

---

# MARXISM AND CHRISTIANITY:

## On Human Nature and Humanism



---

Arthur F. McGovern

The approach one takes in comparing Marxism and Christianity greatly influences the degree of compatibility or incompatibility one finds. Contemporary Christian social thought shares many of the values and perspectives found in the humanism of the young Marx. Traditional Western Christian concepts of human nature, on the other hand, conflict strongly with Marxist thought as it developed historically. Both approaches merit consideration: the first, because it offers hope for the future in establishing common values about human development; the second, because it can help us to understand some of the conflicts which have separated Marxism and Christianity.

The humanistic writings of the young Marx played little direct role in the actual history of Marxism. The most important of his early writings, the 1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (and also The German Ideology), remained unpublished and virtually unknown for nearly a century. Only in recent decades have they exerted a significant influence on Marxist studies. Consequently, I have chosen to discuss the traditional Marxist-Christian concepts of human nature first and to examine the humanism of the young Marx afterwards.

### I. Human Nature : Conflicting Traditions

The Individual Self. The Western Christian tradition has considered the real self as an inner, spiritual self. Greek philosophy

established the concept of man/woman as a composite of body and soul, with the rational soul as the truly distinctive core of the self. Christianity enhanced this with the notion of man/woman as made in the image and likeness of God and as destined for eternal happiness with God. Western philosophers have differed in explaining this spiritual self.<sup>1</sup> But almost all have agreed that the "inner self" - a conscious, spiritual psyche - is the ultimate self. This Western Christian tradition, while recognizing human need for society, has also tended to emphasize the individual. The influence of society and social environment on the individual was acknowledged. But the Christian tradition stressed individual responsibility and the capacity of individuals - as free, rational, inner selves - to stand back from society. The individual's self was not determined by society.

The Marxist tradition challenged these Western Christian concepts. Marxist atheism questioned the spiritual nature of the self; Marxist social doctrine challenged individualism. We will question later whether Marx's own atheism really negates the spiritual dignity of the individual, since he himself felt that it was religion, by encouraging servility, that really undermined the dignity of humans. Marx called himself a "materialist", but he used the term to emphasize the influence of socio-economic conditions on human behavior. He did not develop a materialist metaphysics. His colleague Friedrich Engels did, however, articulate an explicitly materialist metaphysics (dialectical materialism), a worldview which was clearly incompatible with Christianity. Engels explained the origins of the world and of human life as the products of "matter" alone.<sup>2</sup> Humans are not spiritual selves with souls but products of the evolution of matter alone. Lenin subsequently insisted that this worldview was essential to Marxism and that "materialism is relentlessly hostile to religion."<sup>3</sup> In the U.S.S.R., and in later Communist nations, this materialist worldview became the official and only acceptable philosophy taught in the Communist educational system. Marxist philosophy does speak of the "spiritual dimension" of the human person, but the spiritual is seen as an outgrowth of matter and not as metaphysically distinct from matter.

The Marxist tradition also puts heavy emphasis on the "social" nature of man/woman. Marx himself sharply criticized the "egoistic individualism" of Western capitalist society. His advocacy of socialism contained many stresses on the social nature of humans: society was shaped by modes of production built on definite social relations (e.g. workers-owners); the socialist revolution was to be achieved socially by the proletariat as a class; socialism would bring social control and

collective ownership of property.

Human Nature. The Western Christian tradition considered the individual spiritual self as a human essence constituted by fixed traits common to human nature, and by certain unique traits peculiar to each individual. Thus all humans are rational, have a free will, seek for happiness, etc., but also have unique personalities and talents. The Christian view, influenced by the doctrine of original sin, also saw potentially negative traits (e.g. selfishness, pleasure-seeking) as constant in human nature. These common fixed traits underly the traditional Catholic concept of "natural law" and the more broadly-Christian view of unchanging moral principles.

Marx's famous theory of history (historical materialism) asserted that as economic structures change, so do the politics, values and mores of society. Marx was also convinced that human behavior, even human nature itself, is transformed by changes in society. In The Holy Family (1844), Marx reviewed the evolution of different materialist philosophies in modern times. The sense of materialism most important for socialism, according to Marx, was the conviction that humans are shaped by their environment. Hence, says Marx:

*"If man is shaped by his surroundings, his surroundings must be made human. If man is social by nature, he will develop his true nature only in society, and the power of his nature must be measured not by the power of separate individuals but by the power of society."<sup>4</sup>*

In the sixth of his "Theses on Feuerbach" Marx claimed that the human essence is "the ensemble of social relations." These statements suggest a human nature so malleable that it can be completely transformed by new social conditions.

A major Soviet textbook, Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism (1961), indicates the extent to which humanism in the Marxist tradition became identified with "creating the conditions" needed for individual development. The textbook has little to say about individual human development. The few statements that do deal with such development stress the influence of social conditions.

*"The spiritual aspect of man, his relations with people around him and his personal consciousness depend on the nature of society in which in lives."<sup>5</sup>*

*"The supreme goal of communism is to ensure full freedom of development of the human personality, to create conditions for the boundless development of the individual, for the physical and spiritual development of man."*<sup>6</sup>

The implications of this emphasis on social conditioning will be seen more clearly in the discussion which follows on the relation of the individual to the state.

The State. Western Christian thought, in modern times, has favored a very limited role for the state in respect to the individual. The social contract theories of Locke and Rousseau viewed the state as formed by individuals for the protection of individual freedoms and pursuits. State constitutions embodied Montesquieu's views of separating executive, legislative and judicial powers to limit concentration of power. The Catholic principle of "subsidiarity" served this purpose as well. J.S. Mill stressed minimum intervention by the state to maximize individual freedom.

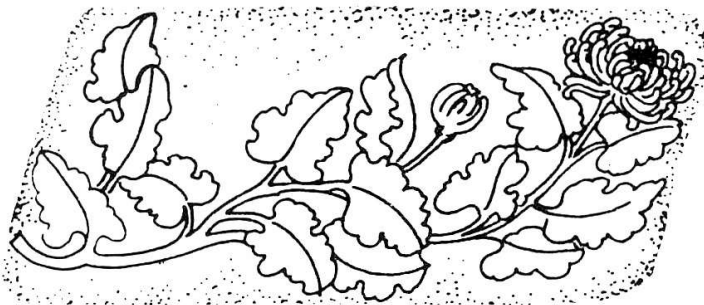
Marxist Communism, in contrast, has become identified with strong state power and a centralized, single-party rule. Recent studies of Marx's political thought suggest that Marx himself, far from advocating a restricted democracy and dominant state, envisioned a radical participatory democracy and minimum state control.<sup>7</sup> But Marx's few references to the need for a transitional "dictatorship of the proletariat" were enough for Lenin and subsequent Communist leaders to develop a strong state ruled by the Communist Party. The state, in turn, became directly involved in efforts to inculcate a correct view of human nature and to create conditions needed to transform human nature. We have already noted the insistence, in Communist nations, that a materialist worldview be taught in all schools.

Donald Munro, in his insightful book, The Concept of Man in Contemporary China, describes Soviet use of Marx's views on the malleability of human nature.<sup>8</sup> Munro believes that in the 1920s Soviet philosophy simply reflected Marx's conviction: change socio-economic conditions and humans will themselves be gradually transformed. But by the 1930s Soviet leaders were adopting a more aggressive, interventionist view of transforming human nature. They sought to mold the "new man", to instill through education the desirable traits needed to create this new man/woman. In short, as Munro sees it, the Soviets sought to transform human nature by a process of manipulation or social engineering rather

than wait for social conditions to effect the change gradually.

Munro focuses his main research on subsequent changes introduced by Mao Tse-Tung and Chinese Communism. In Chinese Communist thought (under Mao) the real and primary essence of humans was seen as social. As in Western Christian thought, humans were seen as constituted essentially by their mind, feelings, attitudes, habits, etc. But in sharp contrast to Western Christian thought, this essence was not seen as given, innate, and already formed in each individual. The individual finds his/her identity only in relationship to the group to which he/she belongs. Mao believed that the Chinese people, because of their great poverty, were like a "blank paper" open to change. But he applied this also to human nature. Education and thought reform became the keys to molding the new person. Since human nature is completely malleable, "correct ideas" could thoroughly transform it.<sup>9</sup>

As an illustration of how Christian and Marxist thought came into conflict over these differing concepts of human nature, we might look briefly at Pope Leo XIII's encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891). Pope Leo wrote the encyclical well before some of the developments in Marxism which we have noted. But his criticisms of socialism were judgments based on Western Christian views about individual rights, human nature, and the role of the state. The socialist aim of abolishing private property, said Leo XIII, runs counter to the "natural right" of each individual to possess property. Socialist goals are futile; social change will not make humans any different. Socialism threatens the individual with "absorption" by the state or a collectivized society.<sup>10</sup> Thus differing views about the individual self, human nature, and the state put Christianity and Marxist socialism at odds from the outset.



## II. Humanism: The Young Marx and Christian Views

Traditional Marxist studies and textbooks paid little attention to humanism and issues of individual development. In the nearly 900-page

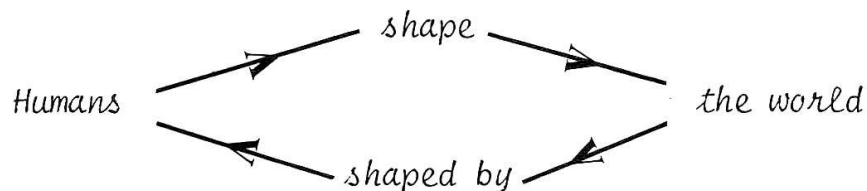


textbook cited earlier (Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism) only a few paragraphs discuss individual self-realization directly.<sup>11</sup> Even in these few places, as we noted earlier, the attention is focused on "creating conditions" for individual development. (Many Christian groups have also downplayed humanism, viewing human nature as basically sinful or considering human self-realization a "secular" doctrine inimical to the Bible.)

The young Marx, in contrast, gave extensive treatment to the issue of self-realization. His early writings, moreover, stress the creative, subjective side of human action as a balance to his comments about human nature being shaped by society.<sup>12</sup> As Marx himself stated in the third of his "Theses on Feuerbach": "The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing ... forgets that it is men who change circumstances."<sup>13</sup>

Marx's most important writings about humanism, his 1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, remained generally unknown until their publication in 1932. They became widely discussed after World War II. Many Marxist scholars saw them as providing a whole new basis for understanding Marx. Leading Communist intellectuals, on the other hand, dismissed them as insignificant compared to the writings of the mature, "scientific" Marx. But these writings have become the major focus of attention in discussions about Marxist and Christian humanism.<sup>14</sup>

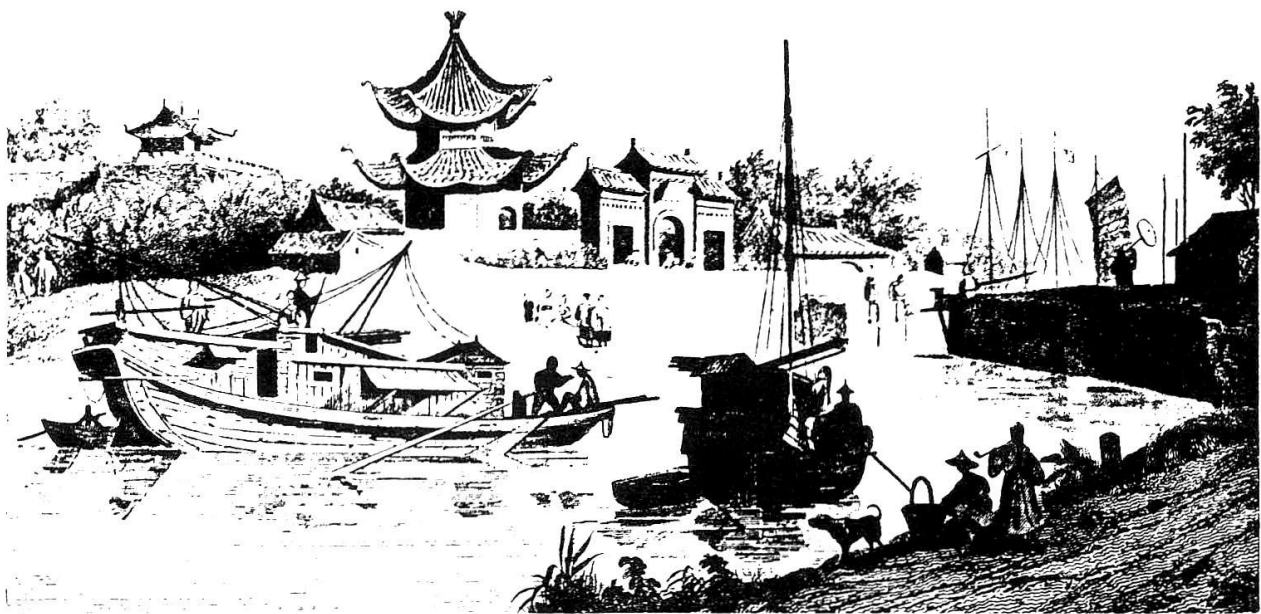
The basic core of the young Marx's humanism can be stated, and diagrammed, simply: Human beings shape the world, themselves, and society through work, and they are in turn shaped by the world.



Humans are active beings; they shape the world. From Hegel Marx adopted a dynamic view of history and society. History and society are formed and changed by the way humans act on the world. But while Hegel emphasized human "reason" as activating change, Marx stressed work. Through freely-chosen, cooperative work, the world can be truly humanized and become a healthy environment for human development. But capitalism, according to Marx, created an alienated, dehumanized world characterized by forced, unfree, uncreative labor and by egoistic competition. From

this conviction came the central tenet of Marx's theory of social change: the economic structures of society must be transformed, replacing capitalism with a cooperative socialist mode of production which would enable humans to work freely and develop all their natural capabilities and talents.

*Humans shape the world.*



Marx unfortunately believed that for humans to exercise responsibility in creating their world, they must renounce religious beliefs. He viewed religious beliefs as a form of servility: God's providence determines history; humans must passively accept the world as given.

Humans are self-creative beings; they shape themselves. In their activity of shaping the world, humans also create themselves. Their work determines who they are. Under capitalism, Marx sees workers as alienating themselves. They do not develop as rich human beings because the products of their work go only to capitalists. Their work is not freely chosen and is dehumanizing in its monotony. The world of culture lies beyond their means to enjoy, and they work in conflict with each other. Only through socialism, as Marx saw it, can work and the achieve-

ments of work become truly the workers' own. Only then will they freely develop into all they could be

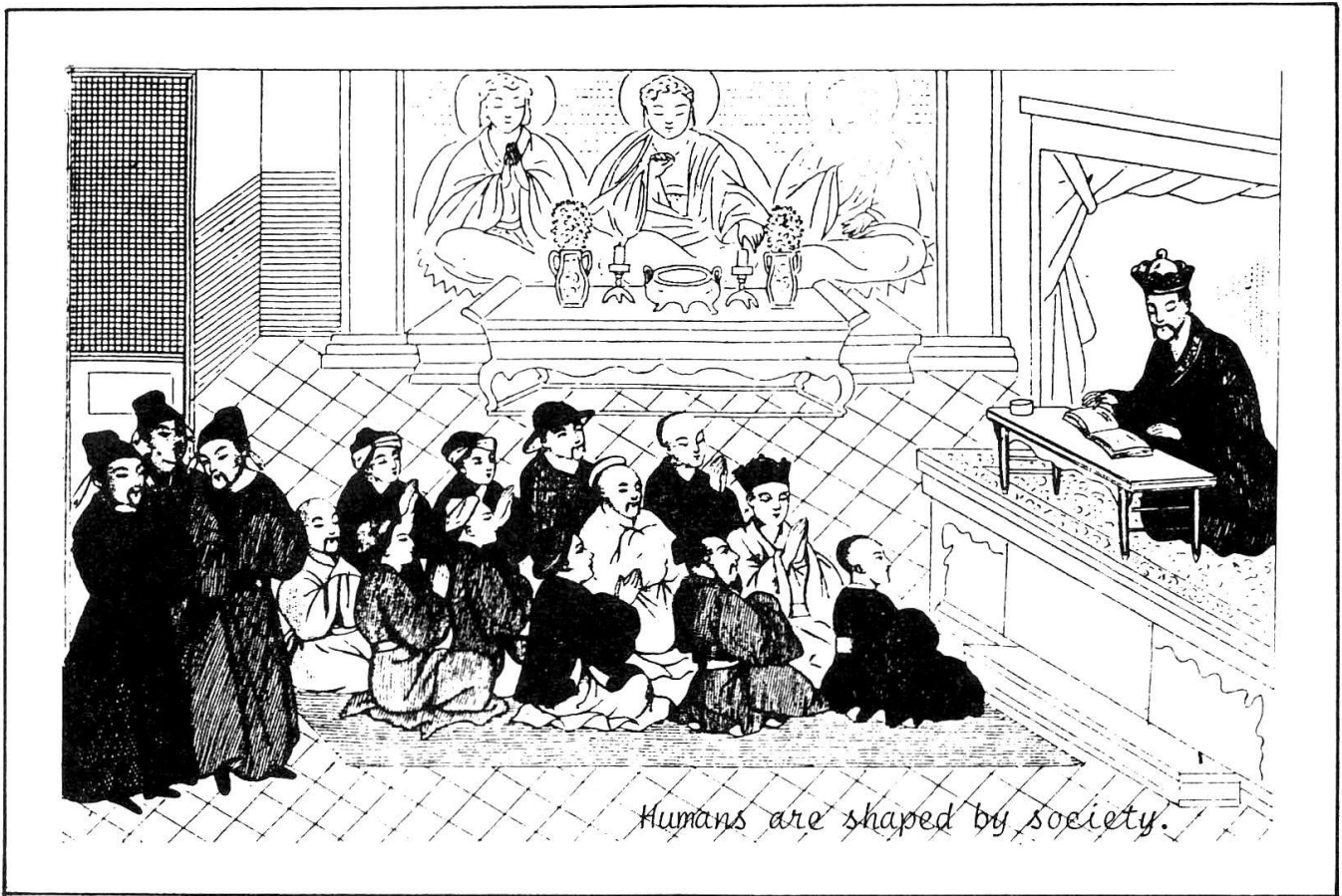
Humans are whole persons; they fulfill needs and develop new needs. Hegel, in the classical philosophical tradition, focused on human as "thinkers". Following Feuerbach, Marx stressed the whole person, all the human senses and emotions, not just the development of rationality. Marx noted a whole range of human needs, from basic needs for food and shelter to the higher needs of love, music and art appreciation, and above all the need to develop one's own capacities and to encourage others in their self-development. Marx felt that capitalism created false needs, the need for money, for possessions, and for domination over others.

Humans are social beings; they shape society. The idea that humans are social beings hardly originated with Marx; Aristotle had made this point centuries before. But what Marx stressed was the primacy of work in creating the bonds and structures of society. How men and women relate to each other in work greatly determines their whole life in society. They can work freely and cooperatively to fulfill the highest human needs, or competitively, egoistically and in conflict with each other, as they were doing under capitalism.

Human nature is the "ensemble of social relations"; humans are shaped by society. If humans act upon the world in shaping history, society, and themselves as individuals, they are also shaped dialectically by the world. This has been implicit in all that was said above. Humans do not simply recreate society anew in every epoch. They are conditioned by the world and the society which previous generations have created. If society has become dehumanized, individuals will be dehumanized. Only by transforming society and humanizing it can individuals become truly human. It is this last thesis, as we have seen, that became almost the sole focus of Marxist teachings on human nature.

How does contemporary Christian thought compare with Marx's humanism? Two problems still persist: Marx's atheism and the extent to which human nature is changeable. If we take Marx's critique of religion as a criticism of how religion functions, many of his criticisms were quite legitimate. Religion often was used to justify the status quo (e.g. the divine right of kings) and to pacify the poor (e.g. the miseries of this life should be accepted for the sake of eternal happiness). But religion can also provide the motivation for social change. Far from opposing human activity and responsibility (the God-versus-Man





dichotomy assumed by Marx), contemporary Christian thought views human actions as a share in God's creative activity and in Jesus' Mission to bring a new kingdom of justice and peace. This may not have satisfied Marx and it does not remove the materialist worldview developed by Engels. But the human responsibility called for by Marx is compatible with contemporary Christian social thought.

The malleability of human nature raises a second problem. It can certainly be argued that for all his emphasis on change, Marx did, implicitly at least, recognize "given" human traits and needs.<sup>15</sup> Marx spoke of the human need to freely choose work (hence reason and free will were constant human traits for him); he stressed the need of humans for work, for love, for self-development (if these were not continuing traits, the goals of socialism would have little meaning). From the Christian side, on the other hand, has come a much greater awareness of "social sin", of the influence of social conditions and social structures on human life. Laws that legalize racial discrimination serve to reinforce racism; concentration of ownership and power in the hands of a wealthy elite leads to exploitation and oppression; a consumerist society

affects consumerist attitudes in individuals. Marx did, however, over-emphasize changes in human nature through changes in social conditions (just as Christian thought too often relied on the moral conversion of individuals to the neglect of working to change social structures). Communist societies have not eliminated human tendencies toward hedonism, self-interest and domination. Marx did not intend state/Party rule over individuals, but his overreliance on changing economic structures led him to neglect the political structures necessary to preserve individual freedom.

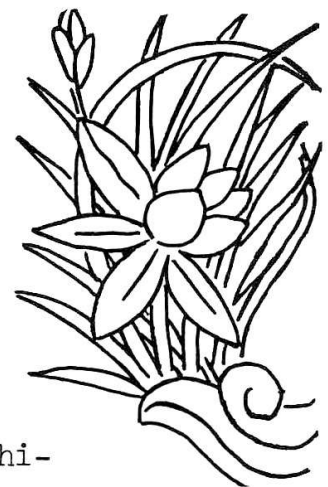
For the rest, most of Marx's humanism is quite consonant with contemporary Christian thought. It has, in fact, greatly influenced Christian social thought. Vatican II promoted, as an integral part of the mission of the Church, the task of transforming the world. It developed a theology of "work" quite similar to Marx's.<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, in his encyclical on human work, spoke of the primacy of work in human life and condemned the treatment of workers as mere "instruments" of production. In his stress on workers as "subjects", the pope affirmed the active, creative role of humans in shaping society and their own lives. He likewise echoed Marx's views on work as necessary for self-realization and development. Finally, his views on "true socialization" and on worker solidarity suggest a strong recognition of the social nature of man.<sup>17</sup> These are but a few examples of the convergence of Marxist and Christian views, a convergence which could be greatly expanded upon by considering the contemporary theologies of Jurgen Moltmann, Johannes Metz, Gustavo Gutierrez and many others.

In conclusion, any Christian appraisal of Marxism should be realistic enough to recognize the conflicting traditions which we discussed first, but open enough to appreciate the values and contributions of Marx's thought.

## Footnotes

(1) The Platonic-Cartesian conception of the soul treated it as separate from the body. The Aristotelian-Thomistic conception dealt with form-matter (body-soul) as two principles fused into one substance. Kant argued that we cannot prove the existence of the soul but that practical reason requires us to assume its existence.

(2) Friedrich Engels articulated his materialist phi-



losophy in several works, principally his Anti-Duhring and his Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy. For more specific references and discussion of his materialist philosophy, see A.F. McGovern, Marxism: An American Christian Perspective (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1980), pp. 51-54, 255-261.

(3) V.I. Lenin, Selected Works, XI (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1939), p. 666. On Lenin's "militant atheism", see McGovern, pp. 263-266.

(4) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Holy Family (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), ch. VI, p. 176.

(5) Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism, translated from the Russian, edited by Clemens Dutt (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), p. 755.

(6) Ibid., p. 868.

(7) See Richard N. Hunt, The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels, volume I (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1974) and also his forth-coming volume II.

(8) Donald J. Munro, The Concept of Man in Contemporary China (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1977), chapter 1, "Three Concepts of Man". I have used many of Munro's insights in presenting the first half of this essay.

(9) Ibid., pp. 15-25.

(10) Pope Leo XIII, on "The Condition of Labor" (Rerum Novarum) in Five Great Encyclicals (New York: Paulist Press, 1939). In numbers 3-6 he makes the criticisms we have noted, but especially significant is his statement: "Man is older than the state and he holds the right of providing for the life of his body prior to the formation of any state" (n. 6).

(11) Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism treats of individual self-realization on pages 755-759, 866-871.

(12) My summary of Marx's humanism in this essay draws chiefly from the sections of his 1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts found in Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society, edited by Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1967),

pp. 283-337.

(13) The Marx-Engels Reader, edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 2nd edition, 1978), p. 144. This reader also contains the 1844 Manuscripts.

(14) For more details on the controversy surrounding the writings of the young Marx, see Donald C. Hodges, "The Young Marx-A Reappraisal" and Iring Fetscher, "The Young and the Old Marx", in Marx's Socialism, edited by Shlomo Avineri (New York: Lieber-Atherton, 1972).

For articles dealing with Marxist humanism, see Socialist Humanism, an international symposium edited by Erich Fromm (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1966). For Marxist-Christian interchanges, see Marxistes et Chretiens, Entretiens de Salzbourg, translated by Michel Lousis (Paris: Mame, 1968), also Roger Garaudy and Quentin Lauer, A Christian-Communist Dialogue (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968).

(15) For a fuller treatment of Marx's references to human "needs" and to the whole question of human nature in Marx, see Joseph J. O'Malley, "History and Man's 'Nature' in Marx", in Marx's Socialism, op. cit., chapter 5.

(16) See The Documents of Vatican II, edited by Walter M. Abbot, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966) on "The Church in the Modern World." On transforming the world, nn. 26, 39, 43, 64-65, n. 93, etc.; on human work, n. 67.

(17) John Paul II, "On Human Work" (Laborem Exercens), published in Origins, September 24, 1981, vol. 11, no. 15. The pope speaks on the primacy of work (introduction and nn. 3-4), on workers treated as mere instruments (nn. 7-8), on workers as active "subjects" (nn. 6, 9), on self-realization as a goal of work (nn. 6, 9), on "true socialization" (nn. 14-15).