

# Shared values

## *Socialism*

## *and religion*

**L**et me begin by recalling the burial of Comrade Chris Hani who, by the way, was booked to deliver this lecture shortly before his tragic assassination.

The scene at the Boksburg cemetery seemed unusual to some. Religious leaders, in full regalia, officiated at the grave-side of the atheist Chris Hani. A few voices were subsequently raised within the religious community as to whether this was proper. But, leaving aside for the moment the philosophical tensions between socialist atheism and religion, the event did underline a significant commonality between religion and socialist values.

Albert Nolan (in his work *God in South Africa*) writes that, if faith is both a way of thinking and a way of living, there are both practical and theoretical atheists. The practical atheist espouses a belief in God, but denies this belief in practice by supporting social evil, for instance, in our case, racism and apartheid. "What," asks Nolan, "if the theoretical atheist in his/her practice is closer to the practice of Jesus?"

There can be little doubt that Hani, the theoretical atheist, was

The core values of religion — co-operation, human equality, sharing and liberatory hope — are, precisely, the core values of socialism. This is the argument of **JOE SLOVO** in a talk first delivered at the Summer School of the Department of Extra Mural Studies at the University of Cape Town (25 January, 1994).

closer to the practice of Jesus than many of his detractors. Hani, in the early part of this life, did aspire to priesthood, but what drove him then was precisely the same aspiration that drove him towards socialism.

And in case I am accused of evasion, I want to recall also that we not only buried a socialist but an activist who found, at a certain stage of his life, that he should shoulder a gun to meet the tyranny of apartheid. Very often the incompatibility between being a socialist and the Christian ethic is related to the question of pacifism and violence.

Here, too, the contrast is not as stark as some would have us be-

lieve. When faced with brute repression and a threat to the lives of his disciples, Jesus did not always turn the other cheek. He used force to expel the traders from the temple. At one stage he advised his disciples to sell their cloaks and buy swords for their own self defence. (*Jesus before Christianity* — Nolan) And history is replete with examples of the Christian Church wishing god-speed to men of arms, all too often in the kind of cause against which Hani was compelled to turn to the gun.

It is my contention that there is a major convergence between the ethical content of Marxism and all that is best in the world's religions. But it must also be conceded that in the name of both Marxism and religion great damage has been done to the human condition. Both ideologies have produced martyrs in the cause of liberation and tyrants in the cause of oppression.

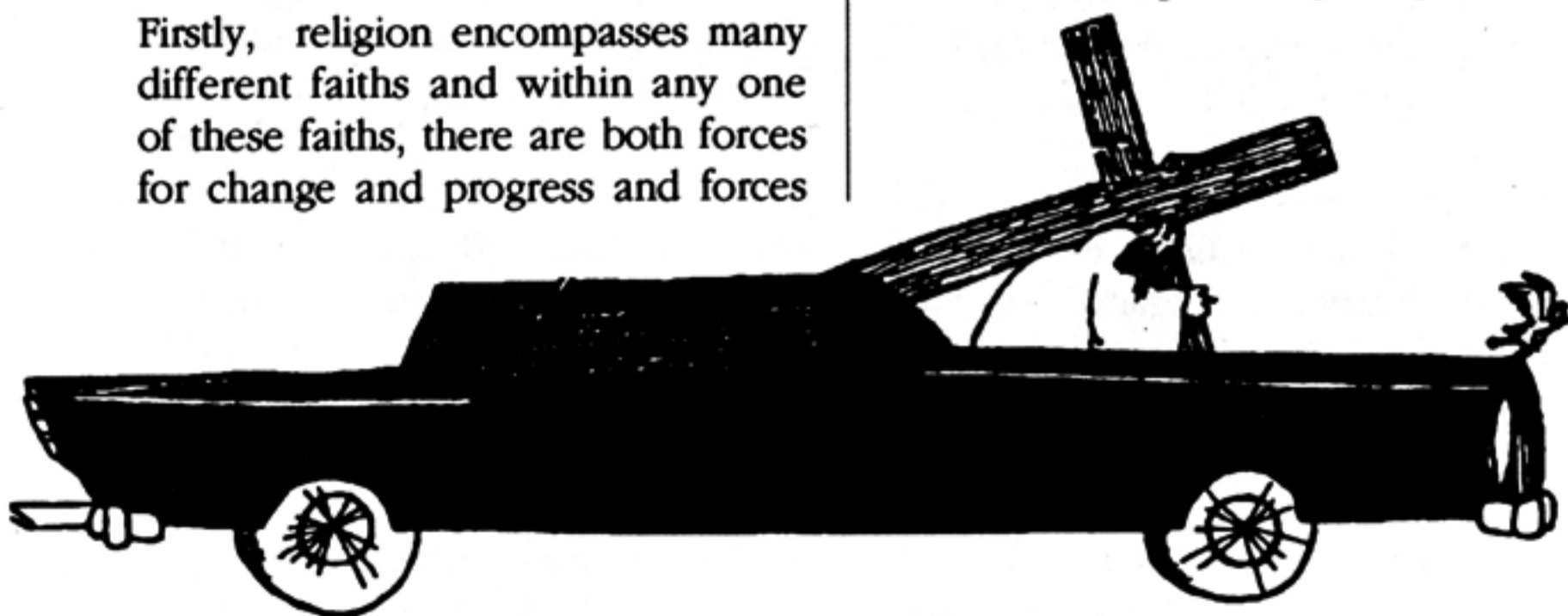
In addressing the meeting point between socialism and religion, it is imperative to situate both of them within historical and social contexts. Firstly, religion encompasses many different faiths and within any one of these faiths, there are both forces for change and progress and forces

which have, and do, protect the status quo with all its exploitation and violence.

There are two Gods. There is the God of Trevor Huddleston, Mahatma Gandhi, Archbishop Tutu, Frank Chikane and others. But there is also the God of Verwoerd and his cohorts who claimed a biblical mandate for the ghastly system from which we are just beginning to emerge.

Let us be even-handed. The crimes committed over the centuries in the name of the great religions punctuate a large part of world history. There are not too many conquerors, colonisers or exploiters who have not used religious institutions to bolster and rationalise acts of human depravity. Yet true believers, conceding this reality, would never, on this ground, abandon faith in the moral objectives of their religion.

Surely, then, we ought not to allow distortions committed in the name of socialism to blind our understanding of the basic objectives of socialism and the calibre of its true adherents. Despite the glaring abuses



Has capitalism hijacked Christianity?



which history has witnessed in the practices of both religion and socialism, I remain convinced that among those whom we can trust as liberators from all that is evil in the human condition, are the true communist and the true believer.

I do not think that what drove Chris Hani is very different from what drove progressive religious activists. An element of difference is that Hani believed that our fate is in our own hands rather than in the hands of some force outside of history. But to the extent that believers perceive God as existing within history, that difference becomes less significant.

Existing socialism might have failed in many respects. But, if history is the yardstick, so has the Sermon on the Mount, whose values have been flouted ever since it was given. But this in no way diminishes the normative value of the Sermon on the Mount, anymore than the collapse in eastern Europe could be said to prove that the values of the Communist Manifesto are irrelevant.

The main religions of the world share fundamental ethical values, but in the South African context, the most widespread religion is that of Christianity, and it is this fact which explains why I proceed to illustrate my contentions through the commonalities of Marxism and Christian faith, or more particularly through some of the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ.

A Canadian poster which I have in my office shows a working class woman leaning on a fence in a pen-

sive posture. The words on the poster read:

"Class consciousness is knowing which side of the fence you're on. Class analysis is figuring out who is there with you."

Let me perhaps shock some of you by saying that this simple yet profound aphorism would place the founder of Christianity in the category of a class conscious socialist. Huddleston (*Spirit of Hope*) puts it most directly: "For me, Christianity and socialism ... (form) a unity... I am convinced that to be a Christian is to be a socialist and I like to tell my socialist friends it will do their souls good to read the New Testament story of Jesus."

Jesus and his disciples knew which side of the fence they were on. It was on the side of the wretched of the earth, the dispossessed and the oppressed. As Frei Betto says (in his *Fidel and Religion*):

"He chose to be born among the poor as the son of a carpenter... he spoke to everyone, both rich and poor, but from a specific social stand, from the social stand of the interests of the poor... he reflected the interests of the oppressed strata

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of the times. If the rich man wanted to have a place next to Jesus he had to opt for the poor. There isn't a single example in all the gospels of Jesus's welcoming a rich man beside him without first making him commit himself to help the poor."

Those who would be at his side were abjured to sell their possessions and to share the proceeds with the poor ( LK 12:33-34; 14-33) And if a rich man wanted to enter the king-

dom of heaven he had virtually to commit class suicide.

Even the most cursory reading of the teachings of Jesus would indicate that it is socialism and its values that should most naturally be associated with Christianity. Capitalism, by contrast, is thoroughly anti-Christian. It is at variance with the most basic values of the Bible and,

indeed, of all the world's great religions. Let me touch on four values which seem to me to be the cornerstone values of both socialism and Christianity.

In the first place, there is the consistent commitment in the Bible to those thoroughly non-capitalist values of community and co-operation. The ethos of the Bible is not the ethos of an unbridled free mar-

ket, the frenzy of the stock market or of privatisation and self enrichment from the labour of others.

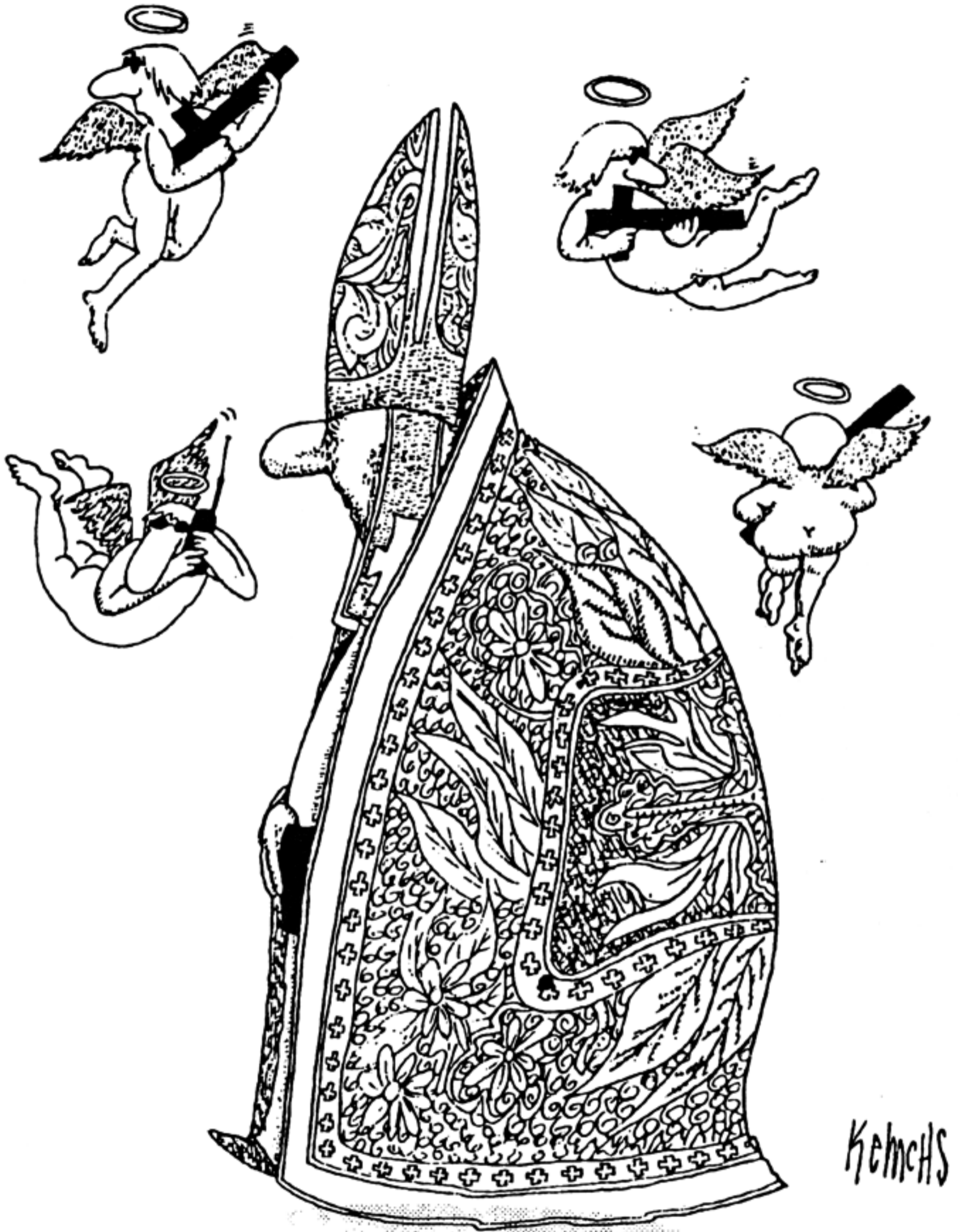
In the second place, and closely related to the above, there is the deep-seated and, indeed, revolutionary Christian value — human equality. This expresses itself in the belief that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. We can debate whether or not there is a God, but the belief in the unity of God, and humanity's reflection in Him is a powerful symbol at the very least of human equality.

What could be more distant from capitalism, whose existence depends on a radical division between owner and non-owner of the means of production, between capitalists and workers? What could be more distant from the principle of our common, shared, single humanity, one people on earth, from a capitalism whose very origins and survival depend on the divisions of humanity into haves and have nots?

This brings me to the third basic value common to both the Bible and socialism. This is the value of sharing, of redistribution, on the basis of need not on the basis of individual wealth and power.

"The heart of the multitude of believers was one, and their soul was one .... there was no poor person among them, since whoever possessed fields or houses sold them, bore the proceeds of the sale and placed them at the feet of the apostles, and a distribution was made to each one in accordance with his needs." (Acts, Book 4, Chapter 32,

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The Church – A site of struggle between the old and the new



Verses 34, 35)

What does that sound like to you? Certainly not like those who exhort us to go forward and enrich ourselves — with the handy self justification that this is somehow in the general interest. It sounds rather more like Karl Marx's basic categorisation of the Communist ideal, as a society in which everyone works according to his or her ability and each is rewarded according to his or her need.

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**The origin  
of the  
Communist  
idea is  
the New  
Testament**

And then there is the fourth basic shared value, it is what we might call liberatory hope. The promise of some vastly improved future, whether it is portrayed in secular terms, or as a Kingdom of God, may, it is true, act as a demobiliser. It may encourage resigned passivity in regard to the present. But, for those who are op-

pressed, the dominant effect of some form of liberatory hope, of an alternative vision, is I believe a powerful mobiliser. It can, and does empower ordinary people into collective action, action which can begin to fulfil the vision itself.

It seems to me that the Bible is filled with precisely this message of liberatory hope, and in the words of Jesus, reading from the Book of

Isaiah, it is a message directed especially at the poor:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke Chapter 4, Verses 18 and 19)

This is certainly not merely a promise of pie in the sky when you die.

My point is that the message of liberatory hope remains fundamentally foreign to the prophets and apostles of capitalism. You are black, you are a woman, you are in a developing Third World situation, you are a worker, you are an unemployed Bantustan dweller — bad luck. Hope a little, but do not hope too much. Isn't it telling that day after day the ANC is asked the question: "How are you going to deal with people's aspirations?" By "deal" the question usually means, of course, "manage" if not "suppress". The implication of all of this is that popular aspirations are somehow an embarrassment, something to head-off if possible.

These points of profound commonality between the core values of socialism and Christianity are not purely fortuitous. They are anchored in a shared history. According to Miranda (*Communism in the Bible*):

"The origin of the Communist idea in the history of the West is the New Testament ... the banner the Communist groups and movements

marched under from the first century through the Middle Ages all the way to Wilhelm Weiteling ... in whose pro-Communist organisation Marx and Engels were active in their youth — was the new Testament.”

If we go back to the historical roots of Marxism in the West, then we find that those roots are thoroughly Christian. Saint Simon, Cabet, Lamennais, Le Roux, Considerant in France, Ludlow in Britain — almost all the early modern socialist thinkers, were Christian. They turned to the Bible for support and inspiration. They saw themselves as continuing a long Communist Christian tradition, not breaking from it.

When, in the middle of the 19th Century, scientific socialism emerged with the theoretical work of Marx and Engels, it did so, it is true, largely in the form of a critique of the earlier Christian socialists. The new scientific socialism was critical of their woolliness, their impracticalities, and above all, of their attempts to launch small socialist experiments, islands in a capitalist ocean. The new socialism was also avowedly atheistic.

But its break with the earlier socialism is not total — it was dialectical. It drew heavily on the early Christian socialists anti-capitalism, and above all it grounded itself upon and even took for granted, the most basic ethical values which had been articulated earlier. Those values are precisely the ones I itemised earlier — a spirit of collectivism, of sharing, of equality, and of revolutionary op-

timism.

Despite this convergence, the divide between the Christian tradition and socialism widened in the last half of the 19th century and during the major part of the 20th century. The philosophical gap between materialism and idealism sharpened progressively, and threw a blanket over some of the key ethical commonalities of both ideologies.

On our side, the over-simplified phrase that religion was “the opiate of the people”, dominated the perceptions of most Communist revolutionary activists. Failing to draw a distinction between the practice of institutionalised religion and the moral potential of Christian teachings, we saw religion as nothing more than an instrument of capitalism. In doing this communists, as it were, donated all believers to the other side, and invited their hostility by the way in which believers and their institutions were treated in the socialist countries. The right not to believe was transformed into state policy leading to persecution and discrimination against believers. In a way it was a sort of counter-inquisition.

In any case, on reflection, the

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maxim that religion is the "opiate of the people" is fundamentally unMarxist. It contains what is certainly a part truth, but is completely one sided, which is to say undialectical. You cannot analyse religion except dialectically. The church (and religion more generally) have certainly been used for obscurantist purposes for deferring struggles to redress injustices and suffering on this earth, but religion has also been a weapon of the oppressed, a powerful voice of opposition in the face of tyrannies of all kinds.

South Africa is itself a telling example of this paradox. On the one hand, the racist state and its adherents and more particularly the establishment church, projected its mandate as coming directly from God. On the other hand, some of the most committed radicals on the side of liberation came from the ranks of the church.

In general, the liberation theology in Latin America and other places began to rescue the earlier tradition of Christian humanity from the grip of church institutions which were perceived as part of the mainstay of ruling class inequities.

In South Africa, the re-examination of the roots of Christianity was evidenced by the Kairos Document which provided a significant depar-

ture point. On our side, the liberation of Communist dogma from its separation between socialism and democracy and the emergence of a fresh spirit of tolerance towards the complexities of ideological disputes is more and more opening the way for a constructive dialogue between Communists and Christians. I have no doubt that we can begin to find each other through our shared values and principles.

Above all, in the spirit of that fine Biblical maxim, ("by their fruits you shall know them"), we shall find each other, as we have increasingly been doing, in practical, active struggle, shoulder to shoulder in a quest for a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, and united South Africa; a South Africa which will guarantee the right to believe, or not to believe — a South Africa in which the ultimate blasphemy of apartheid will be no more.

Let me end with a paraphrase of one of the kinder things which Lenin said about religion: Let us stop concentrating exclusively on the debate about whether there is or is not a paradise in heaven. Let us work together to build a paradise on earth.

As for myself, if I eventually find a paradise in heaven, I will regard it as a bonus. ★