

Karl Marx and the Catholic Church's praxis: A possible influence

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Abstract

This article addresses the question of whether a spiritual institution can be influenced by a secular ideology, which is conceived as 'atheist'. Can a secular ideology influence and shape the nature and praxis of an institution which prides itself as having a predominant spiritual foundation. This article's objective is not necessarily meant to provide an absolute doctrine but seeks to stimulate debate based on a reasonable connection of Socialist influence on the development of the Catholic Church's praxis. This article argues that the Catholic Church's praxis, which is explicitly embodied in the Catholic Social Teachings might have been influenced by a Marxist or Socialist/communist wave of the 19th Century. This article is guided by a literature-related historical enquiry method, which compares historical events in a bid to identify possible logical connections. Literature reveals that in as much as some Catholic related movements such as the Liberation Theology had an obvious connection with Marxism, the praxis of movements embodied in both the 'Social Catholicism' and 'Catholic Action' was shaped by the Church's beliefs and contextual circumstances of its time. Literature further shows the Catholic Church neither subscribe to the Socialist revolutionary stance nor approve of its methodology, but it recognised the effects of these socialist movements toward the workers. Hence, the influence of these secular institutions cannot be totally dismissed, even though they did not shape its praxis.

Keywords

Liberation Theology; Catholic Church' praxis; Social Catholicism; Catholic action; social question; socialism

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Introduction

This article will focus on the development of the Catholic Church's praxis. To understand the development of its praxis, it is beneficial to delve into historic moments that compelled the Church to become more responsive to the social wellbeing of the society. The article will start with Marx² and how he played a seminal role in possibly awaking the Church from its confinement to the spiritual matters and was arguably perceived as 'indifferent' to the political, economic, and social injustice of people. After Marx and companions vilified religion as *the opium of the people*, there was a development of Church literature to challenge this view. The Catholic Church, in particular, embarked on writings that were partly made to repudiate Marx and other socialist formations' methodology and hostility to the conduct of the Church. One of the most influential repositories of the Church's intent to care for sundry needs of its adherents was the *Rerum Novarum*, an encyclical³ letter which proclaimed the sympathy of the Church with the plight of exploited workers.

The development of liberation theology in Latin America was a very instructive way through which Catholic theologians in the third world grew more aware of the role that the Church can play in campaigning for political rectitude and economic justice. From the publication of the *Rerum Novarum*, the next momentous event which reiterated the transformation of the Church from an institution which was predominantly theological to one which was moving apace with the world was the formation of what was called 'Social Catholicism/Catholic Action' and ultimately the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which tried to make the church relevant to the modern world as expressed by *Gaudium et Spes* – a pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world. For this reason, this article will start by highlighting the attitude of the communist movements toward the church in the 19th Century. Then I will focus on how the Catholic Church developed

2 I am using Marx as one of the most influential figures and a representative of the socialist/communist movement of that time. The article generally looks at the Socialist/communist movement in general.

3 These are letters written by the popes (through intense consultations of course) which speaks of the mind of the Catholic Church and its conviction at a particular time within a given context.

its praxis through the formation of Social Catholicism, which eventually birthed the Fribourg Union. This Union became the forerunner of *Rerum Novarum*. I will further look at the *Rerum Novarum* and the development of what was known as the ‘Catholic Action’. The article will finally focus first on the Vatican II Council and secondly, at the development associated with a theology of liberation. All these developments will be viewed in the light of whether there was a socialist influence or not.

Marx(ism) and Religion

Marx constituted one among the socialists/communists who opposed capitalism and perceived it as mindlessly exploitative of workers over profit. Though Marx was understood as a militant atheist, he argued for communism because of his concern with the poor. This concern was akin to the concern that the Church manifests in its social responsibility. Marx, just like his fellow communists, took it upon himself to fight for the poor through an ideology that took the experiences of the poor seriously. In other words, he used a communist ideology informed by the real conditions of the workers during the nineteenth century. He used the word ‘Alienation’ to describe the workers’ deplorable state where they were mercilessly cut-off from their true humanity and dignity. This is fluently expressed in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript 1844*. Marx is possibly the most noted voice to criticise religion and the Church, in particular, for failing to effectively challenge capitalism. He described religion as ‘the opium of the people’⁴ in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*⁵ (1844). His antipathy to religion was based largely on how it failed to make the deplorable conditions of workers its central concern. The depiction of religion as intoxication or illusory bliss was common during Marx’s time.⁶ For instance, Heinrich Heine in 1840 remarked that ‘for men whom earth has nothing more to offer, heaven is invented... Hail to the invention. Hail to a religion which poured for a suffering race of men some sweet narcotic

4 Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscript” (1844). Marxist. Org. Accessed 31 May 2015, <http://marxist.org/archieve/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>

5 This is a sub-section in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript*.

6 Karl Marx, “The Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1844). Marxist Org. Accessed 11 May 2016, <http://marxist.org/archieve/marx/works/critique-hps/intro.htm>

into their bitter cup, spiritual opium, a few drops of love and hope and faith'.⁷

The reason beyond the dictum that religion was/is opium was that it forestalled the abused believers from changing their circumstances because of the religious promise of an idyllic afterlife. Hence, believers could just resign themselves to their deplorable but changeable conditions. On these grounds, it is plausible to argue that the development of social concern in the Church was largely due to the realization that it was truly abstracted from the real-life experience of people. Gollwitzer argues, that it should be emphasized that attacking religion was not a central theme in Marx's thought nor was it central to his contemporaries. Religion was just one of the institutions that did not effectively question the unjust nature of the world in which the rich mercilessly exploited the poor.⁸ The next section will present the events which constituted the formation and consolidation of Social Catholicism, which birthed the Fribourg Union – the forerunner of Rerum Novarum. The objective of this section is to try and establish if these formations were responding to the communist criticism or they were directly influenced by the 19th century conditions of the workers.

Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union

In his 1968 speech, Bishop Gaspard Mermillod, a known pioneer of modern Catholic Social movement,⁹ expressed concern about the plight of the workers and also noted the work that was done by socialist groups in this regard. Despite the socialists' contribution to improve the deplorable conditions of the work, the Bishop was convinced that only Catholic movements will better serve the workers' needs.¹⁰ Before 1945, a Catholic group had responded to the plight of the workers by creating a charity

7 Helmut Gollwitzer. *The Christian Faith and the Marxist Criticism of Religion* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew's Press, 1970), 18.

8 Gollwitzer, *The Christian Faith*, 11.

9 Gaspard Mermillod. Religion – *Encyclopedia. Com*, Accessed 22 Dec 2023, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/mermillod-gaspard>.

10 Normand Paulhus. "Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union," in *Selected Papers from the Annual Meeting*. Society of Christian Ethics. (Georgetown University Press, Society of Christian Ethics, 1980), 64.

organisation that helped boys and girls who were preparing to work. Among the founders were Augustin Cochin and Maurice Maignen. This endeavour was known as the 'Young workers club' and was entrusted to the care of a chaplain whose responsibility was to help these young people to learn to take care of themselves in a responsible manner.¹¹

The limitations of charity in dealing with the plight of the workers was recognised by some concerned Catholics, who insisted on the need for justice and structural reforms. This led to the linking of the plight of the workers with the nature of the social order by figures such as Henri Lacordaire and Frederic Ozanam.¹² This view was challenged by Conservative Catholics who failed to understand the importance of social processes. After the February Revolution of 1848, there was no strong Catholic Social Movement that emerged in France until 1870.¹³ Individual Catholics still took this fight further after the 1848 revolution, among the most noted individuals was Bishop Emmanuel von Ketteler. Machael J Schuck described Bishop Ketteler as 'the towering figure of politico-economic cosmopolitanism', he further went on to say 'many considered his creative combination of Catholic republicanism and economic reformism the most outstanding work of the Roman Catholic social thought in the early modern era'.¹⁴

Bishop Ketteler was the first known Catholic leader to write on the Church's social involvement. Some writers like Walsh and Davies have argued that Bishop Ketteler's advocacy of the rights of workers in the nineteenth century was influenced by the structures of medieval German not by the experience of industrial society. They further went on to say Bishop Kettler was sympathetic with ideas of socialism not economic liberalism,¹⁵ Normand Paulhus understood Bishop Ketteler as open-minded and willing to challenge the social order. His open-mindedness was evident in his

11 Paulhus, 'Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union', 64.

12 Sister M. Eveline, "The Social Thought of Frederic Ozanam." *The American Catholic Sociological Review* (1941): 46-56.

13 Paulhus, 'Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union', 64.

14 Michael Joseph Schuck, 'Early modern roman catholic social thought, 1740-1890', in Kenneth R. Himes, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*: 103-132. (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 112

15 Michael Walsh and Brian Davies, *Proclaiming Justice and Peace* (London: Collins Liturgical Publication, 1984), xii.

willingness to dialogue with democratic socialist leaders like Ferdinand Lassalle and economic liberal leaders like Franz Herman Shulze-Delitsch in a bid to search for a solution for his people that depicts a mid-ground between these two contending ideologies. Hence, he was not necessarily sympathetic to one as against the other. In his enquiry, for a Catholic social solution, he used Thomas Aquinas' teaching as an ideological and ethics barometer of his social actions. Ketteler's prominent book which underpins the most preferable reference for understanding the roots of social Catholicism is entitled *Christianity and the Worker Question*.¹⁶

During the 1870s, two events took place in France which threaten the stability of Europe and the rationale behind the existing world order. The first event was the France-Prussian war, which was followed by the 18 March 1871 worker insurrection called 'commune de Paris'. Since the Catholic social movements were weak in France, the working class was won over to socialism. This situation awakened the Catholic Social thinkers to start to rethink their responsibility with renewed commitment.¹⁷ Two convicted French soldiers took their time in prison to reflect on the social conflict between different groups (the workers and those who controlled the social order), they resolved to find a solution. Inspired by the work of Maurice Maignen's 'Young Workers' club they initiated a Catholic workers' club, which sort to bring awareness of the deplorable condition of the workers to the middle classes. They strategically drew a working framework with an objective of establishing a decree of a Christian Society¹⁸. The group, taking the position of Bishop Ketteler, they claimed to be neither socialists nor liberal but studied the social dynamics of their context in the light of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. St Thomas Aquinas was regarded as 'the church's philosophic muse, delimits the intellectual latitude of the faithful Roman Catholic social thinkers'¹⁹ Another individual clergy who was also concerned with issues related to social justice was a prominent Catholic Church high ranking Bishop Cardinal Manning. While Ketteler was

16 Paulhus, 'Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union', 65

17 Paulhus, 'Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union', 65

18 Paulhus, 'Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union', 66

19 Schuck. 'Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought', 114.

concerned with the plight of exploited and alienated workers in German, Manning was doing the same in Britain.²⁰

Some of those who took the issue of justice and social reforms seriously was a group called the ‘Society of Catholic Workers’ Circles’. It consisted of three prominent Bishops namely Gaspard Mermillod in Switzerland, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler in German and Willian T, Manning in England. This circle was conceived as the most socially enlightened of their time. They were well acquainted with socially related issues such as the nature of work, property, and society.²¹ As part of what they achieve was the stimulation of interest related to social issues and help to usher a conducive ground for Rerum Novarum. The prominent spiritual director of the Fribourg Union was from this circle.

The Fribourg Union was made up of lay Catholic intellectuals who were well knowledgeable in social issues of their time and the teachings of the church. They gather every October from 1885 to 1891 to study issues associated with the nineteenth century industrialisation and the predicament of the workers, and other related social problems. The attendance of these meetings varied from 20 to 32²². Their discussions were done in the spirit of the social teachings of the church through the teachings of St Thomas Aquinas. The spiritual director of this group was Bishop Memillod who was no stranger to Social Catholicism. Due to the significance of its work, the group was seen as the think tank and was tasked with the responsibility of helping Pope Leo XIII to draft Rerum Novarum. The founders of this group comprised of Prince de Loewenstein, René de La Tour du Pin and Bishop Mermillod.

This brief historical development of Social Catholicism sought to deal with the issue of the social question – that is how the Catholic Church engaged with the social issues associated with the industrial revolution and the predicament of the workers. The Catholic Church acknowledged the work that the socialists were doing towards the plight of the workers but detested their methodology. In as much as both the Catholic Church

20 Thomas Bokenkotter, *Church, and Revolution: Catholic Church in the Struggle for Democracy* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1998), 172.

21 Paulhus, ‘Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union’, 67-68

22 Paulhus, ‘Social Catholicism and the Fribourg Union’, 71

and the Socialist movements were moved by the deplorable situation of the workers, the former's social engagement was guided by the Social Teaching of the Church, which was shaped by the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. While the latter emphasized on revolutionary change, the former stressed on social reforms.

Rerum Novarum

This social encyclical was written in 1891 and marked the official acknowledgement by the Church of all the efforts invested by different groups toward the 'social question' of the day. As indicated by Schafer²³ most of the basic contents of this 'Worker' encyclical, like the demand of State intervention and freedom; the resolution of the property question with reference to Thomistic philosophy, natural law and revelation; and the anti-socialist and anti-liberal orientation had already been developed by the Christian social movement before 1891.

Rerum Novarum is called the worker's encyclical because it was written specifically against the way workers were treated in the nineteenth century. The encyclical served not as the brainchild of the Social Catholicism but rather as an affirmation of what has been done. It was an official ecclesiastical recognition of the Social Catholicism. By the time this encyclical was written, other Social Christian movements (as mentioned earlier) had come into being as a response to the demands of the nineteenth century's problems related to worker's conditions. These organisations took a direct part in the social and political struggle of the time, and in so doing developed an ethic, which was adopted by this papal encyclical.

According to Schafers,²⁴ the encyclical's aim 'was to draw the attention of large areas of the public within the Church to the workers' question, which hitherto had been treated only by individual representatives and groups within Catholicism and the Christian movements'. The letter challenged those Church circles which were fixated on authority (especially the conservative groups within the Catholic Church) and hesitation or even

23 Michael Schafers. 'Rerum Novarum- The Result of Christian Social Movement from below'. *Concilium*, 5 (1991): 14.

24 Schafers, 'Rerum Novarum', 14.

hostile about workers organising themselves to be concerned about the ‘social question’. After 1891, the Catholic Church in general has taken a Christian inspired socialist perspective, which is critical of capitalism due to its emphasis on economic development at the expense of human development; it was also critical of communism due to its antireligious position, which in history has degenerated into totalitarian rule which ultimately undermines human dignity. The Church’s perspective does not disqualify these two ideologies,²⁵ but it seeks to give them a human face to the predicament of the workers through Christian principles. The next section will go further than acknowledging the worker/social question to the practical implications of such an endeavour. In other words, we want to shift from ‘Social Catholicism’ to ‘Catholic Action’. The objective of this section is to establish if the Catholic Church’s praxis was drawn from the socialist or specifically Marxist way of doing.

YCW (Young Christian Workers) the Catholic Action: A Methodological Inquiry

YCW existed from 1912 in Belgium, but it was officially recognised as a national movement in 1925 under the leadership of a Catholic priest called Fr. Joseph Cardijn. During the time of its founding Joseph Cardijn was a student priest whose concern was to help boys and girls who were subjected to hopelessness when they leave school to go to work or to seek work. His father’s death was also another motivating factor to the formation of this movement. Fr. Cardijn’s father died of over-working at the age of 43, due to this unfortunate incident he vowed to give his life to improve the lives of workers as dignified Christians.²⁶ YCW consisted of mostly unemployed youths, who gathered to reflect on their problems in a bid to find ways of solving them. In explaining the methodology used by YCW to deal with their social realities, Cardijn described three fundamental truths. He was convinced that there is a truth of faith, which is the eternal destiny of each young worker. The second truth is a truth of experience, which is a terrible contradiction existing between the real state of the young worker

25 Socialist and Liberal ideologies

26 Mary Irene Zotti, ‘The young Christian workers’. *US Catholic Historian*, 9, no. 4 (1990): 387.

and this eternal destiny. This is an existential truth, which constitutes our day-to-day experiences. The third truth is a truth of pastoral practice or method, this truth tries to help us to live our faith through our everyday experiences. Our faith cannot be understood as separated from our experiences. Affirming the three fundamental truths, the founder of the movement, Monsignor Father Joseph Cardijn in 1935 on the 26th August gave a speech expressing the centrality of human experience to our eternal destiny as follows

There cannot be an eternal destiny by the side, at a distance from the earthly life, unrelated to it. A destiny cannot be disincarnated, any more than religion cannot be disincarnated. No, eternal destiny is incarnate in time, begun in time, develops, is fulfilled, in the whole earthly life, in all its aspects, all its application, in all its achievements, physical, intellectual, moral, sentimental, professional, social, public life, daily life, concrete and practical. Eternal destiny can no more be separated from temporal destiny than religion is separated from morality.²⁷

This address' objective served to show that there was a contradiction between the terrible conditions of the young worker and the promises of eternal destiny. Cardijn further said 'we must remain with our eyes fixed to the heaven and our feet on the earth as we are inexorable for the brutality of the conditions of the earthly life as we are inexorable for the demands of eternal destiny.'²⁸ These three fundamental truths were summed up in three magic words – See, Judge, and Act. See represented the ability to look or observe reality and then judge whether what has been observed/seen was in line with our lord Jesus Christ's teachings. Once these two elements (See and Judge) are established, then we act. Those subjected to this process gain a sense of responsibility to serve the needs of their fellow young workers.²⁹ This movement evolved into a apostolic movement led by young workers with a slogan 'A new youth for a new world'. It became the first movement

27 Young Christian Worker (YCW), *The Life and Work of Cardijn: The Three Truths*. Accessed 15 January 2022, <https://aycw.wordpress.com/2015/08/28/the-life-work-of-cardijn-the-three-truths/>.

28 Young Christian Workers, *The Life and Works of Cardijn*. Online.

29 Zotti, 'The young Christian workers', 387

to be known as the 'Catholic Action'. It was also known as the Jocist³⁰ of Catholic Action.

During the 1930s there was a great depression in America, which badly affected Catholic laborers and craftsmen. Businesses and industries collapsed, and unemployment skyrocketed. In response, the American Bishops issued a pastoral statement, the following, year blaming capitalist practices for the economic collapse. This is the same year that Pope Pius XI introduced another worker papal encyclical called *Quadragesimo Anno*, which reiterated most of what *Rerum Novarum* stipulated in terms of the predicament of the workers³¹. The influence of the communist call on workers was evident during this period (1937) such that Pope Pius XI wrote another encyclical called *Divini Redemptoris*, *On Atheistic Communism*, which he encouraged worker solutions based on the teachings of the Church and further stressed on lay action. In response to this call The National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) developed a programme to of social education to train lay people with emphasis on 'Catholic Action'.³² In May 1937, Archbishop Samuel Stritch called a conference on Catholic Action, where he reiterated on the need to spread action-oriented agendas. The coming year, the Social Action Department of NCWC began a series of conferences that sought to educate priests on the social teachings of the church so that they will in turn teach lay people. Unfortunately, the proposed methods used could not be applied to real life circumstances. Hence there was a need to search for an effective socio-religious action,³³ which was based on Fr. Cardijn's work. Individuals like Fr. Henri Roy in Canada and Paul McGuire, an Australian writer and Catholic activist started to promote YCW methodology in the name of Joci movement. The promotion of this movement was received well in Europe than in English speaking countries such as America. The YCW methodology did not just

30 Jocist is a word derived from a French abbreviation - JOCI (*Jeunesse Ouvri re Chre'tienne Internationale*), which literally mean International Young Christian Workers (IYCW).

31 Zotti, 'The Young Christian Workers, 388

32 Zotti, 'The Young Christian Workers, 390

33 Zotti, 'The Young Christian Workers, 391

shaped a practical way of applying the Catholic social teachings in reality, but it also created dedicated Catholics.³⁴

30 Bishops who were former chaplains of YCW attended the Vatican II Council. Moreover, the writings of Fr. Joseph Cardijn on the YCW were extensively distributed during the Council. There is a possibility that these writings might have influenced the council's decree on the Lay Apostolate and the Church in the Modern World.³⁵

Vatican II Council (1962-1965)

This section does not give a detailed account of the Vatican II Council; it briefly highlights how this Council contributed to the Church's advocacy role. This Council is known as the Vatican II Council because it was a second council of this nature to be held in the Vatican City. What was it about this council that makes it unique?

This Council was called by Pope John XXIII, and it took place in Rome (Vatican City) from 1962 to 1965. It will be useful to understand this council in relation to the 1891 *Rerum Novarum*. *Rerum Novarum* acknowledged and officially declared the Catholic Church's concern with the plight of the workers. This acknowledgement was also a recognition of the intellectual effort invested towards the development of 'Social Catholicism'. It expressed the need of the Church to stand for the justice of the workers and advocated for reform. Even after the *Rerum Novarum*'s endorsement of the Social Catholicism, there were further efforts by the Catholic Church to seek a methodology that will effectively encourage the faithful to act against capitalist forces through 'Catholic Action'. It is in this sense that we realised that we could see the church as a learning institution. The Vatican II Council presents another learning curve of the Church, which challenged it to appreciate the dynamic which the modern world brings to enrich it.

34 Zotti, 'The Young Christian Workers, 399

35 Zotti, 'The Young Christian Workers, 400

The Vatican II Council's radical stance called for change both within the Church and how the Church relates with the outside world. Comblin³⁶ described the Council as preparing the Church to genuinely start to listen to the actual world. Hales³⁷ further pointed out that through these few extraordinary years, which this council was in session enabled the Church to meet the world, and the world to meet the Church. Pope John XXIII had in effect thrust the problem of change upon the Council, when he asked it to enact amendments to make the Church's message more intelligible and acceptable to the modern persons.³⁸ One of the words commonly used was *aggiornamento* which means 'to bring the Church up to date'.³⁹ For the first time, Catholics were allowed to vote for Communist political parties and the pope was prepared to invite communist leaders to Rome with the open-mindedness of Bishop Ketteler mentioned earlier.

No pope in the whole of papal history has ever suggested so many specific and practical suggestions in the realm of social organisation as Pope John.⁴⁰ Pope John wanted to approach the problem of the world more empirically, unlike his predecessor who had less to say about justice, practical suggestions and policy changes. He announced that the Church's laws and institutions must enshrine a wider equality and a fuller social justice.⁴¹ The Latin American Bishops who officially accepted Liberation theology were inspired by this Council, which made the Church open to dialogue with prevailing philosophies.

Despite effort made by the Vatican II Council to create a church relevant to the modern world, the role of the Church in the third world was questioned by Latin American theologians.⁴² No one can doubt that the Catholic Church had a solid practical theology which was grounded in the methodology of YCW known as Catholic Action. Since the Catholic

36 Jose Comblin, "The Signs of the time". *Concilium* 4 (2005), 82.

37 Edward Elton Hales, *Pope John and his Revolution* (London: Cox & Wyman, 1965), xi.

38 John O' Malley, "Ressourcement and Reform at Vatican II". *Concilium* 3 (2012): 47.

39 Hales, *Pope John*, xi.

40 Hales, *Pope John*, xii.

41 Hales, *Pope John*, xv.

42 Jacobs Martin Andrews. 'The Second Vatican Council, and the Vatican-Liberation Theology Dialogue' (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1989), 1-2.

Church's methodology was neither liberal nor socialist, the Latin American theologians such as Gustavo Guitierrez, Leonard Boff and others wanted a more radical theology relevant to the third world. This type of a theology has to transcend the middle ground between the socialist and the liberal thinking. This type of theology cannot accommodate reforms but calls for a revolution.

Liberation Theology in Latin America

This type of theology rose during the 1960s, when priests who worked among the poor realised that there was a gap between theory and practice, both in their own religion and in the continent's politics. 'A growing number of priests began to question whether social and economic injustices could be tackled with good will and the word of God'.⁴³ According to Nolan and Broderick⁴⁴ this theology was stimulated by a context of ever-increasing poverty of millions of people in Latin America and their political struggle for liberation from the social structures that make them poor. This social and political context gave rise to the questions related to the meaning and relevance of their faith in such circumstances. Liberation theology was the answer to these questions. Such a theology was one which was prepared to abandon its intellectual focus on 'Western philosophy to the life and death struggle of the poor and oppressed communities'.⁴⁵ As a guide to the Liberation Theology's advocacy work was a Marxist maxim 'Preferential option of the proletariat'. Baum⁴⁶ understands that the preferential option of the poor was inspired by Marxism, but he goes further to make a distinctive trait of the one advocated by Liberation Theology. According to Baum, Liberation Theology's 'preferential option of the poor' goes beyond material gains of the disenfranchised but also for the sake of common

43 Alain Gheerbrant, *The Rebel Church in Latin America* (Ontario: Penguin Books, 1974), 10.

44 Albert Nolan and Richard Broderick. *To Nourish Our Faith: Theology of Liberation for Southern Africa*. (Hilton: Order of Preacher, 1987), 18.

45 John de Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspective* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2005), 184.

46 Gregory Baum, 'The Originality of Catholic Social Teaching'. *Concilium* 5 (1991), 58.

good that is for ethical and spiritual well-being of the whole society.⁴⁷ This 'preferential option of the poor' is derived from the religious experiences of base communities in Latin America and has been defended and explored by Liberation Theology and approved by the Medellin and Puebla conference.⁴⁸ This maxim is a motto against the powerful upholders of the oppressive and exploitative structures.

At Medellin in September 1968 the Latin American Bishop expressed salvation in terms of liberation. Pope Paul VI in his opening address urged the delegates to promote social justice and to love the poor. The important question is, what type of liberation? The Bishops were unaware that they were implicitly calling for a revolution, and Medellin was nothing but 'a staging-point along the road to frankly political liberation'.⁴⁹ McLellan using an article from Gustavo Gutierrez entitled 'Liberation Theology and Christian Faith'⁵⁰ expressed the prospects of Medellin as follows: Medellin marks the beginning of a new relationship between theology and pastoral language on the one hand and the social science which seek to interpret this reality on the other hand. The relationships give rise to statements which are to a large extent contingent and provisional; this is the price one must pay for being incisive and contemporary and for expressing the Word today in our everyday words. But this language is only a reflection of a deeper process, a new awareness.⁵¹ Medellin sums up the previous efforts taken by the Latin Americans to identify their faith with their experiences. Liberation requires social analysis, which was to be borrowed from Marxism/social sciences in order to uncover various levels of exploitation. One cannot fight an enemy which one cannot see or understand. There was a need to analyse the situation and this analysis was fundamental to liberation and hence Liberation Theology. The Bible might have good intentions, but the actual situation needed a social scientific understanding of the prevailing circumstances, which underlined all oppression. It is not

47 Baum, 'The Originality', 59.

48 Baum, The Originality, 58.

49 Peter Hebblethwaite, *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue: Beginning, Present Status, and Beyond* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 43.

50 Gustavo Gutierrez. 'Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith', in R. Gibellini, R (ed), *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979)

51 David McLellan (ed), *Political Christianity: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1997), 114.

surprising that the first Liberation Theologians like Leonardo Boff⁵² were labelled as Marxists. It is important to note that Liberation Theology is not a direct product of the Marxist ideology, but both Marxism and Liberation Theology are inspired by the oppression of the poor and their methodology is derived from the experiences of the oppressed. Since Liberation Theology wanted to deal with a situation similar to Marx's, it has to borrow some useful hints from a method, which once worked. Looking at the historical priority and the prominence of Marx, it is inevitable to see the connection of these two liberation models.

From the reading of the earlier Liberation theologians, it is easy to see that they were influenced whether consciously or unconsciously by Marxism. Hebblethwaite⁵³ affirms this point by saying Liberation theologians are Marxist because of the lack of any alternative analysis of society and the causes of its oppression. He further quotes Paul Lehmann who said that 'contemporary revolutionary practice has been forged by the Marxist assessment of the concrete mode of injustices and the realities of power'.⁵⁴ What Hebblethwaite is saying is that Marxism is used as an instrument, in a way that freed it from its rigid ideological comfort. In other words, I am not saying liberation theology is a branch of Marxism as it is a system of practical Christian thought that both acknowledges and critiques Marx.

Conclusion

The speech by Bishop Gaspard in 1968 and the reaction of Pope Pius XI against the influence of communism on the workers shows that the Church was aware of the work that communists and socialists were doing among the workers and the influence that they wielded on them. The widespread work of these groups had an influence on the steps that the Catholic Church took in developing its praxis. The article has also showed that the actual praxis of the Catholic Church was not influenced by these socialist groups. The historical development of Social Catholicism and Catholic Action was

52 Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (London: SCM, 1985).

53 Hebblethwaite, *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue*, 50

54 Hebblethwaite, *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue*, 50

a response to the context and circumstances of the workers and shaped by the teachings of the Catholic Church inspired by the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. The Catholic Church wanted to deal with the predicament of the workers within the confinement of its beliefs. In contrast to the socialist call for revolutionary change, the Catholic Church preferred a process in which the society is reformed to accommodate everyone. In this sense, the Catholic Church had its own praxis independent of socialist radicalism. In as much as both Socialism and Catholicism wanted the best of the workers, their methodologies were different. I also brought Liberation Theology in the picture to also highlight that the Catholic Church has a theology that is as radical as the socialist perspective. Even though this theology is evidently influenced by Marxism, it still transcends Marx's atheism. It is also of paramount importance to stress that Liberation Theology does not necessarily define the essence of the Catholic Church praxis: it is just part of it.

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