social classes and individuals to the life of society as a whole will always be a contentious point.

The Marxist concept of the “class”, which is solely oriented towards ownership of means of production, has become equally blurred. The idea that the power relations of today’s society have ultimately come to depend on the private ownership of the means of production is no longer a plausible simplification. It is already demonstrated often enough that the relationship between ownership and power of disposition, like economic

and political power, have become more differentiated than in early English capitalism, which was the model from which Marx and Engels drew their analysis. It appears also to me that the well-known thesis that our part of the world owes its standard of living to the exploitation of other parts of the world, is indiscriminate and misleading. Finally, the majority of the actions of industrialised countries are handled in exchange with one another.

All of these Marxist catchphrases cannot explain the despair about modern-day civil democracies, which has become rampant in recent years, rather, the use of such catchphrases is merely a symptom. The deeper causes of this despair would sooner be found in the alienation of life, the senselessness, which go hand in hand with the industrialisation and bureaucratisation of modern society. This occurs both in socialist and capitalist countries. Human lack, and limitations of individuality and of finitude, can be exploited, manipulated, represented into an uplifting belief, as applicable to everyone, and as truth, which makes sense to people and can unify people without constraint.

In this position, the theologian should be concerned with their own responsibility. Here is displayed the direct and immediate relevance of the reign of God over the hearts of people to achieve the extent of fairness and societal peace that is possible in this world. The Marxist buzzwords can now be seen to serve as a surrogate for the accomplishment of that despair regarding the life circumstances of today's modern society. Their actual causes and deepest need is the invisibility of God in modern society and the awareness thereof, that the question of the meaning of human existence under these social circumstances in which we live can no longer take shape.