



Christian Communism

by Roland Boer

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*All who believed were together and had all things in common;
they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute
the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

—Acts 2: 44-45



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Introduction

Christian communism may seem like a strange combination. Religion is religion and communism is communism and never the twain shall meet—or so many may think. The truth is quite different: Christian communism has a history of thousands of years.

I will deal with some features of this history in a moment, but first I need to ask: what is meant by the term ‘Christian communism’?¹ It has two crucial features: the first may be called the collective or communal. This entails finding an alternative way to live together as a community. Historically, these were usually small communities that sought to embody a different way of living out their belief and practice within the world. They may have wanted to provide alternative models, hoping that others would see the benefits and thereby gradually transform society as a whole. Or they may have distanced themselves from the world, desiring to be left in peace so as to develop their communities.

Crucially, these efforts—which continue today—were based on profound criticisms of the state of the world, usually from careful attention to key texts in the Bible and a sense of radical divine transcendence. In our time, this communal focus has undergone a significant shift as Christian churches have become part of the construction of socialism in other parts of the world where communist parties are in power.

The other dimension is revolution. The theologically inspired criticisms of the injustices and oppressions of the status quo led some of them to the position that the only answer is a revolutionary overthrow. At times, we find that both of these elements—the communal and the revolutionary—come together, while at other times a peaceful community is forced to engage in revolutionary action in response to oppression from outside forces. The only path left to achieve their desired communism is to engage in revolutionary violence.

But what was and is the inspiration for this type of communism and why is it religious or indeed Christian? Its core inspiration comes from two key verses in the Bible:

¹ This booklet draws on research for a book to be published soon: *Red Theology: On the Christian Communist Tradition*.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Acts 2: 44-45

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common ... and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Acts 4: 32-35

The verses concern the nature of the earliest Christian communities. But the texts immediately raise a couple of questions. First, who proposed that they form the basis of Christian communism? Was it biblical scholars and theologians? No, they are usually busy denying that any form of viable communal life appears in these texts.² They prefer to reinterpret the texts in terms of an ‘idealisation’, a ‘community of goods’, an ‘alternative family’, the Christian ‘love feast’, or simply as advice to give alms. They all share in various ways the assumption expressed explicitly by Walter Rauschenbusch—champion of the ‘social gospel’ more than a century ago—that it was ‘not communism in any proper sense of the word’ (1907, 122). So it was not biblical scholars and theologians who first proposed that we find in these texts the origins of Christian communism.



Agape feast

² Although Montero (2017) is a notable exception.

This problem leads to the second question: is it really communism? Perhaps the image from these texts is merely Christian worship, or gathering together from time to time for Bible study or community outreach, or even the meals known as ‘love [*agape*] feasts’. The early Christians might have lived together for a while, but perhaps it was simply a ‘share house’ arrangement —students or those with little cash do such things all the time. Is not ‘communism’ too strong a word?

Forerunners of Modern Socialism

The answer to both questions —who proposed the idea and whether it was really communism— may be found with the leading Marxist of the generation following Marx and Engels: Karl Kautsky. Not a theologian, not a biblical scholar, not a historian by profession —although he was well-versed these areas— but a Marxist intellectual. Kautsky first proposed that what we find in the Bible was Christian communism and that it has a history of some 2,000 years. It constitutes the longest continuous form of communism in the world.

Let us see what Kautsky argued, especially in two works. The first is *Forerunners of Modern Socialism*, first published in 1895. This was a massive project and had a significant impact at the time. It was initially published in two volumes, with Kautsky writing all of the first volume and the second also written by a number of leading socialist intellectuals: Eduard Bernstein, Paul Lafargue, Hugo Lindemann and Morris Hillquit (Kautsky 1895; Kautsky et al. 1895). While this work may have made a great impact at the time, it has been given scant attention since.³ The opposite is true of Kautsky’s other work, *Foundations of Christianity* (1908a, 1908b), which has been republished many times and translated. For example, the Chinese translation (Kautsky 1932) deeply influenced Marxist approaches to Christianity in China, especially among a number of Chinese Christian communists, such as Wu Yaozong.

In identifying the main points of Kautsky’s contribution, I primarily draw on *Forerunners of Modern Socialism*, using *Foundations of Christianity* where needed. Kautsky’s major contribution was to identify a distinct tradition of Christian communism. Although he begins with Plato’s *Republic*,

³ A signal of this lack is that fact that only selections from the first volume have ever been translated into English, under the title of *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation* (Kautsky 1897).

he sees this as ‘gleichheitskommunismus’, or egalitarian communism (the term comes from Engels) —the forerunner of later, liberal versions. His greater interest is in Christian communism.

Early Christian Communism

Although Kautsky agrees with some of the points Engels had made in an essay on early Christianity published at the same time (chiliasm as a revolutionary expression and the appeal of the Christian message to slaves, labourers and urban unemployed), Kautsky goes beyond Engels on two important points.⁴ The first can be dealt with briefly: Engels suggested that one result of early Christianity’s revolutionary impulse was the conquest of the Roman Empire, when it was adopted as the state religion by Constantine in the fourth century. This is not a strong argument from Engels, wielded perhaps for polemical purposes, and Kautsky wisely disagrees (implicitly). Instead, Kautsky sees the adoption of Christianity as the ideology of empire as a form of betrayal of the initial communist impulse. Or rather, Kautsky identifies two paths taken by Christianity: one is to the seat of power, providing an ideological and material surrogate for the powers that be; the other is the communist drive, which could not be suppressed and kept on reappearing in the centuries that followed.

The second point where Kautsky goes beyond Engels is the proposal that the earliest Christian communities were communist in organisation. Aware that his readers —both religious and socialist— may find this a somewhat strange proposal, he makes some careful qualifications. One qualification is that it was a communism of consumption rather than production. In other words, these communities —which he assumes existed historically— based their communism on sharing their goods. All possessions were put in a common treasury and distributed to any as had need. The problem is that this approach makes no effort to change the actual means of production. Once the goods ran out (as Luxemburg also points out (1905)), members would have to find other means to obtain more goods.

⁴ Kautsky had —through correspondence— been fully aware of Engels’s essay on early Christianity (1894-1895), the converse did not apply: Engels was somewhat upset when *Forerunners* appeared, for he had no idea it was underway (1895).



John Ball, a leader of the Peasants' Revolt, England, 1381

The distinction is important for Kautsky's overall argument, since he needs to find a difference with modern communism, which targets a transformation in the means of production. However, we find later in the work that this distinction begins to break down, for he finds that one mediaeval and early modern group after another not only had a reputation for diligent work, but also engaged in production. At times, this production may have been part of the larger economic framework (feudal and early capitalist), while at others it offered a distinct alternative.

Another qualification turns on the distinction between passive and active. Kautsky suggests that early Christian communism tended to be passive and non-political, while medieval Christian —which he also calls 'heretical'—communism was active and political. This is really a contrast between communal life and revolutionary action (see earlier). Indeed, Kautsky goes on to provide a historical outline in which the 'passive' form is the preferred option for a series of groups, until a distinct turn with the Dulcinians. They marked —for Kautsky— the first appearance of the active, militant and revolutionary form of Christian communism.

The Turn to Revolution: The Dulcinians

Let me say a little more on the Dulcinians (skipping over the groups before them). They arose in the early fourteenth century, led by Fra Dolcino of Novarra (1250-1307), who took over the leadership of an earlier group —the Apostolic Brethren— and radicalised them. The Dulcinians took up arms, retreated to the fortress on Monte Rubello in the Piedmont, and held off the crusaders sent to crush them for a number of years. How did this turn of events come about?



Fra Dolcino

For Kautsky, it was not simply due to the individual inspiration of Dolcino, but to the changing socio-economic conditions, affecting peasants and wage-workers and leading them to a nascent sense of class consciousness. Dolcino was able to articulate this consciousness through a series of writings and speeches, some of which have been preserved. In these texts we find him advocating liberation from feudal and church hierarchies, along with the need for a communistic organisation of society, in terms of property in common, mutual aid and respect.⁵ Clearly, the element of communal life was important still, but the new ingredient was militant action. For Kautsky

⁵ Dolcino also had a liking for the millenarian theories of Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), for whom the history of the world followed three stages. The ages of the 'Father' and the 'Son' had already happened, but humanity awaited the age of the 'Spirit', when Christ would return, humanity would face God directly and achieve a society of complete freedom.

the Dulcinians mark ‘the first attempt at an armed communist uprising’ (1895, 153; translation mine).

With this new development, Kautsky proceeds to identify a number of groups that also took up arms, such as the Lollards (in England) and the Taborites (part of the earliest reformation in Bohemia), but his main interest is with the turbulent sixteenth century in Europe. He devotes considerable attention to both the Peasant Revolution of 1525, led by Thomas Müntzer, and the Anabaptist Revolution in Münster in 1534-1535.⁶

The Revolutionary European 16th Century: Müntzer and Münster

Thomas Müntzer has become a curious hero among radical circles, especially in Europe. Why curious? He was a theologian of significant intellectual ability, but also a visionary and prophetic figure who relied on both careful biblical interpretation and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (through visions and dreams). How could such a person become a hero for some on the Left? He was also a leader of the peasant uprising in the German states (and elsewhere) in 1525. Scattered uprisings had appeared earlier, especially in light of the rapidly changing socio-economic conditions and the clear beginnings of capitalist market conditions (so much so that the first commercial empire arose in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century). These uprisings came to a head in the 1520s, and Müntzer emerged as one of the leaders. Usually, this uprising is called the Peasant Revolt, but it is far preferable to call it what it was, a Peasant Revolution.

In the Marxist tradition, Müntzer and the Peasant Revolution first came to prominence through Engels’s article, ‘The Peasant War in Germany’ (1850). Later Marxists developed the analysis further, before and after Kautsky (Bebel 1876; Mehring 1931), with Ernst Bloch famously calling Müntzer the ‘theologian of the revolution’ (1969). But I have still not completely answered the question as to who Müntzer was and why he became so important among Marxists.

⁶ I leave aside here other movements studied in *Forerunners*. These include the sections on Thomas More (written by Kautsky), Thomas Campanella (written by Paul Lafargue), the seventeenth-century English (bourgeois) revolution (written by Eduard Bernstein, although this section was removed in the later revised edition), and socialist developments in France and North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (written by Hugo Lindemann, with the section on North America later rewritten by Morris Hillquit).

Born in the Thuringian mining town of Stolberg (in the Harz Mountains), he had been inspired by the message of Martin Luther and went to study with the latter. Upon completing his studies, Müntzer was called —with Luther's approval— to a church in Zwickau (in 1520). Here he found the miners and weavers deeply unsettled by the economic changes under way. He responded with his preaching, church organisation and publications. This was particularly the case during his time in Allstedt (1523-1524), where thousands came to his worship services, which were delivered in German and not Latin. Here he also produced the first German church liturgy (before Luther) and a number of clear statements of his position —especially 'On Counterfeit Faith'. Radicalised by his experiences and his further study, Müntzer soon fell out with Luther.

He became what would now be called a revolutionary on the run, spending a year here and a few months there, organising, preaching, writing and publishing. Radical town councils would ask him to come and preach, only for others to drive him out of town. As matters came to a head and revolutionary activities gained momentum, the German princes saw a distinct threat. With Luther's blessing, mercenary troops were organised, descending on Bad Frankenhausen. Here a few thousand peasants, miners and weavers had gathered, hoping for reinforcements from other places. It was to no avail and the revolutionary forces, who really needed more time, were crushed. Müntzer was captured and taken to Mühlhausen, where he was tortured and executed in 1525.

Let me focus for a few moments on Müntzer's message (mostly following Kautsky's careful reconstruction).⁷ In his first phase, Müntzer was concerned with developing his theological position, studying, writing and publishing. He was also involved in church and community organisation, which included a more participatory and democratic approach to worship. Importantly, he also counselled his flocks to be disciplined so as not to cause undue trouble. Here we find one of the distinct elements of the Christian communist tradition, focused on communal life.

The other —revolutionary— element emerged at a distinct moment: the famous sermon delivered to the princes, with the title 'Interpretation of the Second Chapter of Daniel' (Müntzer 1988, 230-52). It was delivered in Allstedt on 13 July, 1524, and the audience included Duke Johann (John) of Saxony, the brother and soon to be successor of Friedrich III, the Elector of

⁷ A significant amount of Müntzer's writings have survived the ravages of time, published in a careful translation by Matheson (Müntzer 1988).



Saxony who had done so much to enable Luther's efforts. The sermon gave a skilful interpretation of Daniel 2, setting up sharp distinctions between the elect and damned, prophet and soothsayer, Christ and Antichrist, so as to call on the princes to destroy the evil oppressors and liberate the poor and oppressed. Drawing on a full range of biblical texts, Müntzer then quotes Christ: 'I am not come to bring peace, but the sword' (Matthew 10:34). 'But what is one to do with the sword? Exactly this: sweep aside those evil men who obstruct the gospel! Take them out of circulation!' But if the princes will not carry out their divinely appointed task, 'the sword will be taken from them' (Müntzer 1988, 246, 250).⁸

Even though the audience was sympathetic to some extent, they neither took up the challenge nor constrained Müntzer to any great extent. In response, Müntzer now changed tactics: instead of trying to persuade others, he began—with other leaders—to rouse his associates and comrades. The revolution now began in earnest. For Kautsky, the best expression of Müntzer's position from this time is captured in the following:

⁸ 'On Counterfeit Faith' from December of 1523 already speaks of the need 'to root out, tear down and scatter the counterfeit Christians' (Müntzer 1988, 218).

In regard to what was to be understood by 'the Gospel', he asserts: 'It is an article of our creed, and one which we wish to realise, that all things are in common [omnia sunt communia], and should be distributed as occasion requires, according to the several necessities of all. Any prince, count, or baron who, after being earnestly reminded of this truth, shall be unwilling to accept it, is to be beheaded or hanged.'

Kautsky 1895, 284⁹

Omnia sunt communia is the Latin translation of the slogan 'all things in common' in Acts 2:44 and 4:32, the core inspiration (see above) for Christian communism itself. This text captures the two dimensions of Christian communism, for not only do we find the emphasis on communistic life, but also the revolutionary drive to do away with oppressive conditions.

The Peasant Revolution, with Thomas Müntzer as a significant leader and ideologue, became deeply influential in the later Marxist tradition. The movement and its leader were claimed as revolutionary forebears, not only in the German Social-Democratic Party, but also in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). More recently, the anti-capitalist movement in parts of Europe has reclaimed this earlier history, influenced in part by the writings of Luther Blisset —later known as Wu Ming (2004).¹⁰ It was not for nothing that Kautsky could already write:

in popular consciousness [Volksbewußtsein] Müntzer was and is the most brilliant embodiment of heretical communism.

Kautsky 1895, 154

⁹ The text translated by Matheson reads: 'All things are to be held in common [*omnia sunt communia*] and distribution should be to each according to his need, as occasion arises. Any prince, count, or gentleman who refused to do this should first be given a warning, but then one should cut off his head or hang him' (Müntzer 1988, 427).

¹⁰ But it was also an ambiguous influence. This ambiguity appears above all in the inability of Germany, let alone Europe, to deal with the history of a country that has been erased from the map, although not from cultural consciousness. I speak of the German Democratic Republic, informally known as East Germany. Here above all was Müntzer remembered as a pre-modern revolutionary hero. Indeed, one can travel through parts of Thuringia and Saxony today and find many examples of Müntzer's influence. For instance, in preparation for celebrating the 500th anniversary of Müntzer's birth, significant energy was devoted to sculptures, historical markers, vast murals (especially in Bad Frankenhausen), publications and festivities. The celebration itself took place in September, 1989, only weeks before the DDR was enveloped, if not colonised, by West Germany. Müntzer and East Germany remain inseparably linked: the inability to come to terms with one influences the appreciation of the other.

The same cannot be said of revolution in Münster, in 1534-1535, which is usually seen as a violent trauma led by depraved monsters who let loose the most primal of human passions once the fetters of 'respected order' had been cast aside. This perspective has been shaped especially by those who wrote about it at the time, especially the account by Gresbeck (Mackay 2016). The catch is that Gresbeck was the one who finally betrayed the militants behind the walls in Münster, so his account is far from sympathetic.

Kautsky begs to differ, going into great detail and carefully countering the bias of the sources. A few details: the Anabaptists in question began peacefully in the context of the Swiss Reformation, based in Zurich.¹¹ Persecution from both Roman Catholic and (Lutheran) Protestants pushed them into the Tyrol, Moravia, The Netherlands and north-western Germany. Free for a while from persecution —especially in Moravia— they were able to flourish, developing a sophisticated communistic organisation that went so far as to alter the means of production. But they were not left alone for long. Intense persecution pushed them more and more towards a militant response. This was particularly so in north-western Germany and The Netherlands.

Charismatic leaders arose and they managed to gain control of the town council in the city of Münster, ousting the corrupt and worldly Roman Catholic bishop and calling on other Anabaptists to join them. Thousands heeded the call in 1534, especially from the northern provinces of The Netherlands, which was a seat of militant radicalism (not least due to the rise of the first capitalist commercial empire thereabouts). The deposed bishop called for military aid, which both Protestant and Roman Catholic princes provided. The ensuing siege was long and the defenders in Münster held out against all odds far longer than expected. The fortress fell only through treachery.

By now Kautsky's approach to revolutionary violence should be clear: it arises of necessity from opposition to and persecution by reactionary forces keen to avoid any disruption to the status quo (and their hold on power). In this context, communist movements are forced to respond. If they do gain power through a revolution, it becomes necessary to defend the revolution against counter-revolutionary forces. However, their overwhelming desire

¹¹ Kautsky develops what would later be called the 'monogenesis' position. This has become the majority approach to Anabaptist origins (Bender 1944; Friedmann 1973; Estep 1995). The alternative polygenetic approach stresses many currents that led to Münster (Klaassen 1973; Packull 1977; Seebaß 2002).



Das neue Gottesreich der Widerläufer und deren König Jan Bockhold in Münster 1534.

is to be left in peace to develop their new social, cultural and —especially with modern socialism— economic structures. In this light, Kautsky's main interest is in analysing how the Anabaptists in Münster went about the task of reorganisation, even under siege (he does so also because Münster and radical Anabaptism was used in his time by conservatives as examples of the 'evils' of communism).

Thus, Kautsky's account emphasises the disciplined communal life even under duress. He examines the limited nature of wealth redistribution (from the old order), the management of popular governance in democratic forms, the persistent enthusiasm and devotion to the cause even in the final hours, the desire for celebration even under siege and —the most contentious issue of all— the economic and social need for what has been called 'polygamy'. This is an old charge against all manner of socialist movements: the community of goods meant the communal 'use' of women by men. In reply, Kautsky points out the economic necessity in a town under siege: of about 10,000 defenders, 8,000 were women. Given that household structures were not dismantled, women were free to choose a household with a man 'in charge', and leave if it was unsuitable.

What emerges from this analysis is a profound insight: any form of socialism is a work in progress. Too often critics assume that socialism should be instituted perfectly in the blink of an eye, failing to understand that any such effort involves much trial and error. Many mistakes are made, from which much is learned. The path of constructing socialism is never direct, often needing to zigzag or even step back before stepping forward once again. This reality is even more obvious when under siege, as at Münster but repeated time and again with later efforts to construct socialism. The ferocity of opponents is usually unbounded, as the punishments meted out to the defeated defenders at Münster already show.

So also with the later history of socialist states: international blockades, economic sanctions, fostering of civil wars and anti-socialist forces within, if not outright invasions. Kautsky does not opt for the position that the Anabaptist effort at Münster was thereby distorted by the necessity of dealing with counter-revolution, preferring to emphasise that they achieved far more than could be expected in the circumstances.

I have devoted considerable attention to Kautsky's work, both because it has been quite neglected and because it is a foundational text for identifying the tradition of Christian communism. But his analysis leaves us with a question: what do we do with the inescapable biblical and theological language of all these movements? These forms of expression seem to be a far cry from the socio-economic analysis of later Marxism.

One approach follows Engels's effort to speak of a 'cloak' or 'shell': the theological language is an outer shell, appropriate at the time but not needed in later analysis. This approach remains persuasive in many circles. Another approach is more of a challenge, for it takes the theology seriously. Müntzer is simply incomprehensible without it. Ernst Bloch is usually attributed with this effort and insight, pointing out the central role of apocalyptic (or millenarian) thought in revolutionary movements. But we also find an awareness in Kautsky's account. While he occasionally speaks of the 'shell of religion [*religiöse Hülle*]', he also writes:

At the time of the Reformation, the general tone of thought was not legal, but theological, and, in consequence, the more radical a social movement, the more theological were its forms of expression.

Kautsky 1895, 221

Immediate concerns are more obviously economic: a grievance over corn prices, hoarding by the rich, service demanded by a lord, restrictions to traditional rites of access to common lands, an increase in taxes that were already beyond the means of peasants and workers. But when those local protests gain more widespread and organised support, they typically take on modes of expression that go deeper, seeking underlying causes and expressing common grievances. In the sixteenth century, the way of doing so was through theology and biblical language.

Constructing Socialism in Korea

The history of Christian communism —first identified by Kautsky— is long and varied. *Forerunners of Modern Socialism* appeared in two thick volumes, following the appearances of Christian communism up to the nineteenth century. Even so, its analysis focused only on Europe and the Americas (one late chapter). Many more examples could be added, such as small communities today in many parts of the world, Liberation Theology in Latin America from the 1960s, the recognition of the important role of radical strains of Christianity in the Cuban Communist Party, or the fascinating developments on the borders of the Russian Revolution (peasant socialism, Tolstoy and the ‘God-Builders’ among the Bolsheviks). But I prefer — for reasons that will become obvious later— to focus on two unexpected examples. The first concerns the development of a unique type of Christian communism in Korea, especially the DPRK (North Korea), while the second concerns Chinese Christian communism.

In regard to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), we need to tread warily, for much is the speculation and little is the reliable research. As Marx pointed out in a letter (27 July 1871), modern media ‘in a moment spreads inventions over the whole earth’ and fabricates ‘more myths in one day than could have formerly been done in a century’. This is particularly so with the DPRK. In this section, I initially deal with an anecdote, drawn from the writings of Kim Il Sung, the revolutionary leader and founder of the DPRK. Subsequently, I draw on some important research on the nature of religion —especially Christianity— in the DPRK today. On a personal note, I have visited the DPRK twice, the most recent being October 2018. On this visit, the engagement was more in-depth and I learnt much. One experience was to join worship at Chilgol Church, a Protestant church in Pyongyang. It is none other than the church Kim Il Sung attended as a child with his parents, who were members.



North Korean Catholics

A favoured style in DPRK writing is the anecdote, a style deployed in particular by Kim Il Sung. He tells the following story: in 1981, a certain Reverend Kim Song Rak visited the DPRK (Kim 1994, V, 323). Kim Il Sung invited the minister to a luncheon and, before the meal began, advised him to pray (see also Kim et al. 2013, 18-20). The minister was surprised, since he had not expected a communist leader to be concerned about prayer. The anecdote provides Kim Il Sung with the opportunity to make some observations about religious policies of the DPRK. He does so fully aware of the suggestion the DPRK had attempted to abolish religion. Given that the constitution stipulates freedom of religion, this means that the state constructs churches for believers and provides them with accommodation. Further, a religious department had been established recently in Kim Il Sung University. And he identifies a growing affinity between some Christians in the south and communism, based on a desire for reunification.

But a question remains: why has religious observance had declined so noticeably in the north? He suggest that the initial cause was the Fatherland Liberation War (Korean War). After United States bombers had obliterated most of the north, few if any churches and temples were left standing — as commanders of United States forces have also admitted. For example, General Curtis LeMay, head of the U.S. Strategic Air Force Command,

admitted in a 1984 interview:

So we went over there and fought the war and eventually burned down every town in North Korea anyway, some way or another, and some in South Korea, too Over a period of three years or so, we killed off —what— twenty percent of the population of Korea as direct casualties of war, or from starvation and exposure.

Kohn and Harahan 1988, 88

After running out of urban targets, U.S. bombers destroyed hydroelectric and irrigation dams, flooding farmland and destroying crops, along with any building that could be found. Churches, temples, monasteries, crucifixes, icons and Bibles were all destroyed, and the ‘believers were killed and passed on to the world beyond’ (Kim 1994, V, 324). As a consequence, religious believers came to see that God had not saved them or their places of worship. Even worse was the fact that those who claimed to be Christians had perpetrated such destruction. Korean believers came to see that prayer was useless, realising that their faith was ‘powerless in shaping the destiny of human beings’ (Kim 1994, V, 324). So, they did not rebuild churches in a hurry, for they were concerned with rebuilding a country that had been completely destroyed. Kim adds that education and culture have also produced a situation in which the younger generation simply does not believe that paradise will be attained by worshipping God, Heaven or Buddha.

Kim Il Sung is fully aware of the international representation that religion has been suppressed in the DPRK, so much so that its apparent ‘reappearance’ in the 1980s was a propaganda move by the government and thereby ‘fake’. His answer has theoretical and empirical dimensions. Theoretically, he observes that the fostering of religion and construction churches and temples was and is not a ‘conciliatory trick’, trying to inveigle religious believers into some form of a united front. Instead, he asserts that he has no intention of turning religious believers into followers of Marx or of communism, for the basic criterion is love of country and nation.

He also makes an empirical point: those who were punished were ‘criminals and traitors to the nation’, selling out the country and people. These criminal acts were ‘deviations’ in local areas and their punishments were not a standard policy by the central government. If this is not enough, Kim falls back to his personal relationships with religious figures, whether Chondoist or Christian, if not criticisms of the more doctrinaire comrades

in the Red peasant unions, who smashed windows of churches, tore down crosses and destroyed Bibles in their misdirected revolutionary zeal.

This anecdote leads into the intriguing question of the place of religion in the DPRK today. I leave aside Chondoism, the primary religion supported by the state as a revolutionary movement, for it is worthy of study in its own right. Instead, I focus on the situation for Christianity. Since reliable material is scarce indeed, I rely primarily on two articles, one by Ryu Dae Young (2006) and the other by Kim Heung Soo (2009). They provide an alternative history of Christianity in the DPRK, especially in light of renewed religious activity from the 1980s onwards: new churches have been built; a Protestant theological college in Pyongyang has been established; official and house churches have seen a rise in numbers; and church leaders have begun to engage on the international scene. The pertinence of Kim Il Sung's anecdote will become obvious soon enough.

Against various ill-founded suggestions that religion had been eradicated in the DPRK and that its renewed presence is thereby 'fake' or 'propaganda religion', Ryu and Kim propose four stages of religion: encounter with socialism (1945-1953); endeavouring to survive (1953-1972); creating a socialist Christianity (1972-1988); transformation (1988-). One aspect of the initial encounter with socialism was for a large number to flee to the south before and during the Korean War, since they tended to be professionals, business people and landlords. Their class identity would obviously mean that their assumed privileges would soon be severely curtailed. It also meant that they fostered a distinctly negative view of religion in the north (Ryu 2004, 2017).



Pyongyang, 1953

The Korean War was certainly not a boon for Christianity: the wilful destruction of almost everything in the north —so much so that everything one sees today in the DPRK has been rebuilt— seared into people's minds the connection between Christianity and United States imperialism. After the war, everyone's energy was focused on the reconstruction of society and economy. Many began to see their former faith as obsolete and useless, leaving behind their commitment and religious observance. By now, the resonance with Kim Il Sung's account (see above) is remarkable, especially since the authors do not refer to him on this point. Ryu and Kim add that the remaining Christians found themselves alone, meeting in unorganised 'house churches' or small congregations (Kim 2009, 11-12).

This period is crucial, for many pundits have tried to depict it as an 'eradication' or 'vacuum' for Christians. Ryu is keen to point out that evidence indicates that the government permitted approximately two hundred informal congregations in former centres of Christianity during the 1960s:

Contrary to the common western view, it appears that North Korean leaders exhibited toleration to Christians who were supportive of Kim Il Sung and his version of socialism. Presbyterian minister Gang Ryang Uk served as vice president of the DPRK from 1972 until his death in 1982,¹² and Kim Chang Jun, an ordained Methodist minister, became vice chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly. They were buried

in the exalted Patriots' Cemetery, and many other church leaders received national honors and medals. It appears that the government allowed the house churches in recognition of Christians' contribution to the building of the socialist nation.

Ryu 2006, 673

In this light, one may understand the Korean Christians Federation (a DPRK organisation)¹³. Originally founded in 1948, the Federation was reactivated in the 1970s. It reopened the Pyongyang theological college in 1972, publishing Bible translations and a hymnal in 1983, and oversaw the building of two new church buildings in 1988 with state funds. One of these was Chilgol church, which was not only attended by Kim Il Sung's parents and a young Kim, but was also the one I attended in October of 2018.¹⁴

¹² Gang was Kim Il Sung's mother's cousin and erstwhile leader of the Korean Christian Federation.

¹³ The other organisations are the Korean Buddhists Federation, the Korean Catholics Association, the Chondoist Association of Korea and the Korean Council of Religionists, now known as the Religious Believers Council of Korea (Kim 2017, 55).

¹⁴ See also the earlier accounts by two New Zealanders, who attended Bongsu Protestant Church and the Jangchung Roman Catholic Church (Borrie 2004; Beal 2005, 146-47).



Chilgol Protestant Church, Pyongyang

As I write, five churches now exist in Pyongyang: three Protestant, one Roman Catholic and one Russian Orthodox (completed with state funds in 2006). We should also note the increase in numbers of Christian church members, rising from approximately 5,000 in the early 1980s to more than 12,000 at the beginning of the 2000s, with 30 ministers and 300 church officials (Kim 2003, 26). What is the source of these numbers? They do not come from proselytising, which is restricted due to concerns over foreign influences, but from an active search for Christians, who earlier worshipped privately or in small house churches but have more recently been encouraged to worship openly.

Clearly, this is a rather different picture from the one usually peddled concerning Christianity in the DPRK. I suggest that it is also a unique and—for many—an unexpected form of Christian communism. Ryu and Kim admit that the context remains somewhat hostile for Christianity, at least in the forms to which many have become accustomed, but they also emphasise how Christians in the DPRK have been actively involved in society and largely support the government in its arduous task of trying to construct a Korean form of socialism. This is support in word and in deed.

For instance, the Korean Christians Federation now plays a significant role in international relations through their connections and dialogue with Christian organisations in South Korea and further abroad, especially for a

country that has so systematically been demonised and isolated. This development enabled the Federation to secure massive amounts of foreign aid during the economic difficulties —the ‘arduous march’— of the 1990s, brought on by the loss of economic connections with the USSR and Eastern Europe, as well as devastating hail storms and floods.

The Federation called on the World Council of Churches, which organised Action by Churches Together to direct relief to the DPRK. The Federation and the other religious organisations also opened up many channels with the south in order to secure aid. It is no wonder that the ‘Federation has successfully established itself as a valuable organization that works for the greater good of North Korean society’ (Ryu 2006, 674). Or as Don Borrie puts it:

With great caution and sensitivity the North Korean Christian community, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, have been able to show by example that they are fully committed to the well-being of their nation. They strongly identify with the ideals of the DPRK and sincerely believe that their Christian Faith strengthens and deepens their role as loyal citizens.

Borrie 2004

Chinese Christian Communism

Despite their proximity and the reality of socialism in power, the story of religion —especially Christianity— in Korea and China is quite different. Christianity has had a presence in China since the seventh century, when the Church of the East (often called the Nestorian Church and up to the fourteenth century the largest branch of the Christian Church) was permitted to establish churches by the Tang dynasty emperors. Its presence was intermittent, until Roman Catholicism arrived with Matteo Ricci in the sixteenth century and Protestantism —the latecomer— in the nineteenth century through the missions based in Hong Kong.

For the sake of this account, I would like to reverse the historical order and begin with Protestantism, turning later to Roman Catholicism. Protestantism's arrival in China was highly ambiguous. While the number of converts was not insignificant, Protestant Christianity was overwhelmingly seen as a 'foreign teaching', tied up closely with colonialism, 'Western' culture and the humiliation of China. The Opium Wars, the destruction of the Summer Palace in Beijing, the comprehensive looting of thousands of years of Chinese artefacts in 1900, the imposition of unfavourable economic conditions —these and more were seen as bound up with this 'foreign teaching'.

At the same time, Christianity was also regarded as profoundly destructive for another reason. It had been the core ideological position of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1837-1864), which cut a violent swathe through the cradle of Chinese civilisation in Henan province and almost brought the Qing dynasty to an end. The cultural memory of the Taping Revolution was ambivalent, to say the least. On the one hand, it appealed to peasants, miners and other labourers, giving vent to centuries of pent up hatred against landlords and oppressors. It was in this respect a genuine movement from below and is regarded as the first modern revolution in China. But it also threatened to turn China upside down, all in the name of a foreign doctrine based on the Bible. The trauma ran deep indeed: this is what such a foreign teaching could do.

It should be no surprise that waves of anti-Christian sentiment arose in China. Already in 1899-1901, the Boxer (Yihetuan) Rebellion made Christians a primary target. From 1922 to 1928, we find the 'anti-Christian movement', which advocated government control of the Christian schools and questioned the loyalty of Chinese Christians. The latter were suspected of being covert

agents of the imperialism and colonialism that had so humiliated China. For many, Christianity was itself a profound problem for China. Christians were faced with a challenge: to whom should they give their allegiance? To the unfolding Chinese revolution or to foreign imperialism and its values (Zhang 1929)? A number of Christian leaders made a clear decision to support the revolution and oppose foreign imperialism. They include Wu Leichuan, Shen Sizhuang (J. Wesley Shen), Zhu Weizhi (W.T. Chu), Zhao Zizhen (T.C. Chao) and Wu Yaozong (Y.T. Wu).



Wu Yaozong

Of these, Wu Yaozong (1893—1979) is particularly interesting and relevant, so let us focus on his work.¹⁵ In a number of influential works, he sought to deploy Marxist and theological approaches to core issues (Wu 1934, 1947, 1948, 1949). The results were threefold: an emphasis on the revolutionary dimension of Christianity; an effort to overcome the negative aspects of Christianity in the light of Christian communism; and an awareness of the different bases and common goals of both Marxism and Christianity.

The revolutionary emphasis comes to the fore in an unexpected way: with revolutionary love. For Wu, love ‘without a revolutionary spirit is not love’ (Wu 1948, 77). But what does this mean? Christian love is not a feel-good

¹⁵ The initial research for this material on Wu Yaozong was undertaken in collaboration with China Kenpa.

option, in which everyone holds hands and sings Christian songs in some massive liberal project of tolerating individual differences. Revolutionary Christian love entails a profound hatred of sin (Wu 1934, 15). In other words, this love supports class struggle, for true reconciliation is possible only after the oppressors have been defeated through revolutionary action and the liberated are able to begin developed a reconciled society (Wu 1934, 154-55). As he writes: 'We love peace, but we love justice more. We love people, but we hate sin. We have fiery wrath, but also sincere compassion. We are strict and severe, but also tolerant and open minded' (Wu 1934, 25). In Wu's context, the primary focus is liberation in China through revolution, for only then would a new world order focused on reconciliation be possible (Wu 1947).

Much of this emphasis comes through in Wu's concern with Jesus of Nazareth. He had been deeply influenced —as were the other Christian communists of the time— by Kautsky's *Foundations of Christian Communism*, which was translated into Chinese in 1932. In Wu's reading, the Sermon on the Mount is central, not least since it played an important role in his first conversion —the second was to historical materialism (Wu 1948, 95). The Jesus who appears here is without miraculous or mystical aspects. Instead, this Jesus is realistic, approachable and concerned with very human and material matters. But this is not all, for Jesus also offers a glimpse into heaven's grandeur. This brings Jesus close to the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*:

I find the personalities of Marx and Jesus alive on the paper. I can also find their similarities and differences. Both are enthusiastic with the vision of a prophet, calling for social justice and the creation of a new heaven and earth for humanity. Both have unsurpassable love and compassion; this is why they see injustice everywhere and do not put up with it.

Wu 1934, 127

The second feature of Wu Yaozong's approach is to overcome the negative dimensions of Christianity, especially the tradition from which he came. Thus, it can be a religion of 'personal spiritual stimulation', one that is idealistic, emotional, individualistic and anesthetising, all too easily providing the 'enslaving toxicants of imperialism' (Wu 1949, 228). Yet, this is not the whole story:

What Christianity advocates is freedom, equality and democracy in the purest form. Therefore, it should be progressive and revolutionary, which truly embodies the spirit

of Jesus. The mission of Christianity today is to transform society where people are treated as slaves and tools into one where the dignity of man is fully upheld, so that human beings will no longer form cliques and fight against each other because of economic interests and class opposition.

Wu 1949, 17

Third, the question arises as to whether Marxism and Christianity are essentially the same? For Wu, they approach the same goal from different paths. Materialist communism may do so through analysis of capitalism and the need for class struggle and revolution, but Christian communism does so from the core doctrines of Christianity and the practice of prayer. Wu writes:

I have realised that Christianity and materialism do not conflict with each other. Moreover, they can complement each other. The reason why I came to this conclusion is based on the basic doctrines of Christianity, especially on God and prayer. I have had a long and deep reflection upon them, offering poignant criticisms as well.

Wu 1948, 98

At the same time, Wu was always careful to indicate the differences between Marxism and Christianity. At one point, he observed:

I can accept 99% of Marxism-Leninism, but when it comes to the question of whether there is a God or not, I keep my own counsel.

quoted in Cao 2011, 139)

A question remains: was this theological effort merely accommodation to the times by a church leader keen to keep his job? Was he —as some conservative critics have suggested— sidling up the communist party for pragmatic reasons and in the process betraying his Christian faith? Not at all, for the importance of Wu Yaozong's theology lies in its connection with the crucial role he played in founding the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church (TSPM). The church was established in 1951, working closely with the government —especially Zhou Enlai— after the liberation.¹⁶ Today, the TSPM has about 38 million members and 24 theological colleges, which

¹⁶ The best work on TSPM is Wickeri's careful study (1988). Needless to say, the church has generated some misdirected international controversy, of which Tee (2012, 73-118) provides a useful summary. The successor of Wu Yaozong as chair of the movement was Ding Guangxun, or K. H. Ting (Wickeri 2007).

train in the vicinity of 2000 students per year.¹⁷ Clearly, it is a large and vibrant Christian Church, if not the largest Protestant Church in the world.

Let me provide a personal experience: close by where I work in Beijing is a large church, which was built by the local government and is one of the parishes of the TSPM. I attend one of the morning worship services—in Chinese. The liturgy is formal, the sermon scholarly, detailed and carefully prepared, and vestments are worn by the clergy. The service is always full to overflowing, keeping in mind that the church building holds about 500 worshippers at any one time. Repeat this situation five or six times on a Sunday and you have about 3000 worshippers each week. The ministerial staff number almost 20.

This experience is backed up by the doctrinal statements of TSPM, which are highly confessional. It adheres to the major creeds of the Christian tradition, holds the Bible as the supreme religious authority and fosters the Christian faith of its members. This emphasis should be no surprise, given Wu Yaozong's stress on prayer, belief and the Bible. It is perhaps more of a surprise that TSPM is officially recognised and supported by the Chinese government. Obviously, the government wants the church to be a church. But it is also involved in the construction of socialism. This emphasis becomes clear in a statement from the website of the church I attend:

Our first vision is 'WE'—in close fellowship with God, every brother and sister who is inspired by the Holy Spirit, can take part in the ministry of the church, serving our Heavenly Father as one Body. Our second vision is 'Care'—in prayer, encouragement, love and commitment, we would like to focus on what our society needs by our pastoral work.

We may see this statement in terms of the larger concern with the common good, or, as the old Confucian saying puts it, 'all under heaven is as common [*tianxia weigong*]'. On the one hand, this emphasis has been a long-standing feature of statements from the government's religious affairs department: all religions in China should be part of the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics. On the other hand, the theological and ecclesial nature of TSPM has been focused on precisely this project. How so? Through constructive rather than destructive activities.

¹⁷ The Chinese government's white paper on religion of 2018 estimates a total of 200 million adherents to all the religions in China, a significant increase but not outside normal patterns of population growth (China 2018).



Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church

I have not yet addressed the question as to why this Church is called ‘Three-Self Patriotic’. The ‘three-self’ is a Chinese shorthand for self-government, self-support and self-propagation (*zizhi, ziyang, zichuan*). Thus, it is to be an autonomous and sovereign church, free from foreign interference. Why such an emphasis? As I made clear earlier, Protestantism has a dubious history indeed in China, being too closely connected with European colonialism and China’s humiliation. Continued efforts by some foreign evangelical Protestant missionaries today certainly do not help. It follows that any church recognised by the government would be free from foreign interference.

In other words, sovereignty is absolutely crucial. But we need to be careful about the meaning of sovereignty in such a context: it arises from the anti-colonial movement of the nineteenth century and continues to unfold today (witness the Belt and Road Initiative as the latest development). Thus, sovereignty means resisting and being free from outside interference. As the local church in Haidian puts it: ‘Love your country and love your Church; Glorify God and serve the people’ is the motto and ultimate goal.

In light of this description of TSPM, some may wonder about the unregistered 'house churches' in China, which have a lower membership than the TSPM. Of late, there has been a renewed effort to direct people from these house churches into TSPM. Some of the larger and more restless house churches have been closed down by local authorities, at times in a somewhat heavy-handed matter (with reprimands from the central government). More effective are the continuing efforts by members of the TSPM and ministerial staff to encourage people from house churches into TSPM churches.

Why is this happening? We need to understand the larger context, especially the revised *Regulation on Religious Affairs* (China 2017b), which came into effect in February, 2018, and the comprehensive white paper, *China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief* (China 2018), which followed soon after in April. While these documents revise earlier legislation, they carry forward the principles outlined in the constitution of 1982. The texts of both documents are notably positive, stressing 'the goal of protecting citizens' freedom of religious belief, maintaining religious and social harmony and regulating the management of religious affairs' (China 2017a). But the core of the approach is found in article 3 of the new regulation: 'protecting the legal, stopping the illegal, containing the extreme, resisting infiltration, and combating crimes' (China 2017b). Let me say a little more about three of these items.

Protecting the legal (*baohu hefa*): the boundary between the TSPM and unregistered house churches is one of legality and illegality. The TSPM is the organisation of officially recognised Protestant Churches by the Chinese government (along with the China Christian Council). Apart from the obvious point that 'legal' also refers to the whole framework of rule of law (as in any country), 'protecting' gives the phrase a proactive sense. Thus, the government at all levels is meant to protect and support (with funds for religious buildings, for example) all legal religious activity.

Stopping the illegal (*zhizhi feifa*): the unregistered churches are illegal. Although their history may be traced back to missionary incursions in the nineteenth century, they arose in their current form during the Cultural Revolution, when all official religious activity was banned. Religious structures were reinstated in 1979, but unregistered churches have continued and grown. Through a complex and diverse history,¹⁸ some of them have become

¹⁸ Internally, the more evangelical Protestantism of the unregistered churches tends towards conservative social and political mores. Externally, their position outside the law has also fostered in some cases anti-government sentiments.

somewhat anti-communist, which is curious in the light of the history of Christian communism in relation to analogous groups. Since they are less regulated and attempt to operate under the radar, they can be subject to foreign interventions, as more conservative international Christian bodies see them as an avenue for irritating the Chinese government.

At the same time, the situation is quite complicated, with a good deal of movement between registered and unregistered churches and their leadership. Above all, there has been a renewed effort to channel people from unregistered churches into TSPM churches. This process takes place formally, with the closing down of unregistered meeting places, and informally, through personal communication and through the work of ministers in TSPM. Through all this, the TSPM with its numerical weight and government approval, often sees itself as a moderating force, tempering the extremes of the myriad temptations of the unregistered churches and guiding those influenced to a more developed sense of religious faith.

A final dimension is that the renewed religious regulations are part of a much wider push to ensure that the laws in place —the socialist rule of law— are actually enforced consistently and comprehensively. In the last five or six years, it has noticeably become impossible to pay lip service to the law and then operate on its borders or outside it. The most comprehensive anti-corruption campaign since Mao Zedong is only the negative dimension of this development, for it entails a more important positive campaign to reshape moral values at the intersection between traditional cultural values and core socialist values. The regulations on religion are part of this much wider process. Simply put, the government is keen to ensure that religious bodies work within the socialist rule of law.

The Vatican and the Chinese Government

We should also understand the significant breakthrough in Vatican-Chinese relations in this light. In 2018, the Vatican and the Chinese government signed a provisional agreement to solve a centuries-long problem. The deal stunned some international observers, who were unable to make sense of what happened. But it should not surprise us. In fact, I would like to propose that the Chinese approach to Christianity might offer some alternative and viable options for moribund churches in Western Europe. More of that later, for now a few basic facts are needed.



The agreement was signed on 22 September, 2018, after some years of careful negotiation. Its essence was that the Vatican would recognise bishops appointed by the Chinese government, while the government would recognise bishops appointed by the Vatican. It is a provisional agreement, since it is envisioned that it will be improved over time as the effort to unite the two Roman Catholic Churches in China develops.

A long history lies behind the agreement, dating back some three centuries to the ‘Chinese Rites Controversy’, in which some advocated adapting to Chinese conditions and culture and some opposed such developments. But the core was an old problem indeed: who should appoint bishops. Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has for century upon century negotiated different arrangements with states, at times with more success

and at times with less. For complex historical reasons, the situation in China (especially after Liberation in 1949) had developed into a situation in which the government recognised the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which is under the direction of the government's department of religious affairs. The Vatican had never recognised this organisation, but it had also never condemned it as schismatic. On the other hand, there has been the unofficial Roman Catholic Church in China, which was recognised by the Vatican but not the government.

All this has now changed with the agreement of 2018. From the Chinese government's perspective, it may be seen as part of the larger project to ensure that all religious organisations operate within the rule of law and work together for the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics. From the Vatican's perspective, the primary motivation is theological and pastoral, with a concern to include all Roman Catholics within the church, but it obviously also has political dimensions.

Let us stay with the church's reading of the situation. Three statements are important. The first comes from a 2016 interview with Pope Francis, in which he said:

It has been said many times and my response has always been that, if anything, it is the communists who think like Christians. Christ spoke of a society where the poor, the weak and the marginalized have the right to decide. Not demagogues, not Barabbas, but the people, the poor, whether they have faith in a transcendent God or not. It is they who must help to achieve equality and freedom.

Pope Francis 2016

The observation has a much longer history, which includes Francis's affiliation with Latin American Liberation Theology, the long struggle within the church between conservative and progressive elements, but above all the tradition of Roman Catholic Social Teaching. Tellingly, this teaching was first formulated in an 1891 encyclical called *Rerum Novarum* and subtitled 'On Capital and Labour'. Issued by Pope Leo XIII, it was a response to the growing appeal of socialism, as was its follow-up in the context of the Great Depression, *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931. Both documents sought to distance themselves from both socialism and capitalism, stressing a distinct tradition in the Church that was beholden to neither.

The question arises as to how Pope Francis can make a connection between communism and Christianity, a connection that resonates with the position

of Wu Yaozong (see above). Context is the key. While modern socialism in its early phase was deeply anti-clerical, socialism today is a rather different reality. Part of this reality a century of communist parties in power throughout the world, but it also includes developments in Christian communism. I have touched on a number of these developments, with a focus on the DPRK and especially China. In this different context, Francis is able to make the connection.

The second statement comes from an insightful piece by Massimo Faggioli, who teaches at Villanova University in the United States. After explaining the historical, pastoral and theological reasons for the China-Vatican agreement, Faggioli writes:

The use of Catholicism as an ideological surrogate for Western ideologies is not new, but is especially at odds with Pope Francis' vision of Catholicism, and it makes it impossible to understand this important moment in the relations between the Vatican and China.

Faggioli 2018)

Too often has Roman Catholicism (I would add, Christianity in all its forms) been used as an ideological prop or surrogate for Western ideologies. The phrasing is crucial, for it indicates that the Church's traditions and theological expressions have a much longer history that at best sit ill with the more recent developments of European liberalism. With Francis setting the agenda, the Roman Catholic Church has once again been extracting itself from a deal with the devil.

All of this leads to the third statement:

Right now, those who are best implementing the social doctrine of the Church are the Chinese ... They seek the common good, subordinating things to the general good ... The dignity of the person is defended ... Liberal thought has liquidated the concept of the common good, not even wanting to take it into account, asserting that it is an empty idea, without any interest. By contrast, the Chinese focus on work and the common good.

quoted in Álvarez 2018

Much sharper and focused than the other two statements, this one comes from Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Vatican's Academy of Social Sciences, who has been involved in the Vatican's negotiations with the Chinese government. Needless to say, it generated some controversy, but Sorondo has made it quite clear that the critics are a minority. They

include the retired Cardinal Zen from Hong Kong and some bishops from the Taiwan region, but these criticisms obviously arise from their loss of influence as a consequence of the agreement.

Sorondo's point is clear: socialism with Chinese characteristics focuses on the common good, work and human dignity. By contrast, liberalism has dispensed with any pretence to such matters. In relation to the Church's social teaching, Chinese socialism is much closer.

Sinification of Christianity for the West

From Wu Yaozong to Bishop Sorondo, from the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church to the China-Vatican agreement, a distinct shift is underway. Is it possible that this type of sinification of Christianity offers some pointers for Western Christianity?¹⁹ In Western Europe and its outposts (like Australia, New Zealand and even North America), Christianity's decline continues. Regular observance keeps dropping, the churches are virtually empty, being either sold off or kept as cultural relics. By contrast, the registered churches in China keep growing. The TSPM has tens of millions of members and keeps expanding, while the recently united Roman Catholic Church is also sizeable. Minsters and priests are in short supply, hardly keeping up with the needs of congregations; hundreds of applicants to theological colleges have to be turned away each year, since the colleges are already full. Something is clearly working in a Chinese context.

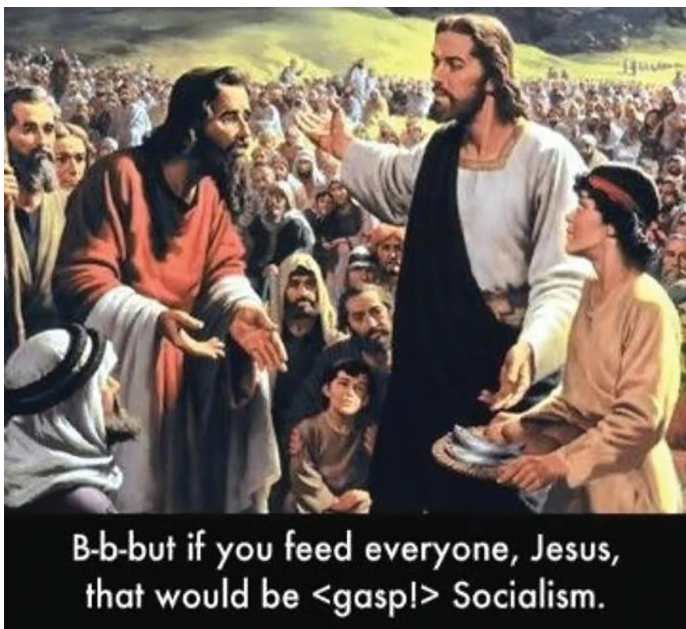
Let me suggest at least two possible lessons. First, there is the emphasis on the common good, which has a dual dimension in Chinese culture. The long Confucian tradition plays a role, especially the four-character saying, 'everything under heaven is as common'. The individual is not neglected, but is constituted through the collective. Further, a central Confucian virtue is *ren*, which is often translated as 'benevolence'. However, this translation does not really capture the core meaning of the Chinese character (仁), which has two parts: one designates a person and the other the number 2. So a better translation is 'two-person mindedness'. One thinks of the other first, and when one has two, one has many.

The connections with Marxism should be obvious, for communism has its focus on what is in common. In a Chinese context the two traditions have

¹⁹ This suggestion comes from Mike Quille, Editor of Culture Matters, which I have sought to elaborate with some historical and theological background.

engaged with one another, at times opposed and more recently in an ever greater symbiosis, so that sinified Marxism is the result, in which Marxism has become an integral part of Chinese culture. As for Christianity in China, this context has brought to the forefront a long-held dimension of Christianity that has often been lost in the West: Christianity too has a focus on the common good. Practically, this means that the churches see as a core mission the need to focus on pastoral care, in terms of social programs, pastoral care, and the wellbeing of society as a whole. Wu Yaozong, Pope Francis and Bishop Sorondo obviously see this emphasis as crucial.

The second lesson is that Christianity may become part of the construction of socialism. This may seem like a more difficult prospect —intellectually and practically— for those who live in countries where the communist party has never been in power. But it is a reality in China, and even in the DPRK. This is not to say that the churches should betray their basic positions. As Wu Yaozong already made clear, and as the strongly confessional nature of the TSPM and the pastoral and theological positions of the current Pope of the Roman Catholic Church also indicate, this approach arises from within the Church's own traditions. The origins may differ from modern socialism, but the goal is very similar.



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Publications

Recent publications from **Culture Matters**, available from <http://www.culturematters.org.uk/index.php/shop-support/our-publications>

The Trouble with Monsters by Christopher Norris

Christopher Norris's new collection of political poems takes aim at some monsters of our present bad times, among them Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg, Theresa May, George Osborne, Benjamin Netanyahu, and assorted hangers-on. The satire is unsparing and the dominant tone one of anger mixed with sorrow, compassion and a vivid sense of the evils and suffering brought about by the corruptions of political office.

The influence of Brecht is visible throughout, as is that of W.H. Auden's mordant verse-commentary on politics and culture in the 1930s, along with the great eighteenth-century verse-satirists Dryden, Pope and Swift. Norris leaves the reader in no doubt that we now face a global, European and domestic neo-fascist resurgence.

One of These Dead Places by Jane Burn

One of the voices rarely heard in modern poetry is that of working-class women, in terms of both the impact of major historical events on their identity, health and happiness, as well as their day-to-day experiences of work, men and motherhood.

In this remarkable, powerful collection, Jane Burn has told her story and more, in a series of poems which are both personal and political. She has also illustrated the poems with a beautifully imaginative series of illustrations, which add depth and detail to the collection.

This is a vital collection for our time. Are things worse than the 80s? Have a read, then decide —you won't be disappointed. As one of the titles says: these poems are 'Sentences to Survive In'.

Ruses and Fuses by Fran Lock and Steev Burgess

Fran takes us to the rebellious, inspiring heart of English dissent with her portrayals of Levellers and Diggers such as Gerard Winstanley and Ned Ludd, and their fight with authorities over property rights. She also writes of witches, working-class suffragettes, and the unsung, unlovable labours of working-class women. Her poetry conflates historical detail and present crisis to highlight both the continuation of violence against women, and the continuum of solidarity and sisterhood that exists despite this abuse.

As with her first collection, **Ruses and Fuses** is adorned with the poignant, sensitive collages of Steev Burgess. Together, text and image rail powerfully against neoliberal capitalism and its globalised threat to the livelihoods, health and happiness of working-class people.

From Aberfan t Grenfell by Mike Jenkins and Alan Perry

From Aberfan t Grenfell shows that Mike Jenkins's sublime skills in dialect poetry continue to shine as brightly as ever, as he evokes a bravura array of voices from his Merthyr bro. Using his work to give speech to people without power, Jenkins's poetry dramatizes the characters and struggles of a community—but also a community's surviving capacity to raise its voices against the power-structures which cause it to suffer. Compassionate and incisive in equal measure, **From Aberfan t Grenfell** is required reading in an era of austerity.

—**Professor Matthew Jarvis**, Anthony Dyson Fellow in Poetry,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David

A Third Colour by Alan Dunnett and Alix Emery

Through the sheen of vivid, simple narratives and vignettes, we glimpse more disturbing, ambivalent themes of alienation, dislocation and suffering, the psychological fallout of anxiety in modern capitalist culture.

A Third Colour is a book of visionary, poetic parables and dystopian, uneasy images. It is a principled and skilful expression of, and protest against, the world we live in.

We Will Be Free!
The Bread and Roses Poetry Award Anthology 2018
edited by Mike Quille, with an Introduction by Len McCluskey

The poems all reflected the fact that we find ourselves in such bleak and alienating times —making this type of competition more crucial than ever. And this year we had a particularly healthy number of entries from women and from young people —again, a reflection of deep, unvoiced feelings from those hardest hit, by today's increasingly rampant inequality.

—**Mary Sayer**, a judge of the Bread and Roses Poetry Award

We must take heart from the response in this competition, as well as more widely, that the working class are continuing their fight for justice, equality, and freedom —be it the economic struggle on the picket line, the political struggle through the ballot box, and the cultural struggle through poetry, the arts generally, and other cultural activities.

Society cannot be changed solely from the top, even with a progressive Labour government. It needs strong unions, not an add-on to government but to assist in building the foundations of a more just and equal country. None of this can be done without socialist culture policies —for the many, not the few.

—**Len McCluskey**, General Secretary, Unite

Power Play by Mair De-Gare Pitt, with images by Jill Powell

From the very first poem this collection focuses on the human and, through its brilliant lyricism, elevates the experiences it describes into something like beauty. The collection understands that the real way to political change is by moving people, by getting hold of their hearts, and by writing memorably, which the poems do again and again.

This collection is wonderfully illustrated by Jill Powell, the images and poems now endorsing each other, now opening each other up to new possibilities of meaning.

I'd say this collection is important because it's political. But I'll say more. It's important if you're human.

—**Jonathan Edwards**

arise! by Paul Summers

This pamphlet-length poem celebrates the rich heritage and culture of mining communities, which is expressed so vibrantly and colourfully in the marches, the banners, the music and the speeches at the Durham Miners' Gala. It invokes the collective and co-operative spirit of past generations of men and women who worked and struggled so hard to survive, to build their union, and to organise politically to fight for a better world.

Arise! also celebrates the new, resurgent spirit in the Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn, and the renewal of support for socialist solutions to the country's growing economic and social problems.

It's wonderful to see the proud history of the Durham Miners' Gala represented in this powerful poem. Paul Summers has managed to capture the spirit of the Miners' Gala and its central place in our movement's mission to achieve 'victory for the many, and not the few'.

—Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party

10% of the proceeds of sales of this book will go to the Durham Miners' Association Redhills Appeal, to help turn Redhills into a cultural hub for the area

The Combination by Peter Raynard

Peter Raynard has written a remarkable new long poem to mark the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth, and the 170th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto.

Like the Manifesto, it protests the injustice and exploitation which is integral to capitalism, and the growing gap between capitalism's productive potential and the unequal distribution of its benefits. And like that Manifesto, it is a dynamic and powerful piece of writing—pungent, oppositional and unsettling.

This poetic coupling is something else. It's a re-appropriation, a reclamation, a making sing. It's bolshie (yes, in every sense), provocative and poignant too. It takes the Manifesto back from all that is dead, dry and terminally obfuscated. It's a reminder of reality, the flesh on the theory. It gives Marx to those of us who need him most. Not just relevant, but urgent. Not just angry, but hopeful.

—Fran Lock

Poetry on the Picket Line
an anthology edited by Grim Chip and Mike Quille

Poetry with principles. Poetry with a point. Poetry on the picket line. That's where it should be.

—Billy Bragg

Poetry on the Picket Line sounds a bit unlikely, but it works. It's a squad of writers prepared to turn up on picket lines and read poetry. Something a bit different, and it usually goes down well.

The poets do what it says on the tin. They turn up at pickets and demos and read poems—with a mic, without a mic, through a bullhorn, whatever. Pickets are generally pretty pleased and surprised to see them. They appreciate the support, and some of them even appreciate the poetry!

It matters because it brings poetry onto picket lines and picket lines into poetry. Real people connecting with real poetry in the real world. That's got to be a good thing!

This anthology of poems from PotPL is sponsored by trade unions: PCS, RMT and TUC (London, East and South East). All proceeds from the sale of this book will go into strike funds.

On Fighting On!
The Bread and Roses Poetry Anthology 2017

An anthology of poems from the Bread and Roses Poetry Award 2017, sponsored by Unite.

We sponsored the first Bread and Roses Poetry Award because we believe that our members, and working people generally, have an equal right to join in and enjoy all the arts, and other cultural activities. We believe we should be able to afford them, get to them, and enjoy them, and that art should seek to engage with all sections of the community. Working-class people face a continual cultural struggle to defend our cultural commons, to keep cultural activities open to the many, not the few.

—Len McCluskey, General Secretary of Unite

The Earth and the Stars in the Palm of Our Hand

by Fred Voss

I want to change the world, I want to strike the spark or kick the pebble that will start the fire or the avalanche that will change the world a little.

—Fred Voss

Fred Voss has been a metalworker in workshops in Long Beach, California for over 30 years. His poems are set in the world of work —the workers and bosses in the machine shop where he works, the social usefulness of the products they make, the alienation aggression and camaraderie of the workplace and the relationship of work to the wider world. The poems sympathetically criticise that world, but also envision a better, fairer world, in and out of the workplace.

Everyone can see the growing inequality, the precarious and low paid nature of employment, the housing crisis in our cities, the divisions and inequalities between social classes, the problems of obesity, drink and drugs, and the sheer everyday struggle to pay the bills for many working people.

In this situation, Fred Voss is like a prophet. He is warning us of the consequences of the way we live, he is telling truth to power, and he is inspiring us with a positive vision of a possible—and desirable—socialist future.

—Len McCluskey, General Secretary of Unite

Muses and Bruises by Fran Lock and Steev Burgess

Fran Lock's socialist poetry weaves psychological insight and social awareness into themes of poverty, mental health problems, sexual abuse, domestic violence and political struggle. It is vivid, lavish and punchy, combining a deep sense of anger and injustice with vulnerable empathy and compassion.

The fragmented yet coherent collages of Steev Burgess complement and enhance those meanings perfectly. His images dance with the poems, singing together about muses and bruises, fantasy and reality —grind and grime with a lick of glitter.

The Things Our Hands Once Stood For by Martin Hayes

Martin Hayes is the only British poet who writes consistently and seriously about work, and about the insanity of a society where employees are seen merely as mere ‘hands’ to be employed and to make money for their employer.

Work is what most of us have to do, and the workplace is where most of us spend a large part of our lives. Work should be about creatively transforming the world around us to meet all our needs, but it isn’t. For the many, work is hard, precarious, poorly paid, unsatisfying and alienating, and constantly threatened by automation. Workers ‘never get to share in its profits/but always seem to get to share/in its losses’. Why? Because of the few who own their labour ‘squeezing away at people’s lives like they were plastic cups’.

The clear message of his poetry is that those who do the work should own, control, and benefit fully from it. They should, in the last words of the last poem, ‘start the revolution that will change everything’, and show that ‘all of our fingertips combined/might just be the fingertips/that keep us and this Universe/stitched together’.

Lugalbanda —Lover of the Seed by Doug Nicholls

Produced as a fundraiser for the Free Ocalan campaign, this new version of a 5,000 year old poem speaks out afresh to our times, with lyrical skill and political relevance.

Lugalbanda, a heroic figure from the Sumerian era, the first civilisation to invent writing, the wheel, law, architecture and irrigation, personifies the amazing creative force at the heart of human culture.

At a time when neoliberal capitalism and its associated ideologies seek to deny and destroy the sense of human agency and labour as the source of all social change, and of all our cultural and material wealth, **Lugalbanda** reminds us of our deepest, most distinctive social and creative natures, our stupendous power to create and destroy, and the joys of communication and social interaction.

Slave Songs and Symphonies

by David Betteridge and Bob Starrett

Slave Songs and Symphonies is an ambitious, beautifully crafted collection of poems, images and epigraphs. It's about human history, progressive art and music, campaigns for political freedom, social justice and peace. Above all it's about the class and cultural struggle of workers 'by hand and by brain' to regain control and ownership of the fruits of their labour.

David Betteridge's poems are leftist, lyrical, and learned, infused with sadness and compassion for the sufferings of our class, the working class. They are also inspired by visionary hope, and a strong belief that our class-divided society and culture can be transformed by radical politics and good art —and by radical art and good politics.

Bob Starrett's drawings are much more than illustrations. They dance with the poems, commenting on them as well as illustrating them. They are like Goya's drawings in their dark, ink-black truthfulness and their intimate knowledge of suffering and Blake's 'mental fight'. Like the poems, they express and resolve the struggles they depict.

Slave Songs and Symphonies tells the story of how slave songs become symphonies —and helps makes it happen. It is not just about class and cultural struggle —it is class and cultural struggle.



Roland Boer is a distinguished overseas research professor at Renmin University of China, Beijing, and research professor at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Among numerous works on Marxism, religion and philosophy, he has published the five-volume work, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth* (2007-14). In 2014 he was awarded the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize. He has also published *Lenin, Religion, and Theology* (2013) and is director of the 'Socialism in Power' international research project.

