

**Marxist-Christian Dialogue**

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith

First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, Utah

**October 11, 2009**

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I had a dream the other night, last week in fact. It's still fresh in my mind, and although I never share this kind of stuff publicly, it may be worth noting. I dreamt that the identity of my real father had been concealed, and that the time had come for me to finally realize who my biological father actually was. Following a very complicated meeting with obvious dignitaries whom I could not identify other than realizing in my dream that these were very important people and I was truly fearful, it was finally disclosed that my real father was Ronald Reagan. Is there a therapist in the house?

I think these recessionary times are weighing on me more than I'd like to admit. I had the dream following a brilliant theatrical production *Mary and I* saw while in Ashland, OR last week. The play, *Paradise Lost* by Clifford Odets was written more than 60 years ago, and was about a middle class Jewish family in New York who lost everything during the Great Depression. One of their three children got deathly ill, the father lost his job, the family became homeless, there was no safety net, and indeed, their modest paradise consisting of home, job, family and friends, was decimated by an economy that just crumbled.

The characters in the play raise many questions: What is the solution? Where do we go from here? What can we do? How can this possibly happen? How can good people be stripped of their dignity? But the father, Leo Gordon, ends the play with a monologue in which he reveals great optimism for our nation, saying it was just morning in America.

The third act ends in 1935 and it was difficult to watch the barren stage because by this point all the furniture had been re-possessed and they were about to leave their home for the unpredictable homeless life when Leo proclaims (as an apologist for America) that it was early yet in our nation. It was just morning. He saw a great future ahead, not only of prosperity but a future that held a basic care and concern for all humanity.

I believe that everyone in the audience felt the same shame I felt as we realized that time in America had progressed beyond the morning. It is 2009, and the millions of home foreclosures, the fifty million Americans without health care, the unemployment rate and loss of dignity impacting our family and neighbors, comprises a stunning reality that it is not a matter of needing more time to learn and mature and grow a soul so we understand that it's not only about us; that others matter, too. I was not alone in my sorrow because when the house lights went on and the actors bowed, there was not a dry eye in the audience. The tears were not just for the Gordons who lost their paradise in 1935, but we wept for our own lost souls today. The script was as fresh as though it had been written just the day

before. The tragedy of our cultural excess and neglect of others has roared back to haunt us once again.

In the play, every reference to unions protecting workers, every aspiration for a just society, every hint of sharing the burden that had crippled fellow Americans was refuted with great disdain as being either communist or socialist. These are the same ignorant labels that keep pain and suffering alive in America today. Although sometimes we get a little more specific now, showing contempt not just for socialism generally but for "French Socialism" in particular.

It would be pointless and foolish to blame any one person for our situation today, but (obviously) Ronald Reagan has entered my consciousness. Deregulation, the free market, unbridled capitalism, are all symptoms of a disease writ large by Reagan 25 years ago and maintained by both Clinton and the Bushes. It all boils down to the question of whether or not human beings need controls and checks and regulators to curb their enthusiasm about wealth and their proclivity to excess. Can we trust ourselves to be good in the way our religious teachings bid us to have compassion and empathy.

When Jesus said in the beatitudes: "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth," he was really affirming that we gain the world through meekness rather than self-assertion. And this was so noteworthy even back then because it contradicted the human way of thinking.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." This is overt socialism. And it didn't get Jesus too far, either.

It is time for our nation to revisit socialism without the histrionics. It is time for our nation to revisit the moral responsibility we have for one another. It is time for our nation to revisit the costs of our excess...in human terms and even in monetary ways as we saddle the next generations with enormous debts because we refuse to pay a nickel more in capital gains or any tax for that matter. Our educational system is in shambles, the number of children born into poverty is soaring, providing health care for human beings is ignored because we prefer to see poverty as a function of behavior rather than injustice. As a nation we have always (culturally) been mighty quick to blame the victim. Self interest has blinded us to the real need of extending ourselves to others, either through bringing home a little less in our pay checks to balance the deficit, or by becoming Good Samaritans where we stop to help the stranger who has met with hard times.

We have not learned a thing from the Great Depression when ostensibly it was still the morning hour. I am dismayed beyond belief that we have still not learned a thing from this great recession of today. It's time to revisit, if not socialism, then at least the roots of Christianity. But can they really be distinguished from each other?

In the 1960's one of the more phenomenal explorations that transpired fell under the rubric of Marxist-Christian Dialogues. This was the time when Vatican II opened the windows to let in the fresh breezes of new thinking. Pope John XXIII welcomed dialogue not only with Marxists but with all forms of atheism. I can just see him standing on the balcony facing the Piazza San Pietro in Vatican Square saying, "bring it on." In Latin, of course.

It was Pope John XXIII who cited Marx's famous declaration: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." The Pope said, yeah, bring it on..let's change things around here. And still under his humane influence after he died, the World Council of Churches meeting in Geneva in 1966 affirmed that "Christianity remains a discipline which aims at not a theoretical system of truth but action in human society." This could be the mission statement of any Unitarian Church in the world. Such was the theological climate at that time, but even then, William Saffire...the late William Saffire, a self-proclaimed good catholic, vigorously criticized the Pope as being "soft on Communism."

**Action in human society**, whether espoused by Marx or Christ, is short-hand for let the revolution begin. And Christ was the greater revolutionary of the two. But how is action in human society interpreted by the wealthy, by those in power, by those who profess that material comfort reflects God's favor?

Once intelligent and thinking Christians got over the Marxist insults of religion being the opiate of the masses, and realized that both sides wanted to focus on the rights of the poor and needy, the hungry and hopeless, to end exploitation and the forces of alienation, then Christianity stopped becoming the preserve of an exclusive truth and allowed for real dialogue to pursue finding solutions to human problems.

What brought Marxist and Christians to the table; those atheists meeting with the self-righteous Godly people? It was a mutual concern for human problems, and the problems were identified in the same way by both sides. The dialogue worked effectively because Marxist philosophers were attempting to understand what Christianity could offer Marxism. Even Fidel Castro proclaimed: Christianity has a lot more in common with Marxism than with capitalism." We know he's right.

Jurgen Moltman, one of the brilliant German theologians of the 60's, called it a Theology of Hope. And what he tried to explain was a new understanding of the kingdom of God where the future is shaped by the action of humanity rather than by a sovereign God. The theology of hope does not differ that much from the audacity of hope. But hope filled the breast of Leo Gordon in *Paradise Lost* in 1935...that someday we might "get it." But hope today continues to teeter on a precarious tightrope, and has suffered a severe setback in our nation recoiling from universal health coverage and its insistence that undocumented workers in this nation are sub-human.

As exciting as Marxist-Christian dialogue was back in the 60's, it basically fell apart in roughly 1968. Each side lost credibility and mistrust mounted when Russia invaded Czechoslovakia and the United States escalated the war in Vietnam. Both sides fell short in the service of humanity.

These days Christianity kind of gets involved in social matters, but it's still a far cry from where it needs to be or where it was some 45 years ago. The Catholic Church, for example, has set its sites these days on what is called "Turbo-Capitalism." The message is that global capitalism has raced off the moral rails and that justice for the weak has been ignored and markets need to be regulated.

The major spokesman is the archbishop of Munich – and you'll love this: His name is Marx. Reinhold Marx has just published a book with the brilliant title: "Das Kapital." The Germans have a different sense of humor, but I think it's a brilliant marketing technique because everyone here will remember the archbishop Marx who has just written "Das Kapital." Basically the book calls for ethical reform in economic thinking. That is: cooperation among nations and a vibrant welfare state that reflects the love-thy-neighbor imperatives of Christian social thought.

As far as I'm concerned it's milk-toast, lacking the radical edge that Jesus would have wanted. But let me add a post script. Marx is the archbishop who replaced Ratzinger in Germany when Ratzinger left for the Vatican and eventually became Pope Benedict XVI. Ratzinger, as we know, was extremely powerful in Rome. This is Ratzinger's story: You see, Marxist-Christian dialogue did not die completely but assumed a new iteration in Latin America known as Liberation Theology. The mission of liberation theology is basic and crystal clear: To bring justice to the poor and oppressed, particularly through political activism. (Catholic clergy in Latin America surely knew their Marx – the old Marx). Capitalism is regarded as the exploitation of the poor by the rich, and thus the principles of Jesus need to be reinstated. Jesus was poor, advocated for the poor, and wanted to change the hearts of greed to hearts of compassion. Liberation Theology in Latin America is also referred to as Christian Socialism, which drove folks like Ratzinger crazy.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, the beloved liberation prelate of El Salvador was assassinated by the army in 1980. He was succeeded by his good friend Arturo Rivera who continued bravely in the same line of advocating for the poor. When Rivera died, Ratzinger made the appointment of the next archbishop, Fernando Lacalle. To cut to the chase, LaCalle was made honorary brigadier general of El Salvador's armed forces. Where once a pope was called "soft on communism," we now have a pope who has lost every shred of Christian ethics, and Jesus – the ever-malleable Jesus returns to his throne at the right hand of God to smile upon the wealthy, the powerful, and the armed forces who maintain the system of oppression.

In 1925 before the Great Depression hit, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*. It was, of course, about many things, including a climate of unprecedented levels of prosperity during those roaring 20's. Although the protagonist, Nick Carraway,

idolized the glamour of the day (who wouldn't), he felt uncomfortable with the unrestrained materialism and moral bankruptcy of that era. Fitzgerald described the hubris and greed and heedlessness of the wealthy as those who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or vast carelessness and let other people clean up the mess they made."

The banking crisis of today was pretty much man-made: Greed leading to flawed incentives unchecked by regulatory structures and oversight. And when the mess was made, smashed the economy and peoples lives into pieces, the \$700billion bailout cleaned it all up.

The immediate problems of the world: hunger, illiteracy, pollution, energy, demand an honest reckoning of what we are doing and what our responsibilities are. What does it mean to live in an emerging pluralistic society? What does it mean that we are causing environmental devastation? What does it all mean and we better learn quickly because it is no longer the morning hour.

We don't need Marxist-Christian dialogues today. I'd settle for Democratic-Republican dialogues. I'd like to see Western-Islamic dialogue. How about Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, all held not through the prisons of ideology, but the need to pursue a new truth a new way to save the world. I'd like to see real dialogue in Copenhagen – our last chance in all likelihood to save the planet.

And so we all wept as the play ended and Leo Gordon stood like a naïve fool begging us to have hope. We fully understood that we have let paradise slip though our fingers, and hope alone won't restore us to a sane world marked by justice. I think it's going to take a little bit of Marx, a little bit of Jesus, and a lot from us, to come to our senses and realize it is not all about us. It's about our neighbor and our children and our planet and our responsibility that the inherent worth and dignity of every person is fully realized. It's all a mix of economics, politics, and ethics. It's about the blatant truth that all the world's religious prophets have tried to make us understand: We're all workers in the same vineyard. The burdens we carry must be borne collectively.