

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_sbct-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php)

## A Theological Letter about Socialism Today

CLODOVIS BOFF

Dear Nilo and friends from the Parque Paulista base community (Duque de Caxias, Rio de Janeiro)

You have had a chance to read my letters reporting on my three journeys to the socialist world – more specifically to Cuba, the Soviet Union and China. The last two are certainly the most important socialist societies in the world, and Cuba, apart from Nicaragua, is the only socialist society in the West – which naturally gives it a very special significance for us.

In this letter I would like to give you a general outline of socialism in today's world. In a sense, this will complete, or at least amplify, the more detailed description in the three previous letters. I shall do this under four headings:

- 1 A quick look at the socialist countries today. [This section has been omitted from the translation published here, since it is now out of date.]
- 2 The essence of socialism.
- 3 Socialism and democracy.
- 4 Socialism and Christianity.

### The Essence of Socialism

At this point the great danger is to get lost in a haze of general definitions or even mystical affirmations, such as that socialism is not a social system but a moral attitude, being on the side of the poor or fighting for justice. This easily ends up as mystification. Who isn't on the side of the poor and justice? We need only to ask our wonderful bosses in the Chamber of Industry or the patriots who make up the landowners' organisation, the UDR. Or ask President Sarney, or, if you like, the Finance Minister. That's not the way to define socialism.

I don't mean that this isn't connected with socialism. It certainly is! It's the basis of socialism. Durkheim went so far as to claim that socialism was first and foremost a 'cry of pain'; science would come later to give a rational structure to this cry. This feeling is not enough, and it's not typical of socialism. It can and does produce other things than socialism, such as do-gooding, populism or even terrorism. As long as we're on the subjective level of the 'option for the poor', 'hunger and thirst for justice', 'a longing for a better world', we haven't yet got socialism. Socialism in the strict sense starts when we ask how we get there, what all this would look like in a particular society, and give a particular type of answer, which we'll explain later.

I start by saying that socialism is not, in essence, a *complete social system*, nor just a method of organising *economic production*. It is, more exactly, a way of

organising all of society starting from the (socialised) economy; or alternatively it is a way of organising the economy which has implications for politics and ideology. Socialism is, then, a type of (socialised) economy, but it implies a type of politics (democratic) and ideology (pluralist).

Socialism, therefore, is directly and essentially a way of organising *production*. It is that to start with, although this has repercussions for the whole social system. That is its backbone, its substance, its sticking point. It involves the answer to the question, 'Who ultimately controls a society's economy?' Is it private individuals or groups? If either, that isn't socialism, however much love for the poor or enthusiasm for justice there may be.

A socialist society, in the strict sense, a socialist economy, presupposes *the end of private property*, not as such, but as the *dominant* form of ownership. In its place there arises *collective or social ownership*. In other words, it's not some *pure* mode of production. That only exists in books and in the heads of abstract intellectuals. There's no such thing as pure capitalism or pure socialism. What exists is a dominant or principal mode of production, capitalist when private ownership is dominant, socialist when the dominant mode is social or collective.

That is why we say that socialism proposes the 'socialisation of the means of production'. There are two ideas here which need to be explained.

First, 'means of production'. They are sources of life; not exactly products, but the means of producing these products which are necessary for life. These means are principally land and factories (though the *means of exchange*, such as banks and shops, are not excluded).

What is really meant here is the important means of production, which form the real levers of a nation's economy. So we're not talking about small or medium-sized means of production, small and medium-sized holdings of land, backyard factories, small or even medium-sized shops. All this can perfectly well remain in the hands of private groups, and be left to their initiative. The current reforms in the Soviet Union and China, as I showed in my letters about those countries, are giving particular encouragement to this smaller-scale economic sphere.

So small and even medium owners ('medium' is always a relative term) have nothing to fear from socialism. It is the large owners – the bourgeois class – who have something to fear and who get terrified and terrify others . . .

Do we still need to tell them here how ridiculous and nonsensical it is to go on insisting that in socialism everything is in common, even things like spectacles and underwear?

I now come to the second idea which defines socialism, 'socialisation'. This is the most difficult point. What it basically means is placing the essential sectors (I repeat, 'essential') of the economy *in the hands of society*. Marx, and Durkheim as well, stressed that the economy needs a rational control centre. But talking about 'society' is very abstract. The question here is 'how?': how, through what intermediate institutions, will society control the most important means of production? In fact, today, more than the ownership of these means of production, it is the *control* of these means which counts. In multinationals it is sometimes enough to own 5 per cent or even less to control the firm's whole economic strategy.

I come back to the question: who controls the means of production? In practical terms, control of the economy conditions all the rest of social life, such as politics and culture. The means of production can be means of exploitation or means of life, means of oppression or means of liberation, means of conscientisation or means of alienation.

After the unhappy experiences of many countries under 'real socialism', in which the state took over the role of controller of the means of production, there is much talk today of 'self-managed socialism' and similar phrases. The idea is a socialism managed by the people at the base.

But how can the people at the base or 'the workers in association', as Marx described them, manage the economy? This is possible through a combination of three entities:

- 1 *The state*, insofar as it is really representative of the base and administers the economy for the benefit of the majority (not as in our country, where the state sets up its economic policy overall to benefit the rich). At this point comes the vital question of political democracy as an instrument for (and even a path to) self-managed socialism. I'll come back to this later on.
- 2 *Associations of workers* directly administering the different production units. This would be 'direct economic democracy', while the first form would be 'indirect democracy'.
- 3 *Private individuals and groups* exercising 'freedom of economic initiative' in small and medium-sized businesses, without excluding large businesses provided that they subsidise and encourage the essentially socialised system of the national economy, as is the case in China. This is precisely the direction of the economic reforms taking place today within 'real socialism'.

It is on this basis, and only on this basis, that socialism can be thought of as, at root, a 'moral' tendency and not just a 'model' of economic organisation (L. Kołakowski), a 'passion for justice' and not only a 'doctrine which insists on the connection of economic forces with the immediate, conscious centres of society' (Durkheim), a 'moral choice' about the ends of society and not merely 'a technique of methods' for organising the economy (Roger Garaudy). In other words, it is only from above, from socialism as an economic system, involving the whole social system, that we can reach the socialism of the spirit, and not the other way round. In fact, beginning with the socialism of the spirit or 'mystical socialism' means falling straight into spiritualism and mystification. Didn't even Delfim Netto, the guru of right-wing economists in Brazil, once declare himself a socialist?

Moreover, it is necessary to stress very firmly that socialism is not just a project, a simple historical ideal, but it is the *expression of the real historical process*. This means that at this stage of the development of modern economies it is no longer possible to hand over control of a society's economy to private individuals or groups. We need to 'sort things out', or rationalise the global productive process by giving it a 'conscious social organisation' (Marx).

In the Third World it is becoming more and more obvious that the historical solution for our countries is socialism. Our dependent capitalism is unable to ensure the people's *biological survival*, let alone a decent life. There is, then, no other objective solution. The people, as well, are being pushed in this direction by events themselves, as is shown by the historical process in the most recent nations to win their freedom.

Does it need to be said that authentic socialism will never be a 'single model' to be copied, but something which grows out of the objective conditions of a people and is at the same time developed subjectively by the people on the basis of its culture and its ideals?

### **Socialism and Democracy**

The great challenge of the present period of history is to create a model of socialism

which represents freedoms:

- 1 *Economic freedom*, in the sense of participation in decisions about production and the right to use one's initiative and inventiveness in the economy (the question of flexibility in the economy).
- 2 *Political freedom*, in the sense of participation in the general management of society, including leadership positions (the question of political democracy).
- 3 Finally, *freedom of conscience* on the level of world views and religious beliefs (the question of ideological pluralism).

Michael Novak, the theologian of American capitalism, challenges liberation theology to define the 'institutional form' or particular face of socialism it advocates. He is worried about the 'practical institutions' which will guarantee persons their creativity and freedom. Despite the author's ideology, the question is serious. It can be summed up in the old dilemma: how to combine equality and diversity, justice and freedom; specifically, socialism and democracy.

Before continuing, I would like here to give a theoretical, or at least terminological, explanation. We hear of a 'socialist society' or a 'democratic society'. But this means dividing society up. It means taking the part for the whole or making the whole the part. In fact, society (as it exists or the one still to be built) is a complex totality; yes, a system. What we are trying to build is not, strictly speaking, a society which is 'socialist' and/or 'democratic', but a really authentic, integrated society, a social, that is, human society. A tautology? I don't know if we can go any further than this here; and this, at any rate, indicates a historical horizon which is asymptotic, that is, unattainable.

Today, in the practical reality of history, this true society could be described in the following terms: (a) *socialist* on the economic level; (b) *democratic* on the political level; (c) *pluralistic* on the ideological level.

In current language, people today talk both about 'democratic socialism' and about 'socialist democracy'. But how are these two levels related? Leaving aside for the moment the third level (the ideological), I think that the foregoing remarks help us to see more clearly the relations between democracy and socialism. It is a very difficult question, as N. Bobbio warned us (in his *Qual socialismo?* (Paz e Terra, Rio, 1983)). In his little book *Construir a utopia* (Vozes, Petrópolis, 1987), Herbert de Souza (Betinho) develops his 'democratic proposal' around three principles: equality, participation and diversity – which coincides with the threefold division above.

For my part, I take democracy directly as political democracy, that is, as a way of participating in decisions which involve the whole of society. Obviously, this also includes the economic sphere in the sense of an 'economic policy', but only indirectly. Democracy, then, is not socialism, but implies socialism in the sphere of production.

On the other hand, I take socialism to mean directly economic socialism, and not immediately referred to the political sphere in the form of the 'socialisation of power'. This issue is implied in it, but indirectly. It comes later, after production.

When we have said this, it becomes clear that the key question is: how do we make socialism and democracy historically compatible? The basic conviction is that socialism and democracy are not only compatible, but consubstantial. Bobbio insists that today, 'Where there is democracy there is no socialism, and where there is socialism there has until now been no democracy' (p. 110). But the real question is: can there be authentic (political) democracy without (economic) socialism, and can there be true socialism without democracy?

Let's take the two points in turn.

- (1) *There is no genuine (political) democracy without (economic) socialism.* In

practical terms, how can a starving and ignorant people freely participate in decision-making? A recent study carried out by the economist M. Romao for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) shows that 'half Brazil is below the poverty line', as a headline in the *Jornal do Brasil* put it (9 April 1989). To be precise, 49.2 per cent of the population receive an income below 88 per cent of the minimum wage (which is the equivalent of just over US\$30 at current unofficial exchange rates). Without a basic income, how can a people be expected to exercise their political freedoms such as the right to information, to express their own opinions, to run for public office etc.? There's no need to labour the point. With the Brazil we have today, all we can have is a 'democracy of the masters', a contradictory expression equivalent to 'oligarchy' or 'plutocracy'. Without a degree of economic relief, there is no free people, just a mass open to manipulation.

In capitalism, where the owners of money rule, it is impossible for genuine democracy to operate (although progress is always possible). In the First World, the world of advanced capitalism, the most that can be achieved is social democracy, that is, socialism managing capitalists' business. Capitalism creates two limitations for people's democracy (a historically necessary pleonasm): the factory gates, on the far side of which the tyranny of capital rules; and the power of money, which distorts the democratic process.

Despite all this, liberalism has always claimed that democratic freedom is linked to the freedom of the market. But what market? The capitalist market as supreme regulator, dominating all central planning, impedes and even stifles democracy rather than the reverse. However, if we mean *some forms of market*, subsidiary to a socialist economy, then democracy not only tolerates them, but even requires them, as we are seeing in the reforms currently being introduced in 'real socialism', especially in China.

The conclusion is clear: socialism is the *economic basis* for the democratic ideal. It is the material condition for the exercise of civil and political freedoms.

(2) *But there cannot be real (economic) socialism without (political) democracy.* After all, what is socialism but control of the productive system and process by the workers themselves? And can this exist if the workers lack the political freedom to discuss and decide on the way production should go? How can they really be 'subjects', shapers, of the economy if they are deprived of the exercise of citizenship? It is only as citizens that the workers can really control the economic process.

Without democracy all there can be is an 'authoritarian and bureaucratic state', as much of a contradiction as a 'democracy of masters'. But this was what existed in much of 'real socialism', at least until recently.

In this sense, democracy is, in its turn, the precondition for the exercise of *real* (and not merely formal) control over the means of production by those at the base of society, that is, the organised people.

Certainly, the *technical* management of an economy as complex as a modern one can properly be carried out only by experts. What is unacceptable is for them to turn themselves into technocrats, that is, also to take over political hegemony or leadership. On the contrary, the citizen workers' control of the productive apparatus is exercised through political control over its technical and administrative controllers. This presupposes that the workers possess political hegemony in a society. In this way they can exercise political control over those who have the technical control of production units. To reduce the (political) 'government of men' to the 'administration of things', as Engels advocated, following Saint-Simon, is to fall into the illusion of technocracy and deal a mortal blow to socialism (see the little book by Paul

Singer, *O que é o socialismo hoje?* (Vozes, Petrópolis, 1980).

As a result, the genuine social appropriation of the means of production includes an essential political component, as I shall explain later. Another reason is that the socialised economy is only the material basis or necessary (but not sufficient) condition for something more and more important, namely the *practice of freedom*, guided by moral ideals. Without this, all there would be is economicism, enthroned as always on the corpse of freedom. A socialised economy may produce equality, but by itself it doesn't produce freedom. Perhaps we can agree: a mere mode of production isn't a whole social system.

That is why socialism is only one element in the totality of society, though it is an element integrated into a political system (democracy) and, in addition, into an ideological system (pluralism), as I shall explain below. It is therefore important to say as clearly as possible that socialism and democracy go together like flesh and bone. One is a precondition of the other. There is no justice without freedom, nor genuine freedom without justice. The implication is reciprocal.

However, we have to recognise that within this circularity the economic base – in this case, socialism – has a determining role, from the structural, not the moral, point of view. That is, it sets the rhythm of the dance. The priority of the economic sphere is not necessarily priority in time. It is structural priority in the sense that the political and economic edifice is erected on economic foundations. The question of temporal priority is merely one of strategy and tactics, not history and structure.

Normally the processes of the socialisation of the economy and the democratisation of society go together. We win political power in order to control the productive apparatus together, and we take economic power in order to exercise political power effectively. There may not be coincidence in time, but the tendency is towards structural synchrony.

I shall now leave this issue, with its theological complications, to register that these days there is an increased demand for democratic socialism. The conviction is gaining ground more and more that without freedom there can be no socialism worth the name. Socialism is democratic essentially and not merely accidentally. Without democracy it becomes a dictatorship over and not of the proletariat. As an old Brazilian politician, the socialist candidate for president in 1950, used to say, 'Freedom without socialism isn't freedom, and socialism without freedom can't be socialism.' Without democracy socialism is 'state capitalism' or, at best, a 'socialism of accumulation' that could be a basis for subsequent mass democracy (Florestan Fernandez).

It also needs to be said that the connection between socialism and democracy belongs to the oldest Marxist tradition. Marx never thought of socialism as the opposite of capitalism, but as something surpassing it. And as a higher stage, socialism preserves everything good in capitalism, but goes further towards the collective and historical achievement of the great liberal ideals of which capitalism is the bearer but which it cannot realise. Socialism seeks to be the base of a democracy extended among the masses, 'a truly democratic democracy'.

Lenin had the same view. Political revolution, he said, picks up from the ground the trampled banner of democracy abandoned by the reactionary bourgeoisie, panic-stricken at the advance of the new class. Finally, Rosa Luxemburg took this idea further and did much to put it into practice (a dimension certainly lacking in Marx and Lenin). It is an idea which for us is becoming an obvious truth of history: there can be no socialism without democracy and no democracy without socialism.

## Socialism and Christianity

A lot could be said about this subject, but for the moment I will simply refer you to two authors who have dealt with it quite comprehensively: an Italian scholar, Paolo Pombeni, in his book *Socialismo e Cristianismo 1815–1975* (Brescia, 1977); and an American historian, John C. Cort, with his *Christian Socialism* (Orbis Books, New York, 1988). Here I shall limit myself to the basics or, rather, to some of the most important aspects.

First is the word ‘communism’, the oldest term to describe the ‘communion of goods’ in society. You ought to know that this is a word of Christian origin and one even used by Christians until recently. As the sociologist J. Leclercq says, ‘Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Christian spirit was constantly centred on the communism of the primitive community’, and Christians abandoned the use of the word, and began to talk instead about ‘community’, only after it was adopted by ‘socialist anticlericalism’. The ‘ancient spirit of Christian communism survived, however, in the religious orders’.

If you get the chance to look at one of the best known theological encyclopedias, the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, written at the beginning of the century, look up the word ‘communism’ (it’s in Volume III). You’ll get a big surprise. You won’t find anything about Marx or Engels, but only about Jesus Christ, the apostles, the first Christians, the Fathers of the Church, the monks, the mendicants etc., showing that this is a church affair – the biblical idea of ‘communion of goods’. I’m not even going to tell you about the famous ‘Christian communist republic of the Guaraní’ run by the Jesuits in Paraguay, which lasted for over 50 years (1610–1786). This was completely inspired by the ideals of the Acts of the Apostles (see the beautiful book by Clóvis Lugon, *República comunista-cristã dos Guaraní* (Rio, 1977)).

The first phase of modern socialism, in the first part of the nineteenth century, has obvious Christian roots, as has been demonstrated by a number of authors (H. Desroche, Houtart and Rousseau, in addition to Pombeni and Cort, whom we have already mentioned). The so-called ‘utopian socialists’, typical of this first phase, appealed to the New Testament, especially to the community of Acts, for the basis of their ‘socialist’ ideal. Cabet, for example, the founder of the first French communist party, who died in 1856, said, ‘Christianity is communism . . . Yes, Jesus Christ is a communist!’

Robert Owen, who coined the word ‘socialism’, and was the biggest European industrialist of his day, was not afraid to assert that ‘Jesus’ Christianity is socialism’. (On this see the study by A. Lion, in the journal *Lumière et Vie*, 153/4, 1981, which has the significant title ‘In the beginning were the Acts of the Apostles’.)

The same happened with Saint-Simon, who died in 1825, and who wrote the book *The New Christianity*. Proudhon too (died 1865), though anticlerical, drew inspiration from the Bible for his great socialist ideals. So did Saint-Simon’s Belgian disciple, Philippe Buchez (died 1865), the leading figure of the ‘Christian socialists’, who had already used, in 1829, what is today the well-known expression ‘the exploitation of man by man’.

The trouble is that this was a ‘marginal Christianity’, in the phrase of F. A. Isambert. Although it had sprung from the reservoir of Christian faith, it did not find space within the church to flourish and develop. The institution as a whole did not recognise itself in it. It is true that this early socialism was a confused mixture of medieval Christianity and socialist dreams. In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx



and Engels attacked 'clerical' or 'sacred' socialism. For all that, it remains a tragedy that the church was unable to combine Christianity with socialism (or even with political liberalism, as was shown by the condemnation of Lammenais), and that the great leaders of the communist movement did not allow a link between socialism and Christianity (as in the condemnation of Kriege by Marx and Co.). In the first case the reason was to do with purity of doctrine, and in the second concern to be serious about analysis and organisation (the idea of 'class struggle' was the watershed).

Nevertheless, after 1848, the year of the Paris Revolution which overthrew the monarchy and established the republican system, with great repercussions throughout Europe, the 'Christian socialist' movement sprang up more or less everywhere. Its aim was to 'baptise' socialism, and to link Christians with this historic movement. It maintained the *goals* of the socialist movement, the abolition of capitalist property and wage labour, but did not accept the *means* proposed, the strategy of 'class struggle', preferring the methods of associationism, producers' or consumers' cooperatives etc. It was a trend which spread widely among European Christians, especially among Protestants.

So in England from 1848 there were the Anglican theologian F. D. Maurice and his associates, but the movement didn't get very far. In Austria-Hungary the movement was led by the Prague theologian Bernard Bolzano (died 1848), who left a number of followers in Vienna. In Belgium, apart from the powerful figure of Buchez, whom we have already mentioned, there were A. Bartels (died 1862) and F. Huet (died 1869), who was convinced that Christianity and socialism were synonymous. In Germany the socialism espoused by Christians took the form of 'state socialism', with a conservative and moralising stamp. We should also remember, however, the brave gesture of the German pastor and theologian J. C. Blumhardt, who joined the socialist party in 1899 and was dismissed as a result. He used to say that socialism might well be the realisation of the Kingdom in history. In France, from 1908 onwards, Christians went further: they developed a critique of the church's subordination to capitalism and began to accept class struggle.

In Switzerland there appeared the extremely influential figure of the Protestant theologian and pastor Leonard Ragaz. In 1921 he gave up theological work and took over the leadership of a specific movement, 'Religious Socialism'. This had already begun at the end of the nineteenth century and had held its first international congress in 1910 in Besançon (France). Ragaz firmly believed that Christianity and socialism are in principle as closely united as God and humanity. 'Religious Socialism' was not a party, but a movement of ideas which sought to bring about a meeting between Christians and the developing socialist movement. Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, great theological figures of our century, belonged to it. Nevertheless it must be recognised that the political effect of this movement was not great, precisely because it lacked a popular base, having remained confined to an intellectual elite. After all, what is socialism without the masses?

In the United States there was the 'Movement of Socialist Christians' (1930–1), founded and organised by the Lutheran theologian and pastor Reinhold Niebuhr (died 1971). The ideal was 'the Kingdom of God in America'. Niebuhr, you should know, was the greatest and most influential theologian and political philosopher in the United States, listened to and read by the highest levels of American political society (he was Jimmy Carter's favourite theologian). He began with a tendency to socialism, and drew on Marxism, but ended in a liberal position, largely because of the aberrations of Stalinism.

In Latin America at the beginning of the 1970s there grew up the movement

'Christians for Socialism', which later spread through Europe but is now in decline, not because of its content, but because of its form, elitism, conflicts with the institutional church etc.

It is reasonable to say that now Christians no longer offer any great obstacles to the socialist vision. This is the result of the great historical transformations which have taken place both within socialism and within the Christian churches themselves. I will restrict myself here to the Catholic Church. In relation to socialism, it must be recognised that the magisterium has evolved significantly. The encyclicals *Octogesima adveniens* (1971) of Paul VI (para. 31) and *Laborem exercens* (1981) of John Paul II (para. 14) give the 'green light' to the socialist venture (though certainly not to every sort of socialism).

If we turn to bishops of Latin America and the Third World in general, the openness to socialism is even greater, as Yves Lesbaupin showed (*Concilium* 125, 1977, pp. 122–3). For example, in the Third World bishops' manifesto of 1967 we find the statement 'True socialism is Christianity lived completely'. The same thing had been said in the heart of the Second Vatican Council by the Lebanese Patriarch Maximos IV. The remark recalls what that combative Christian layman J. M. Domenach said: 'Socialism is the gospel in action, at least in politics' (*Christus* 52, p. 472). Finally, the great Karl Barth said in a lecture in 1911 that 'Real socialism is the real Christianity of our time (Jesus Christ is the social movement).'

Let us now leave the historical process and examine the essence of socialism. The idea of 'communion of goods', of which socialism is the modern form, was and continues to be the great social ideal of Christians. We need only look in the Acts of the Apostles (4: 32–7): 'All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. . . . There were no needy persons among them . . .'

The main teaching of the ancient church followed this line. The church fathers were united. A studious Spanish layman collected the social thinking of the fathers in a book entitled *Doctrina económica y social de los Padres de la Iglesia. Colección general de documentos y textos* (Compi, Madrid, 1967). He found that only four texts spoke in favour of private property, three saying it was allowed and one, from Theodoret (fifth century) that it was necessary. The rest were in favour of the 'communion of goods'. St Ambrose's aphorism is worth quoting here: 'Community comes from God; property comes from theft.'

The medieval doctors, especially St Thomas Aquinas, at root follow the great tradition: objects are intended for all, and private property is legitimate only to the extent that it does not conflict with the common use of goods. The thesis which sums up earlier Christian thought is expressed in St Isidore's maxim: 'The common possession of everything and freedom for all are part of natural law' (*Etymologias*, V, 4, quoted by Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 94, a. 5).

It is true that the subsequent evolution of Thomism, especially neoscholasticism, which resulted in the 'social doctrine of the church', got entangled in regrettable errors, as a number of scholars have shown (J. M. Díez Alegría, F. B. de Ávila, J. Comblin and others). What happened was that, in polemical reaction against an extreme socialism, the church defended private property, intending in this way to defend not just capitalist property as such, but human beings threatened by the depersonalising effect of a totalitarian economy. What was at issue was the human person as the 'subject' of production, and not at all the defence of capitalism, with which, if the truth be told, the Catholic Church never had good relations.

In the meantime, since the encyclical *Mater et magistra* (1961) of John XXIII, the

church's social teaching returned to emphasis on the great tradition and began to give priority once more to the 'social function' of property. This is the emphasis of the current papacy. We have already seen, moreover, that *Laborem exercens* explicitly admits a 'socialisation of the means of production' provided that it is 'satisfactory'. In other words, in the encyclical's terms, from the point of view of Christian ethics, socialism is possible (para. 14). No pope had ever gone so far.

What can we say after all this? It is clear that Christianity is rediscovering its socialist roots. At the same time socialism is becoming open to the moral and religious dimension. Well-known socialists of today, such as Roger Garaudy and Lelio Basso, insist strongly that socialism needs to be reconciled with religion. Basso, an Italian politician, used to say that 'Without religion there is no true socialism, taking religion not in the denominational sense, but as a desire for transcendence, an openness to the "ever greater".' I myself heard the following from the lips of the 'Minister for Religion', K. Kharchev, when we were in the Soviet Union: 'Socialism will be complete only when it responds to all human needs, including religious ones.'

If there is a 'historical demand' for socialism inherent in Christianity, the converse is not identical but only similar. All socialism needs is an 'openness' to Christianity and the religious question, that is, respect for the right of freedom of conscience and of religion. So let's not turn any historical venture, even socialism, into a creed. Where would that leave the 'ideological pluralism' of a genuine modern society?

So there you are, my friends. That's the situation of socialism today, from the point of view of a liberating faith. I think that this general survey will make my letters and the real situations they reflect easier to understand. In the hope that they help you to find your place more easily in our world in ferment, and make you more energetic in quickening it with the leaven of the gospel, I send you a fraternal greeting of courage and peace.

Yours ever

Clodovis Boff

Rio, 1 May, Workers' Day and feast of St Joseph the Worker, 1989.

(Translated from the Portuguese by Francis McDonagh.)