

Helmut Gollwitzer's Lessons for Theology from Encounter with the Marxist Criticism of Religion

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Part 1 (April 26, 2011)

I've been slowly working my way through Helmut Gollwitzer's [*The Christian Faith and the Marxist Criticism of Religion*](#) (Scribner, 1970), over the past while. I did one [post on it previously](#). I've enjoyed the read as a whole, but the last chapter stopped me in my tracks. For in this chapter, entitled "Christian Encounter with Atheism," Gollwitzer teases out the lessons that theology ought to learn from an engagement with the Marxist criticism of religion. So, I've decided to put together an eight-part miniseries on this chapter, highlighting the six points Gollwitzer makes, along with a treatment of his introductory remarks and his conclusion – which provide a context for the six points.

Kait Dugan recently teased me, saying - in a clearly derogatory manner - that my blog is "largely occupied with announcements and book excerpts." Perhaps this mini-series will go some way in answering her imprecations.

Gollwitzer argues that Marxism's atheism and its Messianism (utopianism) are mutually implicating. Messianism provides a way of overcoming the crisis opened by atheism, and atheism is confirmed by that overcoming insofar as it demonstrates that no God is necessary for humanity's salvation. So Gollwitzer:

[T]he one confirms the other: because God does not exist, a world must be constructed, first in thought, and then in reality, in which man does not need God, and so no longer regrets God's non-existence... On the other hand: because this man has now decided to see his dignity in not requiring God, and can come to fulfillment without God, therefore he must also show that God does not exist (146).

What should be the Christian response to this constellation of issues? In what way should Christianity go about engaging with Marxism or, we might say more simply in a more contemporary North American context, atheistic secularism [Ed. note: Gollwitzer's text is interesting as it stands, but don't get hung up on his reference to Marxism of Communism – his discussion applies far more broadly]? Gollwitzer notes that the mere existence of a truly Christian community raises a question within such a society as a phenomena for which there is no explanation, undermining that society's theoretical certainty about itself.

However, there is much more to say about this encounter, for it is an encounter that equally raises question to the Christian community about the truth of its existence. I leave you with the following length (to say the least!) quote. As always, bold is me (underlining as well, for even more emphasis):

[Christianity] must win from its faith the inner freedom to **judge its own history relentlessly** under the accusations of Communism, **without thereby losing its glad confidence in its message**, without prejudice and without anger admitting the Communists to the brotherhood in the solidarity of the godless, without thereby losing its

freedom and courage to make clear and emphatic contradiction.

Above all, **this community will have to abstain from the indignation which is widely felt today in Church circles, as if atheism were a new-fangled and vicious invention of the Communists. The original thing in it is merely that here atheism is taken seriously, whereas the Church and its position in society have long depended on the fact that the world around it is indeed atheist, but would not wish to do without its Christian decoration**... But now, on the contrary, the consequences are drawn from the already long-present atheism of natural scientists, historians, psychologists and sociologist, from the materialism of the capitalist economy, **from Christianity's lack of influence on manufacture, commerce, and politics**, from the schizophrenic division of man into a weekday heathen and a Sunday Christian, **from the failure to implement Christian social doctrines (the gulf between white and coloured peoples, not bridged, but rather deepened by Christianity, the merely verbal reservations about the whole capitalist development)**... This shatters the former feeling of security of the church, which had ever and again **comforted itself with the secure anchorage of Christian morals among the people, and with the respect for Christianity at least as a cultural and sentimental factor among those who were not practising [sic] Christians**, and which therefore made confident claim to respect and privilege. Communism is without respect for what merely exists; it suspects that it might already belong to the past, and allows it to continue in existence only when it can prove its right to do so. This disrespectful and drastic questioning arouses alarm and indignation in the Church. **This is a reaction of the ecclesiastical 'flesh'**... The spiritual reaction against it must consist in this, **that the Church should not only admit, but inwardly accept the fact that this is how things stand**, that Christianity is no longer taboo, but that every conventional status and reputation has been taken from it... **The Church must take in the fact that the world no longer takes it from granted. But by the fact of ceasing to do so, the world is taking the Church with new seriousness – or at least there is given the possibility that it will take it with new seriousness.** The Church can only inwardly accept this situation, if it understands the burden of being called in question by the world around it as **God's question addressed to it**, as the question addressed to it in judgment and grace by its own Lord, who wishes thereby to revive it (148-50).

Part 2

(April 27, 2011)

For Gollwitzer, the Marxist criticism of religion sets six tasks for theology. The **first** of these tasks is to discern whether and to what extent the Marxist criticism of Christianity is on to something. So Gollwitzer:

[T]his criticism of religion makes us aware of a transition which is repeatedly to be observed in the various epochs of Church history – a transition from a critical challenging of the existing order by the Christian message to an ideological support of the existing order (151).

In other words, the Marxist criticism of Christianity, falling as it does under a broader criticism of religion in general, serves to reveal the way in which the church has lost its prophetic voice. Rather than confronting the powers and injustices of this world, the church all too often becomes the opiate of the masses. A true, living church can never be this, but a dead church always is. Along these same lines, the Marxist criticism of religion also

draws our attention to the singular limitation of most Christian movements of renewal...they limit the thrust of their attack and challenge to the sphere of the private person, remain socially conservative, **attacking the heathenism of individuals, but not of institutions**...the legitimate application of the gospel to the individual...runs in fact precisely and inevitably the risk of encouraging the illegitimate modes of piety, a selfish religious desire for salvation, a flight from the world, and a fatalistic submission and the like (ibid; bold is mine).

These days, this is perhaps especially truth in the North American context, whose Christianity has been decisively shaped by ‘great awakenings’ and revivals, and whose most pervasive religious impulse seems to be the desire for individual salvation - which translates quite easily, I might add, into a desperate craving for the assurance of political or social safety. Of course, all these limitations and dangerous impulses fed into the Marxist criticism of religion:

The Marxist accusations are a catalogue of actual Christian degenerations. One should attempt to read the theological and edifying literature of the nineteenth century with the eyes of a man like Karl Marx, before whose keen vision the trend of the times and the problems of the present and the future were evident in all their grimness, while there he could find almost nothing but blind ignorance! This ignorance he saw to be based on a piety which he all too hastily took for the real thing (151-2; bold is mine).

The corollary of this is the following: if the church wishes to avoid criticisms from Marxist or other atheistic quarters, it must purge itself of these dangerous mutations and demonstrate that the piety in question here is not, in fact, the real thing.

Part 3 (April 28, 2011)

For Gollwitzer, the Marxist criticism of religion sets six tasks for theology. The **second** of these tasks is to reassess the practice of apologetics. Gollwitzer makes a distinction between two types of apologetics. On the one hand is what we might call “better” apologetics. This form of apologetics is necessary for theology, and it is concerned with

going beyond the positive exposition of the meaning of the statements of Christian faith, to a polemical rejection of the appeal of Marxism to so-called contradictions between Christian faith and modern science, to challenge the validity of the opponent’s arguments, and so on (152).

It is clear that Gollwitzer has in mind here something like defensive apologetics, aimed at showing the plausibility, or the non-contradiction of Christian faith with life in the modern world. In other words, the task of this apologetics is to establish and maintain the distinction between methodological atheism in the natural sciences, for instance, and dogmatic atheism as a worldview. Worth noting is Gollwitzer's proviso that any sort of "God of the gaps" apologetics is a non-starter and ought to be rejected.

Another form of apologetics is what we might call "bad" apologetics. As opposed to "better" or "defensive" apologetics, we might call this one "worse" or "offensive" apologetics. In this form, apologetics attempts – to put things crassly – to argue people into the Christian faith. Such is simply not possible, for reasons that will be explained more thoroughly in Gollwitzer's next point (to be treated in the next installment of this series, Part 4). Suffice it for now to raise a warning:

apologetics cannot afford to attempt to adduce supports for Christian faith, which can then be pulled around, and whose questionable character discredits Christian faith (ibid).

Part 4 (April 29, 2011)

For Gollwitzer, the Marxist criticism of religion sets six tasks for theology. The **third** of these tasks is an elaboration on the second, which was a discussion of apologetics. Gollwitzer returns now to what he considers to be a very dubious – perhaps the most dubious – form of apologetics, namely, that build on a "God of the gaps" or on a *dues ex machine*. The problem with this approach isn't, strictly speaking, that the modern age witnessed the end of the regnant metaphysics that made such argument possible, although Gollwitzer recognizes that this is the case. Instead, this approach is problematic because

To argue against our opponents with this sort of necessity of God was from the beginning a self-misunderstanding of Christian faith (153).

Here is how Gollwitzer parses the nitty-gritty:

Marxism...sums up the results of this end of the great tradition of scholastic thinking in the *analogia entis* in so far as the latter had claimed to find by speculation the rational ground of earthly being in the divine *summum ens* (most real being), and therefore conversely to pass by inference from the conditioned to the unconditioned. The presuppositions of faith concealed in these apparently rational operations have long been evident, and give Marxism the opportunity of unmasking this kind of philosophy as disguised theology (ibid).

Gollwitzer is actually being nice to theologians in the scholastic tradition. He recognizes that those theologians worked out of faith's conviction, which served as a ground for their thought-

experiments with reference to God. The problem is that they were not clear about this foundation, nor were they careful to distinguish how this foundation fundamentally sets them apart from broader metaphysical inquiry in the traditions of Plato and Aristotle. The result of these failures is this: when the metaphysics to which theology had been joined was seen to fail, it was not at all self-evident that theology should not ultimately and necessarily fail as well.

The flip side of this is Gollwitzer's recognition – in the concluding sentence of the above quote – that ultimately the sort of metaphysical inquiry established in the tradition is a form of philosophy rather than theology. For Gollwitzer, this applies to all forms of idealism. Consequently,

Christian theology must see in the Marxist identification of Christianity and idealism a warning for itself not to bind the Christian faith for better or for worse to idealistic metaphysics. It does this, for example, so long as it includes the faith in creation under the inquiry about an explanation of the world. For then if the article of our faith about the creation is understood as an assertion of reason, God is a function of our self-understanding and our understanding of the world... (154).

Here is the payoff:

In view of the idealistic influence on Christian thinking since the time of early Catholicism, **the end of Christian metaphysics demands a thorough-going theological self-criticism**, to which Marxism (with its interpretation of Christianity as a special case of idealism and idealism as a special case of theology), has given a fruitful impulse (ibid; bold is mine).

Christians owe thanks to Marxism, in other words, for so driving us back to a consideration of our particularity by unceremoniously lumping us in as a species within a broader genus of thought.

Part 5 (May 02, 2011)

For Gollwitzer, the Marxist criticism of religion sets six tasks for theology. The **fourth** of these tasks continues Gollwitzer's sally against apologetics. The particular form of apologetics that attracts Gollwitzer's ire now, however, is that which would link Christianity with religion as a general category and, attempting to demonstrate that religion is a necessary facet of human culture and development, thus hope to secure Christianity's pedigree. As true as such claims may be about religion, and Gollwitzer is willing to entertain that possibility, he provides four reflections on the issue.

1. Such arguments cannot defeat the immanentism of the Marxist criticism. To begin, who cares about this immanentism when leveled at religion? Christianity has no dog in that

fight. Furthermore, a general defense of religion will not defeat this immanentism. So Gollwitzer: Christianity “cannot prove, or wish to prove, that the living God to whom the biblical word bears witness does not belong to the immanent conditions of the world, and is not a product of our need. It can, however, indicate that this is not so, by showing how in his revelation he distinguishes himself from the gods” (155). In other words, Christianity should show that its God is not one of the gods, leaving the latter to fend for themselves since “It is with the powers of this world, positive and negative, that we have to do in religion, not with the Creator himself, who must in his freedom encounter us, in order that we may have such dealings with him as to know him and be able to speak with him” (ibid).

2. Secularism pushes these things further, although Marxism is only one form of secularism. Whereas in the past Christianity could assume the general religiosity of those it encountered, such is no longer the case. It would be a mistake for Christianity to think that it first had to reproduce this general religiosity among its hearers before proclaiming the uniquely Christian message. No, that message must be proclaimed in such a way as to bypass the need for this general religiosity. Of the secular person, Gollwitzer writes:

Without his putting himself in a religious frame of mind, creating for himself religious experiences, awakening within himself a so-called natural consciousness of God, thus without his being compelled to adopt forms of consciousness which he can no longer recapture, he must be encountered in his life, which has become secular, by the good news from the Lord of the world, who has committed himself in the man Jesus of Nazareth to the world and the secularity of the stable and the gallows” (155-6).

This, Gollwitzer maintains, is what Bonhoeffer was on about when he spoke of a “non-religious interpretation” of the gospel.

3. What theology should focus on in the encounter with Marxism, then, is not the antithesis between atheism and religion, but the one “between the ‘God for us’ of the gospel, and the human refusal to live in the strength of the vital reality of this ‘God for us’” (156). In other words, it must call the world to repentance, to abandon the attempt at self-justification, which can take religious, secular, technological, and other forms. Nothing is ultimately gained if a culture or an individual converts from atheism to religion, so far as Christianity is concerned: “The only conversion which brings something new, is that from law to gospel” (ibid). The strength of this conversion is that it tears us away from all these forms of self-justification. It “ends our existence as functionaries of a front representing a world-view, and makes us messengers of the love which from above seeks every individual, the religious man as the atheist, as a creature beloved, which must leave the tense struggle against the feared non-being, to receive fellowship with him who places himself between the creature and non-being” (157).
4. All this lies behind Gollwitzer’s concluding statement, which provides a very measure paradigm for Christian engagement with Marxist criticism. I’ll quote it in entirety:

Thus it is possible without prejudice, without irritation, and defensiveness to discuss with the Marxists the phenomenon and the problems of religion. **Not the Christian message but our human method of receiving and embodying it, the Christian religion, will there, so far as Christianity is in question, be dealt with, but it must not be withdrawn from criticism.** In this, theology will be both the defender of religion over against the onesidedness, the superficiality and the fatuities of Marxist criticism, and at the same time the ally of this criticism against cruelties, stuffiness, terrorism and like inhumanities of the religious life (157; bold is mine).

Part 6 (May 03, 2011)

For Gollwitzer, the Marxist criticism of religion sets six tasks for theology. The **fifth** of these tasks concerns a renewed consideration of what it means for theology to be a science. Gollwitzer recognizes that the tradition has long considered theology to be a science, and he affirms that status. Or, he at least defends its claim to be scientific even if it not strictly speaking an independent science:

Theology indeed participates in the other sciences, has a nexus with them, uses them, welcomes them in its own sphere, inasmuch as here also, for example, philosophy and history in the strict sense are studied. It is certainly not really ‘a’ science, but (in this resembling medicine), a sphere in which different sciences are united by their service of a determinate purpose, the critical self-examination of the Church in relation to the correspondence between its actual achievement and its task (157-8).

Gollwitzer goes on to list three points to bear in mind concerning the responsibility that theology must faced because of its scientific character.

1. Theology must be sure not to mislead other sciences by taking up a posture that opposes free investigation, or that seeks to enforce a law other than that inherent within the subject matter itself.
2. Theology must be sure to develop methods that fit with investigation of its subject matter, to do so critically, working to clarify its concepts.
3. Theology must be true to its peculiarity, and thereby embody an uncomfortable question for the other sciences as to their limits.

Christianity’s peculiarity, and thus theology’s, “consists in the fact that it is related to a history, the history of revelation, about which it must make statements which go beyond the appearances which are accessible to the historian” (158). By doing so, it raises a serious question to the Marxist criticism of religion, making clear that every field of study has a special methodological perspective suited to its object and that, consequently, each perspective is limited. In this theology resists the temptation of the humane sciences to borrow the concept of “science” found in the natural sciences, and encourages the humanities to recognize their limited and provisional

status.

The danger on which theology shines a spotlight here is scientism, “the superstition which makes a world-view out of modern science, and uses it as a quarry for the building of world pictures allegedly demanded and authorized by science” (159). For Gollwitzer, this impulse is a product of humanity’s inherently religious impulse deprived, by the Marxist and other criticisms, of the religious outlets previously open to it. Here is a good chunk of Gollwitzer by way of a conclusion (bold is me, as usual):

Every assumption, every hypothesis can in science grow into a prejudice. Rightly understood, theology opens the way unconditionally to every investigation of fact. Faith in the creator is actually an affirmation of things as they are, and is opposed to all well-meaning misrepresentation or taboo. Where science is understood as in conflict with faith (in the biblical sense of the word), and as a substitute for religion, the place is necessarily assigned to it [that] religion previously occupied. It is then required to give what it cannot give. It is then neither free nor subject to criticism, it becomes itself a taboo. Science must prove its freedom also in this, that it recognizes itself as a specific and therefore limited mode of knowledge, to which other aspects of reality are closed... **The scientific attitude is not incompatible with Christian faith, but with the superstitious faith in science, and with the subjection of science to the demands of a need to believe, which finds an ideological satisfaction in it**” (159-60).

Part 7 (May 04, 2011)

For Gollwitzer, the Marxist criticism of religion sets six tasks for theology. The **sixth** of these tasks pertains to the question of meaning. Explanations of the world – worldviews, or metaphysics – attempt to provide security by means of bestowing meaning on brute phenomena. Ancient Christianity’s worldview/metaphysic was theological in two senses: first, because it made use of God in explaining the world; second, because it viewed its explanation as identical with that which provides the world with meaning. Marxist makes use of science in a similar way, that is, as an explanation of the world that attempts to provide meaning. In the end, Gollwitzer says, “Marxism is a kind of positive Stoicism; more meaning [than that provided by science] is unfortunately not our lot, but at least we have this much” (160)!

Positively, theology must recognize the difficulty with which one moves from science, or brute phenomena toward meaning. A sense of “need” is similarly not a trustworthy guide. To treat it as such would be to reintroduce something like natural theology, which has lurked behind much of Gollwitzer’s discussion. Ultimate meaning, Gollwitzer insists, cannot be read of the surface – or even from the depths – of human existence. Rather, meaning requires an encounter and fellowship with God. On the other hand, it is not the case that this God-bestowed meaning is entirely disconnected from human “need,” for Gollwitzer. It does, however, add a new depth and aspect to that need, situating it in a greater context and, indeed, showing us what our true need is. So Gollwitzer:

it is not the case that the fullness of meaning experienced in the gospel is the answer to an already manifest question. **What the gospel offers is the answering of a question and the fulfillment of a need which is only awakened by the gospel. Therefore it can be satisfied only by the gospel.** We are thus confronted here by a circle which we are always coming up against when we concern ourselves with theology; the gospel is the answer to a life-question; relevant, fully satisfying answer, but the question only arises through the proclamation of the answer (162; bold is mine).

Or again, from a different angle:

the death-bringing lack of fellowship with God, and the devastation wrought by evil is visible before the encounter with God's condescension in the gospel, in all the phenomena of estrangement, lack of fellowship, perversion of life, which cause the ever-repeated attempts to heal life, the religious as well as the atheistic ones. But how deep the injury is, and how inadequate, indeed, how destined to lead to further evil are the remedies offered for healing, this is only evident when God himself comes on the scene and his appearing at once judges our previous state as our own self-inflicted misery and removes it. Only in concrete encounter with the Word of God that speaks to us does man's destiny become clear, and only in the light of this highest destiny of life in fellowship with God is the previous condition unmasked as the misery of the man who has forfeited his high destiny, and the also previously visible signs of defect and wickedness of life are exposed as consequences of forfeiting his destiny" (163).

What does this mean for Christianity and theology? It means that they must stick to their guns, so to speak; they are "thrown entirely upon...faith in the self-evidencing power of its message" (165). The church ultimately has only one tool in its toolbox, namely, proclamation of the gospel. Granted, that proclamation will take different forms in different places and times. But this plurality of forms must be only that. In no sense can the church base its proclamation of the gospel on a condition that is not itself created by that proclamation. All such conditions have been contested, and contested well, by Marxism and other criticisms of religion. There is no sense casting about in search of a new one, for anything one finds will not be categorically different than those that have come before. Instead, the church must recognize its vulnerable position, and remember the saying of its Lord that his strength is made perfect in its weakness. **The church - and theology, - need not "demonstrate to blind eyes, so that these will then be opened by a free decision; it can only proclaim to blind eyes the message committed to it, in the hope that this call itself, and he who is proclaimed in it as the real one will open men's eyes"** (ibid; bold is mine).

Part 8 (May 06, 2011)

For Gollwitzer, the Marxist criticism of religion sets six tasks for theology. Having treated them, he **concludes** with two more points that Christians and theologians should bear in mind when engaging with the Marxist criticism of religion.

1. Harkening back to the discussion in the last installment, Gollwitzer notes that for Christianity to base its message on humanity's "need" would be to play into the Marxist criticism: "That God is the means to an end, even if an ineffective one, is a point in which Feuerbach and Marx are one" (167). Of course, this breaks down when faced with a more sophisticated way of understanding the Christian God, one based on value and not need: "Anyone who wishes adequately to understand biblical texts must... understand that there are encounters which primarily have their significance as such, and in relation to which the consideration of value is only secondary" (ibid). The encounter in view here is, of course, one with God. That such an encounter is valuable goes without saying. But what Christianity cannot and must not do is attempt to demonstrate the truth or superiority of Christianity on the basis of this value. It must not do so because to make the attempt would be to deny the nature of the case, and it cannot do so because this value is only accessible from within the encounter, not without. So Gollwitzer (bold is, as always, mine):

It is not man and his needs that can be the meaning of God's existence, but God is the meaning of the existence of man. Therefore what man receives in the encounter with God is not visible outside of or before this encounter, not outside of "faith". For **only in this encounter does God himself become important to men, not because of his meaning, or any value, but He himself** - and just this is the most supremely satisfying answer to the question of meaning (168).

2. The payoff of the whole of Gollwitzer's discussion is this: **"What the atheist denies is not what the Christian affirms"**, or at least not what the Christian ought to affirm, or would affirm if there was more clarity on the issue. So, Christianity must, in the face of the Marxist criticism of religion, undertake "a self-critical examination of [its] own previous statements" (172), and it has made many of the unguarded variety over the centuries. But this does not deny the other side (bold is mine, as always), and I conclude with the following long block quotation:

The whole polemic of Feuerbach indicates that the Christian faith is interpreted as the 'assumption' of the existence of a God, as the hypothesis that there is such an existence, and only distinguishes itself from polytheism by its concentration on one instead of many. The triumph over the fact that the sputnik and the subsequent space-travellers [sic] discovered no such being in the world of space is only an element of bathos in anti-religious propaganda and a booby-trap. **The possibility of such primitive argumentation is, however, based on the fact that they denial of God occurs on the same ontological level as that on which people can discuss the existence of Martians**; here one can set up theories pro

and con; here one can some day by testing discover what is right... **The denial which finds expression in the assertion that ‘there is no God’ believes it is speaking about the Christian God, but speaks about something quite different...** I make judgments about existent facts without thereby altering myself. But the denial of God cannot at all be spoken in this way as a meaningful sentence: **the sentence “God is not” is either thoughtless chatter, or it is a self-cancellation in revolt; “God must not be”.**